



DONNER CROSSINGS



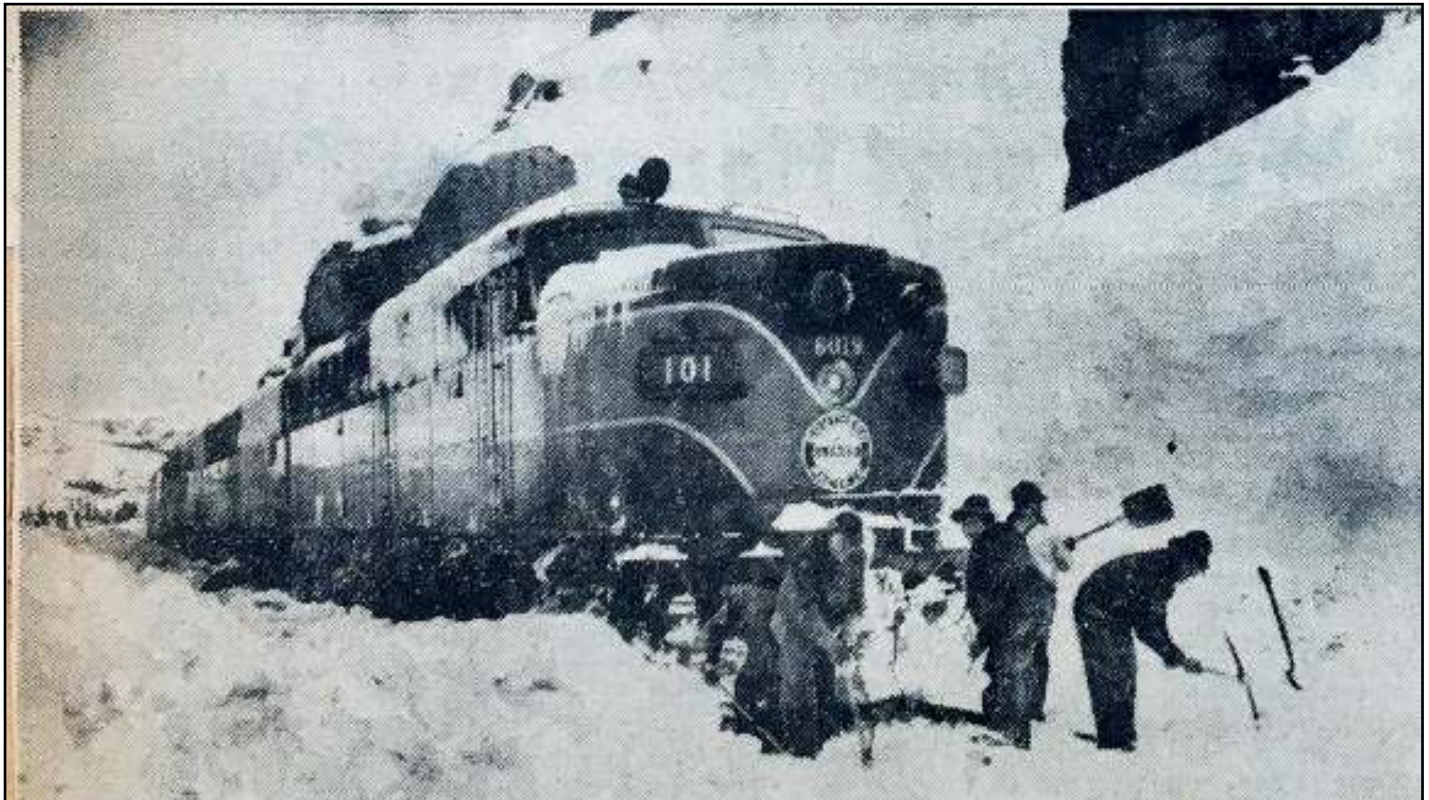
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Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route

Snowbound City of San Francisco

A First-Hand Account of the
Preceding Days and Events

This newspaper photo shows hand crews digging out the snowbound City of San Francisco lead locomotive after the train had been stranded for several days near Yuba Gap in 1952. Read inside for a first-hand account of the events leading up to that fateful day. *Photo and story courtesy of Andrew Brandon*





From the Editor:

When one begins conducting research for an extensive project like a book, all kinds of interesting things happen. New story ideas are encountered often by accident, and unrelated facts are uncovered to the extent that it is often hard to stay focused on the issue at hand. But those side stories are worth pursuing at some point so notes are taken and with a little luck they are not filed away and forgotten. Such is the case with the two stories featured in this issue of Donner Crossings.

A photo of the Rocklin roundhouse and its crew for use in a new book came with a story about a young teenager who was in the photo. That same teenager went on to become an SP engineer who was intimately involved in the events leading up to the snowbound City of San Francisco passenger train in 1952. His handwritten and signed account of those events is featured as the first article in this issue.

While researching details behind the PG&E rail operations at Lake Spaulding, I uncovered interesting tidbits about the standard-gauge gravel spur that was operated for several years by the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad. I've woven those findings into the second article in this issue, about the NCNG gravel operation.

Enjoy these two peeks into local and regional railroad history.

Roger Staab, editor

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You are invited to submit feature articles and/or photos for future issues of Donner Crossings. Please contact Roger Staab, email roger.staab@psrhs.org, or by mail at PSRHS, P.O. Box 1776, Colfax, CA 95713. Assistance is available to format your information or photos into final form for publication.

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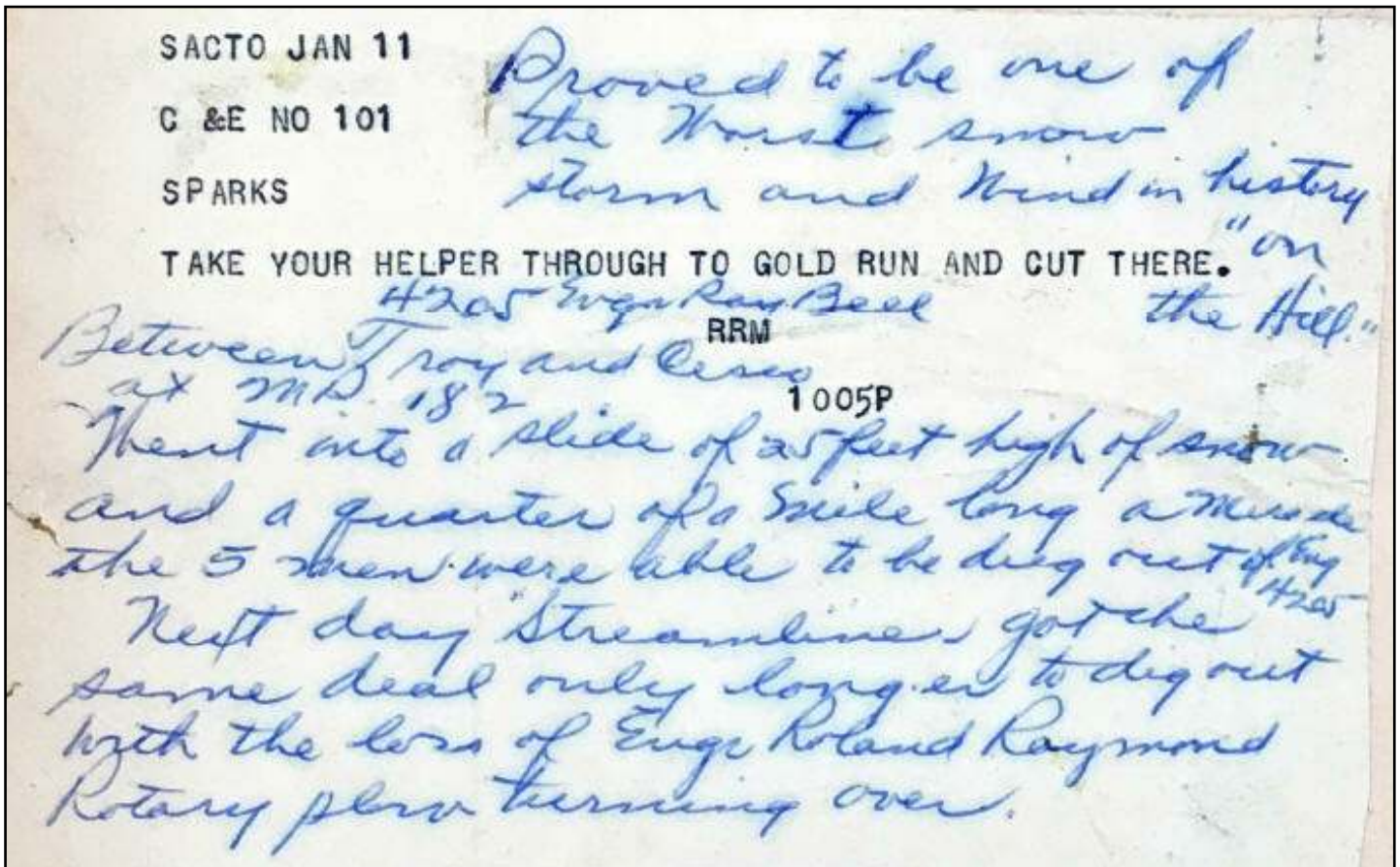
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Snowbound City of San Francisco

A First Hand Account of the Preceding Days and Events

Editor's note: The text in this article was transcribed by Roger Staab from a handwritten account by SP Engineer Harry Rasmussen of three days in January 1952 aboard City of San Francisco (COSF) runs over Donner Pass, leading to the famous stranding of the westbound COSF near Yuba Gap. Harry played a supporting role in this historic event. He served as engineer on COSF runs between Sacramento and Sparks during this period, but he was not on the famous COSF #101 that was stranded for several days. Yet his first-hand account helps define the days and events leading up to that fateful run. Every effort was made to follow Harry's handwritten account verbatim except for the addition of a few punctuation marks to clarify his wording. Copies of his handwritten notes and accompanying images were provided by Andrew Brandon from a Rasmussen scrapbook in his possession. Thanks Andrew for sharing this interesting story.

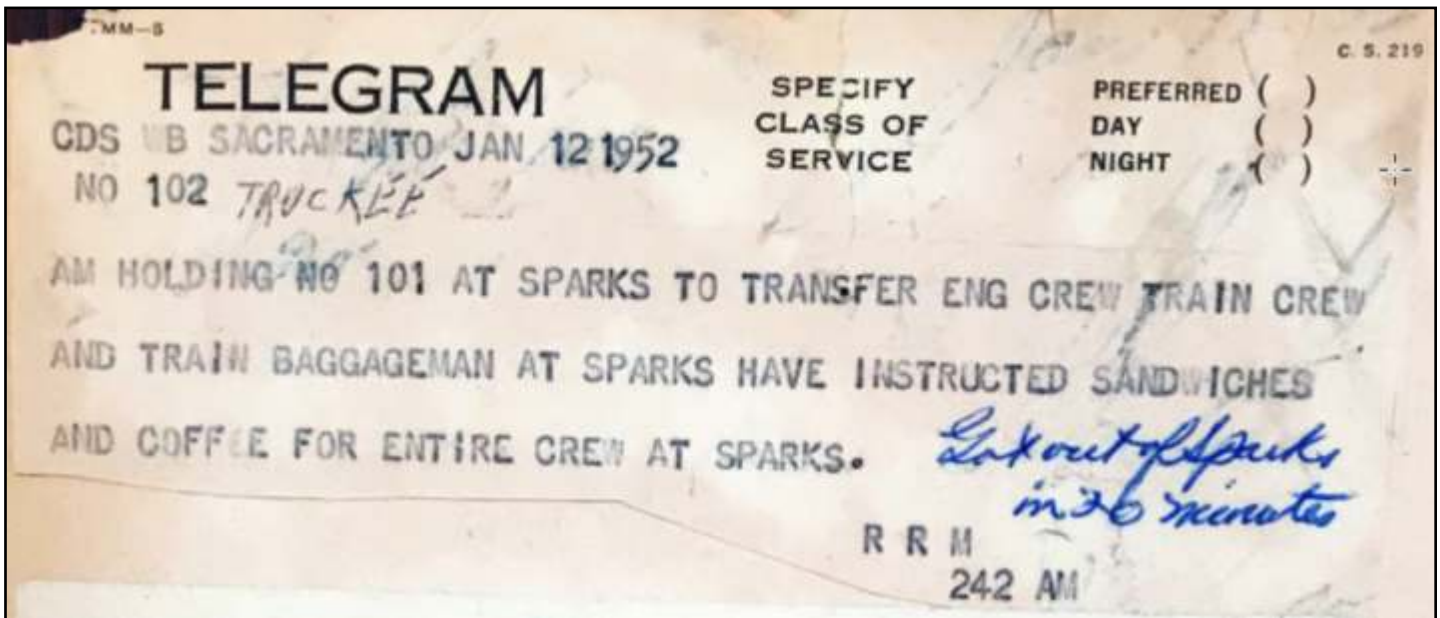


This telegram dated Jan. 11 at 10:05pm tells the engineer and conductor on the westbound City of San Francisco due to arrive at Sparks that they will retain their helper to Gold Run due to heavy snow conditions. Harry's handwritten notes on the telegram copy summarize his run the next day and the fate of the westbound streamliner that would follow his run. His more detailed account can be found below.

“The heaviest snow-storm “over the hill” on January 11, 1952 on record and for the rest of the month. It had been snowing, piling up snow all month. I realize the officials are not cleaning up right from past experience, that snow around the track is one jump ahead of them.”

“On January 11th Thursday I went out on my regular run #102 “City of San Francisco,” left Sacramento at 7:45pm. The Engineer coming into Sacramento had trouble with Head Unit 6013 with ground relays from Oakland. He ordered 2 Electricians to get on at Roseville also picked up a AC Engine #4205 with Engineer Ray Bell. First stop was at Colfax for #4205 to get water, a couple of feet of snow there. At Blue Canyon there was 5 feet of snow. Stopped at Emigrant Gap to get water and let a Rotary plow to go ahead of us. Waited 2 hours. After Rotary got by Crystal Lake we followed to Crystal Lake.”

“While standing there a snow-slide came into Diner on our train putting in 6 feet of snow in it. Nobody in diner, nobody hurt, also another small slide hit the next to last car. After spending 2 hours there we went to Troy. There a drunk soldier fell off our train was found by rear brakeman. General Mgr Mr. Corbett came up and told us of our slides at Crystal Lake. After an hour we went to Truckee, cut off helper #4205 and then to Sparks. 10 hours on trip.”



This telegram dated early in the morning of January 12 informs Harry and the crew of the eastbound COSF arriving in Truckee that the westbound COSF is being held for them at Sparks, and they will become its crew after a brief coffee break. The handwritten note shows they left Sparks westbound after only 20 minutes.

“Was told at Truckee that they were holding #101 at Sparks for us. They had sandwiches and hot coffee for us at Yard Office. Only 20 minutes at Sparks, we were on our way back, following a flanger Engine 4155 Engr Joe Bush. Caught up with flanger at Truckee, there we picked up the same helper Engine 4205 Engr Ray Bell.”

“Everything went OK, at Norden we picked up relief crews and wire men. There were 5 men in cab of helper engine 4205 and 5 men in our cab. Its snowing hard – at M.P. #182 we went into a snow slide of 20 feet high and a quarter mile long, that had come down from the side of the mountain 2000 feet up. The AC Engine 4205 and 3 units were buried up in snow. Cab of Engine 4205 was full of snow, windows had given way and the 5 men were packed tight in cab with snow. We dug them out after a half hour, grateful they were OK. Engr Bell complained his hip hurt him, but we got them all back in Pullman car.”

“A Rotary plow came up on East bound and went back and notified them of our troubles, after 6 hours got Streamliner back to Norden. Then the 2 Mallets came and pulled the 3 units back and at west switch at Troy the 2nd Mallet 4290 went off the track pulling the 3 units off with it. It was caused by the ice-pack on track.”

“Cut off AC 4178 and went to Norden, getting supper after 28 hours on duty in (unreadable) SP cook-car, cost \$1.80 for rib steak. Ordered then to Dead-Head on #101 on East siding Norden to Sacramento arriving at Noon.”

“The next day the “City of San Francisco” had the same experience at between Crystal Lake and Yuba Pass snow-slide. The sad part a rotary plow coming to relieve it the Streamliner, turned over, Engr Roland Raymond jumped and the snow-slide buried him up, killing him.”

“226 passengers were stranded on #101 without heat or food, a worse condition.”

“Reported January 15th 10 feet of snow at Truckee 19 feet at Norden. The Snow King has put in his home run.”

(signed) Harry A. Rasmussen
 January 15th 1952
 Engineer on City of San Francisco
 January 11-12-13th 1952



The story that made the news, the stranding of the westbound City of San Francisco for 3 days near Yuba Pass, was the culmination of a series of snow-driven events over several days, as reported in Harry Rasmussen's handwritten account.



Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) Standard Gauge Gravel Spur

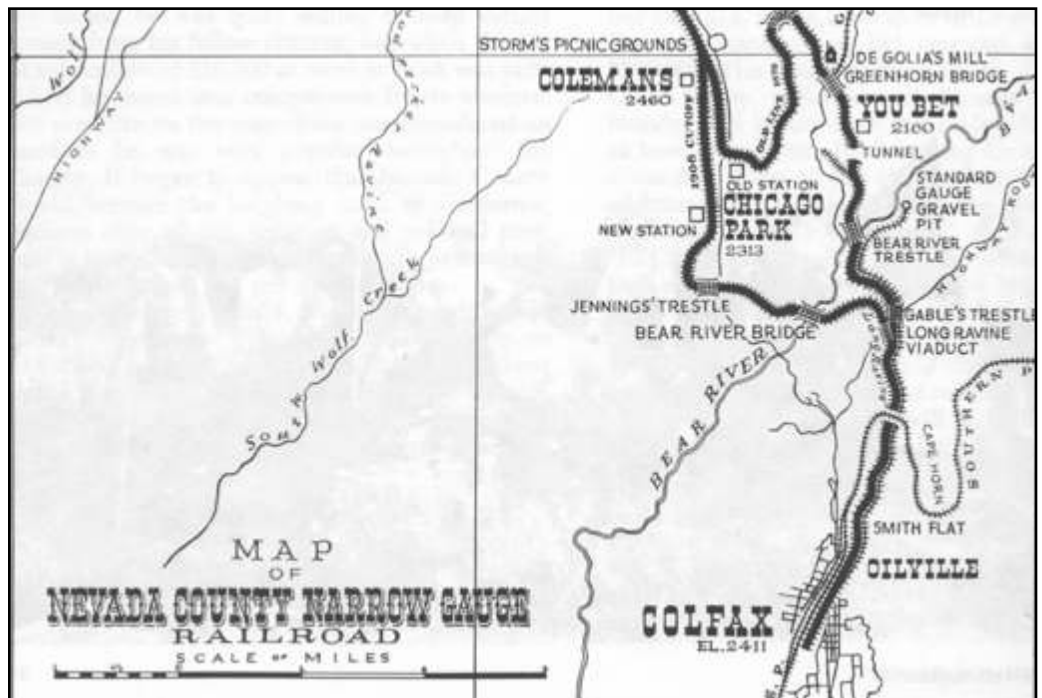
As its name implies, Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad was a narrow gauge line. Transfer sheds were built at Colfax to transfer cargo from narrow gauge cars on one side of the shed to standard gauge mainline cars on the other side. But from 1913 until the early 1920's, NCNG standard-gauged a portion of its track to take advantage of a business opportunity. Or more correctly, the company built a standard-gauge spur from Gable's Trestle to a gravel pit and added a third rail along the part of the line from Long Ravine Viaduct near Bear River to Colfax.

In 1912, PG&E began an extensive project to build a new and higher dam at Lake Spaulding, to increase the water-holding capacity of the reservoir and to provide a supply of water to a new downstream power-generating plant at Drum. Construction of the new Spaulding Dam would require a great deal of sand and gravel, and NCNG officials knew they had a ready supply at the Bear River near the old Bear River bridge.

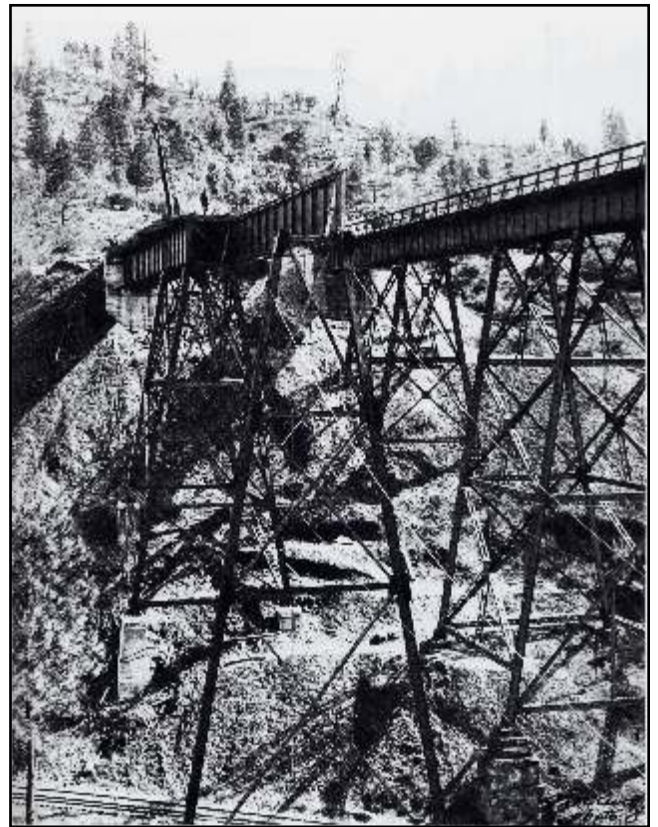
PG&E built a standard-gauge spur from SP's Smart siding east of Emigrant Gap to bring supplies and equipment from the SP mainline to the Spaulding Dam construction site. Thus if the sand and gravel could be brought from the Bear River to Colfax, it could be transported directly to Spaulding Dam over SP and PG&E tracks.

In order to market the Bear River sand and gravel to PG&E, the product would need to be transported to Colfax and transferred to SP for shipment to Spaulding Dam. The old NCNG roadbed over Gable's Trestle to the original Bear River bridge site was still intact but not being used since NCNG trains now ran on the new cutoff over Long Ravine Viaduct and the new steel Bear River Bridge to Chicago Park. The NCNG directors decided to build a standard gauge spur on the old right-of-way to the Bear River, and to add a third rail for joint standard- and narrow-gauge operation from where the tracks joined near Long Ravine Viaduct to Colfax.

This portion of the NCNG route map shows the standard gauge gravel spur that was built from Colfax to the gravel pit located near the old Bear River bridge. Gravel was loaded into standard gauge cars that were pulled to Colfax, then transferred directly to Southern Pacific trains for delivery to PG&E's Spaulding Dam construction site. PSRHS Collection



This photo shows NCNG #2 on tracks between the Bear River and Colfax that served both narrow gauge trains and the standard gauge gravel spur. Note the third rail clearly visible in front of the locomotive. Ken Yeo Collection



At top left is the Heisler geared locomotive used by the NCNG to bring gravel from the Bear River to Colfax on the standard-gauge gravel spur. It was on the NCNG roster from 1913-14. At lower left is the Climax locomotive, also added in 1913 and sold in 1923. The photo at upper right shows construction of SP's second steel bridge/viaduct at Long Ravine in 1913-15. The 3rd-rail NCNG tracks can be seen at the bottom left of the photo. By the mid-1920's all traces of the standard gauge third rail had disappeared. Photos at left from Ken Yeo Collection. Photo at right from Best's book Nevada County Narrow Gauge.

PG&E's original plan was to quarry rock at the Spaulding Dam construction site, run it through on-site crushers, then mix it with locally available sand. However, the Bear River gravel was already a workable size, and it came with a sand mix that was close to the proportions desired at Spaulding for making concrete. PG&E project managers determined that it was more cost effective to purchase the NCNG Bear River gravel and ship it via SP to Spaulding, than to quarry, crush and mix the gravel on-site. In PG&E's heavy construction year 1913, Bear River gravel purchased from the NCNG became the primary source for the sand/gravel mix added to the concrete for the new Spaulding Dam.

The first phase of construction at Spaulding Dam was completed in November 1913. There were some further shipments of gravel from the Bear River gravel spur in 1914 and 1915, but not enough to warrant two locomotives so the Heisler was sold in 1914. The gravel business declined sharply after 1915, finally resulting in the sale of the Climax in 1923 and abandonment of the gravel spur. The third rail from Colfax to the Bear River was removed shortly thereafter, returning the NCNG to its traditional narrow gauge configuration.

