



Quarterly Newsletter of the Truckee Donner Railroad Society

Snowshed

Keeping Truckee's Railroad History Alive!

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Event Calendar

Winter Carnival Makeup Games	Mar 30
tdrpd.org/carnival	Noon
Truckee River Railroad kick off run	May 25

President's Letter

Jerry Blackwill

Dan Cobb, Bill Ramsey and others continue to work on a "pop-up" HO model railroad. Many of the components describing Truckee's railroads are nearing completion. The historical model will reproduce in miniature the way Truckee's trains looked after the Southern Pacific took over the railroad to Lake Tahoe. Initially, they hoped to be able to use a small building in the Truckee River Regional Park for storage and perhaps some operation. Regrettably they've found that the structure was in use full time by the Truckee-Donner Recreation & Park District. If anyone has a garage or spare building that's unused, it would be great if you could make it available for the model railroad until we have a permanent facility.

Some of you may be aware that the operation of the Museum of Truckee History (<https://museumoftruckeehistory.org/>) is a joint effort of the railroad society and the Truckee Donner Historical Society. If you're interested in becoming a MoTH docent, you can go to the "Contact Us" page on their website.

Truckee 1927 Model Railroad Update

Dan Cobb

"Truckee 1927," the Railroad Society's historical model railroad project, is taking shape. About a year ago, the Railroad Society began a project to build a model railroad illustrating the role of the railroads in the town's rich



1882 granite roundhouse. Model by Bill Ramsey

and colorful history. We chose the year 1927, a time when Truckee was a bustling transportation center; nearby Hobart Mills was still a working mill and lumber town, the "Tahoe Branch" sped tourists from California and points East to the growing tourist industry at Lake Tahoe, and the Southern Pacific mainline (original Central Pacific transcontinental) was still the fastest and most reliable way to move goods and passengers between California and the rest of the country. Our vision is that the model will someday be the centerpiece of a new railroad museum.

Since we lack a permanent location for the model, we decided to build the first phase as a modular layout that we can "pop up" for a few days or weeks at various locations around town and at

events around the region. Phase I will model the town of Truckee as it appeared in the late '20s, complete with the granite roundhouse and balloon track, downtown depot, SP Hotel, freight house, and other iconic town structures, many of which still stand today. Tracks will head west for Sacramento, east toward Reno, north to Hobart Mills and south to Tahoe City, all meeting in the back of the layout for train staging and continuous loop operation. Future additions will model Tahoe City, Hobart Mills, and the narrow-gauge logging operations north of town. We've made a lot of progress. Benchwork, track, and wiring is complete for 9 of the 15 modules that comprise Phase I, and the frames are built for 3 more. Scratch-built models of the roundhouse, mallet shed,

depot, and SP hotel are complete or nearly complete. Work is underway on the remaining modules and a number of other structures including Commercial Row.



1901 SP Depot. Model by Jay Jacobs.

We've also learned a lot of local history in the process. It turns out that Truckee streets were still dirt in 1927 - paving didn't happen until the early '30s. The building now known as the Truckee Hotel had been "modernized" and was operated as the Hotel Blume. The SP Hotel and the Hotel Rex also served a booming tourist trade. Thornton's Tourist Garage out in the Gateway area repaired autos damaged on the rough roads of the era while McIver's downtown Truckee Livery still shod horses and repaired wagons. Steam engines had outgrown the 1882 roundhouse and were sheltered and serviced in a two-track "mallet shed" adjacent to it.

Our plan is to have the Phase I modular layout ready for exhibition next summer, and we're looking for local places to set up. Exhibition spaces must be at least 20' x 28', have electric power and be able to be secured when not staffed. Exhibitions can be as short as one weekend or as long as a month. Email me at daniel.cobb@tdrrs.org if you have a space to offer or suggest.

The model railroad committee consists of Dave Cutting, Jay Jacobs, Bill Ramsey, Jeff Jones, Durk Stelter, Tom Smith, Bob Bell, Ron Mason, and me, Dan Cobb.

Truckee River Railroad

Bob Bell, Trainmaster

The Truckee River Railroad (miniature riding train at our Regional Park) will kick off the run season on May 25 and continue with the following dates: June 8 and 22, July 6 and 20, August 3, 24 and 31, and September 14 and 28. We will have three locomotives available for us and depending on crew and public turnout have two trains running most of the time. We will need some track work and other maintenance work completed in the month of May. If you have helped out before you will be getting emails from me in advance of work and run days, but if you have not helped out in the past and would like to get involved, please contact me at bellbob@sbcglobal.net to be sure you get information from me when the season starts. Last year we had 2,500 riders and are always in need of more help. See you at the track!

Fire Train

Dan Cobb

When the Central Pacific (CP) built the first Sierra crossing in 1866-68, the railroad's engineers didn't think snow removal would be a major problem. Since most of the grade was on a steep sidehill, they theorized that

snow could simply be pushed to the downhill side of the track, where it would tumble harmlessly down the hill. The winter of 1866-67, when the western grade to Donner Pass was still under construction, immediately proved them wrong, and huge gangs of shovelers had to be hired just to keep their supply trains moving.

Central Pacific began a snowshed-building program the following summer. Over the next several decades, the railroad used over 44 million board feet of lumber to build more than 30 miles of sheds. While the sheds were mostly successful in keeping the tracks clear, they introduced a new problem: they tended to catch on fire.



Early 4-4-0 Fire Train #1259, photographed in the 1890s (Truckee-Donner Historical Society Image Collection).

The CP knew time was of the essence in extinguishing snowshed fires, and as early as the summer of 1870 they had set up three fire trains, at Blue Canyon, Summit (Donner Pass), and Truckee. Each fire train consisted of a locomotive, two water cars, and a steam-driven pump. One of the first locomotives assigned to fire train service was the 4-4-0 Governor Stanford, now preserved and on display at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento.

Early detection was also critical. In 1876, the railroad set up a fire lookout on Signal Peak (a.k.a. Red Mountain), where an observer had an unbroken view of 26 miles of sheds. A surveyor's transit was installed to assist the watchmen in determining the specific location of any smoke observed, and a telephone line was strung to the

station at Cisco. With this system, it was possible to dispatch the nearest fire train within minutes of a smoke sighting.

By most early accounts, the system worked quite well. On September 25, 1883, the Marysville Appeal reported enthusiastically that "the services of these fire trains are frequently called upon, but they are so prompt in action that they generally subdue the fires before much damage is done. The system is as near perfection as can well be made, so that any great destruction of the sheds is now nearly impossible."



Fire Train #2248, a ten-wheeler, photographed at Emigrant Gap in the early 1900s (TDHS collection).

The fire trains had their limitations, however. In September of 1889, a forest fire near Cisco burned for over a month and eventually engulfed a section of snowsheds. The Sacramento Union reported on September 17 that "on Thursday, shortly before noon, the Cascade bridge caught fire and was destroyed. From the bridge, the sheds on each side took fire and in a short space of time about a mile of them were burned. The Blue Canyon, Summit, and one Truckee fire train were caught on the other side of the break and could do nothing towards checking the flames."

Over time, the fire trains became faster and more capable. In the 1890s, ten-wheeler locomotives, originally built for fast passenger service, were routinely deployed on fire trains. Southern Pacific locomotive #2252, now on public display in Roseville, CA, was one of

these engines. The water tanks on each train held 65,000 gallons, and their pumps were capable of delivering 300 gallons of water per minute through a 1,000-foot, 2 ½ inch fire hose. Crews were staffed around the clock and the engines were constantly kept under steam, so that they could be under way in a matter of minutes. When enroute to a fire, the trains had absolute right-of-way and blew their whistles continuously the entire way.

In addition to their primary job of fighting snowshed fires, the fire trains often proved useful in fighting conflagrations in towns along the railroad. In 1890, a fire burned half of Truckee, but the railroad's facilities and a number of commercial buildings were saved through the efforts of the fire trains. On October 26, 1903, a fire destroyed the Truckee Lumber Company's sawmill, but according to a Sacramento Bee report, "the Southern Pacific Railroad Company had two of its fire trains at work and it is probably due to their efforts that the conflagration did not extend to the business part of the town." The fire trains' value to the town was such that a proposal the same year by SP to move the Truckee fire train up the hill to Tunnel 13 prompted so much protest from the citizenry that it was abandoned.



Fire Train #2252 fighting a boxcar fire at Soda Springs (TDHS collection).

By the early 1920s, the need for snowsheds was declining as a result of improving snow-removal capabilities. By 1926, SP had in service six rotary snow plows plus numerous flangers and spreaders. The total mileage under snowsheds was reduced from 29 miles to just under 23 miles in that year as part of a massive double-tracking project that included the 2-mile "big hole" (Tunnel 41). The Truckee fire train was moved up to Andover, near the east end of the "big hole", the Blue Canyon train was moved up the hill to Emigrant Gap, and the Cisco train was eliminated.

As in 1903, the removal of the Truckee fire train to Andover in 1926 occasioned much concern in Truckee. This time, however, all the good citizens of

Truckee got was an assurance that the railroad would "render any assistance possible, provided the snowshed district is fully protected." In January 1946, the railroad proved good for its word when an SP fire train answered the call to fight a fire in the Cottage Hotel that might have engulfed the town if it were not for their efforts. In appreciation, the townspeople of Truckee nicknamed the train "City of Truckee".

Most of the snowsheds were retired by 1934, and the Red Mountain lookout was also abandoned in that year. In 1940, only two fire trains were maintained, at Emigrant Gap and Norden. By 1950, only four miles of sheds remained, mostly over the westbound track above Donner Lake, and just one fire train was maintained at Norden.

The railroad, now Union Pacific, still maintains a fleet of about 50 water tank cars known as the Fire Car Fleet. These former commercial tank cars are fitted with pumps and can each hold 7,000 to 23,000 gallons of water. The Fire Car Fleet was most recently deployed in 2021 against the Lava Fire in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest and against the Dixie Fire on the famous Keddie Wye in the Feather River Canyon. Fire cars were also used against the Delta Fire in 2018.

Sources for this article: Donner Pass, by John R. Signor, contemporary newspaper articles, and the Union Pacific company website.

Volunteer Opportunities

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 snow plow.

Model Railroad – We need additional railroad modelers and builders to construct modular benchwork, install track and wiring, design and build structures and create scenery. Join our committee and build “Truckee 1927”!

To volunteer, drop us a line at info@tdrrs.org. To join or donate, see <https://tdrrs.org/membership>.

<p style="text-align: center;">Board of Directors</p> <p>Jerry Blackwill — President Bob Bell — Executive Vice President and Treasurer Dan Cobb — Vice President, Strategic Planning and Historian Ed Czerwinski — Secretary Nelson Van Gundy —Historian Emeritus Chip Huck — Rolling Stock Restoration & Preservation Judy DePuy — Publicity Tom Smith — Truckee River Railroad Jay Jacobs — Webmaster Bill Ramsey ----- Steve Edelman — Newsletter Editor</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Our History</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;">Our Mission</p> <p>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.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">The Truckee Donner Railroad Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-exempt organization. EIN 91-1917864.</p>	