Coburn Station, 1869: A Railroad Town Takes Shape

Coburn Station (Truckee), circa 1869
Courtesy of the Truckee-Donner Historical Society, FTS0001.

In 1869, Coburn Station, soon to be known as Truckee, was a bustling railroad community in the Sierra Nevada. Established in the mid-1860s during construction of the Central Pacific Railroad, the settlement developed into an important supply depot, transportation stop, and commercial center for workers, freight, and travelers crossing Donner Summit. Its economy depended heavily on railroad operations, timber production, woodcutting, and the businesses that supplied the growing population.

This remarkable photograph captures the town during its formative years. A row of closely spaced, wood-frame commercial buildings lines Front Street, their steeply pitched roofs designed to shed the Sierra's heavy winter snow. Covered wooden walkways connect the storefronts, while ladders, lumber, and construction materials suggest a community still being built and rebuilt. Signs identify several establishments, including the Webber House, a tin shop, and Robert Bell's grocery and provisions store. The unpaved street, scattered rocks, and rough terrain contrast with the substantial commercial buildings rising along its edge. Behind the town, a forested hillside reflects the surrounding landscape that supplied timber for railroad construction, buildings, and fuel.

The photograph also reflects Coburn Station's remarkable recovery from a devastating fire on July 30, 1868. Beginning around six o'clock in the morning in a saloon operated by Mr. Cross, the fire spread rapidly through the closely spaced wooden buildings. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, approximately fifty structures, including twenty stores, were destroyed. Among the losses were hotels, restaurants, saloons, residences, and commercial establishments. Residents attempted to contain the flames by demolishing buildings and using explosives to create firebreaks, but much of the western commercial district was lost. Despite the destruction, rebuilding began quickly, aided by the abundance of lumber from approximately four sawmills reportedly operating within ten miles of the station. By 1869, the town's reconstructed storefronts reflected the determination of its residents to rebuild and the continued importance of the railroad.

Although Chinese residents are not readily identifiable in this photograph, they played an essential role in Coburn Station's early development. Thousands of Chinese laborers worked on the Central Pacific Railroad, excavating tunnels through Donner Summit, grading railroad approaches, and constructing wooden snowsheds. While many lived in temporary construction camps on site nearest the railroad, others established homes and businesses in town. As early as 1867, property records identified Chinese residents occupying houses and lots along Main and Front Streets, including Fong Lee, Chang Ching Chong, Ty Coon, and Ah Lock. By September 1868, sixteen Chinese shops were reported among the town's businesses. Prominent merchants included Fong Lee, Loon Tung Cheong, and Quong Sing Lung. In 1869, Fong Lee constructed one of Truckee's first fireproof commercial buildings, while Ah Coon, a supplier of wood to the railroad, hosted a dinner for prominent townspeople at the Hong Kong Restaurant. Chinese families were also establishing roots in the community, as evidenced by the birth of Cheong Sui Ping in 1867. A visiting journalist in March 1869 described a bustling Chinese neighborhood filled with laundries, barbershops, tea stores, and other businesses. Together, these activities demonstrate that Chinese residents were not merely railroad laborers but merchants, property holders, and families whose contributions helped transform Coburn Station into a thriving mountain community.

As railroad construction neared completion, Coburn Station continued its transition from a temporary construction settlement into the more established community of Truckee. By 1867, the Central Pacific Railroad started referring to the town as Truckee. The name Coburn Station gradually disappeared from common usage. but the commercial district and the community that developed around it endured. Viewed in this broader historical context, the 1869 photograph captures more than a row of early wooden storefronts. It documents a pivotal moment in Truckee's history, when railroad expansion, commercial enterprise, rebuilding, and the contributions of both Chinese and European American residents were shaping the foundations of the modern town.

Sources

1. “16 China Houses.” Truckee Weekly Tribune, September 19, 1868.

2. Cheong Sui Ping. Chinese Exclusion Act Case File No. 200. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

3. “Description of the 1868 Fire.” Carson Daily Appeal, August 1, 1868; Truckee Weekly Tribune, September 19, 1868.

4. “Fong Lee’s Fireproof Building.” Truckee Tribune, April 17, 1869.

5. “Ah Coon Furnishing Wood and Hosting a Banquet.” Truckee Tribune, April 17, 1869.

6. “Description of Coburn Station.” Stockton Independent, July 11, 1867.

7. “Truckee Renamed,” Sacramento Bee August 3, 1867.

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