

Advice about searching for information on your railroad and locale
A handout to go along with the "Structures and Stories" talk given at the NMRA PCR
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Learn Google search tips. (Many other web sites have similar advanced search syntax)

* Quotes around multiple words that must be together: "packing house"

* Limit search to a site where you know content might be: cannery

site:historysanjose.org

* boolean "san jose" and (cannery or "packing house")

Reuse tricks you learned in libraries:

* If you find something good in an archive or library web site, look at other unrelated photos for unlabeled or related images.

* keep track of terms you see on other items, and use those in future searches (names of businesses, alternate spellings of street names, etc)

* Google image search (images.google.com) lets you upload a picture, and get links to similar pictures. This is particularly good for finding the origins of an image that you've found on a random place on the internet.

Useful materials:

* Newspaper archives

* Google News Archive (<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=8lsQavbT1M8C>)

* California Digital Newspaper Collection / U.C. Riverside (<https://cdnc.ucr.edu>)

* Libraries have subscriptions to online services (Santa Clara gave residents access to San Jose Mercury News archives)

* Some newspapers give free / reduced price access (nytimes.com, sfchronicle.com

* Paid online services give access to old newspapers on a subscription or per-article basis (newspaper.com, britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) Often only charge to see actual article, so you might be able to find interesting articles then find copy on free site.

* Local history archives and websites. Not all materials are online - arrange a visit and talk with librarian to learn what material to request and examine.

* California State Railroad Museum: valuation maps, engineering drawings of (proposed or completed) track arrangement changes.

* Main libraries: San Jose library's California Room has physical Sanborn fire insurance maps.

* Sanborn fire insurance maps in digital form: umi.edu (requires library to have subscription), U.C. Santa Cruz's library has digitized copies, U.S. Library of Congress has digitized copies.

* Aerial photos: local libraries, University of California, Santa Cruz

* Most academic and professional archives will describe collections of materials in “finding aids” that document what they have, where they got it from, access restrictions, etc. Sometimes these aren’t detailed: “file folder with engineering drawings for gondola”, and you’d need to visit and request the folder to see the contents.

* Lots of material hasn’t and won’t be digitized - it’s a significant effort. As a result, budget some time to visit one of these institutions and leaf through photos and documents. Most libraries and archives will digitize the materials they think are most interesting, so going into the institution and requesting materials is one way to let them know what might be good to digitize in the future.

* Not everything is going to immediately tell you that it’ll be useful. Random searches of San Jose Library California Room’s card catalog showed a document called “San Jose Railroads” that documented a potential route change. It turned out the report had lots of interesting information about how the railroads operated that I wouldn’t have found elsewhere.

* Facebook history sites are a bit annoying - folks are often sharing random photos from other web sites without a lot of history or references where it came from. If you find interesting photos, Google image search is a great way to find the archive where the photo came from. Facebook’s much better when someone uploads a random photo from their family collection. I’ve found photos of workers preparing to prune an orchard in winter, references to archives I didn’t know about, and comments from folks who remember these places. Captions and dates are often really wrong.

* Keep notebook or text file for searches, save links. Use little facts you learn (such as the chain of companies in a building) to do additional searches for photos or news. If you want to be extra nice, make a web site where you collect what you’ve learned to help others. (vasonabranh.com/packinghouses or Jim Lancaster’s pages)

* Odd places to search:

* Old trade magazines have lots on company changes. books.google.com has digitized and made searchable pre-1930 railroad and food processing/canning magazines. “Western Canner and Packer” was particularly good for me to track down cannery operations and acquisitions.

* Land and loan records at county Clerk Recorder. Requires practice to understand how to look up docs. Learn when land was bought and sold. Some equipment liens and sales include sale of machinery which can hint at operations.

* California environmental impact reports and historic surveys for properties often have great information. Search on address of past buildings and new construction.

* Regular lawsuit transcripts aren’t publicly accessible, but appeals court rulings and government hearings are. Look to those for information on businesses.

* Documents on the industry can help you understand the business. An editorial in the 1920s highlighted how the dried fruit business changed during World War I - from packers holding fruit to more shipping out immediately after harvest or being borrowed against and put into bonded warehouses.

Remembering what you learn

- * Notebook only with sketches of towns and tracks, with photo locations (and citations) marked

- * Photo books saving prints of key photos

- * Keep online notes and links for all you learn about particular industries or places (I actually ran a Wikipedia like website just to collect company info - much better than file

- * Write about what you learn, summarize, share. vasonabrand.blogspot.com has a bunch of my learning