

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society



<https://www.psrhs.org>

June 2025 Newsletter

In This Issue:

JUNE MEETING PROGRAM. Page 2

Membership & Web Site. Page 2

PSRHS May Board Meeting. Page 2

Passing Scene. Page 3

From the Archives. Page 4

**Fire Threatens Business District -
Fire Train Wrecked at Midas** Pages 5-7



*One more look at the new UP fire train that is on standby in Colfax. See page 3 for details
Roger Staab photo*

Scheduled Events & Notices



**Jun 18-22 National Garden Railway 40th Anniversary Convention - SAFE Credit Union
Convention Center, Sacramento – <https://www.ngrc2025.org/>**

**Jun 24 PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program - Marilyn Sommerdorf & Mike
Collins – Early Steam Locomotives: Bright Colors and Elaborate Graphics**

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



June 2025 Newsletter

PSRHS MONTHLY MEETING

JUNE 24, 7PM

AUBURN VETERANS MEMORIAL HALL

June Program: **Early Steam Locomotives: Bright Colors and Elaborate Graphics.** Local historian and photographer Marilyn Sommerdorf's presentation will feature some of the paint styles & decorations of early steam locomotives. During the 1800's, steam locomotives were not the basic black of later time periods, but were painted bright colors with elaborate graphics and polished metal. Marilyn will show photos of some of the beautiful locomotives of the Virginia & Truckee and other railroads.

Marilyn grew up on an 1863 family ranch near Hood on the Sacramento River, and spent most of her career with California State Parks at the California State Railroad Museum. Her work at the museum included restorations, research, photography, and exhibits. Since retiring she continues her history research and volunteering at the Railroad Museum.

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.

May Program Recap: Roger Staab showed photos of **Sierra Fire Trains**, beginning with their past use staged at several locations near Donner Summit to respond quickly to fires in the extensive wooden snow sheds, and to assist with fighting fires in communities along the route. Next, more recent fire train images fighting fires along the tracks and preserving railroad infrastructure. And finally, features of a modern UP fire train that is currently staged in Colfax.

MEMBERSHIP AND WEB SITE

It is PSRHS policy and intent to provide free research materials on our web site to all who are interested. Yet our efforts to collect and catalog information, print documents, support restoration efforts by PSRHS and

others, all have a monetary cost to add them to the story of SP's Donner Pass Route.

Your paid membership helps pay for these activities and helps us tell that story. You can play an important role as we add web site content, publications, web cams, etc., by becoming a member of PSRHS or renewing your membership for \$25 per year.

We offer member only perks, including:

- Invitation to member-only field trips
- Purchase of surplus books prior to public sale
- Satisfaction in knowing you are helping preserve local railroad history

While our meetings and some activities are open to all who are interested, we encourage you to show your support for PSRHS by maintaining yearly membership.

MAY BOARD MEETING

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

1. Garden Railway Exhibition June 18-23
 - Malcolm mentioned the event that will be held at the SAFE Credit Union Sacramento Convention Center.
2. Colfax Caboose on Railroad Days Sept. 13-14
 - PSRHS members help staff the caboose
 - Table with surplus items to give away for a donation
 - Sell books jointly at the CAHS museum on trial basis
3. Future Presentations
 - Marilyn Sommerdorf - V&T Railroad/Engine Colors
 - Jim Wood - England trip photos of British Railroads
 - Dick Dorn photos
4. Web Site Improvements
 - Chuck and Roger to review web site for potential layout improvements and recommended changes.

Check out this month's feature article
starting on page 5





Passing Scene - Today's Colfax Fire Train

Parked in the Colfax yard is a modern Union Pacific fire train at the ready in case of wildfire near the railroad tracks on the west slope of the Sierra. This quote was found on UP's website: "As we work to protect people and our infrastructure, we aim to be as proactive and innovative as possible... Additional equipment is ready to join the battle in Northern California, including 27 new 32,000-gallon tanker cars and a flatcar that's been modified as a platform to help fight fires... These additions are a gamechanger,.. This triples our water-carrying capacity to 100,000 gallons at each location, allowing us to stay out longer before refilling..."



A new UP fire train appeared earlier this summer on the westbound siding in Colfax. It includes larger tank cars for increased water capacity, and a modified flatcar with on-board generators, pumps and valves that allow crews to connect nozzles and hoses to direct streams of water on fires near the UP tracks. *Roger Staab photos*



The modified flat car provides a relatively safe platform where crews can fight fires and protect railroad infrastructure



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:

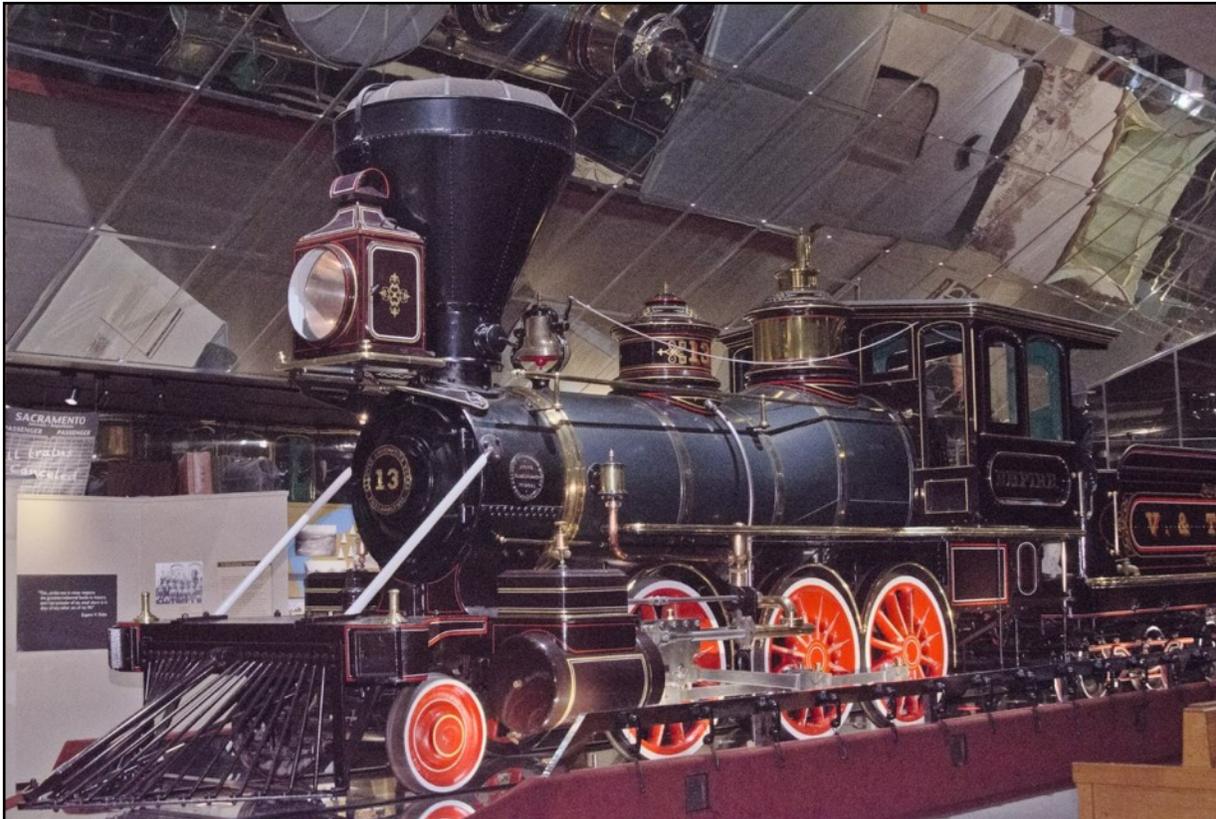
roger.staab@psrhs.org





From the Archives - Virginia & Truckee "Empire" Locomotive

Our June program will feature the colorful, elaborate and detailed paint schemes that were used on many of the early vintage locomotives on both the V&T RR and Central Pacific. The picture below from the California State Railroad Museum web site shows one such paint scheme on the V&T "Empire". Note the details on the headlamp and steam dome as well as the text detail on the tender.



Accidents/Other Incidents. *The Press Tribune, Jun. 20, 1930.* **"THREE RAIL MEN INJURED AS FIRE TRAIN PILES UP** – Three Roseville railroad men were injured, one seriously, when the Southern Pacific fire train of Blue Canyon left the track and overturned on a curve at Midas Wednesday morning while on its way to fight a fire which threatened to destroy the business district of Colfax. C.A. Marr, brakeman, suffered a broken hip; H.C. Bell, fireman, was cut about the arms, and T.P. Holder, conductor, suffered shock and minor injuries. Richard Faltrick, engineer of the wrecked train, was the only member of the crew not hurt. Doctors R.S. Peers and Ralph Miller were rushed from Colfax by special engine and caboos. They took the injured to the Southern Pacific hospital at Sacramento where an operation was performed on Marr's hip Wednesday morning. He will need to remain at the hospital several weeks. A wrecking crew had cleared the main line by the middle of the afternoon. The train included the engine, tender and two water tank cars. It was on the westbound track, on the down grade, when the engine left the rails and leaped to the eastbound tracks. The tender and tank cars were piled up over both tracks...."





Editor's note: On page 4 of the June and May newsletters, the "Accidents and Incidents" section of "From the Archives" features two separate incidents involving fire trains that are linked to the same story. What follows is the complete story as reported in the June 20, 1930 issue of the Colfax Record. rs

FIRE THREATENS [Colfax] BUSINESS SECTION

Early Morning Blaze Destroys Wooden Buildings on Grass Valley Street Occupied by California Café and O K Barber Shop; Lobner Block Threatened During Fire Which Lasted One Hour; Colfax Fire Department and Southern Pacific Fire Train Crew Do Excellent Work

FIRE TRAIN WRECKED AT MIDAS

Emigrant Gap Fire Train Enroute to Colfax Overturms near Midas Injuring Three Members of Crew. Engineer Escapes Without Scratch. Local Doctors Rushed to Scene of Accident; Traffic Delayed Several Hours While Crews Repair Track.

One of the most threatening fires of recent years in the Colfax business district occurred early Wednesday morning when the California Café 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 of destruction by fire and only by the most strenuous efforts by the Colfax fire department and the Southern Pacific Company's local fire train was the tragedy averted.

The fire started about 8 o'clock in the morning and it was not until after nine o'clock that it was under control. During the blaze the Lobner Building, the city's largest structure, twice caught on fire, once flames bursting from a cupola on the roof of the building. On both occasions quick work on the part of the firemen prevented its spread.

Several weeks ago the California Café caught fire from what was apparently a defective flue but the fire was extinguished before it did serious damage. From the testimony of eye witnesses of the onset of the fire which destroyed the two buildings Wednesday morning the cause was the same.

Whether or not the flue was carefully inspected after the first fire, The Record has no information. J. L. Watts turned in the alarm which brought out the fire department. He noticed a small smoke near the chimney and thought at first that it was from the flue. After a closer inspection he turned in the alarm and the fight against destruction was on.

The fact that the Colfax Garage was of metal construction is probably responsible for the fact that it is still standing and unhurt by the blaze. However, no chances were taken on losing the contents, for every car but one in the building was driven out by volunteers and the owners in record time. Not only was this done but all oil, tires and other combustibles were removed. The car that was left could not be moved on account of being in the process of repair and was partly torn down.

Hose was connected with city mains and three or four streams of water were soon playing upon the fire.

Continued on page 6





FIRE THREATENS BUSINESS SECTION (continued)

It soon became evident that this would not control the fire and the Southern Pacific mains were tapped. This added supply of water was what saved the Lobner building. Had this gone there is little doubt that the entire business section would have been consumed.

It is fortunate that there was no wind blowing at the time. Had there been a strong breeze from the north, not even the efforts of the Colfax firemen and of the Southern Pacific Company would have averted a holocaust.

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.

Not only was the local fire train on the scene but the train stationed at Emigrant Gap was dispatched to the scene. The Emigrant Gap fire fighting unit was wrecked at Midas and three men seriously hurt. The locomotive left the tracks and tore up both eastbound and westbound tracks so that traffic was delayed for several hours. The locomotive and cars were a complete wreck.

That any of the train crew were left alive to tell the story is almost miraculous. Engineer Dick Faltrick escaped without a scratch. Fireman H. C. Bell had his left arm seriously lacerated, if not broken; Conductor Tom Holden may have internal injuries and it is certain that he has several broken ribs, but the most seriously injured was Brakeman Clyde Marr, who in addition to head injuries was seriously cut in the side and groin. His leg was also lacerated, if not broken. Marr, Holden and Faltrick live at Sacramento, while Bell is a resident of Roseville.

The loss to the Southern Pacific is of course far greater than that suffered by either the owners of the buildings burned or the occupants of them. The loss to the company must exceed \$20,000 in equipment and the cost of repairing track and delay of traffic is also great. The loss of Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Stegeman is about \$3000 and is covered by insurance. Mrs. Grace Burd's loss has not been fully estimated, but it is understood that she is insured.

The loss to the Chinese who operated the restaurant is not known. After the fire they immediately paid their bills and left town, stating that they were going to Oakland. They came here some time ago from Newcastle.

Aside from the heroic fight made by the firemen, in which they did not falter until the last smoldering ember of the fire was extinguished the most outstanding feature of the misfortune to Colfax was the wreck of the Southern Pacific train which delayed traffic just four hours and injured three men.

Doctors Robert S. Peers and Ralph Miller were taken by a light engine and a caboose to the scene of the wreck where first aid was administered and Dr. Miller accompanied the injured men to the hospital in Sacramento on the special train.

As soon as the fire was under control a crew of men were put to work repairing the burned wires of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. One hour later the power was again turned on in the downtown section and shortly after noon the whole town was getting electric current as usual. The work was under the direction of T. M. Waistrell.

Continued on page 7



FIRE THREATENS BUSINESS SECTION (continued)

Carl Bell, owner of the local telephone company, was hard hit by the fire, numerous lines being put out of commission and the main cable passing over the rear of the Lobner Block suffered from the fire. Repairs to the telephone lines were made immediately. Bell's loss will amount to \$500.

After the fire was extinguished it was the topic of conversation of the entire town and all who saw the firemen in action were loud in their praise of them. A call was sent to Auburn which resulted in Wendell Robie bringing up the Auburn light fire truck, but the blaze was under control before it arrived.

While the fire was extremely unfortunate, the thought that it might have been worse and undoubtedly would have been but for the fact that it was so skillfully fought and the further fact that there was no wind at the time, is a source of much gratification.

Rushton McConnell, an independent adjuster, was here Thursday making a survey of the burned buildings for the purpose of making compensation for the losses sustained by the owners. He said insurance was held by the Netherlands and Mechanics Insurance Companies.

Colfax Record and Sentinel, June 20, 1930

