

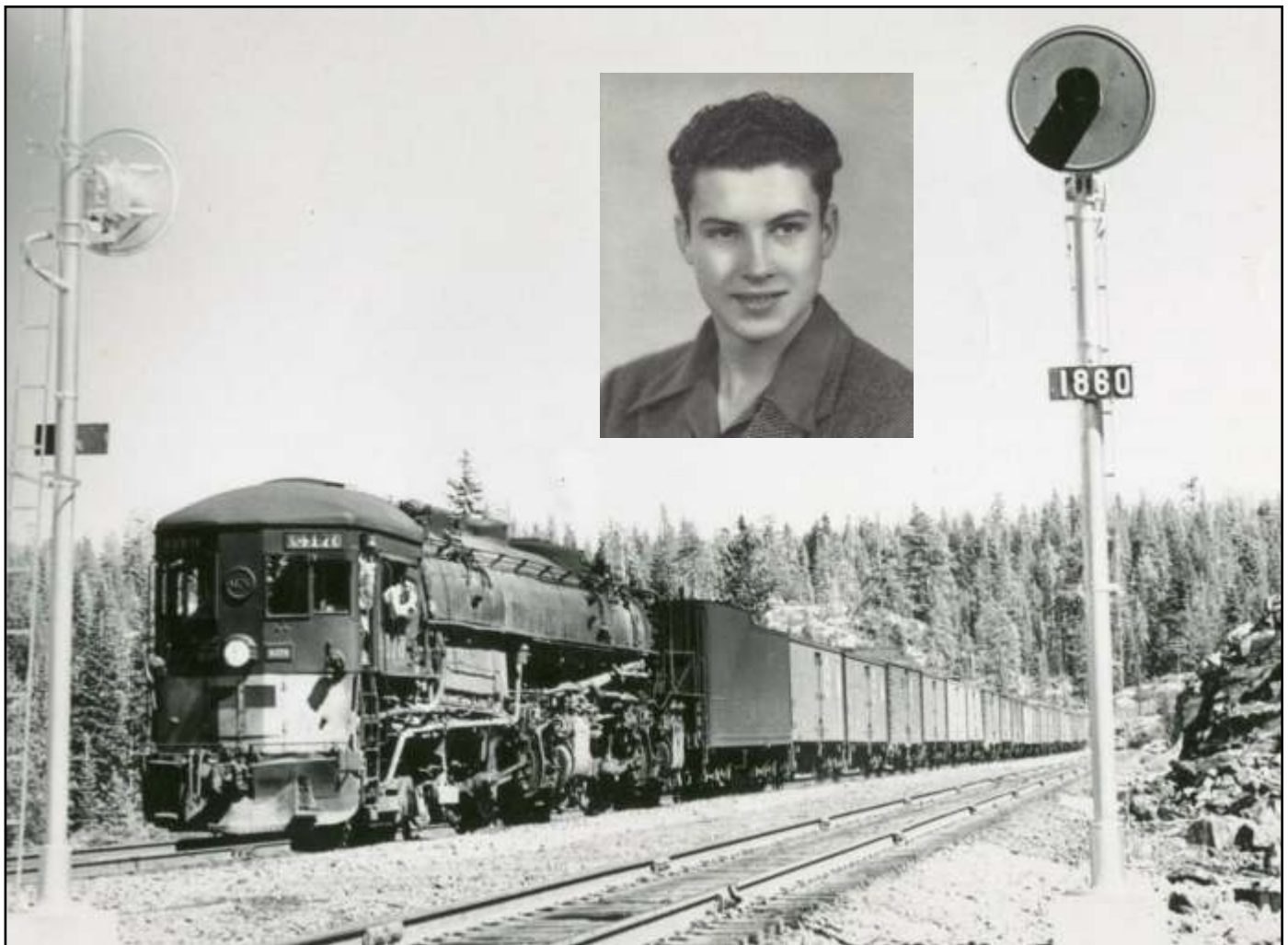


DONNER CROSSINGS



A Publication of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society
Issue No. 9, Spring 2014

Special Tribute to Ken Yeo, PSRHS Lifetime Member



That's PSRHS founding member Ken Yeo hanging out in a Southern Pacific cab-forward locomotive as the train cools its brakes at Troy. Read the article inside to learn how young Ken and his friend talked their way onto this engine for a cab ride from Summit to Cisco. *Photo from Ken Yeo Collection. Inset photo of young Ken provided by Laura Yeo Green.*

Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route



From the Editor:

Ken Yeo has been a member of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society since the organization was founded in 2002. Ken also served on the PSRHS board of directors until his latest term expired in 2013. The board recently voted to recognize Ken's service to PSRHS and to railroad history in general with a Lifetime Membership Award.

The first article in this special issue of Donner Crossings pays tribute to Ken's many contributions to our organization, and highlights some of his accomplishments and contributions to local railroad history. Since childhood Ken has lived and breathed all things railroad, with special fondness for steam power. Enjoy this brief account of Ken's life and the activities that have earned him the reputation as the "go-to" guy for railroad history in the Donner region.

The second article in this issue was found by the editor almost by accident while scanning old newspapers for an entirely different research project. It seems fitting

to include the account in this issue of Donner Crossings, since it has the familiar ring of a Ken Yeo story. What would happen if a railcar got loose on the steep grades of "the hill"? Westbound from Towle's Station is a steady downgrade, except for a slight upgrade from the Long Ravine bridge into Colfax proper. In 1901 a railcar did get loose at Towle's Station, and its resultant ride is described in this newspaper account.

Roger Staab, editor

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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 roger.staab@psrhs.org, 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.

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society

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PSRHS Lifetime Membership Award Recipient – Ken Yeo

Ken Yeo was born in Nevada City in 1926, the son of Howard and Ruby (Eickhoff) Yeo. He spent his early years living at Drum powerhouse, where his dad was employed by PG&E. Ken attended grade school at



Drum Camp, near what is now Drum Forebay. Ken recalls that he had to hike uphill from the powerhouse to Drum Camp for school, and “slide” back down at the end of the day. Sometimes he could talk the PG&E hoist operator into giving him a ride up or down.

In 1937 Ken, his mom and sister moved to Grass Valley so he and his sister could attend “a real” school there. Ken’s dad Howard was a long-time friend of Johnny Nolan, the chief mechanic and yardmaster for the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad. Ken spent many enjoyable days of his youth exploring the railroad’s Grass Valley yard, and learning how the engines and rolling stock operated.

Ken rode the NCNG trains on numerous occasions. He recalls the Sunday School picnic specials that transported passengers to Olympia Park between Grass Valley and Nevada City for family picnics. Ken also remembers riding the train with Johnny Nolan on several trips from Grass Valley to Colfax. If “the brass” were around, Johnny would have Ken hide in the caboose until the train was clear of the depot.

When Ken’s father was transferred by PG&E, the family moved to Auburn where Ken finished high school. While attending school, Ken heard that the NCNG track was slated to be torn up. He and fellow classmate Ed Hoyes went to Grass Valley where Ken recalled there was a velocipede stored in one of the maintenance buildings. According to Ken, he did not steal the

velocipede, but merely borrowed it with the intent of returning it. However, when he was ready to return it there was no longer a railroad to return it to.

Ken and Ed rode the velocipede along the soon-to-disappear NCNG tracks from Grass Valley to Colfax. They made several stops along the way to check things out, including an unplanned stop at the end of the Bear River trestle. They could hear the squeal of wheels on curves and knew a train was approaching. Ken and Ed pulled the velocipede off the tracks and down the hillside into some brush. After the train and crew passed without noticing them, they set the velocipede back on the tracks and continued on their way.



Ken Yeo - Riding the Velocipede - across Long Ravine viaduct.

After the ride, Ken stashed the velocipede somewhere in the Colfax area until he could talk his dad into bringing it to Auburn in the back of his car. Ken’s daughter Laura says her grandfather was very conservative so it must have taken some fast talking for Ken to convince his dad to bring the contraband item to Auburn.

Ken still has the velocipede and has made it available for viewing at area events, including the museum grand opening in the Colfax Passenger Depot in 2005. He says he wants to extend the third wheel so it can be taken on the UP tracks, so don’t be surprised if someday you see

While Ken was still in high school, he and his friend Ed Hoyes would ride the trains whenever they got the chance. Ken recalls that his dad used to attend meetings in Colfax. Ken and Ed would walk out to Long Ravine Bridge. Freight trains stopped there to cool their brakes before proceeding westbound, and Ken and Ed would hop onto the train, usually between the cars, and ride the freight into the Colfax yard.

As to the story behind the photo on the cover, Ken and Ed went to Summit and struck up a conversation with the engineer of a westbound freight. They soon found themselves invited into the cab and rode in the locomotive from Summit to Cisco. Ken said they probably could have just hopped on, but in this case they were invited aboard by the crew.



Around that same time Ken took the above photo. He had been asked by friends why the SP used the cab-forward locomotive design. Ken waited for the chance to catch a cab-forward emerging from Tunnel 8 at Donner Summit – a view that clearly illustrates the advantage for the crew to be ahead of the billowing smoke in the tunnels and snowsheds.

After graduating from high school, Ken entered the Navy at age 17 and served from 1944-46. He was assigned to the USS Sevier (APA-233), an attack transport built as a modified victory ship. Ken was with the ship as it was being outfitted, then helped transport troops and equipment to Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Ken's

ship and fellow crew members then helped transport troops back home after the Japanese surrendered.

Ken learned the refrigeration trade while in the Navy, and put it to use, working for several refrigeration companies in Roseville and Auburn from 1946-1974. His three children, Ken, Chris and Laura, were born during this time. He also worked briefly in the appliance repair shop at Auburn Lumber Co in the early 1950's., and for Placer County from 1974 to 1976.

While answering service calls on his refrigeration job, Ken noticed a man laying out a railroad in his 40 acre back yard in Antelope. He soon became friends with Hal Wilmunder, and Ken and four others helped Hal set rail and build his back yard railroad.

An increase in property taxes on the Antelope property prodded Hal to look for another place to operate his railroad. In 1964 Ken helped Hal open the Camino Cable and Northern Tourist Railroad in El Dorado County. This railroad operated on former tracks of the Michigan Cal logging railroad. Steam engines and a railbus pulled carloads of tourists on a ride through the Apple Hill area near Camino. Ken operated the Shay locomotive and helped with general maintenance of track and equipment. The railroad shut down in 1974 when development encroached on its operations.



Ken relates that he and Hal thought they had struck a good deal when SP agreed to let them have old ties that were being replaced in the Antelope area. As they were loading the ties, though, they learned that as part of the deal they had to take all the ties including ones that were in water in a nearby ditch. The wet ties were very heavy, but they soon discovered that these were brand new ties that had been inadvertently dumped in the ditch. After some hard work loading the ties, Ken and Hal were happy and SP was happy.

In 1976 Ken was hired as Supervisor of Restoration and Maintenance for the new California State Railroad Museum. Ken relates an interesting story about how he got the job. He did not attend the first round of interviews since he didn't think he wanted to work for the state. A friend who knew of Ken's skills strongly encouraged him to attend a follow-up interview the next week. In the interview Ken was asked how old railcars could be lifted to do work on them. Ken noted that they should not lift the cars with a crane because the bearings would fall out. The interviewer expressed surprise based on his knowledge of round roller bearings. Ken explained that on the older equipment with friction bearings the bearing itself was only a half-circle and rode on top of the axle, with the weight of the car keeping the bearing in place. When asked why only half a bearing, Ken explained that the bottom of the axle had no weight on it so it was only the top that needed the bearing. Ken believes it was this knowledge of the inner workings of friction bearings that no one else thought to mention that got him the job.



There is of course another interesting Ken Yeo story from his early days at CSRM. For the grand opening of the museum in 1976, the engine Genoa was decked out with the Jupiter name and colors. It was to be pushed out of the shed and displayed for the crowds expected for the museum opening. Ken and his cohorts thought why push it out when it was perfectly capable of steaming under its own power. Getting approval from the state boiler inspector to operate the old steam

engine at a crowded event proved to be a daunting task, but Ken got an SP boiler inspector to support the operation. It also helped that an influential Senator that Ken knew from his days in Grass Valley was eager to operate the controls. So steam it did, emerging from the shed under its own power, no doubt to the delight of all in attendance. In the photo at left Ken is standing on the rear platform of the "Jupiter" at the grand opening. Note the smoke rising from the stack.

Ken worked for CSRM until he retired in 1988. A few years later he joined the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad Museum in Nevada City as Restoration Manager, a volunteer position he held until 2008.

In his spare time, Ken was a long-term member of Sierra Mountain Railroad Club of Auburn. In 1995 that group made a first attempt at establishing an outdoor railroad museum in Colfax. Paperwork from that effort is now in the hands of PSRHS members.

Ken has amassed an impressive collection of photos related to local railroad history. Some of the photos are his own, while some come from the collections of others. If you need a photo of a scene related to railroading in the Donner area, chances are Ken has one.

Ken believes in getting right in the middle of whatever is going on. When some Donner snowsheds were being demolished, Ken felt it should be captured in photos. What better way to capture removal of a section of snowshed roof than to be inside the snowshed. The contractor's foreman stopped work to "encourage" Ken to move in case the rest of the structure collapsed when the roof section was removed. Ken convinced him that the way the sheds had been built and the pounding they had taken over the years meant there was no danger of collapse. After appropriate warnings that he was there at his own risk, Ken got the shot he wanted as the shed roof was removed.

In 2002 Ken joined a small group of local railroad history enthusiasts in forming Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society, based in Colfax. In addition to being an anchor for the group with his technical knowledge, Ken served on the board of directors of the organization from 2002-2013.

Ken has been the go-to guy for numerous PSRHS presentations and field trips along the Donner route. The following is a partial list of the presentations he has made at PSRHS meetings or on field trips where he lent his expertise for the enlightenment of attendees:

- Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad
- Towle Brothers Logging Railroad
- Visit to Towle Townsite
- Railroads of Placer County
- Field Trip to Texas Hill (Towle Brothers)
- Pre-Fab Concrete Snowshed Construction
- CSRM Field Trip
- CSRM Opening
- Double Tracking & Old Town Auburn
- Sierra Shortlines Video
- Narration on Sacramento Shops

In 2012 & 2013, Ken was a major technical contributor to the PSRHS-published book on Towle Brothers.

As mentioned earlier, Ken has amassed an impressive collection of railroad photos. He has readily shared his collection with interested individuals, believing that the photos need to be viewed by others rather than locked away. Ken has generously shared many of these photos with PSRHS, making them available for viewing on our club web site and in society publications. Photo topics provided by Ken to PSRHS include:

- Towle Brothers
- Texas Hill
- Misc. Donner Steam and Diesel Scenes
- Pre-fab Concrete Sheds
- 1944 Lander Wreck of Challenger Troop Train
- Norden Shed Demolition
- Spaulding Dam and Logging Railroad
- NCNG Railroad & NCNG Dismantling
- Snowbound City of San Francisco Aerial Shots
- Mountain Quarries Railroad

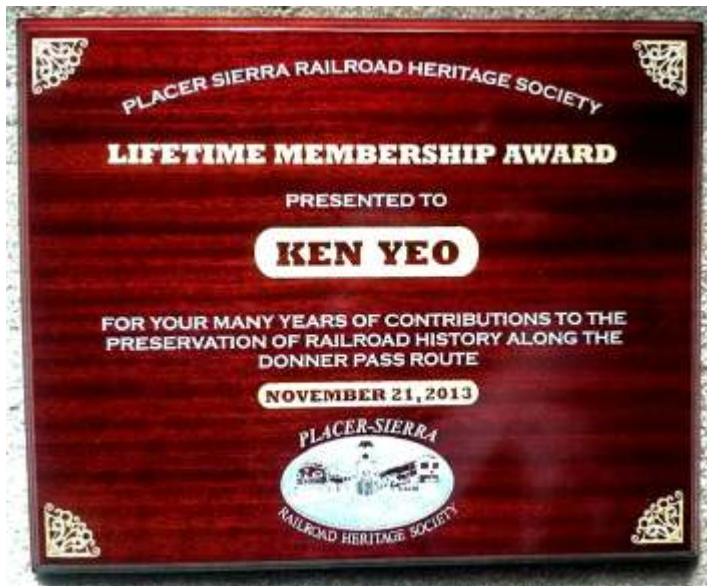
In November 2013 the PSRHS board of directors voted to recognize Ken Yeo's body of work supporting local railroad history with a **Lifetime Membership Award**.

Before concluding this story, two other items are worth noting that are pure Ken Yeo. When I scheduled a meeting with Ken to fill in some of the dates and background facts for his story, I offered to meet Ken in Auburn, but he preferred to meet me in Colfax. I asked Ken if he was sure he was OK with the drive to Colfax, and he assured me that he had no problem with driving.

On the appointed day Ken arrived at Colfax in the company of his daughter Laura. After I thanked her for bringing her dad to our meeting, she confided that while Ken might feel fine about driving, turns out he doesn't have a valid drivers license. Of course that was not a major concern for Ken.

Finally, I had heard of a Ken Yeo quote that verges on folklore. Those who interact with Ken know that he has chosen not to join the electronic world, and doesn't use a computer or email. So I posed the question to Ken – Why don't you own a computer? His response:

“When they make a steam-powered computer,
I'll get one.”





Ken Yeo shared his insight and expertise on field trips to the California State Railroad Museum, above, and pointing out a pipe that once supported a swing at Drum, left. *PSRHS Collection*

Runaway Train Car – Towles Station to Colfax

In 1901, a railcar broke free at Towles Station, near Alta, and ran free downgrade all the way to Colfax before it was stopped. The San Francisco Call, in its March 28, 1901 issue, related the story.

RUNAWAY CAR DASHES DOWN A STEEP GRADE

—————

Fractures all Records for the Run Between Towles Station and Colfax.

“GRASS VALLEY, March 27. – A runaway car on the Southern Pacific this afternoon sped from Towles Station to Colfax, a distance of sixteen miles, in thirteen minutes, caused a temporary delay of traffic while it held right of way of the track, smashed a railroad velocipede into splinters and came to a stop within a few feet of the station at Colfax.

The car was standing on the side track at Towles, when its brake became loose and it started down the steep grade. Efforts to overtake it

were unavailing. The Southern Pacific Flier and the regular Overland were held at Colfax, word having come just in time that the car was dashing down the mountain. Through Dutch Flat and Gold Run it went like the wind.

Near Cape Horn a track rider, glancing over his shoulder, saw the runaway almost upon him. He gave a leap and landed fifty feet down the mountain-side. An instant later his velocipede was struck and broken into pieces. The man was not injured by his leap. From the Gold Run Bridge [*reporter meant to say Long Ravine Bridge – ed.*] to Colfax, a distance of one mile and a half, it is upgrade, but the momentum of the car was so great that it did not stop until almost at the depot in Colfax. Notwithstanding the slackened speed with which the car ascended this grade the entire run was made in thirteen minutes.“

