

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society



<https://www.psrhs.org>

March 2026 Newsletter “Big Boy” Special Issue

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UP 4014 “Big Boy” is returning to Colfax April 12. See pages 3-6 for comparison w/ SP’s Cab-Aheads and UP Challenger, along with more details on these articulated giants. *Ken Yeo collection*

Scheduled Events & Notices



Mar 24 PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program – UP 4014 Big Boy Tour Updates, Details on Its April 12 Stop in Colfax and the Community Event That Day

April Big Boy in Roseville April 10th - 1pm-5pm & April 11th - 9am-3pm

April 12 Big Boy Stop in Colfax 12 noon-12:45pm, & Stop in Truckee 4:45-5pm

Apr 28 PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program – UP Big Boy Visit Recap

May 26 PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program in Development

June 4 PSRHS Tour of Sacramento Shops – Attendance limited

Watch our website and newsletter for monthly program details

**** Remember to Renew Your Dues for 2026 or Become a PSRHS Member ****

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

PSRHS MONTHLY MEETING

March 24, 7PM

AUBURN VETERANS MEMORIAL HALL

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

March Program: Preview of UP Big Boy's April 12 stop in Colfax and the community event planned for that day to celebrate the return of the special train to our area. Our March program will feature latest updates on the tour schedule and train consist, along with details about its stop in Colfax and the community event from 10am-1:30pm with food & craft vendors, music and activities.

See the article below and [our website Big-Boy page](#) for more information on this special event.

February Program Recap: Roger Staab & Mike Haire presented a photo timeline of UP contractors clearing and repairing the tracks after a December freight derailment near Colfax. In the early morning hours of December 13 an eastbound UP double-stack freight train derailed just east of Colfax within sight of the Highway 174 bridge. The derailment location provided excellent views of the specialized equipment in action clearing the wreckage and reopening the damaged tracks in less than 30 hours. The program also included graphic views captured from the Colfax webcam of a locomotive on fire as it passed through Colfax the day before the derailment.

UP Big Boy To Stop in Colfax & Truckee April 12

UP Big Boy is returning to California in April! It will travel westbound via Feather River Canyon with a day-long stop in Portola April 8 for a fundraiser for Western Pacific Railroad Museum. It will then make brief stops April 9 in Oroville, Marysville and Lincoln en route to Roseville, where it will be on display April 10 from 1pm-5pm and April 11 from 9am-3pm.

The train will depart Roseville eastbound on April 12 over the Donner Route, with stops scheduled in Colfax from 12-12:45pm and in Truckee from 4:45-5pm.

Colfax will host an event April 12 from 10am-1:30pm, featuring music, food, vendors and activities before and after Big Boy's arrival.

The California stops are the first leg of a cross-country UP Big-Boy tour that honors our country's 250th anniversary. The eastern leg of the tour, anticipated to start in late spring, is still being finalized and will be announced soon.

UP reports that there will NOT be any passenger excursions offered on the western leg of the tour. However there will be fundraising activities offered in Portola.

Big Boy No. 4014, the world's largest operating steam locomotive, will be joined on its 2026 tour by two commemorative locomotives, including the railroad's newest locomotive: No. 1776 – America250. More information about No. 1776 will be announced soon.

PSRHS will continue monitoring the news releases and will post updates on [our website Big-Boy page](#) and home page. Our March and April programs will be devoted to information on Big Boy's visit to our region. Watch for website updates.

February PSRHS Board Meeting

The PSRHS board met prior to the January member meeting. Items discussed include:

1. Past membership lists are being scrubbed for mailing the monthly newsletter. Email notices from our PSRHS webmail account to some gmail accounts are being rejected, and may require a workaround.

2. The Colfax Webcam may get a camera upgrade which will likely require faster internet upload speeds. Paul is exploring options to obtain faster connection speeds for the webcam, perhaps sharing costs with other non-profits in the depot building.

3. The PSRHS field trip to the Sacramento Shops is scheduled for June 4. This tour will be available only to a limited number of paid PSRHS members.





Passing Scene - UP 3985 "Challenger" Excursions

Before there were Big Boy excursions, railfans were treated to visits by UP 3985 "Challenger", an impressive 4-6-6-4 locomotive. The view below shows UP 3985 on display at Sacramento Railfair, while the inset shows the locomotive near Alta on a return trip to Wyoming. UP 3985 was built in 1943 and served as a high-speed passenger and freight locomotive. It was retired in 1957 but restored in 1981, joining UP's Heritage fleet for excursion runs. It was taken off line in 2010 due to mechanical problems, and in 2019 was replaced in the Heritage fleet by the restored UP 4014 Big Boy. *Main Photo by Ken Yeo, inset by Roger Staab*



See page 6 of this newsletter for a profile comparison of Big Boy, Cab-Forward and Challenger articulated locomotives.

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

editor@psrhs.org

Membership Information

Annual Membership = \$30.00/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/>





From the Archives - Views of SP Cab-Forward and UP Big-Boy

The two images below from the Ken Yeo collection attempt to present a size comparison between UP's 4-8-8-4 Big Boy and SP's 4-8-8-2 Cab Forward locomotives. The Big Boy was about 6 feet longer than the Cab-Forwards (about 9 feet longer with tender), but both were impressive in size and power. They also produced major smoke and gases during their operation. The Cab-Forward design was created by SP to counter the hazardous effects of the smoke on crews when traveling through the Sierra tunnels and snowsheds on the Donner Route, while the Big Boys operated primarily in the wide-open spaces of Utah and Wyoming. One needs only to watch "Big Boy" pass by or stand next to the Cab-Forward displayed at the California State Railroad Museum to fully appreciate the sheer size of these locomotives. A size and power comparison chart along with a profile view of the two locomotives can be found in the article on pages 5-6.

*Both photos
from Ken Yeo
collection*



Accidents/Other Incidents. *Casper Star Tribune, Jul. 10, 1945.* "4-8-8-4. Railroaders identify various types of locomotives by the number and arrangement of wheels from front to rear... a "4-8-8-4" [has] two pairs of small wheels in front, then four pairs of driving wheels followed by a similar unit, and two pairs of smaller wheels in the rear – not including the tender. The "4-8-8-4" type is Union Pacific's largest and heaviest steam locomotive; informally christened "Big Boy" by the men who built it. This giant of the rails is 132 feet in length and weighs approximately 600 tons. Water capacity is 25,000 gallons; fuel 28 tons. A fleet of 25 "Big Boys" is now in Union Pacific service. Built primarily to haul heavy freight loads on western mountain grades, they have proved invaluable in transporting tremendous quantities of war materials over the Strategic Middle Route, uniting the East with the West Coast." [This text appeared in a 1945 Union Pacific ad - ed]



The Biggest Articulated Locomotive “Giants” (plus Comparing SP Cab-Forward with UP Big-Boy)

Source: <https://steamgiants.com/biggest-best-odd/the-largest-steam-locomotives/>

If the question is “What’s the largest steam locomotive ever built?”, most people will say it’s the Union Pacific’s “Big Boy”. In fact they are correct, sort of, but not in every category. A few prototypes were larger, but were unsuccessful and either not built or quickly pulled from service.

So, the Big Boy wins for its sheer size, but surprisingly enough is often surpassed in other categories. The Big Boy had plenty of company when it came to being a steam giant. Perhaps the Big Boy comes to mind so easily because of the fame brought by Union Pacific’s own marketing department and of course the recent multi-million-dollar restoration and subsequent Midwest and Western tours of Big Boy 4014.

“Articulated” meant one or more engine units moving independently of the main frame. Articulation allows the operation of locomotives that would otherwise be too large to negotiate a railroad’s curves. Relevant to big steam, Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines articulated as: “having a hinge or pivot connection especially to allow negotiation of sharp turns [or] having sections connected by joints that allow each section to bend or turn independently in different directions”. Without the development of the articulated locomotive, railroads would have been forced to limit driving wheels or operate at restricted speeds.

See a list of features comparing SP Cab-Forwards and UP Big-Boys on the next page along with profile images of the two locomotives along with UP Challengers





Comparing SP Cab-Forward with UP Big-Boy

Southern Pacific’s Cab Forwards: This unique and highly praised design placed the cab at the front of the locomotive, minus the tender. This arrangement was made possible by burning fuel oil instead of coal. It solved one of the worst fears of being asphyxiated in the many tunnels and snowsheds of the Sierra Nevada’s. Because this locomotive “evolved” several times during the steam era, there were several designations, starting with the AC4 models and ending with the AC12. For simplicity, some of these numbers are not specific.

SP Cab-Forward

Whyte Notation: 4-8-8-2
 Length (without tender): 79’ – 4”
 Weight (without tender): 328.95 tons
 Pulling force (tractive effort): 124,300 Lbs
 Built: 1937-1942
 Builder: Baldwin
 Quantity built: 195
 Locomotive #'s: 4100 – 4294

UP Big Boy

Whyte Notation: 4-8-8-4
 Length (without tender): 85’ – 10”
 Weight (without tender): 386.125 tons
 Pulling force (tractive effort): 135,375 Lbs
 Built: 1941-1944
 Builder: ALCO
 Quantity built: 25
 Locomotive #'s: 4000-4024

Union Pacific’s Big Boy North America’s biggest successful steam workhorses from the day they were built until the end of the steam era. Several Big Boys are preserved in static displays, with the #4014 restored in 2019 and returned to operational status.

This profile comparison of three articulated locomotives appears in the cab of SP 4294 on display at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. Photo by Chuck Spinks

