

# Snowshed

February, 2023

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## Presidents Letter

**By Jerry Blackwill**

This is the snowiest winter I've seen in thirty years. With the exception of our railroad museum, everything else is hunkered down. The snow even prevents the museum from opening up on some weekends. Our work crews of Ed Larson, Dave DePuy, Jay Jacobs, myself, and others have been clearing the caboose museum stairs and deck for visitors.



Snow in front of the Truckee Railroad Museum on March 2, 2023. PC Jerry Blackwill.

Our tentative schedule for running the Truckee River Railroad has been set and is listed in Bob Bell's article on Page 2. The schedule for the Trestle Tours is to be determined, depending on the timing of the spring melt. Those dates will be listed on our website, [tdrrs.org](http://tdrrs.org), and in the May issue of *Snowshed*.

Thanks again to all our members who operate the trains and help with the crowds. We can always use more volunteers to help run the trains and staff the museum. If you would like to get involved, please see the details and contact information in the *Help Wanted!* article below.

Also, if you haven't already done so, please renew your membership as soon as possible. Take advantage of the offer of free rides on the Virginia and Truckee railroad out of Virginia City.

Jerry

## Help Wanted!

The Railroad Society needs your help! The Truckee River Railroad needs volunteers to maintain the track, manage the crowds, and run the trains—contact [kids\\_train@tdrrs.org](mailto:kids_train@tdrrs.org). To train and volunteer as a docent for the Railroad Museum (caboose) or the Museum of Truckee History, contact [museum\\_manager@tdrrs.org](mailto:museum_manager@tdrrs.org). To help with equipment restoration, write to [equipment@tdrrs.org](mailto:equipment@tdrrs.org). To assist with the quarterly publication of this newsletter, contact [daniel.cobb@tdrrs.org](mailto:daniel.cobb@tdrrs.org).

## Truckee River Railroad

by **Bob Bell**

The Truckee River Railroad 2023 season (kids' train rides at the Truckee Regional Park) is getting close. The tentative run days for this year are May 27, June 17, July 1, 15, 29, August 12, 19, September 2, 16, 30. All dates are "weather permitting" of course and subject to change. Please put these dates on your calendar and come out and help us. We'll have a work day in May to get everything unwinterized and ready to roll. We always need help not only running the train but help with ticketing, crossing gate arms, road crossing safety, and other items. We might have a new engine this year but nothing firm at this point in time.

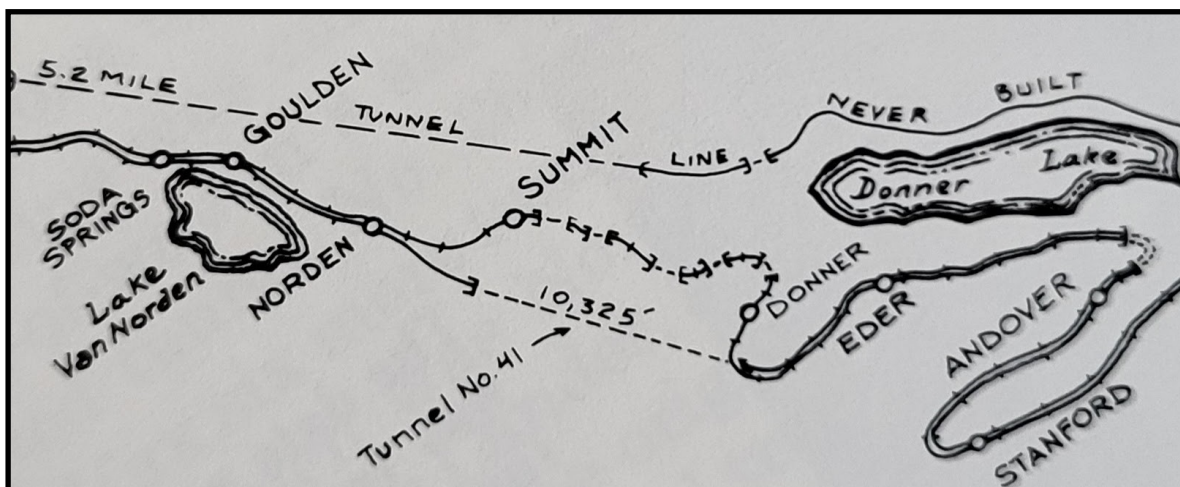
## Tunneling to Truckee

*Southern Pacific's Grand Plans to Tunnel Through the Sierra in the Early 1900s*

by **Dan Cobb**

On Saturday, August 17, 1901, the front page of the *Sacramento Bee* proclaimed "Six Mile Tunnel Through Sierras". The article noted that the new tunnel would shorten the Sierra crossing by seven miles and eliminate fourteen miles of snowsheds, and concluded with "tools are on the ground and the work will be commenced right away and bored night and day from both ends until finished."

Another article published three days later in the *Bee* was titled "Two and a Half Days to Chicago", and described a 27,000 foot tunnel that would lower the railroad summit by 1500'. Additional details were outlined in the following Saturday edition, reprinted from the *Colfax Sentinel*. According to that reporting, two routes or alignments were under consideration. One was a five-mile tunnel that would emerge above the west end of Donner Lake and run along the north shore of the lake, connect-



ing Map showing proposed 5.2 mile tunnel from Spruce to Lakeview, with a grade along the north shore of Donner Lake. Tunnel 41 is the 2-mile tunnel completed in 1925. From the book *Donner Pass* by John Signor.

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## Tunneling to Truckee (continued from Page 2)

with the existing line just west of Truckee. The other was a six-mile tunnel under the mountains from the American River Canyon to the Stanford siding above the south shore of Donner Lake. The article noted that this tunnel would also be “low enough to convey the water of Lake Tahoe to the western slope.” There were even reports that SP was considering a double-track tunnel 18 miles in length with a total cost of over \$30 million, and would electrify the line in the process.

There was certainly cause for excitement. Tunneling technology had improved significantly with the invention of pneumatic drills and drilling machines. The 2.6 mile Cascade tunnel through Stevens Pass in Washington state had been completed by the Great Northern Railroad in 1900. Control of the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific railroads had been acquired the previous year by E. H. Harriman of the Union Pacific, who had declared his intent to invest \$18 million in improvements. Harriman’s aim was to double-track the Central Pacific from Oakland to Ogden, making it capable of handling as much freight between Ogden and San Francisco as the Union Pacific could handle from St. Louis to Ogden. His grander vision was the extension of American commerce to the Far East and the creation of an around-the-world transportation line. Improving the efficiency of the “Overland Route” was a critical piece of that ambitious plan.

And then ... nothing happened for a very long time. In November of 1901, the *Bee* reported that the original line surveyed had proven to be impractical, and the survey crew was working on a new line that would “begin at the head of Donner Lake, with the intention of coming out on the Yuba River near Cisco.” Another article in July 1903 notes that further surveys will be done “in order to see if a better route can be obtained”. Evidently the engineering was proving to be more daunting than originally thought.

Then there was the question of whether a tunnel of 5 miles or longer would require electrification. In 1903, a train carrying 103 passengers was stopped inside the Cascade tunnel in Washington and the engine crew lost consciousness while working on the problem. Passengers and crew were saved by an alert fireman who released the brakes and coasted the train to safety. Notwithstanding this risk, a *Sacramento Bee* article on 29 August, 1904 describing the planned 5-mile tunnel, stated that all trains running through the tunnel “will burn fuel oil, so as to reduce the danger from smoke, as well as the nuisance of it, to a minimum.” Another article, on June 16, 1905, stated that “electric power is to be used in hauling trains through the tunnel to prevent the accumulation of dangerous gases”, and other articles speculated on the possibility of building a hydroelectric plant on the Truckee River to power trains through the tunnel. Electrification would add significant cost to the tunnel project, both to generate the power and for electric locomotives to power trains through the tunnel.

There was also occasional speculation that Harriman would accomplish his double-tracking goal another way—by acquiring Western Pacific’s Beckwith Pass route. A March, 1905 article in the *Bee* went as far as to announce that the Sierra tunnel project had been dropped in favor of the Beckwith route, but offered no details on the business dealings that would make that possible. Another article a couple of months later in the *Sacramento Star* reversed that, noting that Harriman of Union Pacific and Jay Gould of the Denver & Rio Grande and Western Pacific were no longer working together and would each pursue their transcontinental ambitions separately.

In 1907, the Interstate Commerce Commission began to investigate the relations among the western

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## Tunneling to Truckee (continued from Page 3)

railroads as a possible violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Named in the suit along with the railroad entities was E. H. Harriman, who had a financial interest in most of the major western railroads including the Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and the AT&SF.

Harriman did not live to see his tunnel built or his merger unwound. He died in 1909 at his estate in New York, at the age of 61. Cause of death was never definitively determined, but some type of abdominal cancer was strongly suspected.

In 1911, the Eighth Circuit Court found that the merger of the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific did not in fact violate the Sherman Anti-Trust law, but the federal government continued to press other aspects of its suit. In 1913, UP and SP, bowing to legal and business pressures, proposed to dissolve their merger, with each retaining a portion of the Central Pacific.

Talk of the great tunnel persisted through 1912. SP Chairman Robert S. Lovett told reporters in September of that year that SP's directors were "considering" a 5-mile tunnel, but that "the proposition stood just where it did five years ago". Traffic on the Donner route continued to increase, with 44 trains handling 493 cars on the peak day in 1913. Traffic congestion no doubt increased the urgency of double-tracking the Donner route, but managing the traffic and attendant staffing and equipment needs also preoccupied the railroad and made infrastructure improvements more difficult.

In December of 1917, eight months after the United States entered World War I on behalf of the Allies, the majority of the country's railroads, including the UP, SP and CP, were nationalized under the Federal Possession and Control Act, and they remained under Federal control until March, 1920. During this period, the government owners eliminated non-critical passenger service, expanded freight operations, and purchased more than 100,000 new railroad cars and 1,930 steam engines, but made little or no investment in new trackage.

In 1923, the ICC and the Justice Department ruled that SP should be allowed to retain CP in its entirety. This resolution of the legal control of the CP unleashed major improvement projects around the system, including the double-tracking of the Donner route from Blue Canyon to Truckee. Plans to drill a 2-mile tunnel at the summit (Tunnel 41) were announced and work began almost immediately. The summit tunnel was holed through on August 25, 1925, and the first train passed through on September 19th of that year. While significantly less ambitious than the 5-mile or longer tunnels proposed twenty five years earlier, it was still the third-longest railroad tunnel in the United States, exceeded only by the 23,176-foot Hoosac Tunnel on the Boston & Maine and the 14,413 foot Cascade Tunnel on the Great Northern.

Information in this article was sourced from articles in the *Sacramento Bee* and *Sacramento Star* newspapers, the book *Donner Pass*, by John R. Signor, and the *Historic American Engineering Record* No. CA-196, titled "Central Pacific Transcontinental Railroad".

# Truckee Donner Railroad Society

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**Our History:** 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.

**Our Mission:** Our mission is to preserve, interpret, and educate the public about railroading life and history in the Truckee region including its contribution to Truckee and the nation. We will accomplish this through the acquisition, preservation, and restoration of relevant equipment and artifacts and the display of exhibits in our Truckee museums.

## Volunteer!

You can help TDRS and serve the community by volunteering for one of our projects or ongoing operations:

- ♦ Snowplow & Crane Restoration
- ♦ Truckee River Railroad Operations
- ♦ Museum Docent
- ♦ Newsletter

Contact us at [info@tdrrs.org](mailto:info@tdrrs.org).

## Donate!

You can also help by donating at our website, [tdrrs.org/membership](http://tdrrs.org/membership).

The Truckee Donner Railroad Society is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization.

Truckee Donner Railroad Society  
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