

# Snowshed

August, 2020

Volume 13 Number 2



## News & Events

- ◆ Museum of Truckee History Grand Opening on hold pending "Shelter in Place" (SIP) directives.
- ◆ Truckee River Railroad will also not run this summer due to COVID restrictions.
- ◆ The *Snowshed* newsletter will be going to an all-electronic format starting with our next issue.

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## Presidents Letter

### Jerry Blackwill

This is the twelfth year of the newsletter's publication. We want to thank the first editor, Steve Disbrow, for bringing this to life. Dan Cobb has taken it over and continues the great tradition started by Steve. Thanks, Again!

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought almost everything to a halt. Our caboose museum is closed, we can't run our Truckee River Railroad in the regional park safely, the new Museum of Truckee History can't open, and our annual picnic meeting at the park can't occur.

While we can't entertain visitors, we continue to work on our projects. The exhibits in the Museum of Truckee History are being finished and remodeling of the engine shed is nearing completion.

I want to give credit to the many individuals and organizations who are helping with the engine shed: Tom Smith, Tom Nixon, Frank Ross, Greg Zirbel, Greg Kuzma, Bob Bell, Ed Larson, Bill Sunnergren, Placer Electric, and the Truckee-Donner Recreation and Park District. Your efforts are much appreciated.

We still need funds for the restoration of the rotary snowplow and the railroad wrecking crane. If you can spare some money, please send it to the Truckee Donner Railroad Society, P.O.Box 3838, Truckee, CA 96160.



Thanks to everyone who is helping to keep the railroad society going during these difficult times.

Jerry Blackwill

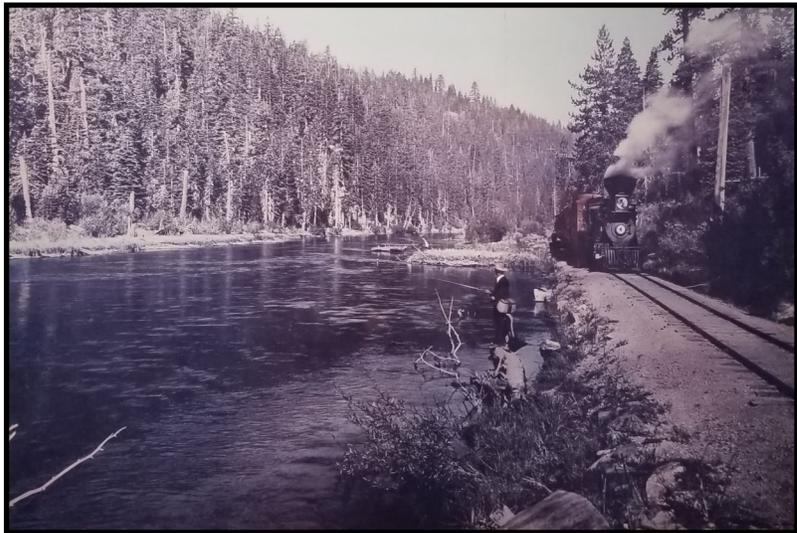
## How Southern Pacific Saved Lake Tahoe

**Daniel Cobb**

In the early 1900s, few people would have accused the Southern Pacific Corporation of acting in the public interest, much less of working to preserve the natural environment. The much more popular view was that of “The Octopus”, a 1901 novel by Frank Norris that presented a thinly disguised SP as a giant, greedy, self-serving enterprise with its tentacles into everything. But there were several situations when SP’s self-interest coincided with that of protecting our natural treasures.

In 1902, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior established the U.S. Reclamation Service to undertake water development and irrigation projects throughout the West. One of their early projects was the Truckee-Carson Irrigation project, which diverted water from the Truckee River below Reno to irrigate desert land in the area around present-day Fallon, NV. From the start of that project, the Reclamation Service had its eye on Lake Tahoe as a controllable water supply, and by the early 1920s had acquired control of the low dam at Tahoe’s outlet and considerable lakeshore acreage. A proposal was developed to build a much larger dam to raise the level of the lake as much as 20 feet, blast a channel below the rim to control another 20 feet, and manage Lake Tahoe as a reservoir for irrigation. The project would inundate much of the low-lying land around the lake in spring, create an ugly “bathtub ring” in late season when the water was drawn down, and periodically flood the Truckee River canyon and the town of Truckee with up to three times the river’s natural flood threshold.

One of the few commercial enterprises around the lake at that time was the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Company (LTR&TC). In 1900, D. L. Bliss established the railway and ran narrow gauge tracks to transport tourists from the Southern Pacific station at Truckee to his Tahoe Tavern resort and steamship operations at Tahoe City. After Bliss died in 1907, his children carried on the business, but by the early 1920s, the freight business in the Truckee River canyon (mostly logging) that had helped support the railroad had dried up, and the railroad was no longer profitable.



LTR&TC passenger train in the Truckee River canyon

While the Reclamation Service had the authority to seize land needed for its water projects and to condemn improvements on that land, it was obligated to compensate owners for the market value of condemned property. Costs to condemn the Bliss properties, including the aging narrow-gauge railroad, were significant, but not insurmountable, and the Service was poised to move ahead with the project.

Southern Pacific was generally an enthusiastic supporter of agricultural development and irrigation projects in particular, since the transportation of agricultural products provided reliable revenue for the railroad. In this case, however, SP saw that the Reclamation Service project would destroy their growing and profitable Tahoe tourist business and would also force relocation of their yards and service facilities at Truckee, which would periodically be flooded.

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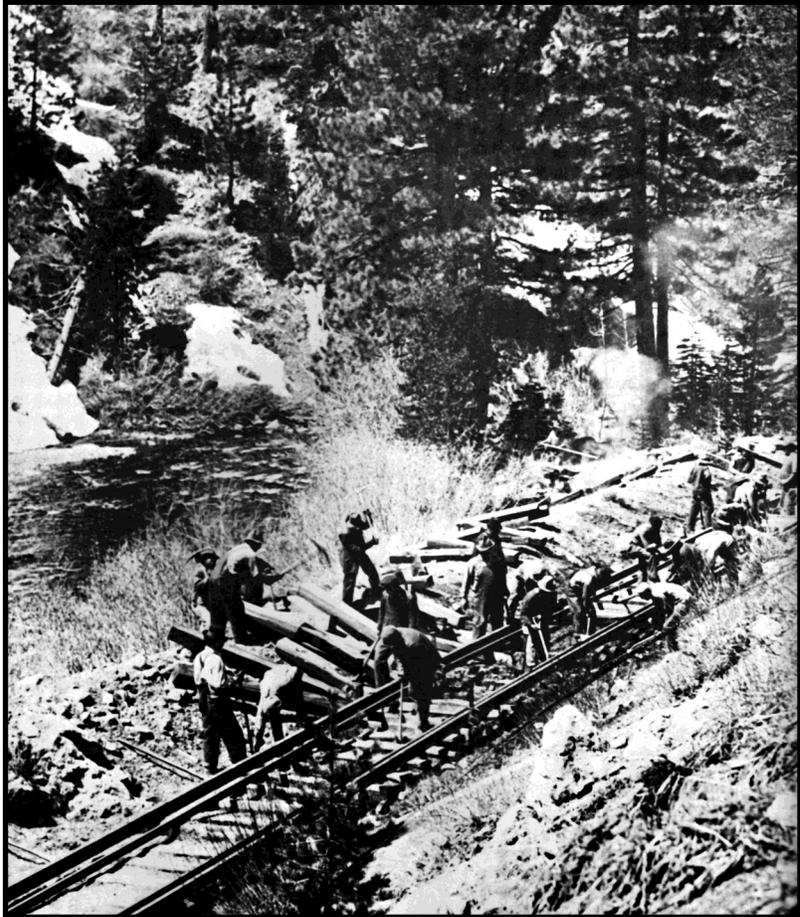
## How Southern Pacific Saved Lake Tahoe (continued)

**Daniel Cobb**

The idea of upgrading the LTR&TC line to standard gauge had been discussed for years, but costs were beyond the capabilities of the Bliss family. Confronted with the prospect of their properties being condemned and their beloved lake turned into an irrigation reservoir, the Bliss family approached SP with a bold proposition. SP would purchase the railroad for \$1 and upgrade the tracks to standard gauge, thereby increasing its capacity, comfort, and convenience (travelers would not have to change trains at Truckee). It would also greatly increase the value of the railroad and of the Bliss resort properties, making condemnation more expensive for the Reclamation Service.

SP leased the railroad from Bliss in 1925, then purchased it outright in 1926. They completed the project to standard-gauge the tracks in a matter of weeks in early 1926, and ran the first standard gauge train up the Truckee River canyon on May 1st, 1926. SP began offering through-trains to Lake Tahoe from San Francisco the following year. The Reclamation Service, faced with strong opposition from SP and much higher condemnation costs, abandoned the Lake Tahoe reservoir project, scaled back the Truckee-Carson irrigation project to about one fourth the planned size, and turned over most operations to the local Truckee-Carson Irrigation District. The Lake and the Truckee River canyon were saved, and Southern Pacific continued to operate the railroad to Lake Tahoe until WWII and America's love affair with the automobile forced its closure in 1943.

Sources: *Sunset Limited*, by Richard J. Orsi, and *Lumber Baron of the Comstock Lode*, by Jack Harpster.



Converting the Truckee River railroad to standard gauge.

## Pocket Park Donation Appeal

The railroad society needs to get our rotary snowplow and railroad wrecking crane painted. We have a contractual obligation to get it done very soon. Because of COVID-19 our normally fundraising activities have been drastically curtailed. We are appealing to our members for contributions. Anything you can contribute would be greatly appreciated. Please send checks to Truckee Donner Railroad Society, P.O. Box 3838, Truckee, CA 96160 or donate online at:

<https://www.truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com/involvement/involvement.html>

# Truckee Donner Railroad Society

## Society Mission:

To preserve, interpret, and educate the public about railroading life and history in the Truckee region including its contribution to Truckee and the Nation. Specifically, depict railroad involvement in local industry through the acquisition, preservation, and restoration of relevant equipment, documents, and artifacts all to be part of a permanent museum facility in downtown Truckee.

### Board of Directors:

Jerry Blackwill—President

Bob Bell—Executive Vice President/Treasurer

Ed Czerwinski—Secretary

Nelson Van Gundy — Historian

Ed Larson—Vice President, Museum Operations

Dan Cobb—Strategic Planning & Snowshed Newsletter Editor

Chip Huck

Greg Kuzma

Jim Hood

Carolyn Wallace Dee

## Truckee Railroad Museum Vision:

*Keeping Truckee railroads alive!*

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 coming into town, to whistles of lumberjacks in the mountains, to the crack of ice being loaded in the reefers, and tourists flocking to share the beauty of the area, the Truckee Railroad Museum tells the story.

A place to Discover

A Place to Interact

A place to Enjoy

Truckee Donner Railroad Society  
P.O. Box 3838  
Truckee, Ca 96160

[www.truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com](http://www.truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com)  
501(c) 3 non-profit organization

## 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

Contact our volunteer manager [volunteer\\_manager@truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com](mailto:volunteer_manager@truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com).

## Donate!

You can also help by donating at our website, [truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com](http://truckeedonnerrailroadsociety.com), at the bottom of the home page.

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Truckee, Ca 96160