



# DONNER CROSSINGS



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Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route

## A Tale of Two Locomotives (and Their Donner Route Connections)

Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) locomotive #5 is shown in the Grass Valley yard. This issue of Donner Crossings explores the histories of this locomotive and its sister. Both saw service on lines adjoining Southern Pacific's Donner Pass route. Read on to learn what else they had in common and what has become of them. *Photo from the Ken Yeo Collection*





## From the Editor:

For some time I have known pieces of the story you are about to read. It is interesting how one more tidbit can sometimes open the door to a much bigger and more interesting story.

A colleague and I have been researching information for a new book on Railroads of Placer County (potentially out early next year if all goes smoothly in the publishing process). During that research my attention was drawn to a surplus locomotive purchased by Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) Railroad expressly for parts for another of its locomotives. That “parts” locomotive had very clear ties to another area railroad. A bigger story then began to unfold. As more details were uncovered, it became apparent that there was more to the story of these two locomotives than immediately meets the eye.

Enjoy this look at the combined history of two locomotives that is likely known in part by many but fully recognized by only a few.

*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](mailto: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.*

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## A Tale of Two Locomotives (and Their Donner Route Connections)

It's not often that one can tell the story of a locomotive from its start to the present day. But how about such a tale of two locomotives?

Our story begins on the east shore of Lake Tahoe. Here in the 1870's a group of men conducted a logging business to supply cut lumber and timbers to the growing mining market in the Comstock Lode near Virginia City. They set up a sawmill near the lake, brought logs to the site and produced cut lumber and timbers. To get their product to the mines, they had to transport the lumber up and over the Carson Range at Spooner Summit. This was accomplished by using oxen teams to pull wagon-loads of lumber up the mountain, then send the lumber shooting down the other side in a flume to a railroad spur near Carson City, where it was loaded on the Virginia & Truckee RR for delivery to the mines. This business and other logging operations in the area were financed and run by the Carson & Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company (C&TL&F). D. L. Bliss was one of the principal owners of the C&TL&F.

As business increased, the company realized a better means was needed for moving their lumber product up the mountain. In 1875 they purchased two new Baldwin 2-6-0 narrow gauge locomotives and had them shipped to Carson City by train. The locomotives were then partially disassembled and moved by oxen teams over the summit to Glenbrook, the site of their sawmill on Lake Tahoe's east shore. Soon the two locomotives were at work on a new rail line from Glenbrook to the summit. The locomotives were named the Glenbrook and the Tahoe, and the new rail line was christened the Lake Tahoe Railroad. For nearly 15 years these workhorses transported countless loads of cut lumber up the steep grade and over a switchback from Glenbrook to the summit, an elevation gain of nearly 1000 feet, then returned the empty cars back to the Glenbrook mill for another load.



*The Tahoe or Glenbrook in its wood-burning, lumber-hauling days with the Lake Tahoe Railroad of the C&TL&F. (PSRHS Collection)*



By the mid-1890's much of the marketable timber in the Tahoe basin had been logged off. As it turned out the nearby mining industry was winding down and thus the market for lumber was also dwindling. In 1898 the decision was made to shut down the lumber mill and railway operations. But what to do with all the equipment? The C&TL&F began liquidating their locomotives and cars. In 1899 the locomotive Tahoe was sold to the Nevada County Narrow Gauge RR where it was numbered NCNG #5 and became a workhorse for the narrow-gauge line that connected Grass Valley/Nevada City with the mainline at Colfax. More on NCNG #5 in a bit.



*Another view of NCNG #5, formerly the Tahoe, at Colfax. This locomotive worked the NCNG for 41 years, and would outlast all other engines on the line. (Ken Yeo collection)*

D. L. Bliss believed in the future opportunities that Lake Tahoe offered for a new industry – tourism. He assumed ownership of the locomotive Glenbrook, and purchased much of the remaining rolling stock from the Lake Tahoe Railroad. The equipment and rails were moved by barge across Lake Tahoe to Tahoe City. He then formed the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Company (LTRY&TCo.) with the intent of providing passenger service between the Southern Pacific mainline in Truckee and Lake Tahoe. The Glenbrook became LTRY&TCo. #1. The new rail line was wholly owned by members of the Bliss family.

The Lake Tahoe Railway opened for business in 1900 to great fanfare. Its operation was primarily devoted to tourists but it also carried some freight and mail. When passengers arrived in Tahoe City the train dropped them off on a pier where they could board directly onto company-owned excursion boats that would take them to other locations on the lake, or they could stay at the hotel located next to the pier and railroad tracks. The rail line followed the Truckee river between the lake and the town of Truckee. The service was provided only in the summer months due to the great amount of snow the area received each winter.

Fast forward to 1925. LTRY&TCo.'s combined passenger and freight business was barely paying the bills, and it was not practical to substantially increase the amount of freight because loads had to be transferred in Truckee

between standard gauge cars and the narrow gauge cars of the Lake Tahoe line. The Bliss family did not want to spend the money that it would take to standard gauge the Tahoe line but they did want to continue to support the tourism business at the lake. They made a deal with Southern Pacific to lease the line to SP for \$1 per year if SP would standard-gauge the line at SP's expense. That deal was struck in 1925.

With the line now standard gauge, the surplus narrow gauge equipment was scrapped or otherwise disposed of, but the Bliss family chose to hang on to LTRy&TCo #1, the Glenbrook, and kept it at Tahoe City for several years. In 1936 they decided to part with it and sold it to the NCNG who wanted it for parts for their nearly identical NCNG #5, formerly the Tahoe. LTRy&TCo #1 went to the NCNG's Grass Valley yard where it sat on a siding, never operating on the NCNG but instead serving as a source of parts for NCNG #5.



*LTRy&TCo. #1, formerly the Glenbrook, sat on a siding in the Grass Valley yard where it served as a source of parts for NCNG #5, all the while retaining its Lake Tahoe Railway markings. (Ken Yeo collection)*

Now fast forward to 1942. Business for the NCNG was dropping off due to demands of WWII. The NCNG decided to shut down operations, sell off the marketable assets and scrap the rest. NCNG #5 was sold to what would become Universal Studios in Los Angeles where it starred in numerous movies over the years.

Meanwhile LTRy&TCo. #1 was sold as scrap along with other metal in the NCNG inventory. The Bliss family learned that their old locomotive was scheduled to be scrapped and rescued it from the scrap contractor. They paid to have it moved on a flatcar from Colfax to the Nevada State Museum where it sat for many years before being relocated to the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City.



But the story does not end there. In the 1980's a group of people in the Grass Valley/Nevada City area initiated efforts to create a transportation museum and began to look for equipment to display as a reminder of the glory days of the NCNG Railroad. In 1985 they were successful in securing the return of NCNG #5 (formerly the Tahoe) from the back lot of Universal Studios to Nevada County. It was painstakingly restored in its appearance and is now proudly displayed in the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad Museum in Nevada City, CA.



*NCNG #5 (formerly the Tahoe) is on display at the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad Museum in Nevada City, CA. (Roger Staab photo)*

Meanwhile in the nearby state of Nevada, similar interest was generated in restoring LTRy&TCo. #1, the Glenbrook, back to its glory. That restoration was recently completed and the Glenbrook is now one of the featured displays at the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City, NV. (See photo on the next page)

These two Baldwin-built locomotives arrived together in Carson City in 1875, brand new and ready to be put to work. They followed widely divergent paths in the ensuing years, though in the late 1930's fate brought them together again at Grass Valley. In the 1940's they were once again separated but both avoided the cutting torch and were eventually restored. Today the locomotives are prominently displayed in two railroad museums located not far from where the Glenbrook and Tahoe first chugged up the mountain from Lake Tahoe to Spooner Summit to deliver their loads of lumber.



*The restored Glenbrook is on display at the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City, NV.  
(Nevada Magazine)*

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