

THE BAY CITIZEN | LOCAL INTELLIGENCE

Niles Canyon Railway

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Steam-powered locomotives still chug passengers on Sundays up a former Southern Pacific railway line from the old town of Niles, now part of Fremont, to Sunol, and back. The track winds through Niles Canyon, which is the site of Alameda Creek, numerous Charlie Chaplin films and the legend of a beautiful ghost.



Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

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Choo-Choo College

[Niles Canyon Railway](#) is operated by a 900-member volunteer organization, the Pacific Locomotive Association. The group staffs the depots and train rides, teaching aspiring railroaders to be conductors, brakemen, firemen and engineers. The railway's biggest locomotive weighs more than 200 tons, and there has never been an accident in its 25 years.

Santa's on Track

Niles Canyon Railway's biggest fundraiser is its "Train of Lights." On Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights from late November to late December, passengers can ride in railcars festooned with thousands of Christmas lights.

Parties on Wheels

Cabooses can be rented for private events, for a fee of \$75 over regular admission. The “skunk” car — a separate diesel motorcar — is also available (\$400 minimum). It seats 36 passengers.

Blasted Work

Union Pacific Railway maintains an active track on the opposite side of Alameda Creek that takes weekday commuters from Stockton to San Jose on the Altamont Commuter Express. Southern Pacific’s “easy side” only needed bridges, but Union Pacific’s route required boring two tunnels of 400 and 4,500 feet.

The Woman in White

According to local lore, a woman was traveling to a wedding via horse and buggy in the 1920s when a car spooked her steeds in Niles Canyon, flinging her from the carriage and killing her. [Her ghost](#) is said to return every Feb. 26, wandering the roadside in a dirty white dress.

Pressure Cooker

Steam locomotives used to run on “bunker seed” oil. Today the Niles train primarily burns recycled oil. The “choo-choo” noise occurs when the engine valve opens the cylinder and releases pressurized steam exhaust.

Silent-Film Center

More than 350 films were produced from 1912 to 1915 in the Niles film studio that belonged to the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company. The nearby canyon and train supplied ideal settings for westerns. Charlie Chaplin filmed “The Tramp” there in 1915.

Blind Curve Ahead

Highway 84 meanders alongside the creek, and there were 436 traffic accidents on this road from 1999 to 2008, with 13 deaths. CalTrans recently removed 100 trees to improve visibility, but the [Alameda Creek Alliance opposed that](#) “eco-destruction.”