

Truckee's Logging Railroads

By Nelson Van Gundy and Jerry Blackwill, Truckee-Donner Railroad Society

Sugar Pine – the gold of the Sierra forests.

Why the loggers came to Truckee

The forests of the Truckee-Tahoe region of the Sierra Nevada have been logged since the mid-1880's, to support the demands of the mining industry, the transcontinental railroad, and the expansion of the West, and ultimately, the world.

Once the transcontinental railroad was completed, lumbermen came from the east in search of riches in the Sierra forests. Here, they found old growth forests composed of seventy percent sugar pine. This tree is the tallest and most massive of the pines. It also has the largest cones of any conifer.

Light in weight with a straight, uniform grain that is unique among pines, sugar pine wood is remarkable for clear, nearly knot free properties. It works well with hand tools and fashions easily into smooth, straight surfaces and shapes.

Sugar pine enjoyed its heyday throughout the nineteenth century when it was used to build homes and most public buildings. It was a key building materials for churches and schools. The wood was used to make the furniture, pews and desks that were used inside these public buildings. The wood's density, weight and strength made it suitable for structural use while its beauty and ease of workability made it perfect for interior finish work. It has always been popular for cabinetry, for custom furniture making, and for carving and sculpture.

To the lumbermen of the late eighteen hundreds, this was as good as gold and a new "timber gold rush" began. The arrival of the transcontinental railroads enabled the economical shipping of the wood to markets in the United States and abroad.

Why the loggers used railroads

Narrow gauge [primarily 3 foot gauge] logging railroads solved the problem of moving the logs to the mills. Wagons weren't that efficient at hauling huge trees to mills and trucks hadn't been invented in 1868 when the first loggers saw the Sierra Sugar Pines. So the lumbermen had to lay railroad track up to stands of trees. There, the trees were cut down, trimmed, and then pulled by horses or "steam donkeys" to the waiting logging trains.

Steam donkeys were the diesel engines of the late eighteen hundreds and early twentieth century. Steam boilers were used to generate energy to pull logs attached by long cables to the logging train cars.

The loggers used the less expensive narrow gauge tracks and equipment because the lines were only needed during the clear cutting operation. Once a stand of trees was exhausted, the lighter

rails could be pulled up and re-laid on a new bed of ties that led to the next stand of trees. Special logging locomotives were made to traverse shorter curves and steeper inclines so less preparation was needed for the track.

Once the logs were brought to the mills and converted to sawn wood, the wood was placed on standard gauge flat cars and taken to the standard gauge transcontinental railroad. The loaded flat cars were then pulled to ports in San Francisco for shipment overseas as well as to markets in the mid-west and east.

Truckee logging railroads

Sierra Nevada Wood & Lumber was one of the largest of these logging and sawmill operations in the Truckee area. The operation was based about 6 miles north of Truckee in Hobart Mills. Logs were brought to the mill through a network of narrow gauge tracks that extended north to the lumber stands. Once the wood was milled, it was placed on standard gauge flat cars for the short run to Truckee and hookup with the transcontinental railroad.

Another railroad was the Boca & Loyalton standard gauge railroad that ran north from Boca to the present-day town of Loyalton. This was a general haul railroad as well as a logging railroad. The ruins of the town of Boca can still be seen just below the Boca reservoir.

The third railroad in the little Truckee river valley was the Verdi Lumber railroad. Their sawmill was in the present day town of Verdi and their standard gauge track ran up and over Dog Valley and into the Little Truckee River valley, through Sardine Meadow and up past Sardine Peak. Because of the steep grades, this logging railroad used specially geared locomotives called Shays to pull the heavy log loads.

Truckee Lumber had a mill at the west end of Truckee and owned logging rights to Truckee River canyon between Lake Tahoe and Truckee. They used a combination passenger and logging railroad – the Lake Tahoe Railway & Transportation Company to haul their logs along the Truckee River to their sawmill.

Other smaller railroad logging operations around Truckee were numerous and widespread. Most were relatively short-lived, but still contributed to the trillions of board feet logged and shipped world-wide. David Myrick's ***RAILROADS OF NEVADA AND EASTERN CALIFORNIA, VOLUME I*** is still the outstanding study of the railroads of the region.

Demise of the logging railroads

Much of the Sugar pine in the Truckee area was clear-cut leaving less profitable logs. Many of Truckee's sawmills went out of operation in the first half of the last century. However, as late as the 1990's there was an operating sawmill near the Truckee railyard.

If you're interested in finding more about these logging railroads, The Truckee Donner Railroad Society offers summer tours of their remains. Check the Society's website for dates.

Sidebars:

- To learn more on this topic, join us on July 27, 2019 for a historical talk on Truckee's logging railroads, 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.

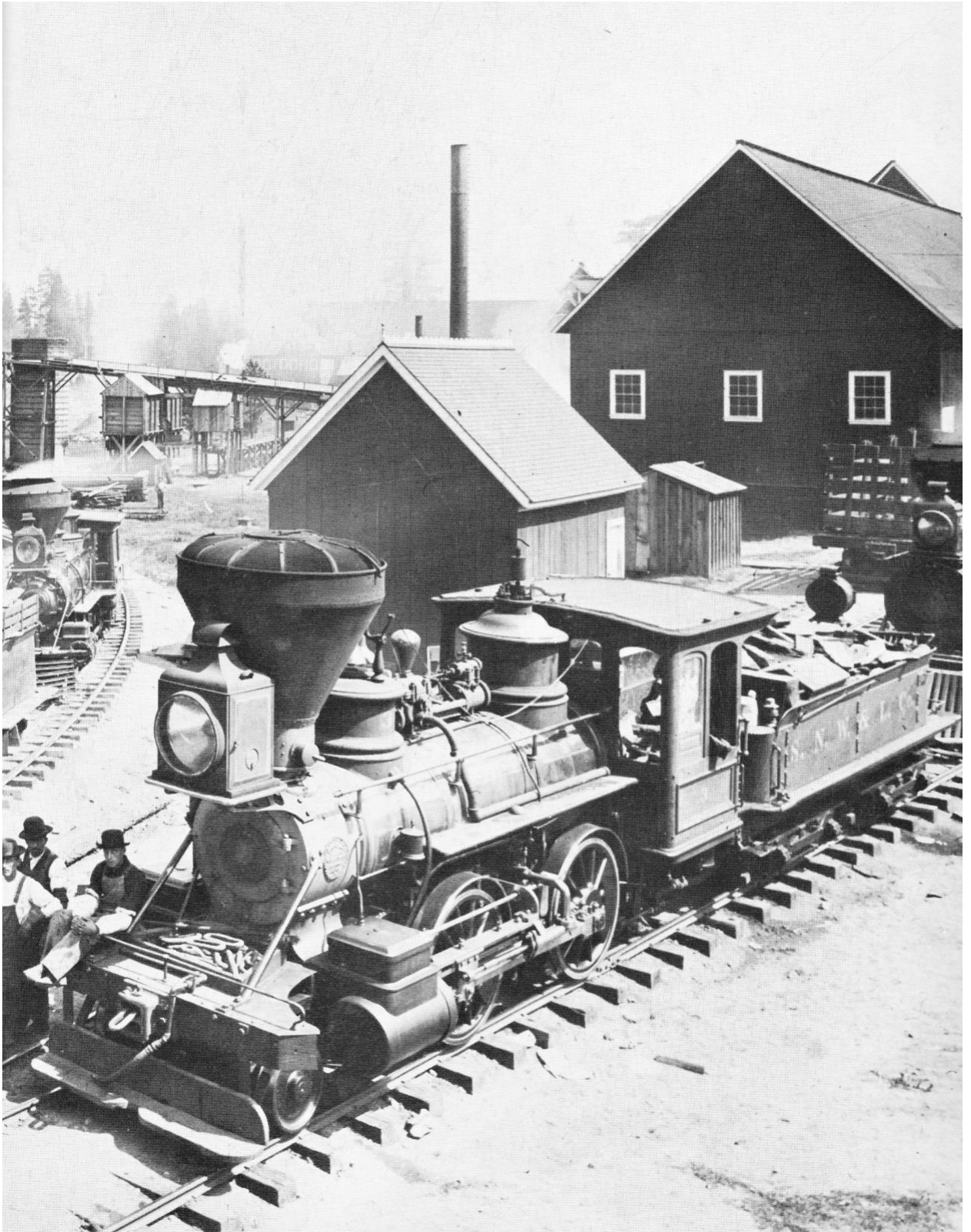
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