

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society



www.psrhs.org

May 2021 Newsletter

In this issue:

NO PSRHS ZOOM PROGRAM IN MAY. Page 2

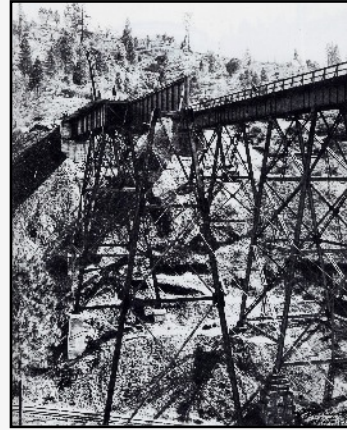
Election of PSRHS Board Members. Page 2

Signal Maintainer - Elford Wall. Pages 2, 5, 6

Passing Scene. Page 3

Member Activities. Page 3

From the Archives. Page 4



This photo featured on page 4 highlights several historic features. PSRHS Collection

Scheduled Events & Notices



May 27 No PSRHS Zoom Meeting in May

Jun 24 PSRHS Zoom Meeting, 7PM. Program TBD

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 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.

MONTHLY MEETING

THERE WILL NOT BE A MAY PSRHS ZOOM PROGRAM. We need your suggestions for future programs.

PSRHS Members – You can help by offering a program topic for future meetings, or by suggesting a topic and presenter. Also note on page 3 your opportunity to contribute your stories to this monthly newsletter.

Board Members – Help make your club more viable with a presentation based on your railroad-related field excursions, research or experiences.

April Program Recap: Bill Taylor, CSRM Docent and Volunteer presented an interesting zoom program on **The Central Pacific/Southern Pacific and California Agriculture.** The railroad encouraged settlement of lands and promoted agriculture products appropriate for the regional climate, thus increasing the value of the land and revenue for the railroad. Bill also discussed the role the railroad played in developing water sources and irrigation to support these new crops. His program was very informative and provided a look at a little-known role the railroad played in the development of our region.

ELECTION OF BOARD MEMBERS

Prior to the April zoom presentation, Chuck Spinks, Don Anderson and Shirley Racine were re-elected to three year terms on the PSRHS board by those members attending the meeting. This election would have normally been held at the November meeting but was delayed due to pandemic restrictions on meetings.

SIGNAL MAINTAINER-ELFORD WALL

The March 2021 PSRHS newsletter included an article by Elford Wall describing his memories of growing up the son of a Southern Pacific signal maintainer. Elford provided another narrative to Art Sommers, this time on Elford's own experiences as a signal maintainer. While most of Elford's work was performed on the Feather River route, his narrative provides an interesting look at the job of signal maintainer in the mid-1900's. Elford's notes presented here are courtesy of Art Sommers.

"In the spring of 1951, the Signal Maintainers position came open in Oroville Ca. I had always wanted to be a signal maintainer and have my own district. If I could hold that job for the rest of my life I would be happy. I was the successful bidder and got the job. I had no previous experience maintaining except for one month I filled in at Keddie for a man that was on sick leave.

On the Third Subdivision, which is the Feather River Canyon, it is required that you know how to contact the dispatcher and get "block time" or "work time" in a given area of track. The reason for this is that the whole 112 miles from Oroville to Portola is nothing but blind curves. In order to protect motorcars and work crews from trains and each other, you had to get block time from the train dispatcher. Before I was allowed to operate a motorcar in block time territory, I had to pass the Book Of Rules with the Oroville Trainmaster. Mr. Phil Prentiss was the trainmaster at Oroville. He was a "bull of the woods" type of guy. When he shook hands with you, he tended to yank you off your feet. He proceeded to test me on the Book of Rules. Everything went along fine until we came to a certain rule of which I disagreed with him on. I must have said the wrong thing because he went into a tirade about his long and impeccable experience as a trainmaster and that he knew the Book of Rules. He told my boss, Ass't Signal Supervisor Slim Eslinger who was standing close by, that he wouldn't pass me because of my attitude. Slim said that he needed me on the job now and please pass him. So he did.

Continued on Page 5



Passing Scene – Sheriff Railcar and Cripple Creek

This photo was captured in Colfax in August 2005. According to the web site icrr.net, the former Illinois Central passenger car #3 was built in 1917 as Pullman lot #4466. It was renumbered to #8 in 1940, and in the 1950's and 60's, was assigned to C. H. Mottier and J. M. Trissal. It was later designated AMTRAK 800138. When captured in this photo it was privately owned, with markings Sheriff Railcar, Cripple Creek, and number PPCX 800138. It was not tied to a sheriff's use. *Roger Staab photo*



Member Activities – Your Submitted Story Here

Page 3 of the PSRHS newsletter has been devoted to a photo of contemporary operations or equipment spotted on the Donner Route, or events such as Colfax Railroad Days. Another potential use of this page is to feature stories submitted by our members and readers on railroad-related activities they have participated in, preferably but not limited to the Donner Route or nearby regions. A photo or two and a few paragraphs with details are all that is needed. Please consider sharing your railroading adventures with our club members and newsletter readers.

Submit your input to roger.staab@psrhs.org.

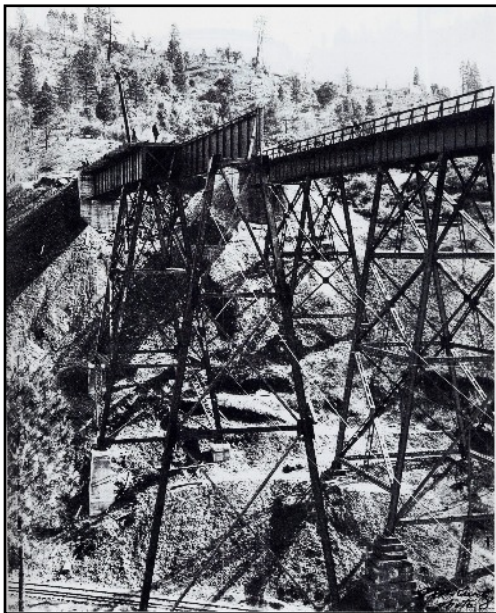
Amazon Smile Fund Raising

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>

From the Archives

April Mystery Photo (right): That's young John Morgan in the photo living a childhood dream. While walking home from Colfax he happened on Bill Fisher's outdoor model railroad layout and was invited to help lay track and replace ties. His efforts were rewarded with the opportunity to operate the locomotive. Bill Fisher and his wife Kay were fixtures in Colfax for many years. Bill wrote several books including *30 Years over Donner* about his experiences as a signal maintainer for Southern Pacific, and Kay authored *A Baggage Car with Lace Curtains*, about living along the mainline tracks. *PSRHS Collection, courtesy of John Morgan*



May Mystery Photo (left): What is happening in this photo, where was it taken, and approximately what year? For extra credit, what other identifiable unique railroad feature is visible (look closely)? *PSRHS Collection*

Accidents/Other Incidents. *Placer Herald*, 17 March 1900. **Fatal Train Wreck.** Freight train No. 203, in charge of Conductor P. A. Tremblay, of Sacramento, left the track six miles east of Colfax Wednesday morning. Five cars went down the embankment, while eight remained on the track. A man named O'Brien who has frequented Truckee, and who has worked at Ophir, this county, was killed in the wreck and a young Englishman, named T. Garner injured. They had evidently been riding the brake beam of one of the cars. Westbound overland trains were delayed most of the day in consequence of the wreck. The injured man Garner is at the County Hospital. His shoulder is badly hurt. Coroner Burns held an inquest on the body of O'Brien.

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@psrhs.org





Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society

May 2021 Newsletter

Continued from page 2

Slim Eslinger taught me how to maintain signals. How to adjust power switches, hand throw switches, maintain storage batteries, make filament light tests, put on rail bonds, how to get block time, read a volt-amp meter etc. etc.

In those days, there were no radio telephones. All communications were done over the dispatchers line, the code line or the message line. The dispatchers line was used primarily by the dispatcher to communicate with train crews and maintenance of way employees. The code line connects the control machine in Sacramento to all signal control points from Oakland to Portola and had a phone circuit on it. The code phone was primarily used for signal personnel. The message line is a dial up line that is connected to most offices on the W.P.

My tool house and motorcar shed was near the east switch at Oroville. The next siding east of there was called Quartz. If I wanted time to travel there I would get on the dispatchers phone and if no one was talking, I would say "East end Oroville". The dispatcher, in Sacramento, would say "Go ahead East Oroville". I would say "This is Wall and I'd like to have 40 minutes between East Oroville and West End Quartz". If there was no conflict with any trains, the Dispatcher would say "Wall has until 8:40 between East Oroville and west end Quartz". I would repeat the time and the dispatcher would say "OK at 8:00 AM". The dispatcher would then put red blocking tags on the signal control levers at east Oroville and West end Quartz, on the CTC board in Sacramento. After I arrived and set my motorcar off the tracks at the West End of Quartz, I would go to the dispatchers phone and say "West End Quartz". The dispatcher would say "go ahead West Quartz". I would say "this is Wall and I'm in the clear between East End Oroville and the West end of Quartz." The dispatcher would say "OK, Wall in the clear at 8:40 AM". The dispatcher would then remove the red tags from the board.

My territory included east end of Craig, Oroville Yard, Oroville, Quartz, Land, Bidwell and the west end of Bloomer. A total of about 25 miles. After the Oroville Dam was built in the sixties, Quartz and several sidings east of there were covered with water. A new railroad had to be built around the new dam and lake.

After I had been on the job for a couple of months, an east bound freight train was going to go into the siding at the west end of Oroville Yard. The locomotive, a 16 wheel mountain steam engine, split the switch and derailed. I was wondering what I could have done to cause that. When I got there, the Road Foreman of Engines and my boss Slim Eslinger were having a heated conversation. The Road Foreman said "I thought the CTC system was fail safe". Slim said "it is if you follow the rules" It was finally determined that the engineer had a Red over Yellow to go into the siding. He stopped with half his engine past the signal. He went to the phone to ask the Yardmaster which yard track he should go into. He got back on the engine, put it in reverse to take up the slack in his train, standard practice in those days, started forward to pull into the yard. But when he reversed, he cleared the track circuit over the switch which showed clear on the dispatchers board in Sacramento. The dispatcher thinking that he had already pulled into the yard, threw the switch anticipating the next train move. As the switch points were moving, the engine moved forward and caught the switch in the middle and went on the ground. After everything was cleaned up, there were only a few bent switch rods to change out.

The Feather River Canyon is a beautiful area, but it can be a dangerous place to work especially in the winter time. There are many miles of slide fences between Oroville and Portola. A slide fence is a fence made of wood or steel poles with wires strung between them with six inch spacing. The fence can be any length and as high as thirty or more feet, depending on the formation of the cliff or rock over hang next to it. In some places the cliffs were so high and steep that extensions of the slide fence were built over the top of the tracks.

Continued on page 6





Continued from page 5

The idea of the fence is to detect when a rock or a slide has occurred that might obstruct the tracks. An electric current is passed thru the wires and holds up a relay. If the relay drops because of a broken wire, the signal goes to Red causing trains to stop and then proceed at caution. Most of the time the wire breaks were just nuisance breaks by a single rock, but occasionally a slide would come down and wipe out the fence and the track next to it. One evening I was called to repair a fence at Jarbo which was on another district. The maintainer on that district was not available. It was raining quite hard. I got block time all the way to Jarbo. I spotted the broken wire pretty quick. I had to climb a wooden pole to get to the broken wire. I put on my head lamp, hooks and belt, grabbed my "come a long" nicopress tool and climbed up the pole. I could hear rocks falling several hundred feet above me. I made myself as small as possible behind the pole hoping that no rocks would come my way. I made my wire splices, reset the relay and headed for home.

After almost a year, a Junior Draftsman job came up for bid in the Signal Office in San Francisco. This is primarily a training job for making blue prints for signal circuits.

I bid on it and got it and moved to S.F.

A few years later, Dick Mounkes, a Division Engineer was killed near Storrie in the Feather River Canyon. Track crews were trying to clean up a slide there and a rock the size of a small automobile came down right on top of him and cut him in half. The railroad named a siding after him near Marysville."

Elford

