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Winter 2026

History and Modeling of Southern Pacific's Narrow Gauge Railroads

Number 100 Supplement



Family intrigue, real estate, whisky, mining and milling; the Hotalings battle it out for the control of their millions!

(Figure s4) Newspaper picture of Mrs. Anson P. (Lavinia) Hotaling and her son Frederick C. Hotaling, during the stock trial in San Francisco. [San Francisco Examiner, 1919-08-06, p. 13]

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Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the society. The society is in no way associated with the Southern Pacific Company or any of its predecessors or successors.

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IN THIS SUPPLEMENT

Linda Clements provides us with additional information on the Hotaling family who controlled what happened at the Rock Point Mill in Dayton, Nevada, for most of the first half of the 20th Century.

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The Untold History of the Mill(s) at Rock Point
Supplement – The “Interesting” Hotaling Family of San Francisco

by Linda L. Clements, President, Historical Society of Dayton Valley

Richard Manderful (R. M.) Hotaling, the man who—through management of his father’s estate—became the last owner of an operating mill at Rock Point, came from an extremely wealthy family.

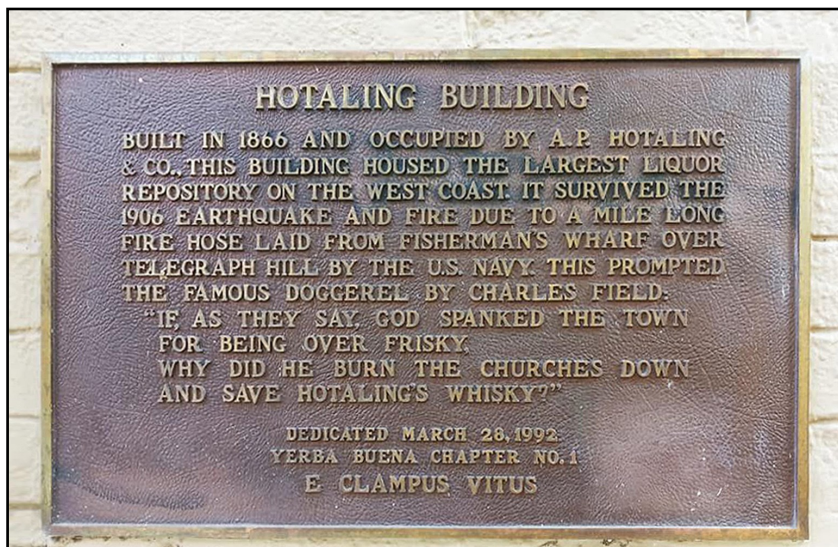
The family money came from the estate of his father, Anson P. Hotaling—estimated to be worth at least \$4,000,000 upon Anson’s death in 1900. (That’s about \$155 million in 2026 dollars.) Anson was a self-made man, gathering his initial wealth as a liquor wholesaler in San Francisco. However, he parlayed that money by investing in trading ventures in the South Pacific, on the Pacific coast of Russia, and in Australia. He also had real estate purchases in San Francisco and on the Peninsula, a bank in San Rafael, real estate in Washington and Oregon, the iron industry in California, and more.

Anson and his wife Lavinia had four sons, but the two oldest—Anson Jr. and George—preceded him in death. Anson had set up a corporation—the Hotaling Estate Company—before his death for management of his various businesses and distribution of stock to his surviving family members—Lavinia, Richard, younger son Frederick, and Ella K. Hotaling, widow of Anson Jr.^{s1}

(Figure s1) Hotaling warehouse building still stands (arrow) after 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco. [Bancroft Library]



His liquor company, the A. P. Hotaling Company, advertised its liquor all over California and Nevada and was well known for fine whiskey.^{s2} However, the company achieved another type of fame after the San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906. The fire that followed the earthquake devoured building after building but spared Hotaling’s warehouse, as shown in *Figure s1*. The Hotaling Building has been renovated and still stands today on Jackson Square in San Francisco.^{s3} It is graced by an E. Clampus Vitus plaque, shown in *Figure s2*, that includes a poem by journalist and poet Charles K. Field:



“If, as they say, God spanked the town
“For being over frisky,
“Why did He burn the churches down
“And save Hotaling’s whisky?”

(Figure s2) Plaque installed on Hotaling Building by E Clampus Vitus, Yerba Buena Chapter No. 1, in 1992. [E Clampus Vitus]

In practice, it seems that after A. P.'s death, Richard Hotaling handled most day-to-day management of the Hotaling Estate Company. In this role in December of 1906 Richard was one of the "Big San Franciscans" who toured mines in Goldfield and Tonopah in search of investment opportunities. This was in part a goodwill trip, since Nevada miners had resented San Francisco merchants for some time, primarily due to their high merchandise costs. This in turn was due to the high cost of shipping from San Francisco and lead miners to buy equipment from Salt Lake City instead. Thus, the trip was also an attempt to put pressure on the Southern Pacific (SP) to lower freight rates from San Francisco.

A special train was put on with five Pullmans plus a diner and an observation car. Seventy-five men attended but another forty were left behind due to limits by SP on the number of cars allowed on a train that was to go into mountainous regions.⁵⁴

The A. P. Hotaling Company might have marketed and sold their whiskey there but Richard Hotaling did not invest in Southern Nevada mines. However, this trip (which also stopped in Reno) may well be where he discovered the opportunity to make money in Nevada. Initially this was by stock holdings from and a mortgage to Nevada Mining, Reduction, & Power Company (NMR&PC), as described in Part 2. However, by 1910 Richard Hotaling and the Hotaling Estate Company were firmly entrenched in the Dayton area, with Richard owning numerous properties in Old Town as well as the Rose ditch and water rights, the Bluestone Building, the Douglass mill, the assay office, and more.

However, there was not necessarily a cordial relationship with Dayton. A September 1910 article in the *Yerington Times* blamed the Hotaling Mill and Mining Company (Hotaling M&MC) for the defeat of the special tax for schools. The article reported, accurately, that Hotaling M&MC had poured a large amount of money into mining and milling in the area and were unlikely to take any profit for a while.⁵⁵ As discussed in the main article, this was to become a somewhat permanent reality for Richard Hotaling and for Hotaling M&MC.

Nonetheless, Richard Hotaling continued to acquire real estate in Dayton and on the Comstock, often by tax delinquency sales. He also made sure the required affidavits of labor were filed on his mining claims, in order to maintain them and also avoid taxes.⁵⁶ During this time he continued the management of the Hotaling enterprises, and his own, including some continued involvement with railroads and traction companies.⁵⁷ Far more importantly (to his mental health) he kept up his "clubman" and "bon vivant" hobbies of staying active in several clubs, particular the Bohemian Club, where he was a noted student of Shakespeare and noted thespian. These were places where the movers and shakers of Bay Area society met; sometimes they were famously secretive but they were also service-minded. Much of Richard's acting work, for which he received significant acclaim, was to support various charities in the Bay Area.⁵⁸

And there was also Richard's home. Anson P. Hotaling, Sr., had purchased 1900 acres in a Marin County valley and leased some of the land to a local dairyman. After Anson died Richard built an elaborate county home on the property—a home he continued to renovate and embellish over the years. His other family members lived in elaborate dwellings on Franklin Street in San Francisco, but he did not like The City (San Francisco) and preferred spending his time in this country environment. He also became interested in the cattle and the dairy, and became a gentleman dairyman and rancher.⁵⁹

So far nothing all that interesting, right? Just what wealthy people do.... However, in late 1918 that was to change...rather spectacularly.

It turns out all these years under the surface quite the family feud had been brewing. Later information indicates that Richard and his younger brother, Fred, did not like one another one bit, nor did Richard and Fred's wife Myrtle. Also, Richard was never going to marry, frustrating many a San Francisco debutant but, due to the family's wealth, not generating the innuendos that might have plagued a poorer soul from a less prominent family.⁵¹⁰ In addition, Richard and Fred's mother, Mrs. Lavinia Hotaling, was determined to keep the family reputation respectable among the San Francisco gentry. Thus Richard not marrying, and her realization of why, may have frustrated and upset his mother as well as his brother and sister-in-law. And, if

this were not enough, in the absence of anyone else wanting to bother with all the work of managing the company and increasing the family fortune, Richard may have been taking liberties. Whatever the real reasons, it all was going to blow up, bringing excitement and scandal to the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond.

On October 30th of 1918 Lavinia Hotaling filed a lawsuit against Richard for the return of 2499 shares in the Hotaling Estate Company—shares worth about \$1 million (\$23.5 million in 2026). Her complaint said that Richard had “wrongfully and fraudulently taken and converted [the shares] to his own use by having the shares transferred upon the books of the company.” The details changed a bit over the ensuing weeks and months, but at first she claimed that Richard had transferred them into his name without her knowledge, then later that he had tricked her into signing the transfer.^{s11}

Soon thereafter she, and Richard’s younger brother Frederick, filed another suit in Marin County over the ownership of the Sleepy Hollow Ranch, which Richard considered his home. (The Sleepy Hollow mansion is shown in *Figure s3*.) Lavinia and her attorneys alleged that when Richard built the home at Sleepy Hollow it was to have been for the whole family. He built it with Hotaling Estate funds, yet in 1917 he had the deed recorded in his name. Further, the suit alleged that Richard had exercised undue influence on Anson Jr.’s widow, Ella, to get her to give him her vote on the Estate board of directors.^{s12}

(Figure s3) Mansion on Sleepy Hollow Ranch after it became a golf club. [San Anselmo History Museum]

The battle dragged on, with legal moves on both sides, until it came to trial on August 4, 1919, in front of Superior Court Judge John Hunt in San Francisco. Not surprisingly there was apt interest all over the Bay Area and across the country. Here, for all to see and hear, were wealthy people in-fighting, obligated to testify in open court, laying bare their family secrets! The newspapers of the day followed every detail.^{s13} (In fact, the coverage in newspapers in California and beyond was almost overwhelming.) *Figure s4* (on cover) shows a newspaper picture of Lavinia and Fred during the trial.



Lavinia claimed Richard had tricked her into signing the share transfer documents, since she trusted him to manage the Estate Company and didn’t follow all the details. Richard countered with specific examples of his mother’s involvement in much of the company management and decision-making. On the second day of the trial Lavinia’s Attorney Gavin McNab also became witness Gavin McNab—as one of the directors of the Estate Company. McNab was no slouch attorney—he’d help end “boss” rule in San Francisco, had been an advisor to President Woodrow Wilson, had served as a U.S. Attorney, and had successfully defended several noted people. He testified that he had been hired by Fred Hotaling to investigate Richard’s management. In spite of his many accusations against Richard, McNab admitted that Richard did not deny him access to any of the company files. Richard claimed his mother had gifted her shares to him in November 1913 after Fred embarrassed her with his drunkenness at a ball at the Fairmont Hotel; Lavinia denied this; Fred said he was never intoxicated. (It should be noted that their oldest brother, Anson Jr., died of alcoholism.)^{s13}

Lavinia denied gifting Sleepy Hollow to Richard, although she admitted signing a deed to him to be recorded only if Anson’s widow, Ella—who was a native of Germany—married a German count who was supposedly courting her. (Hatred of Germans was high right after World War I and paranoia abounded. However, Ella

testified that while she had several friends who were German counts, she had no interest in marrying any of them.) Lavinia admitted gifting property to Fred and said that she felt Fred's inheritance was "slipping away from him." Richard said he felt it was his duty to hold onto Sleepy Hollow for the children of Anson Jr. & Ella. (Fred and his wife Myrtle had no children...nor did Richard, of course.) Both Lavinia and McNab berated Richard for using \$106,000 of the Estate Company's funds to renovate and add artwork to Sleepy Hollow. Attorneys for Richard said McNab had referred to Fred's wife Myrtle as "the little policeman," while McNab said that he'd only said that he wished she had been the one to police the Estate Company. Lavinia claimed she was penniless, although she admitted in court to many donations to people she liked and to getting that money through Richard. Fred admitted to writing anonymous letters to newspapers and to his nephew George that were "defamatory to the character of Mrs. Ella Hotaling," George's mother. Richard admitted to transferred at least 32 parcels of real estate back to the Estate Company *after* his mother filed the lawsuit. Ella testified in support of Richard's version of the Sleepy Hollow dispute. It seemed agreed by all that Richard had never received a salary for managing the Estate Company. Richard, for his part, refrained from speaking of either his mother or Fred in anything but respectful terms, disputing only facts.^{s13}

At the end of the trial Lavinia made a line-by-line denial of any and all witnesses who gave testimony contrary to her own. Past letters written by Richard to Fred and to his mother, assuring them they would be supported, were entered into evidence. Both responded by denying that Richard held any affection for them. In particular, Lavinia called Richard a "thankless child" and quoted the Merchant of Venice, saying "the devil himself can quote Scripture if it serves his purpose."^{s13}

Of interest to the discussion of the mills at Rock Point is the testimony by Richard—as he tried to show that Lavinia was much more involved in Estate Company business than she admitted—that she "objected to investments in Nevada mines and was opposed to the employment of W. B. Sayers, whom she held responsible for them. Dick [Richard] then assumed payment of Sayers on his own account."^{s14}

If your head isn't spinning at the charges and counter-charges you haven't been paying attention!

The trial was expected to take a week; it took almost four. In closing arguments, Lavinia and Fred's attorneys attacked Richard relentlessly. Richard's attorneys then rebutted the plaintiff's arguments in detail, pointing out that McNab acted as both an attorney and a witness. They claimed that "bitter controversy had existed between him and this defendant before the trial." The case began on August 4, 1919; it went to the judge on August 28.^{s15}

On Monday, November 17, 1919, Judge Hunt rendered a verdict for Mrs. Lavinia J. Hotaling on the stock case. Meanwhile the ownership of Sleepy Hollow was pending in a Marin County court.^{s16}

In February 1920 Richard Hotaling asked Judge Hunt for a new trial on the stock case, citing claiming "errors in the law and newly discovered evidence." That was denied, so Richard promptly started an appeal.^{s17}

On the matter of Sleepy Hollow, in the Fall of 1920 the Superior Court in San Rafael, Marin County, took up the issue of ownership. In this trial even more bitterness was shown! Attorney McNab entered into evidence a stack of letters Richard has written to his mother, saying she should be ashamed for her lies. The shortest of those was selected and Richard read it aloud, looking directly at his mother, in court. In other testimony Richard recounted conversations that were held with Anson Sr., Lavinia, and himself before the elder Anson died. Richard testified that it was understood from those conversations that he, Richard, was to be the owner of Sleepy Hollow. Lavinia denied all of this in court and the press wrote column after column about all the "lurid" details.^{s18}

The trial lasted two weeks, with judgment rendered in May 1921... for Lavinia.^{s18}

Somehow—or maybe necessarily—through all of this Richard kept up his acting and entertaining, perhaps deciding to enjoy his life, and Sleepy Hollow, or as long as he could.^{s19} Of course, even after two verdicts for Lavinia this battle was nowhere nearing an end. Unfortunately for Richard, the appeals were no more successful than the original trials. In January 1922 the California Supreme Court found for Lavinia in the stock case.^{s20} Richard responded by attempting to have his mother, age 76, declared incompetent and filed for

her guardianship and conservatorship of her estate. He said she was under the control and influence of "artful and designing persons," particularly noting \$75,000 she'd "turned over" to one man and much more money that she was planning to turn over to attorney Gavin McNab. Lavinia successfully avoided this claim by—so far as I can find—never allowing herself to be served with a summons to testify.^{s21}

By now you won't be shocked to learn that there were more appeals and legal moves on both the stock ownership and ownership of Sleepy Hollow.^{s22} But then there was more—much more—and it was far from boring!

On July 11, 1923, a call went out to the riot squad in San Francisco for what police believed to be a daring daytime hold-up at the Merchants Exchange building on California Street. It turned out instead to be a raucous fistfight between Richard Hotaling and his brother Fred—that also included Fred's chauffeur. It started in Richard's Hotaling Estate Company office. The noise of the blows attracted an employee, who judged that it was a robber attacking Richard and thus yelled, "Holdup! They're mobbing the place." A riot call was then made to police headquarters. Soon the street was jammed and traffic halted so officers could make their way into the building. "When the police reached the Hotaling offices they found that Fred Hotaling and his chauffeur had disappeared and the excitement subsided. No arrests were made."^{s23}

Unfortunately for Richard, on March 13, 1924 the final blow was dealt—not by Fred or his chauffeur but by the California Supreme Court. The court found that the ranch should not have been transferred to his name and should be transferred back to the Estate Company.^{s24}

So next they fought over one (controlling) share of stock, a fight Richard also lost, in June 1924.^{s25}

In January 1925 Fred Hotaling filed another lawsuit, this time asking that a receiver be appointed to take over the Hotaling Estate Company, charging misappropriation of funds by his brother Richard. He also asked for the return of more than \$106,000 from Richard as well as more than \$141,000 from his sister-in-law Ella.^{s26}

And then things got interesting....

The next twist was more unpredictable—and shocking—than any that came before. "POISON MILK SENT HOTALING" and "RICH S. F. MAN FINDS DEATH DRAUGHT ON DOORSTEP" screamed the headlines on the EXTRA edition of *The Bulletin*. Poisoned milk had been substituted for the usual one left on the doorstep of the Hotaling residence on Franklin Street. This was the home gifted by Lavinia to Fred and his wife Myrtle, and where all three of them lived.^{s27}

In perfect Hotaling family style the ensuing accusations, facts, claims, counter-claims, and inter-family drama could stand alone as a Made-for-TV movie. Fred said he took a taste, found the milk acrid, and "immediately took medicine to counteract the dose." The police were called and the milk analyzed. It was found to contain "sufficient poison to wipe out the entire family."^{s27} Ensuing investigation established that the milk had been substituted after it reached the doorstep. Fred, unsurprisingly, accused his brother Richard of the plot. Hired gunmen were arrested and claimed that Richard had paid them \$3300 to "put Mrs. Hotaling [Fred's wife Myrtle] out of the way." They also testified that they thought it was easier to just kill the entire family, even though they claimed Richard had said he did not want to hurt his mother or Fred. The gunmen then found a couple of other thugs to do the task. Amidst all this, however, it was Richard Hotaling that gave police the lead that led them to the gunmen and thugs.^{s28} *Figure s5* shows a "SCANDAL!" headline along with newspaper photos of the family members involved.

Did Richard Hotaling reach the end of his rope and hire men to kill his sister-in-law Myrtle? Was it all a plot to discredit Richard in the face of the receivership battle? I have no clue. However, a Grand Jury was called, before which Richard appeared voluntarily. The police hit a wall and thus, because none of the accusations were supported by independent evidence, the Grand Jury cleared Richard.^{s29}

Amazingly, in July 1925 a settlement was reached between the feuding family members. At a meeting of the Hotaling Estate Company's Board of Directors approval was given to a settlement in which real and personal property would be divided equally among mother Mrs. Levina J. Hotaling, sons Richard M. and Frederick C. Hotaling, and daughter-in-law, Mrs. Ella K. Hotaling. And, because it was the Hotalings, the drama of an

urgent plane fight (unusual in 1925) insured that the decision could be reached before midnight on the day the law governing the settlement was to expire!^{s30}

After seven years the battle was over. There would be no more lawsuits or countersuits. However, days before the settlement Richard's home—Sleepy Hollow Ranch, including "his" elegant mansion—was sold for \$250,000 (\$4.7 million in today's dollars). The dairy was closed and the 1600 acres were to be subdivided with the mansion becoming the clubhouse for an elegant golf club.^{s31}



(Figure s5) Newspaper pictures of the principals in the Hotaling poisoning scandal. [San Francisco Chronicle, 1925-02-27, page 3]

In the meantime, Richard returned to his true passion of acting. He appeared as a scheming spider in the annual "Jinx" of the Bohemian Club at their Grove on the Russian River. A few weeks later another club, The Family, presented a play written by Richard at their annual gathering.^{s32} However, Richard himself was unable to attend, having contracted pneumonia during the run of the Grove play.^{s33}

After spending two weeks in a sanitarium Richard improved enough to return to Sleepy Hollow. This must have been bittersweet for Richard; did it contribute to what happened next? There was much speculation later that it did. On the road to recovery, Richard contracted the flu. Since Sleepy Hollow was some distance from physicians and medical facilities, Richard moved to the home of his long-time business associate and friend, W. P. Sayers, on Lombard Street in San Francisco, where he was expected to convalesce and recover. He did not. On November 13, 1925, Richard was dead. He was 57 years old.^{s34}

Figure s6 shows a newspaper photo of Richard that accompanied his obituary. The funeral was held at the residence of his sister-in-law Ella on Franklin Street in San Francisco. This was across the street from the home of Fred, Myrtle, and Lavinia, but they did not attend. Notables from all over the city and beyond attended, and many flowers were sent and tributes offered; one of his friends collapsed from grief at the funeral. About 10 days later the Bohemian Club and The Family, together, held a "Memorial Hour" for him in San Francisco. Among his friends and to many beyond it was agreed that he was "born for the stage" but instead did his duty to his family.^{s35}

To the surprise of no one, in his will Richard mentioned his mother and brother but left them nothing; his entire estate went to his nephew and niece, George H. Hotaling and Mrs. Jane Hotaling Swinerton.^{s35}



(Figure s6) Newspaper picture accompanying the obituary of Richard Manderful Hotaling, age 57. [San Francisco Examiner, 1925-11-15, page 1]

Richard was gone but the others went on with their lives. In the years after the trials Lavinia's attorney, Gavin McNab, successfully represented Mary Pickford, Jack Dempsey, "Fatty" Arbuckle, and Charlie Chaplin. Then, in December 1927 at age 63, McNab died at his desk in San Francisco.^{s36} As for the family, Fred's wife Myrtle was thereafter only mentioned in connection with their businesses, and died in their home on Franklin Street in June 1928 after a brief illness. Never mentioned again in the society pages, Mrs. Anson P. (Lavinia) Hotaling, 83, died of a stroke in their home in January 1929. After several months of ill health, in January 1930 Mrs. Anson P. (Ella) Hotaling Jr. died of a stroke, at age 60, at a sanitarium in San Francisco. On the other hand, Fred Hotaling went on to become a "clubman" himself, dying in October 1943 at age 73 after a short illness. He died in a hospital in Santa Cruz, CA, where he owned a hotel and maintained business interests.^{s37}

Richard was mentioned in Lavinia's obituary, which said little about Lavinia herself. In several lines about his life he was said to have died "after making a mark in the literary and artistic life of the city." In addition, the Hotaling feud was mentioned in hers and all of the other family obituaries, including that of nephew George, who died in December 1961.

However, when Mrs. Jane Hotaling Swinerton died in August 1969 the family troubles went unmentioned.^{s37}

Maybe the feud was finally over.

Linda L. Clements has been a Dayton resident and active in local volunteer organizations for more than 30 years. She is owner of Nevada Composites, President of the Historical Society of Dayton Valley, and also Historian for Dayton's 1879/1881 C&C Railroad Depot Rebuilding. Email: president@HSDV.org

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