

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society



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**May 2025
Newsletter**

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This early fire train image has the lead-in role for our monthly program on May 27. See pages 2, 3 & 4 for more information and photos about the program.

PSRHS collection

Scheduled Events & Notices



- May 27** PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program – Roger Staab
– Sierra Fire Trains Past and Present
- Jun 24** PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program under development
- Jul 3** Colfax July 3 Celebration – Caboose open if enough volunteers
- Jul 22** PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program under development
- Aug 9** Colfax Museum & Caboose Open for Placer County Museums Heritage Trail

Annual membership renewals pay for publishing railroad history documents, purchasing and posting historic photos, arranging field trips, & other historic preservation activities.

Preserving Railroad History on the Donner Pass Route



Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society

May 2025 Newsletter

PSRHS MONTHLY MEETING

MAY 27, 7PM

AUBURN VETERANS MEMORIAL HALL

May Program: Sierra Fire Trains Past & Present - an updated version of Roger Staab's 2005 program.

We think of fire trains as a fixture from the past, and in fact they were first created to fight all-too-common fires in Sierra wooden snowsheds. Fire trains were stationed at strategic locations on the Donner Route to provide quick response if a fire started in the sheds. But did you know a fire train is still kept on standby at Colfax? We'll take a look at the history of the fire trains and views of modern fire trains in operation.

Our meetings are open to all who are interested. See our web site for updates on future meeting topics and directions to the meeting location.

April Program Recap: Steve Bush & Craig Thomas provided an insider's look On Board the 1975-76 American Freedom Train. They both served as crew members for much of the 1976 tour of the American Freedom Train that celebrated the U.S. bicentennial. Craig fired SP4449 for part of his tour, while Steve's duties left him time to take photos of the locations they visited. The duo provided a first-hand look at this historic train journey using Steve's collection of photos of the trip and their personal memories and experiences accumulated along the way.

APRIL BOARD MEETING

The PSRHS Board of Directors met prior to the April meeting. Items discussed included:

1. PSRHS Domain Name

- Bill Yoder spoke about the crypto key that needs to be migrated to the domain name server.
- ACTION: Bill will work with Malcolm to get this accomplished

2. Heritage Trail Activities

- Intent is to open caboose on Saturday, August 9th

3. September Colfax RR Days

- Status to be determined.

4. Future Presentations

- Nevada County Narrow Gauge suggested by Dave Ferreira
- Additional talks by CSRM Docents

5. Membership

- Bill Yoder advised that we only have roughly half of our regular attendees as paid members
- Need to find incentives to increase paid memberships

6. Fence Painting around Depot

- Paul Greenfield recommends we put this off until cooler weather in the fall.
- ACTION: Paul will advise Colfax City Manager Ron Walker of the new plan

7. Adding psrhs.org to any Newspaper Articles

- ACTION: Malcolm will devise a means for forwarding a non-attributable email that will go to Chuck

THE GIFT OF AN ARTICLE TOPIC

Putting out a monthly newsletter creates a monthly challenge - searching for a feature article to include in each month's issue. But sometimes you get lucky and an article finds you. The article starting on page 5 of this issue grew from a simple request for information. I was contacted via email by Jennifer M who was researching a man who died in a railroad accident in this region. She asked if I had more information about the accident. The location and date of the incident and name of the person who died led to a newspaper search, and thanks to Jennifer's question, the resulting story.

This month's feature article provides an in-depth look at a fatal railroad accident including details as recalled by those who were involved, and the recognition of one person who risked his life to help others, paying the ultimate price for his actions.

Turn to page 5 for the story of the 1937 Blue Canyon Accident and Fatality.



Passing Scene - Colfax Fire Train Testing

The large photo below was featured in our March 2020 issue of the PSRHS newsletter, but it seems appropriate to repeat it here in light of our Fire Train theme this month. The fire train tank cars and pump system were being tested in the Colfax yard in this 2007 view. For several years these tank cars for the UP fire train were kept at the ready on the eastbound siding in Colfax during the fire season. The Colfax fire train played an important role in fighting the Stevens Trail fire on Cape Horn in 2004. A newer unit was deployed on the Dixie Fire in Feather River Canyon in 2021. Both deployments are featured in the May 27 PSRHS program titled **Sierra Fire Trains Past and Present**. 2007 Photo by Roger Staab



Inset photo →

A new UP fire train appeared this year on the westbound siding in Colfax. Watch for more photos and details on this updated fire train set in a future PSRHS newsletter. *Roger Staab photo*

Membership Information

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

- Monthly Meetings (4th Tuesday) 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 <https://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

From the Archives - Norden Fire Train

SP's Sierra Fire Trains are the focus of our May 27 program. The two photos below from John Signor's book, Donner Pass - SP's Sierra Crossing show SP 2252 4-6-0 and its water tenders equipped for fighting fires in Donner's wooden snowsheds. This fire train was kept staffed and steaming during the fire season, ready to respond to a fire. The two water tank cars and pump system could provide water at 300 psi into a fire hose that was connected at the front of the locomotive. SP 2252 survives today. For a time it was on display at the Roseville fairgrounds, but can now be viewed as you approach downtown Roseville on Atlantic Street.



The Colfax Heritage Museum in the Colfax Passenger Depot has O-Scale models on display of the SP2252 Norden Fire Train, SP 4294 Cab-Forward, SP 4318 Mountain Class and SP 2686 Consolidation Class Colfax Helper Locomotives. →



Accidents/Other Incidents. *Colfax Record & Sentinel*, Jun. 20, 1930. **“FIRE THREATENS BUSINESS SECTION.** One of the most threatening fires of recent years in the Colfax business district occurred early Wednesday morning when the California Cafe and the O.K. Barber Shop buildings on Grass Valley Street burned to the ground.

For a time the entire business section of the city was in danger from destruction by fire and only by the most strenuous efforts of the Colfax fire department and the **Southern Pacific Company's local fire train** [*emphasis added*] was this tragedy averted ...

As soon as the danger of the fire spreading to the Lobner Block and other Main Street property became apparent, Foreman Bat Riordan of the round house, brought out the railroad company's local fire train and stationed it at the Grass Valley Street crossing, running a line of hose to the fire. The pressure from the fire train and the Southern Pacific hydrant located at Grass Valley and Main Streets was much greater than the city's pressure and did much towards keeping the fire from spreading...”



1937 Blue Canyon Accident - Death of U.S. Hardison -

Editor's note: The details of a horrific railroad accident coupled with a heroic death are presented through news articles, an editorial, and a coroner's inquest. The inquest in particular points out the difficulty in painting a clear picture of what happened before and immediately after an accident as witnessed by the crew members involved.

*Placer Herald, Jan. 30, 1937. **Trains Collide and 7 Are Injured.*** A fast S.P. freight train ran into a snow plow at Blue Canyon Thursday evening. One fireman is near death and seven others injured. Leonard Woods, engineer, and U.S. Hardison, fireman, on the snowplow, were badly burned. Both men were brought to the Highlands Hospital at Auburn. *[The news report then listed others injured in the accident]*

The snow plow and several cars were stalled above Blue Canyon, when a fast freight, coming west, ran into it. A steam pipe on the snow plow burst and Hardison and Woods were scalded. The freight was loaded with cattle. The wreck stopped all mail and passenger cars coming from the east.

*Auburn Journal, Feb. 4, 1937. [Editorial] **HE SAVED OTHERS,*** himself he could not save. Like a beacon light in the fog, these words come ringing down through the ages to tell the world far too thoughtless of the "other fellow" that there has been those who have given their lives, that others might live.

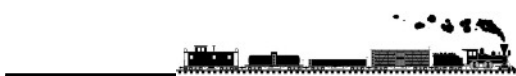
Not long ago in this column, we recorded the passing of one who without thought of himself, gave his life that those who worked under him might live. The life of Al Straightwell ended, but the lives of several men working under him were saved through his heroic death.

Now even as we pen this tribute to him, a man who unflinchingly in the face of almost certain death, saved his fellow workmen, at the cost of his own is approaching the border. U.S. Hardison, a fireman working for the Southern Pacific Company, sacrificed himself, and pulled two men to safety. Even as we write, his life is slowly ebbing away and before the ink is dry, it is a moral certainty that he will have gone to his reward. But his acts will live long in the hearts of those who knew him.

Oh, yes, he was just a common man like the rest of us. He came to the crisis of his life. Before him were two paths. He could jump to safety through a bank of snow piled high beside the railroad track, or he could pull two unconscious forms to safety and perhaps sacrifice his own life. There were none to see his heroism. He was alone. Steam was pouring from broken pipes of the engine. Steam that would burn him beyond repair. He looked at the unconscious forms of the men he knew, had suffered with. Then he knew. Shielding himself as best he could, he pulled the unconscious men to safety, collapsed from the burns, and now lies at the point of death, even at this moment is passing out into the dim semi-darkness of the hereafter.

His act of heroism places him on a pedestal that is far beyond the reach of those financial giants, political head pieces, social lights that seem to us, to be the leaders of men. He stands alone, beside those other greats, who have sacrificed their all that others might live.

What a passing. If as we are taught there are angels to record our passing, what a blaring of trumpets there must be as he approaches. None have done more. Few have done as much.



1937 Blue Canyon Accident (continued)

Press Tribune, Feb. 10, 1937. FUNERAL SERVICE HELD FOR ULYSSES SIDNEY HARDISON.

Funeral services for Ulysses Sidney Hardison were held Saturday afternoon in the Broyer Memorial Chapel. Roseville Lodge No. 222, F. & A.M. conducted the service according to the Masonic ritual. Despite the weather, scores of friends of the man who lost his life from injuries received saving two fellow workmen, were present.

... Interment was in the Odd Fellows cemetery here.

Mr. Hardison passed away Thursday in the Highland hospital at Auburn, as a result of burns and scalds received in a crash between a railroad locomotive and a snow plow at Blue canyon. Unmindful of his own injuries, he rescued Leonard Wood, engineer of the snowplow, and then returned to the steaming engine cab for E.I. Stanley, machinist.

Hardison was born in March, Missouri, May 24, 1887, and at the time of his death was 49 years of age. He lived for 19 years in California, spending most of the time in Roseville. ...

Press Tribune, Feb. 19, 1937. CORONER HOLDS INQUEST INTO HARDISON DEATH.

County Coroner Francis West conducted the inquest into the death of U.S. Hardison Wednesday night at the Broyer Mortuary. Hardison, a fireman on the snowplow, died as the result of scalds received when a freight locomotive collided with the snowplow on January 28.

William W. Zell was the first witness to be called. Zell, locomotive engineer, was on engine No. 4108, and working between Roseville and Emigrant Gap. His engine was shoving the rotary. He was headed east, according to replies to questions from the coroner, while the rotary was headed west [*sic*]. The plow had been turned around at Emigrant Gap. Plow and engine were standing still at the time of the crash.

When asked where he was at the time of the crash, Zell answered: "Part of the time in the air, and part of the time in the snow."

The coroner asked who was in charge of the plow and the reply was "the conductor." They had stopped for lack of steam and water and were waiting for steam to go up.

Engine 4140 was the one that hit the plow. It was traveling on the west-bound track.

Roy Phelps, fireman, told about the same story of the accident as Zell. He said that he jumped from the cab at the time of the accident.

Horace Notley of Colfax, roadmaster of the division, was riding in the cab of the rotary. He said that he had no warning of the impending danger. He said that after the accident he was lying on the floor of the cab and someone told him they would come for him but he finally climbed down himself. The crash had set fire to the woodwork around the boiler and until they were stopped, they stuck their heads out of the door for air. When they stop, men are sent out to signal other trains.

John F. Welton, conductor, was questioned especially about flagging other trains that might come along. He said Engine 4108 was pushing the snow plow between Emigrant Gap and Blue Canyon and someone at the forward end of the train "whistled it was down."

The brakeman went out to flag the train, as they were on the time of 289, a first-class passenger train. Welton testified that the brakeman had all the flagging equipment, including fuzees and torpedoes. He estimated the plow was approximately half a mile from the train when it was flagged. The flag was acknowledged.

When the trains struck, he was standing in the door of the rotary. Then he heard the muffled sound of an engine and a low whistle. The crash occurred at 3:55 p.m., the plow having been on the track 20 minutes when the accident occurred.





1937 Blue Canyon Accident (continued)

In reply to questions from Coroner West, Welton said he takes orders from the train dispatcher but works under directions from the trainmaster.

He said they had been working on the hill that day, as there had been a terrific blizzard. At the most, they could see only 200 feet ahead. The grade and the number of cars on a train makes a difference in the stopping time, he said.

Henry Strube, engineer on engine 4148 *[sic]*, the extra train, said the last time he received orders was at Emigrant Gap. There was nothing to indicate the plow was on the westbound track. He estimated the engine was 250 feet from the rotary when he saw it.

Strube, under questioning, said that he did not see the flares, or hear the torpedoes. There were other men in the cab with him and they were watching for any signals but no one had heard the torpedoes, probably because of the snow covering the rails. There were 68 cars in the train, and he said with that load, it would take at least half a mile to bring the train to a stop. Another thing that made it difficult to see any signals was the spray of snow. The train had slowed down to eight miles an hour. Strube said that if the train had been going any faster he "would not be her today." He did not jump when the crash occurred, but stayed with his engine.

John G. Chapman of Sacramento, locomotive fireman, said he did not hear the torpedoes from his position. He said several of the crew called the flag when it showed up. He was asked whether or not he thought safety boxes lower down the hill, such as those from Emigrant Gap to Andover, would have averted the wreck. However, he declined to answer, saying he was not an expert along those lines.

George High, machinist, who was in the rotary plow, said there was no warning before the crash. He said that Hardison and Woods were in the plow, which has six doors. It happened he and Hardison were stationed near the door. He said it all happened so suddenly that he didn't know the details. He could not tell how he got out, as the impact was so hard he was knocked unconscious. He said there was too much water and steam to see anything but it seemed that a drawbar had been driven into the tank of the rotary. He was brought to Colfax on the flange *[sic]* for medical attention.

Coroner West read a deposition from L.W. Woods, engineer on the snowplow. He didn't know whether he was pulled out of the engine or thrown out, but he remembered his leg had been caught. His deposition said that he had left his seat and gone back to the fireman's compartment. When he returned his cab seat and all along the front was on fire. He thought it was caused by too much oil. He also said they had stopped to get up steam and when the gauge was high enough they were to continue plowing.

Dr. C.E. Lewis of Highland Hospital, Auburn, also made a deposition telling of the injuries which caused the death of Hardison.

After reading the last deposition, Mr. West announced that all witnesses except Mr. Mailing, conductor on the extra train, had given their versions of the accident. Mailing is still in the snow area and was unable to be present.

The jury was out for about half an hour, discussing the testimony. They finally brought in a verdict of "death came from accidental means due to scalding, on January 28, 1937." *[the news article then listed the jury foreman and members of the jury]*

Hardison passed away February 4 at Highland hospital, after several days' suffering from scalds received in the accident.

