



Quarterly Newsletter of the Truckee Donner Railroad Society

# Snowshed

*Keeping Truckee's Railroad History Alive!*

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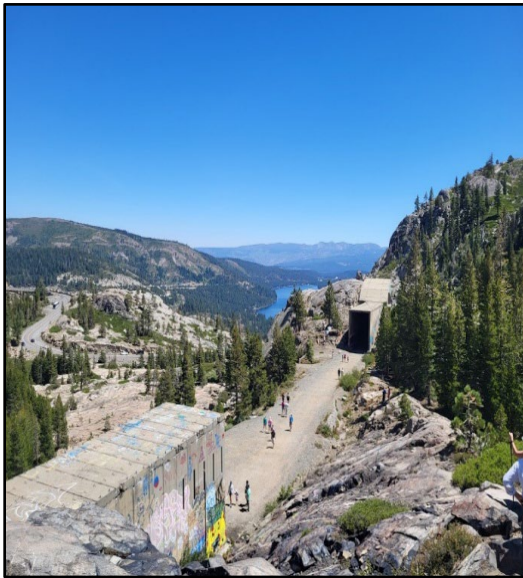
## Event Calendar

|  |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| Truckee River Railroad "Santa Train"   | November 29     |
| "Truckee 1927" Model Railroad at the Steve Randall Community Recreation Center | Now - January 6 |
| TDRRS Board of Directors Meeting   | January 7       |

## President's Letter

Dan Cobb

It must be fall. The riding trains have been put away, our "Truckee 1927" model railroad is set up at the rec center, and the docent heater is on at the caboose museum. Our busy summer on the Truckee River Railroad wrapped up with 14 run days and over 6,300 rides given, which is a new record. If the weather cooperates, we'll run our annual Santa Train on November 29<sup>th</sup>, and then we'll give the trains a rest until Memorial Day.



Tunnels 6 and 7 at Donner Pass, as seen from the western "Summit Camp" with Donner Lake in the distance. Photo by Dan Cobb

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, we did our first tour in many years of the Donner Summit tunnels. In addition to exploring the tunnels, China Wall, and Lincoln Highway underpass, we hiked around the newly dedicated Summit Camps area and saw where the Chinese workers' cookhouse and bunkhouses were located. See Steve's article in this issue for details and some related history.

Our historical model railroad is once again set up at the Steve Randall Community Recreation Center in the north hallway. Rather than move the model for the Christmas Tree lighting as we did last year, we plan to keep it at the Rec Center over the holidays. It will be displayed until January 6<sup>th</sup>. See the article in this newsletter for more details.

Our project to build a new railroad museum in the Truckee Regional Park is moving forward. Last spring, the Park District board approved a Memorandum of Understanding that allows us to build in the park and for Park District staff to collaborate with us on the project. Architectural drawings and engineering plans were completed over the summer, and we're now soliciting bids from general contractors and talking with materials providers about possible donations in kind to keep our costs down. For more details see Durk Stelter's article in this newsletter.

As always, we need volunteers. We always need help with our Truckee River Railroad runs, and we're particularly short of volunteers to staff the caboose museum, where volunteers recently completed repairs to the deck and gave it a coat of paint. No experience is required and it's a great opportunity to meet both locals and visitors and share Truckee's railroad history. We also need help with our model railroad. Even if you're not a modeler, you can assist with our school programs and public run days. C'mon down and run a train! Financial donations toward our new museum are also needed, and donations of model trains enable us to expand our collection of rolling stock or sell to raise funds for the museum.

## Truckee River Railroad

Tom Smith

The society completed another successful summer season of the Truckee River Railroad miniature riding train and we are now looking forward to the Santa train ride on November 29. Also, we want to give a shout out to



Tom Nixon and family working on the TRR.

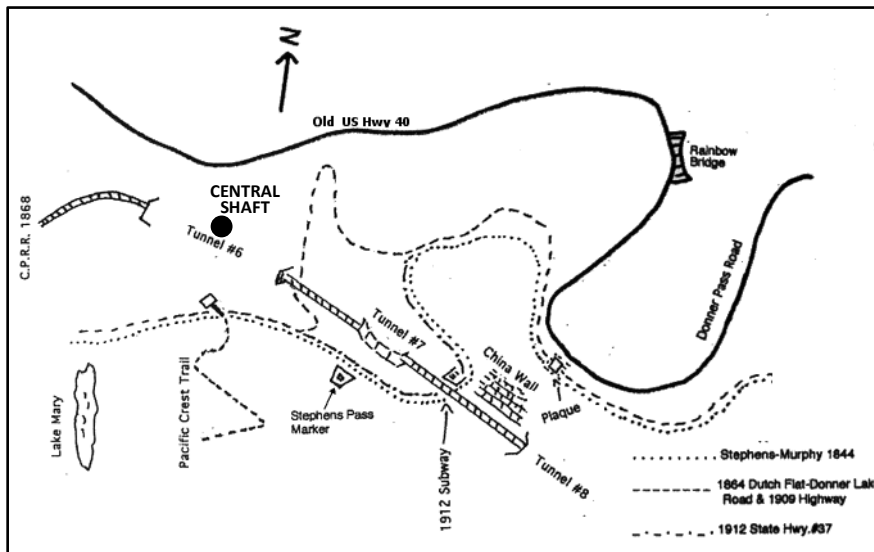
Tom Nixon and his family. Each summer Tom and his son in law and grandsons volunteer and do a project at TRR. This year they did a great job painting our railroad riding car storage barns, installing a cap rail on the station fence, and moving a storage shed. Thanks to Tom and family and we hope to see you again next summer!

## Trestle Tour: Donner Summit

Steve Edelman

On August 24th we conducted our last Trestle Tour of the season and it was certainly a grand finale as we explored Donner Pass and its storied transportation history including America's first transcontinental railroad. Dan Cobb led the tour, assisted by Steve Edelman and Jay Jacobs.

Before the railroad, Donner Pass was an Indian trading route. In 1844, the Stephens-Murphy party was the first group of immigrants to use the pass (see map) followed two years later by the ill-fated Donner Party. In 1853,



Map showing the history of transportation routes across Donner Pass.

Congress authorized surveys of potential routes for the "Pacific Railroad" and two years later identified several potential routes. In 1860, a young civil engineer named Theodore "Ted" Judah surveyed the central route over Donner Pass and obtained funding from four Sacramento merchants, the "Big Four." The 1862 Pacific Railway Act chose Judah's route due to gold in northern California, silver in northern Nevada, and the absence of Southern Congressmen - due to the Civil War -- to advocate for a southern route. The Act specified two railroad charters: the

Union Pacific Railroad (UP) to build the eastern portion of the transcontinental route and the Central Pacific Railroad (CP) to build the western portion. In 1863, grading for the CP commenced in Sacramento and the first rails were laid later that year.

By far the biggest challenge for the CP was the crossing of the Pacific Crest via a summit tunnel at Donner Pass, dubbed "Tunnel 6." The glaciated granite formed a solid wall that had to be penetrated with hand tools, animal power, and explosives. Adding to the challenge, heavy snow slowed and stopped work, so during the winter of



Exploring Tunnel 6. Photo by Jay Jacobs

1866-67, CP workers hauled three locomotives, forty cars, and material for 40 miles of track to the Truckee River at the town of Truckee via the Dutch Flat-Donner Lake Wagon Road, which had been built in 1864 (see map). From Truckee the CP followed the Truckee River eastward from Truckee as work on Tunnel 6 continued.

Over 10,000 Chinese men worked on the railroad and 3,000 of them worked on the Tunnel 6, which was 1,659 feet long, 19 feet high, and 16. Teams of three men used sledgehammers and 4- to 6-foot long bits to drill 2.5-inch by 2-feet deep holes for explosives, then they filled the holes with black powder, set a long fuse, and ran! They did this in three shifts, 24 hours a day. In early 1866, work on two faces was yielding only 7 inches of progress per day, so the railroad dug a center shaft so they could work 4 faces at once and thus doubled their rate of progress. Nitroglycerin was introduced in February 1867, which increased progress to about 22 inches per day, but was discontinued in November 1867 when its inventor, Alfred Nobel, demanded payments for its use.

The Chinese workers lived in a collection of wooden bunkhouses, tents, and huts and ate in communal cookhouses. In winter, the huts could be buried under 15 feet of snow, with tunnels connecting the buildings. More than 1,000 Chinese workers died from accidents or exposure.

Railroad facilities at Donner Summit were constructed at the west portal of Tunnel 6 and included a turntable for turning helper engines, a maintenance facility with sidings, and a hotel. The first locomotive went through Tunnel 6 on December 1, 1867, and it took another four months to complete the rest of the tunnels and track laying so they could run trains through to Truckee. The first revenue train passed through the summit tunnel on June 18, 1868, and the following day the road was opened to Reno. From Reno, the CP had relatively clear



Our group explores the 1912 underpass for California State Highway 37. The east portal of Tunnel 7 is in the upper left. Photo by Steve Edelman

sailing as it wound its way eastward around the mountain ranges and across the flat alluvial valleys of northern Nevada and northwest Utah to meet the UP on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, henceforth binding the nation.

When the railroad was completed, it crossed the Dutch Flat-Donner Lake Wagon Road just east of the east portal of Tunnel 6. Travelers had to drive up the steep grade, open the doors of the snowshed that had

been between Tunnels 6 and 7, drive into the shed and down the track, then out the doors on the other side. In 1909, the Dutch Flat-Donner Lake Wagon Road was upgraded for automobile traffic and in 1912 was rerouted as California State Highway 37, which became part of the transcontinental Lincoln Highway. The rerouting included an underpass between Tunnels 7 and 8 to eliminate the "at grade" crossing.

The Southern Pacific Railroad (CP successor) double tracked the route over Donner Pass in 1925 by building a longer (10,322 feet), lower-elevation, single-track tunnel – dubbed the "Big Hole" -- located about 3,000 feet south of and about 200 feet lower than the original tunnel. The original summit route remained in use as one of the two tracks until 1993, when the SP abandoned the 6.7-mile of the original route over the summit, including Tunnel 6. In 1926, the Lincoln Highway became U.S. Highway 40, which included rerouting over Donner Summit ("Old US Hwy 40 on the map). In 1964, Interstate 80 was built over Donner Summit (just north of the map area).

## "Truckee 1927" Model Railroad

Dan Cobb

The Railroad Society's "Truckee 1927" model railroad is once again on exhibit at the Steve Randall Community Recreation Center, and it's better than ever. The biggest addition is "the mountain"; our nod to Donner Pass, with a tunnel for eastbound traffic and a wooden snowshed protecting westbound trains from avalanches. The Blume Hotel (today the Truckee Hotel / Moody's Restaurant) has been recreated in its 1927 appearance and now provides a luxury lodging option for tired railroad travelers. The passenger depot, freight house, SP Hotel,



A westbound passenger train, headed by cab forward 4110, arrives at the Truckee depot. The depot building in the foreground is still in use today, but the Southern Pacific Hotel behind it no longer exists. Commercial Row, the Blume Hotel, passenger car barn, and 1882 granite roundhouse can be seen in the background.



Cars waiting for a train on Bridge Street. The Blume Hotel (today's Truckee Hotel / Moody's Restaurant) and the Truckee Livery stable, built in 1899 by John Moody, are in the background. Wondering what goes in the empty lot in front of the horses? That will be the Knights of Pythias meeting hall and an undertaker's office, once we figure out how to model it.

and the "mallet shed" have interiors, lights, and inhabitants. Since we set up the model on September 17<sup>th</sup>, we have hosted school field trips from SELS and Truckee Elementary. As part of their 3<sup>rd</sup> grade local history curriculum, the students learned what the town looked like in 1927, how the railroad brought people and goods to Truckee, and how it supported local industries like lumber and dairy. We also taught them about train safety and techniques for creating scale model scenery. Another school field trip visit (Tahoe Expedition Academy) is planned for early December, and we're already scheduling school visits for 2026.

In October, we conducted a model railroad workshop for middle school students. Students learned how to run trains using Digital Command Control (DCC), how to tune up rolling stock, how to improve locomotive performance, and simulated Truckee railroad operations in the 1920s.

Railroad Society volunteers will be running trains at the Rec Center from 2:00 to 5:00 PM every Friday except the day after Thanksgiving. Holiday decorations and special trains are planned for Christmas week. The "Truckee 1927" model railroad is on exhibit until January 6, 2026.

## The Truckee Railroad Museum Project

Durk Stelter

We continue to make progress on our objective to build a railroad museum in Truckee. Our focus has been to build it in the Truckee River Regional Park near the depot for the Truckee River Railroad, where we operate the park train rides for children and their willing adult chaperones. The museum exterior is designed to look like the Truckee Southern Pacific Depot from 1901. It is a simple rectangular building with 12 foot walls and a cathedral ceiling. The lower parts of the windows will actually be covered from the inside to allow for maximum wall space for exhibits. The upper portions will allow natural light.

The size of the building is about 2,200 square feet with another approximately 450 square feet for bathrooms. The bathrooms would be decided by the Park District based on an economic and benefits analysis. They will compare repairing and bringing the existing park bathrooms up to standards versus building new bathrooms connected to the museum. The bathrooms attached to the museum would allow for at least one to be open during museum hours in the winter. The building also includes a workspace where we can conduct STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) classes to teach maker skills used in model railroading for the community.

Since we signed our MOU with the Park District, we have completed the design and engineering of the building, met with and obtained permission from the Truckee Donner Public Utility District (TDPUD, which owns the land),



Rendering of the future Truckee Railroad Museum in the Regional Park (rendering by Megan Jost, architect)

received estimates from a contractor, and obtained the endorsement of the CATT (Contractors Association of Truckee Tahoe). This endorsement will accelerate our ability to pursue initial large donors within the contractor community for labor and materials.

Next steps include filing the preliminary permit application with the Town of Truckee. This is a very low cost way to understand what we need to obtain services for gas, electric, water and sewer (ability to serve confirmation), and to permit the project

through the Town of Truckee. We are confident we'll be able to obtain utility service based on our independent work with the agencies involved, but this will give us the confirmation for the Town of Truckee as well. This work will lead us to the important steps of completing our fund raising, permitting and construction. The window for construction will be dependent on the speed of our fund raising. We should have a better understanding of that timeline in the next few months. For those who wish to show support now, we are always open to actual donations, pledges and/or introductions to any person or organization who may be a good candidate for a donation. If you have ideas, please reach out to Durk Stelter at [durk.stelter@tdrrs.org](mailto:durk.stelter@tdrrs.org).

## Volunteering and Membership

The Railroad Society could use your help in the following areas:

**Truckee River Railroad (ride-on train)** – Issue tickets, load the train, run the crossing gates, operate the trains as engineer or conductor, and help keep our riders safe. Training is provided and new volunteers are always welcome.

**Museum Volunteer** – Learn and share your knowledge of Truckee’s history and local railroading in the Truckee Railroad Museum (caboose) or the Museum of Truckee History. Volunteers work as individuals or pairs in three-hour shifts. Training is provided.

**Newsletter Contributor** – Contribute articles on local railroad history or other topics of interest for publication in our *Snowshed* newsletter.

**Cosmetic Restoration of Railroad Equipment** – We’ll hire professionals to do hazardous materials abatement and retore our wrecking crane to its full mid-century glory, but we can use some help with detailing and ongoing maintenance of the crane and the rotary snowplow.

**Model Railroad** – We need additional railroad modelers and builders to design and build structures, create scenery, run trains, and talk with visitors about Truckee’s railroad history. Join our committee and build “Truckee 1927”!

To volunteer, drop us a line at [info@tdrrs.org](mailto:info@tdrrs.org). Memberships are open to anyone interested in preserving Truckee’s railroad history and supporting the ongoing activities of the society. To join, renew your membership, or make a donation to the society, visit our website at <https://tdrrs.org/membership> or scan the QR code.



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| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Board of Directors</b></p> <p>Dan Cobb — President and Historian<br/>                 Bob Bell — Executive Vice President and Treasurer<br/>                 Jerry Blackwill — Vice President and Museum Manager<br/>                 Steve Edelman — Newsletter Editor<br/>                 Jay Jacobs — Webmaster<br/>                 Tom Smith — Truckee River Railroad<br/>                 Bill Ramsey – Secretary<br/>                 Durk Stelter – New Railroad Museum</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Our History</b></p> <p>Railroads of the Truckee area played a significant role in founding and developing the town of Truckee. From the blasting of black powder in the granite over Donner Lake, to the hissing of the first steam engines coming into town, to the whistles of lumberjacks in the mountains, to the crack of ice being loaded in the reefers, to the tourists flocking to enjoy the beauty of the area, Truckee’s story is very much the story of its railroads.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Our Mission</b></p> <p>Our mission is to preserve and celebrate Truckee’s colorful railroad history and to educate residents and visitors about the important role of railroads in making Truckee what it is today. We strive to enrich the experience of residents and visitors through railroad-related entertainment and education.</p> |
| <p>The Truckee Donner Railroad Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-exempt organization. EIN 91-1917864.</p>   |   |