

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society



www.psrhs.org

February 2021 Newsletter

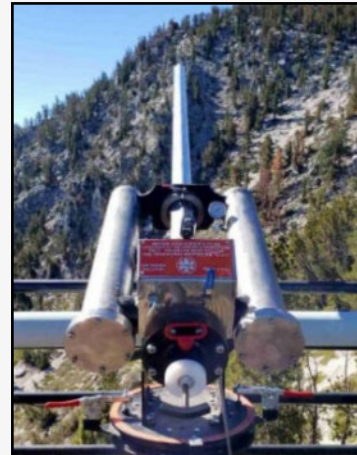
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*What is this futuristic looking device and what does it have to do with the railroad?
See the article on page 3. UP Photo*

Scheduled Events & Notices



Feb 25 **Monthly Meeting Zoom Presentation, 7PM.** Paul Helman will discuss the creation and leadership of the Southern Pacific transportation empire. See page 2 for details

Mar 25 **Monthly Meeting Zoom Presentation, details TBA**

As we move on from the COVID trials of 2020, we encourage you to renew your membership in PSRHS for 2021 or join PSRHS as a paid member. As conditions permit, we will be hosting monthly presentations on historic or contemporary operations along the Donner Route using Zoom or in-person meetings, offer field trips to regional sites, continue publishing our monthly newsletter articles and historic photos, and expand resources on our web site. More web cams are planned so viewers can track rail operations over the route. Thanks for your past and continued support of PSRHS and regional railroad history.

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MONTHLY MEETING

FEBRUARY ZOOM PRESENTATION

Monthly PSRHS Meetings are back via Zoom!!

Placer-Sierra RR Heritage Society February Mtg
Time: Feb 25, 2021 07:00 PM Pacific Time

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82244223475?pwd=b2xsZ0NnTmRoeTRpeDR0MzBIOGvdz09>

Meeting ID: 822 4422 3475

Passcode: 132478

One tap mobile

+16699009128,,82244223475#,,, *132478# US (San Jose)

Dial by your location

+1 669 900 9128 US (San Jose)

Meeting ID: 822 4422 3475

Passcode: 132478

Program: The Creation and Leadership of a Transportation Empire - A talk about the original Central Pacific Associates, their family successors and the assembling of the railroads to create the mighty Southern Pacific Company.

PSRHS member **Paul Helman** will cover the succession of the original Five Central Pacific Associates, the second generation family members who took leadership roles and the acquisitions, consolidations, and corporate restructures that built the Southern Pacific Company.

Paul was born and raised in the sunny Southern California town of Colton, named for a 19th Century Southern Pacific Railroad Executive. He earned a degree in Chemical Engineering at UC Santa Barbara in 1970 and began a 32-year career with the Procter and Gamble Company, 29 of which were at the Sacramento Manufacturing Plant on Fruitridge Road near the old Army Depot in South Sacramento.

Paul retired in 2002 and became a Volunteer Docent at the California State Railroad Museum in October 2002.

He has logged in over 12,500 hours in the museum and its programs. Paul is a trained and qualified museum tour guide and a qualified brakeman on the excursion railroad operated by the museum. He provides additional community service through a lifetime involvement in the Boy Scouts of America and currently serves on the local council Executive Board and Committee.

DONNER MEMORIES OF A SIGNAL MAINTAINER'S SON

Thanks to Art Sommers for submitting this article

My father (Arthur John Sommers) worked as an S.P. signal maintainer on the Donner Route. At first he was assigned the section of track centered around the Towle Depot which had been used as that section's signal maintainer family home once the lumber community of Towle no longer warranted a regular stop of trains at the station. My family (father, mother, three older sisters, and myself) lived in that railroad depot from 1946 through 1955. East bound trains came around a corner at night, the train's light shown right into the living room window. The snow plow trains used to push or throw the snow right up onto the front of the house blocking the front door. Remember that our house was originally a train station and thus built close to the tracks.

My father patrolled his section of track using what we called a putt-putt car. There was a small shed at the side of the house where that track vehicle was stored when not in use. My Dad had to manually maneuver the putt-putt car off the tracks from the storage shed and onto the mainline tracks.



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Passing Scene – Look Out Donner Pass: The Avalauncher Is Here

From a UP news release. Thanks to Jim Wood for providing the link to this story:
https://www.up.com/aboutup/community/inside_track/avalauncher-2-2-21.htm

California's Donner Pass averages 411 inches of annual snowfall – 34 feet! What is there to do to handle Old Man Winter?

They beat him to the action and create a controlled avalanche. You read that right. With a specialized piece of equipment, Engineering crews on Union Pacific's Roseville Subdivision deploy the avalauncher, which launches two pounds of explosives at the mountain to create a controlled avalanche. "We bring an avalanche down to us when we want it instead of when Mother Nature wants it," said Mike Upton, senior manager-Track Maintenance,

Engineering. This action reduces the risk of an uncontrolled avalanche that could create potentially hazardous situations on the tracks.



Numerous winter storms and resulting avalanches have caused derailments and other track issues since Upton joined UP 23 years ago. Avalanches can bring down a half a football-field sized sheet of snow, 2-3 feet deep, going up to 80 mph.

"There had to be a better way than just muscling through everything, and I mean muscling," Upton said. "We essentially fast forwarded the snow program into the 21st century with this change." In hopes of determining that better way, an avalanche mitigation plan has been in the works since 2010. That includes the use of an avalanche forecast team – experts in the field who monitor snow pack, wind, moisture and several parameters to determine when to launch the explosives to mitigate risk. Upton said other research included reaching out to ski resorts dealing with these same issues. It quickly became clear this was the best option. And he ensures it's not a new idea – ski resorts have used a program like this for 40 years.

The system allows the clearing of the track, reducing the chance of potentially dangerous situations. "It's the best for employee safety," Upton said. "This is going to hopefully prevent avalanche-caused problems." The avalauncher could be used between the months of November and April.

Amazon Smile Fund Raising

We are now part of the Amazon Smile fund raising campaign. We receive a donation to the society based on your purchases. Please feel free to copy and paste the link below and include it in all your emails.

<https://smile.amazon.com/ch/68-0488569>

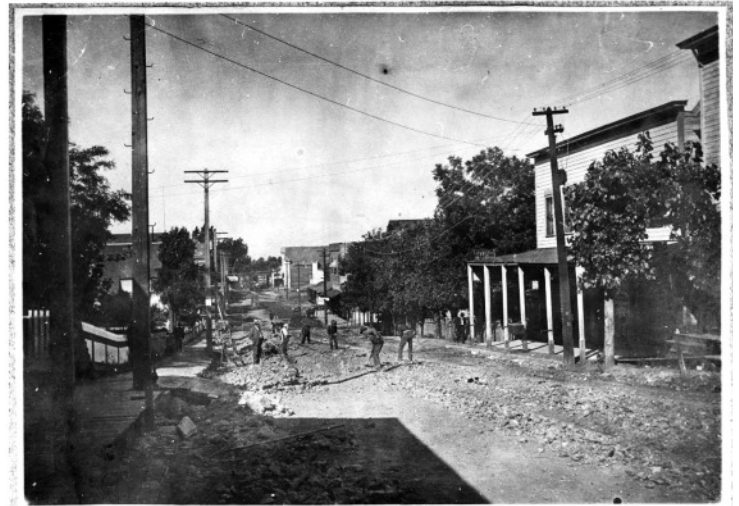


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From the Archives

January Mystery Photo (right): The location is Auburn, and the year is 1901. Wood ties and steel rails are being laid in the street from the depot to the post office (now old-town). Auburn Electric Railroad Company marked the track completion with a golden spike ceremony at Central Square in Oct. 1901, but the company went bankrupt before rolling stock could be purchased. The rails were removed and sold but the ties remained embedded in the roadway for 10 years. This venture is mentioned on page 72 of **Railroads of Placer County** by Art Sommers and Roger Staab. *Image from CSU Chico Collection, courtesy of Art Sommers and John Knox*



February Mystery Photo (left): What building is shown in the photo, and where was it located?. *PSRHS Collection, courtesy of Art Sommers*

Accidents/Other Incidents. *Placer Herald*, 28 'Apr 1900 – **A SLIGHT WRECK.** A slight wreck occurred at 9:30 o'clock yesterday morning at Cape Horn Mills. Two freight cars left the tracks, but no one was injured. The wrecking train from Sacramento was sent to the scene of the disturbance to clear the track. Trains from the East were delayed about six hours.

Membership Information

Individual Members = \$25.00/yr
Each Additional Family Member = \$5.00/yr

- Monthly Meetings (4th Thursday) and Newsletter
- Member Activities, History Pubs and Field Trips
- Display and Restoration Projects

PSRHS, P.O. Box 1776, Colfax, CA 95713
or join/renew online at www.psrhs.org

Reader comments, additional details, etc., are invited on any newsletter items or photos. Please forward comments, suggestions or information for inclusion in future issues of the newsletter to:

Roger Staab (530) 346-6722 roger.staab@psrhs.org





Signal Maintainer - continued from page 2

He had a pocket watch which had to be checked for accuracy at a watch shop down in Sacramento. He had to keep track of the train schedule so that he was not on the mainline tracks when a train was due. If the train was off schedule and he got caught, he was supposed to get off the putt-putt car and toss it off the tracks.

The trains used to drop off bags of mail and pick up bags from a swinging bar erected by the side of the tracks right in front of our house. There was a tiny shed on the side of the house where the incoming mail bags were stored until such time as a postal employee could retrieve them.



The depot building at Towle after it was converted to signal maintainer housing in the 1930's. The pole at the left edge of the image was used to drop and pick up bags of mail. Mainline tracks are in the foreground. Photo courtesy of Art Sommers.

In 1955 he "bumped" another signal maintainer to take over that person's section of track. My father had

enough seniority by that time to enable him to bump another person. My parents bought a home in Auburn to get us kids closer to schools. The only high school in the area was in Auburn. My oldest sister had to take a school bus from Towle down to Auburn which was a long, long trip. My parents wanted to preclude that trip from being eventually taken by the rest of us. My Dad could only bump a maintainer in the Colfax section. My Dad stayed at an S.P. house in Colfax while the rest of us were living in the Auburn house. He would eventually be able to bump another maintainer who worked the Auburn section of track.

By the 1960s, S.P. switched their signal maintainers over to trucks and the putt-putt car era faded away. The

use of trucks meant access roads had to be built along most, but not all, of the railroad track's right-of-way. The use of trucks meant that the signal maintainers became responsible for a much longer section of track. Living in train depots for maintainer families also faded away.

The signal maintainer's first responsibility was to ensure that the train control signals worked. Those signals let a train's engineer know if there was a train on the tracks in front of him in the miles ahead. Those train signals worked by having wires make connections across the steel rail junctions with each other. If one of the wires was broken, there would be no signal. Later on, the signal maintainer also had to ensure the warning signal/lights at automobile crossings

were in working order. When there was a collision between car and train, my Dad had to go and check to make sure the automobile warning signal was working for liability issues. He also had to check the train's warning signal wires to make sure that they had not been damaged by the impact of a train's collision with a car.

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Signal Maintainer - continued from page 5

One time, my Dad got a call at our Auburn home that a train had collided with a car at the Sacramento Street crossing out near the Auburn Recreation Park. He asked if I wanted to go with him. I got in his work truck and we headed to the wreck, which was not far from our house. When we arrived, the train was stopped on the tracks, blocking the street. My Dad got out to check the crossing guard signal and the wires connecting the sections of track. I walked down the tracks to the front of the train. The train had caught the car right in the passenger side door and had pushed the car down the tracks about 100 yards. The driver's side door was open and I saw a pool of blood on the floor under the steering wheel. I turned around to see the train's engineer checking the front of the train and using a small whisk broom to clean broken glass off the train. I was to find out later that a woman had kids in her car and the thought was that she had turned around to admonish them or something and had not seen the crossing guard warning signal which was working. I don't remember how many people were in the car and how bad their injuries were. I was not very old and that information was not shared with me.

As part of my family research, I sent a letter to the Railroad Retirement Board located in Chicago, Illinois. I provided my Dad's social security number and asked them to send me any employment history they had for Arthur John Sommers. In return, the Board sent me a sheet showing the years he worked and how much money he made in each year. For the last full year (1966) that Arthur John Sommers worked as a signal maintainer for the Southern Pacific Railroad Co., he earned \$6,516.81. That calculates out as \$543.00 a month. Only a decade after his death in 1967, I started work in 1978 at McClellan AFB as a lowly GS-3 keypunch operator and made more my first year than my father did after he had been working for Southern Pacific Railroad for 27 years. Those two earnings figures help demonstrate the enormous increase in wages that most every job in America was experiencing in the 1970s. However, the cost of things was going up correspondingly. The nickel candy bars were now selling for 25 cents. The price for cars and the price for homes was going up and up.

My father died of a heart attack in 1967.

