



# DONNER CROSSINGS



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A westbound double-stack freight exits Cape Horn tunnel 33 at the center of this 2011 photo. Visible to the right of the tunnel portal is the eastbound track which follows the original route around Cape Horn. Curved tunnels 33 and 34 were built as part of SP's double tracking of the Donner Route. When completed in May 1915, the tunnels were double-tracked, and the outside route around Cape Horn was abandoned. Problems with clearance and smoke soon resulted in the reopening of the outside route for eastbound traffic, while the tunnels were single-tracked for westbound traffic. In this issue of Donner Crossings, we look at rumors that surfaced in local newspapers that SP might have considered a different path for the 1915 double-tracking of the Donner Route above Long Ravine, possibly along the NCNG right-of-way. *Photo by Roger Staab*

Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route



## From the Editor:

While researching information on the double-tracking of the Donner Route for the previous issue of Donner Crossings, I chanced on some articles in local newspapers hinting that Southern Pacific might have considered adopting an alternate route above Colfax, bypassing Cape Horn and other challenges further up the hill. While nothing has been found to verify or completely refute that notion, it makes for an interesting tale of unexplained delays, rumors, and speculation. We'll take a look at those rumors, as told through the eyes and ears of local newspapers of the time.

The double-tracking above Colfax closely followed and in most cases paralleled the original transcontinental route, but that was not true below Colfax. The result is split tracks, with eastbound and westbound tracks at times miles apart, and left-hand running on portions of the route. A lesser known result of the double-tracking was abandonment of many winding sections of the original transcontinental roadbed, several portions of which can still be seen today. We'll take a step back in time and walk one of these abandoned sections, and imagine the scenes that were visible along the way.

If you have been in downtown Colfax recently, you have probably noticed the activity around the NWP caboose. PSRHS, under the leadership of Tony Hesch, is well underway on a major restoration of this wood-sided classic. Jim Wood's successful removal of the electrical service panels from the side of the caboose paved the way for starting the renovation in earnest. Exterior boards been removed from one side, and volunteers are in the process of replacing damaged support members. They will then apply new siding to that portion, and continue the process on the remainder of the caboose. If you are interested in getting involved with fund-raising or hands-on construction, contact Tony at 530-346-9179.

*Roger Staab, editor*

## In This Issue:

Was Cape Horn almost bypassed by SP's double tracking project?

Abandoned Roadbed – Walking a portion of the original Transcontinental Route

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*You are invited to submit feature articles and/or photos for future issues of Donner Crossings. Please contact Roger Staab, email [rsrr@exwire.com](mailto:rsrr@exwire.com), or by mail at PSRHS, P.O. Box 1776, Colfax, CA 95713. Assistance is available to format your information or photos into final form for publication.*

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# Was Cape Horn almost bypassed by Double Tracking?

## The Double Tracking Project

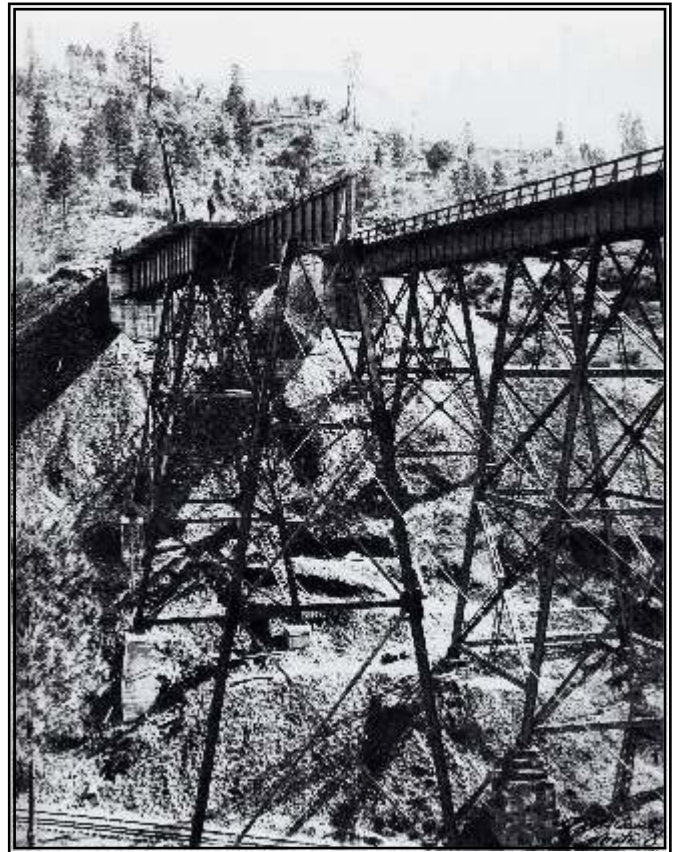
During the late 1800's, Southern Pacific Company's management of Central Pacific assets provided enough resources to maintain operations. A reorganization of the Central Pacific company in 1899 provided the means to begin planning improvements to the line to accommodate longer trains and larger equipment. *(Much of the background material on the double-tracking project comes from John Signor's excellent book, Donner Pass – SP's Sierra Crossing).*

During that same time, Edward Harriman had taken control of the Union Pacific and spent a sizeable sum on improving the line. He attempted (unsuccessfully) to purchase the Central Pacific to give UP a connection to west coast ports. After Colis Huntington's death in 1900, Harriman's Union Pacific was able to gain control over the Southern Pacific company in 1901.

Shortly after gaining control of the Donner Route, Harriman initiated a series of major improvements to the line. Movement of the main terminal and roundhouse from Rocklin to Roseville was one part of those improvements. Providing a second track over Donner was another.

Several alternatives were considered to improve the Donner crossing, including long tunnels and possible electrification of the line. In all the discussions, there was general agreement that the grade between Rocklin and Colfax needed to be reduced for uphill traffic. In 1909, work commenced on reducing the grade to Colfax from 2.2% max to 1.5% max. At that time, the plan was to eventually continue the grade reduction to Donner summit.

The first phase was actually broken into two parts, with separate contractors working Rocklin to Clipper Gap, and Clipper Gap to Colfax. The contracts called for constructing new track and tunnels to maintain a maximum 1.5% grade, and then eliminating some of the more curved sections of the original line. In some locations the original and new lines were so close together that the original tracks were moved to the new alignment.



Installing the second bridge for double tracking at Long Ravine, 1915. These bridges connect Colfax with Cape Horn. The tracks at lower left served the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad until 1942. Interstate 80 now runs under these bridges. *Best – NCNG*

Under these contracts, construction activity reached Colfax in 1910. Plans called for major excavation to allow the tracks to be straightened through Colfax, and a large yard and engine house were to be built near the west end of town.

The Colfax Record of June 25, 1910 reported that a *Large steam shovel is busy tearing away the point of the hill in the west end of town. Utah Constr. Co. will leave in August. Work constructing cutoff between Clipper Gap and Colfax will be completed by that time. Grading is practically finished and SP will soon begin laying rails. One tunnel is yet to be completed between Clipper Gap and Applegate. Three other tunnels are completed. When the cutoff work is completed, the contractor will then straighten and lower grades on old*

*road between Rocklin and Colfax. Entire work on cutoff will probably be done by close of 1911.*

Thus, although there was a lot of construction activity in Colfax from 1910-1912, including a new yard, track alignment and an engine house at the west end of town, for all practical purposes this initial construction ended at Grass Valley Street.

## **Cape Horn and Beyond**

With all the construction activity west of Colfax, what was happening above Colfax, beyond Grass Valley Street? In the June 18, 1910 issue, the Colfax Record stated that SP will start work above Colfax in July. On July 2 – SP purchased the house and lot belonging to Mrs. CB Wales. This was likely done to begin clearing land for excavating the hillside north and east of Grass Valley Street. On July 16, the Record reported that *Blue Canyon is excited about railroad work starting this summer in Colfax.*

On Aug. 13, 1910, the Colfax Record reported: *Contract was let for all work east of town excluding six miles at Donner Summit tunnel. Work will last for ten years, 23 tunnels will be built between Colfax and Truckee, several thousand will be employed. At Colfax, preparations are underway for a roundhouse, machine shop and wye. Sounds like we were well underway with the next phase above Colfax. However, the first hint of problems appeared in the Dec. 10 Colfax Record: There is a rumor that work east of town is about to be renewed.* From this statement it appears that although a contract had been awarded, actual construction work had been at a standstill.

Then the kicker in the Dec. 31, 1910 Colfax Record: *Rumor from Grass Valley that SP may be planning to standard gauge the route from Colfax to Grass Valley, then through Beckwith Pass to Reno. Work at Colfax is at a standstill.*

According to the May 24, 1911 Sacramento Union, work was still underway on the project west of Grass Valley Street in Colfax:

*RAILROAD WORK AT COLFAX COLFAX (Placer Co.), May 23 - The work of laying out the Colfax railroad yard is going ahead rapidly. Work trains have been busy the past week placing material, ties, rails, ballast, etc. These trains were in charge of Conductors WELLS and LINDSAY. The steel gang under John*

*KNOX arrived a few days ago from Fernley Nev., and it has considerable work to do. Colfax will be one of the important railroad towns of this county when the Colfax cutoff is completed and arrangements made for putting on the helper engines here.*

More speculation on the work east of Colfax surfaced in the July 28, 1911 Colfax Record:

*More rumors from Grass Valley/Nevada City – the cutoff between Newcastle and Colfax is about completed, but work is not continuing past Colfax. Surveyors are on the Bear River, possibly looking for routes with reduced grades to Emigrant Gap or Soda Springs, perhaps through Nevada County. According to reliable sources, two tentative routes have been mapped out, one along the Bear River by way of Chalk Bluff, the other skirting Nevada City on the east side of Banner Mountain. Sara Kidder has been meeting with SP. San Francisco papers have said that NCNG is to be taken over by SP.*

Best's book on the Nevada County Narrow Gauge indicates that around 1912 rumors surfaced that Sara Kidder was interested in selling her shares of the NCNG and moving to San Francisco. In early 1913, the NCNG board of directors initiated a project to add a third rail from Colfax to the Bear River to allow standard gauge cars to haul gravel from Bear River. The directors were also considering converting the entire NCNG to standard gauge. Sara Kidder did in fact sell her shares of the NCNG in 1913. It is not known if any of these plans were related to possible SP interest in re-routing its line above Colfax over portions of the NCNG right-of-way.

The local press was silent about the work above Colfax until Feb. 2, 1912, when Supt. Sheridan was in Colfax. He verified that a 10-stall roundhouse and machine shops were to be built, with work starting soon. He hinted that double tracking above Colfax might begin soon, but first they needed a place for engines and equipment.

During the first half of 1912, numerous articles appeared documenting progress on the work on the Colfax yard and engine house. Finally on July 12, The Record reported that *work east of town is likely to start in a month.* The July 27 issue announced that the *Reno-Truckee double-track contract was awarded*, and on August 14 – *SP planning contracts for double tracking from Colfax to Dutch Flat.*

Finally on Oct. 11, 1912, the Colfax Record reported that *Double track work above Colfax has begun in earnest. Camps up the line are busy. Tunnel work will be done above Colfax.* On Nov. 29 – *Double track is being laid between Colfax and Blue Canyon. A man was killed when he fell off a masonry abutment at Caporn and fell 80 feet.* And on Dec. 20 – *crews are working at Midas above Towle.*

On Sept. 17, 1913, the Colfax Record reported that *Work of demolishing the hill east of the SP tracks to make room for the ... right of way for the second main line has begun. Within a few days the steam shovel will begin loading cars for fills east of town. A 70 ton steam shovel is in place.*

In 1914, Railroad Telegrapher magazine reported *Double track from Colfax to Wirt (near Long Ravine) completed July 15. Contractors will rectify conditions in Colfax yard and have it ready for service when Cape Horn tunnel is finished about Oct. 1. With completion of the double track between Blue Canyon and Colfax, Wirt, Capehorn and Magra (stations) will be abolished.*

The August 1920 issue of the SP Bulletin indicated that the second track from Colfax to Blue Canyon was completed in 1914. The Colfax Record in its Apr. 23, 1915 issue verified that the double track from Colfax to Blue Canyon had been inspected.

### **So what happened to cause a two-year delay in starting the work above Colfax?**

The rumors indicated that alternate routes were being surveyed and considered. It is an apparent fact that surveyors were in the area during those years. Were they working for SP, or there for other purposes?

SP may have had good reason to look for alternate routes above Colfax. The new route from Rocklin to Colfax was chosen primarily to reduce the ruling grade to 1.5%. Supposedly the double-track above Colfax had that same objective. Yet the work that was completed above Colfax essentially

followed the old roadbed, with grades remaining as high as 2.4%. Apparently there were no easy grade reductions that could be accomplished along the original route. Signor's book reports that it would have taken a widely divergent 36 mile route to cover a distance that the original grade covered in 25 miles. It is certainly likely that SP conducted at least a cursory look at alternate routes that might have resulted in a grade reduction from Colfax to the summit of the Sierra.

Another major issue was playing in the background during this time. The federal government filed suit in 1908 under the Sherman Anti-trust Act to break up the Harriman-era combined holdings of UP and SP. In 1912, the Supreme Court ruled that UP must divest itself of all SP stock. Since the assets of Central Pacific were still under lease to Southern Pacific, this meant that UP would lose control of the Donner Pass route and UP's direct connection to the central California ports. In 1914, the government raised the question of whether SP should continue to control the Central Pacific. This issue dragged through the courts for nearly a decade, with UP and SP fighting for control of the Donner Route. This prolonged battle delayed the decision on how to improve the Donner Route above Blue Canyon. It is possible that early legal wrangling and difficulty securing funding while the issues were being argued in court may have contributed to delaying the start of the double-track work above Colfax.

So did SP consider a different route above Colfax for the new double-track? Or was SP waiting for the Colfax yard and engine house to be completed to serve as a staging area before beginning work above Colfax, as Supt. Sheridan suggested during his 1912 visit?



Wherever the truth may lie, it makes for an interesting story as details and speculation unfolded through the eyes and ears of local news reporters. In the end, the route above Colfax continued to cross Long Ravine, rounded Cape Horn, albeit through a tunnel, and followed the original Transcontinental Route to Donner Summit.



# Walking a portion of the original Transcontinental Route

When SP added a second track along the Donner Route from Rocklin to Blue Canyon in 1910-1915, the existing line was straightened in many locations to eliminate the sweeping, tight-radius curves that followed the hillsides in the original construction. If one looks carefully, many of these sections of abandoned right-of-way can still be found and explored.

One classic example is a section between Long Ravine and Colfax. From 1903-1915, the station of Wirt was located just west of the present Carpenter Road crossing. At Wirt, the old tracks toward Colfax curved to the right along the hillside. That curved portion of roadbed is now abandoned but walkable, offering evidence of impressive early fills and rural scenery.



Wirt station is seen in this view looking westbound (from John Signor's book, *Donner Pass*). Note the tracks curved to the right at the station. Wirt served as a staff station, a control point where trains waited until receiving a "staff" which was the authorization to proceed onto the next section of track. The eastbound train in the photo was waiting on a passing track until the single track ahead over Long Ravine was clear.



In the photo at left taken near the same location, the old grade can easily be seen veering to the right from the present grade. The fill on the double track in the distance serves both the 1914 second track and the realigned original grade. The power pole near the right edge of the photo is an old square telegraph pole. Roger Staab photo.

**Caution: Be vigilant of trains on the active tracks. The section of abandoned grade is accessible from Carpenter Road without crossing the existing tracks.**



Above, the dotted line on the Google Earth map highlights the old section of abandoned grade west of the crossing at Carpenter Road (far right on map). Wirt station was located where the old grade diverges from the present grade. The scene below the map is looking east-bound on the old grade towards the former site of Wirt station.

While this old grade more closely followed the natural contours of the land, there were still two impressive fills and a small cut along its length. Examples of culverts placed under these fills to facilitate drainage can be seen on the following page.

*Photos by Roger Staab*





Examples of old and new culvert construction under railroad fills. Photos at left and upper right show both ends of a Rocklin granite rockwork culvert under an original fill near Wirt. Photo at lower right is a concrete culvert under the 1914 fill. *Roger Staab photos.*

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