

Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Company

By Jerry Blackwill, Tahoe-Donner Railroad Society

Did you know that from 1900 to 1943 you could ride a train from Oakland and at Truckee transfer to a railroad going up the Truckee River to Lake Tahoe? When the train got to Lake Tahoe, it would drive out on a pier, stop and be met by steamer that would sail around Lake Tahoe.

From 1900 to 1925 this trip was operated by the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation company founded by Duane L Bliss and his family. Then, from 1926 to 1943, the trip was run by the Southern Pacific Railroad.

These two railroads opened up Lake Tahoe to a major tourist boom that has extended to this day. The Blisses were the family responsible for this tourist empire. At the age of 17 young Bliss left his home in Savoy, Massachusetts in search of his fortune in the gold fields of California. Initially, Duane was plagued by bad luck. His gold mining activities came for naught and he lost his wife and two daughters to illness.

Finally, he left California to try his luck in the silver operations of Virginia City, Nevada. While there, the Bank of California took over most of the town. Because he was a bright young man, he was put in charge of some of the Banks operations. He worked with Henry Yerington building the Virginia and Truckee Railroad and then the two of them formed the Carson and Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company with Bliss as president and general manager.

Backed by the Bank, this lumber company acquired stands of timber all around Lake Tahoe. With their sawmills based in Glenbrook, they built a logging railroad to haul the milled wood up to the top of Spooner Summit. Once at the top, the wood was sent down flumes to the Virginia and Truckee railroad yards and on to the Virginia City mines by rail.

As the silver was exhausted, independently wealthy Duane Bliss looked for new challenges. His dream was to make a tourists system and the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Company was born. The system had three legs. The first leg was a railroad from Truckee to Tahoe City. The second were steamers to transport visitors around Lake Tahoe, and the third were hotels in Tahoe City and Glenbrook.

Duane had prepared in advance. He sent two sons to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to gain technical degrees - William Seth Bliss received a degree in civil engineering and Walter Danforth Bliss a degree in architecture. William Seth used his skills to construct the railroad from Tahoe City to Truckee and Walter Danforth used his to build the Tahoe Tavern hotel at Tahoe City. A second, smaller hotel in Glenbrook was upgraded for tourists.

The railroad needed a route between Tahoe City and Truckee. Duane worked a deal with the Truckee Lumber Company to get the railroad's right-of-way along the Truckee. The lumber company owned the river valley and its tributaries. The lumbermen could log the timber along the river, but the flow was not reliable enough to float the logs down to the saw mill. Duane successfully proposed that he construct a railroad alongside the river to carry the timber on logging cars. And, he would charge a reasonable hauling price in exchange for railroad right-of-way. The railroad would then become a combination passenger and logging operations.

Steamships were Duane's third tourist leg and he arranged for the Union Iron Works in San Francisco to design and build the steamer *Tahoe*. The steamer was fabricated and shipped in sections. The sections were loaded on railroad flatcars and sent from the Bay Area to Reno on the Southern Pacific and then on to Carson City on the Virginia and Truckee railroad. Once in Carson City, the sections were put on wagons and hauled up and over Spooner Summit to Glenbrook. The ship was assembled and launched into Lake Tahoe. A smaller steamer Bliss called the *Nevada* was acquired from Lucky Baldwin.

So, what was a Lake Tahoe excursion like back in 1800? You might have boarded a Southern Pacific train in Oakland on a Friday night and arrive at the Truckee depot before seven in the morning. You would take a short walk across the tracks to your seat on a passenger car with open windows. For the next hour, you would experience a delightful, pine-scented trip along the babbling Truckee River. Along the way were the two regular stops at Squaw Valley and Deer Park. Deer Park was a tourist hotel and hot springs near today's Alpine Meadows.

If you stayed on the train, you would embark on a long pier extending out into Lake Tahoe from Tahoe City. Soon, you could board the steamer *Tahoe* and sail around the Lake. The cruise took most of the day with stops at: Homewood, McKinney, Meeks Bay, Emerald Bay, Tallac, Al Tahoe, Bijou, Lakeside Park (State Line House), Glenbrook, Brockway, Tahoe Vista, Carnelian Bay and finally returning to the Tahoe City pier.

Your day would end with a meal and night's sleep at the Tahoe Tavern overlooking Lake Tahoe.

Sidebars:

- To learn more on this topic, join us on August 3, 2019 for a historical talk on Duane L. Bliss's vision to bring tourists to the Lake Tahoe region, 7:00-8:00 pm, Truckee Airport Conference Room, 10356 Truckee Airport Road, Truckee.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

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