

Every Train Station Needs a Trainmaster: The Truckee Train Depot

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Railroad Order Hoop Picks
Made from bamboo bent around to form a hoop, with a clip to hold the paper order. The station master would hold it up high so the engineer could just put his arm out the window and snag it. After removing the order that was clipped on to the hoop, the engineer would throw down the hoop for easy retrieval. This way the train didn't have to stop to pick up his order.
Gifted to the Museum of Truckee History by Nelson van Gundy - May 2020

Railroad order hoop pick at museum of Truckee History.

Train stations were the hub for many towns bringing in visitors, guests, freight and everything else the town needed or wanted to export. When the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, there were numerous train stations along the rail line. Only a handful of these stations still exist.

Their demise was due to the lack of a sustainable economy and the change from steam trains (which needed water at regular intervals to fuel the steam) to diesel engines.

Truckee has been predominant as a way-station for emigrants. Not only did we have the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road but we also had a toll bridge across the Truckee River. These conveniences made it slightly easier for the traveler to go from the East Coast to California and back again. However, the train station was the most important part of the town. Truckee's train station is special in that it was in the center of the town and has been able to reflect its changing character. The Truckee train station is one of three remaining stations built by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1900 that is still in use as a railroad station today.

Trainmaster Offices

Who are trainmasters? Trainmasters are railroad officials who manage the operations of a specific part of a railroad. They are in charge of the trains that operate in a subdivision or division of a railroad.

Trainmasters are also responsible for:

- Overseeing the equipment on the line;
- Ensuring the proper equipment is in place for service;
- Keeping track of train crews, including when they sign up and when they finish.
- Monitoring the town's shipments and material received using bills of lading.

But the trainmaster did so much more in the mid-1800s. Before cell phones, radios and other electronic devices, the trainmaster got his order via the telegraph (which ran parallel to the railroad). Steam trains have never liked stopping unless they need water. To communicate with the train engineer, the trainmaster used a railroad order hoop pick. This was basically a bamboo pole bent into a hoop with a clip to hold the paper orders of what the train engineer needed to do for the next couple of towns. It was a simple operation. The Trainmaster held out the stick for the train engineer to grab with his arm, take out the orders and then throw the stick back onto the train platform. Communication complete.

Running on Time

The history of standard time in the United States began November 18, 1883, when United States and Canadian railroads instituted standard time within time zones. Before then, what the time of day was a local matter, and most cities and towns used some form of local sun-based system maintained by some well-known clock (for example, on a church steeple or in a jeweler's window). Prior to standard time, the clock was set to noon when the sun was directly overhead. Use of standard time gradually increased because of its obvious practical advantages for communication and travel.

Truckee's trainmaster office and the railroad depot have been a part of the community since 1885. By 1900 the current station and the need for the trains to run on time was clearly prominent. A fun fact is that across the United States watches were sold, set, repaired and made available to the public from the most often reliable place... the trainmaster's office. The railroad wasn't selling watches, it was the telegraph operators in the train stations who were. Rumor has it that it all started by a train telegraph operator (Richard) in Minnesota. When a load of watches arrived from the East with no one claiming them the manufacturer did not want to pay return freight charges and asked Richard if he could sell them. And sell them he did! News got out and the train station became the place to buy an accurate pocket watch.

Why Keep a Trainmaster Station?

It was the trainmaster's responsibility to share local conditions and even local information as to what was going on in town. The train station also turned out to be the hub of social events.

For summer outings, in 1900 Bill Bliss built a narrow gauge railroad (along Hwy 89 from Truckee to Tahoe City) to take San Francisco visitors to Lake Tahoe. The guests bought their tickets in the trainmaster's office, boarded the narrow gauge train, taken to a pier in Tahoe City, and then put on a steamer (boat) that went around Lake Tahoe. It was the highlight of the summer season and posts went out as to the families enjoying the majestic mountains and lake. Passengers extolled about the elegance of the Lake Tahoe Railroad which brought even more visitors to Truckee. Regrettably, the line was abandoned on November 10, 1943 due to the war and lack of passengers. Much of the line is now a bike path along the Truckee River from Palisades Tahoe (Squaw Valley) to Lake Tahoe.

Visit Truckee's Trainmaster Office

Truckee did not become an incorporated town until 1993 but the train station has been prominent in the Town's character. Truckee still sees 15-30 trains a day run through Old Town. Only two passenger trains stop in Truckee: Amtrak running East and Amtrak running West. The other trains rumble through town at 25-30 mph. They are not able to stop for pedestrians nor vehicles so it is urged to give them great leeway.



Ventiduct windsor cylinder stove manufactured in 1901.

The Museum of Truckee History shares stories about Truckee's past, present and future. The trainmaster office a rolltop desk and an order cabinet where shipments were kept tracked via hard copy form (heaven forbid!). Also, there is the fabulous wood burning stove from a waiting room that kept passengers warm in the cold winter, an 1888 original railroad map, and various colored lanterns to communicate when a train had to stop or proceed.

Live a bit of Truckee's past and visit the Museum of Truckee History. You will be amazed at how rough and tumble yet humble this town was and still continues to be.

About the Author:

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