

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society



<https://www.psrhs.org>

March 2025 Newsletter

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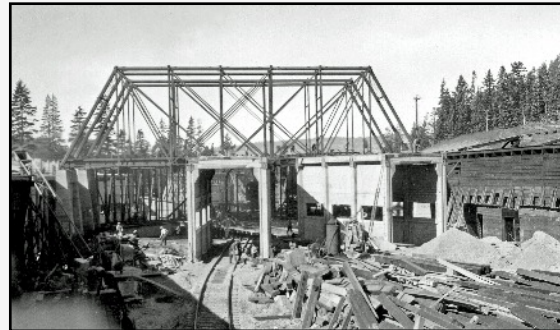
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SP's Norden facility near Donner Pass was fully enclosed against the elements. It included a large turntable shown here under construction. See pages 2, 4, 5 & 6 for more details about Norden and our March program. Ken Yeo collection

Scheduled Events & Notices



- Mar 25** PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program - **Brendan Compton Video**
- Panel Discussion on Norden Operations
- Apr 22** PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program - **Steve Bush & Craig Thomas**
- The 1975-76 American Freedom Train (Steve & Craig were crew members)
- May 27** PSRHS Monthly Meeting, 7PM – Program under development

Your annual PSRHS membership helps fund purchase of historic photos, publication of railroad history documents, field trips, and other historic preservation activities.

Preserving Railroad History on the Donner Pass Route

PSRHS MONTHLY MEETING

MARCH 25, 7PM

AUBURN VETERANS MEMORIAL HALL

March Program: PSRHS Member & Videographer **Brendan Compton** will present a video he recorded of a 2016 panel discussion on rail operations at the Norden interlocking plant on Donner Summit. The panel featured insights from former Southern Pacific officials, including J.W. Lynch, Jimmy Mahon ("The Bear"), and Manager John Valdez. Additional contributors to the discussion included Mike Pechner, Dick Dorn, Mike Graham, Shirley Burman, and Scott Inman. They shared captivating stories about snow service operations, the turntable and the equipment it handled, housing at the site, and the lives of those who lived there. This video offers a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at the daily operations of this remarkable location.

Our meetings are open to all who are interested. See our web site for updates on future meeting topics and directions to the meeting location.

February Program: Dick Dorn presented photos he has taken of SP Snow Fighting on Donner Pass since the early 1970's up to the merger with Union Pacific in 1996. His friendship with Jim Mahon and other crew members provided opportunities to capture views at the heart of snow operations, resulting in excellent photos of flangers, spreaders and rotaries in operation. His presentation was enjoyed by a large audience.

FEBRUARY BOARD MEETING

The PSRHS Board of Directors met prior to the February meeting. Items discussed included:

1. PSRHS Future Presentations

- March 2025 - Brendan Compton's Norden Area Historic video with Q&A session. Roger will verify the length of Brendan's video and request photos to accompany a news promo about the program.

- Future – possible program about the 1975-76 American Freedom Train by local crew members.

2. Proposed Purchase of O-Gauge locomotives for display at Colfax Museum. Models of SP cab-forward and Colfax Helpers are currently on loan to the museum but the owner has indicated a desire to sell his collection. The museum has asked PSRHS to consider helping purchase these items to solidify their future display. The PSRHS board agreed to possibly assist once prices for the models are known. PSRHS will own any models we purchase and will loan them indefinitely to the Colfax Heritage Museum for display.

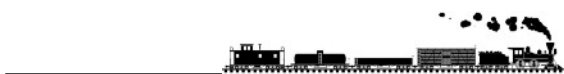
3. Payment for renewal of Zoom license was mentioned in the treasurer's report. A question was raised about the value of the zoom license with current software alternatives. In the past zoom was used to record some of our programs and post the video on our web site. This topic needs further discussion at a future meeting. The board meeting was cut short by equipment problems preparing for the night's program.

NEW ON OUR WEBSITE

Visitors to our web site www.psrhs.org can find a page titled **Historic Railroad Articles/Maps/Docs** under the **Local RR History** tab. Items listed on that page are made available courtesy of PSRHS to those interested in regional rail history. They can be accessed on our web site or downloaded to peruse at your leisure. Recent additions to this page include:

- **1869 Journal of Lt John Currier**, describing his trip on the newly completed and not-yet-completed Union Pacific tracks to Promontory, the ceremonial Joining of the Rails, and his ride on the first CPRR train west to Sacramento after the ceremony.
- **1947-49 Freedom Train Brochure**
- **SP Lake Tahoe Branch Right of Way & Track Maps**
- **Article –Anticipated Rich Trade Vanished After Rails Met**

Watch for more articles and documents to be added to this page in the near future. Meanwhile feel free to explore the regional railroad history offerings on other portions of our web site.



Passing Scene - New York Central "Babbling Brook" in Colfax

This classic New York Central sleeper "Babbling Brook" was spotted in Colfax on Amtrak #6 in February 2025. The website webbrail.com provides this history of the car. "The *Babbling Brook* was built in June of 1949 by the Budd Company of Philadelphia, PA. Originally ordered in December of 1945, the *Babbling Brook* was one of a group of four identical cars built for the New York Central Railroad for use on the *New England States*, the NYC's premier train between Boston and Chicago. ... As built, the *Babbling Brook* contained five double bedrooms with sleeping accommodations for ten people, a small bar and buffet kitchen, and a twenty-five seat rounded end observation lounge.... with spacious groupings of comfortable club chairs and sofas, all arranged for unobstructed sightseeing.... On the rounded end of the lounge, an illuminated tailsign identified the name of the train." After numerous owners and name changes, the car was returned to its NYC look and name. Current owner John Webb III purchased the car in 2012 and now offers it for private tours. It is certified to operate anywhere in the U.S from its home base of Albany, NY. *Roger Staab photo*



Membership Information

Individual Members = \$25.00/yr
Each Additional Family Member = \$5.00/yr

- Monthly Meetings (4th Tuesday) and Newsletter
- Member Activities, History Pubs and Field Trips
- Display and Restoration Projects

PSRHS, P.O. Box 1776, Colfax, CA 95713
or join/renew online at <https://www.psrhs.org/>

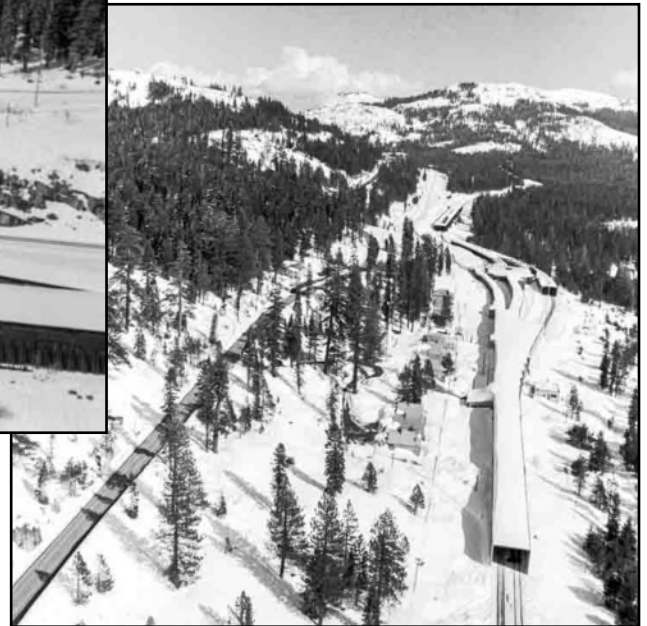
Reader comments, additional details, etc., are invited on any newsletter items or photos. Please forward comments, suggestions or information for inclusion in future issues of the newsletter to:

roger.staab@psrhs.org



From the Archives - Norden Complex

Our March program will feature a behind-the-scenes look at railroad operations at Norden, once a major site on Southern Pacific's Donner Route. You will hear stories from people who worked at this unique facility, built to support mountain operations in the worst of Sierra winters and to withstand the summer fire season. The photo at left shows the heart of the Norden complex which included a covered turntable large enough to turn cab-forward locomotives. The photo at right shows the complete facility stretched along the tracks near Donner Summit. Old Highway 40 cuts across the scene from lower left, with the Norden sheds starting at lower right. The clear area in the distance is the former location of Track 1, the CPRR-built track to Tunnel 6, while today's mainline curves to the right toward Tunnel 41. Most of the Norden structures are now gone.



Photos courtesy of Brendan Compton

Accidents/Other Incidents. *Roseville Press-Tribune, Nov. 16, 1961.* **“DONNER SNOWSHED FIRE CRIPPLES SP.** Norden, Calif. – Two hundred men worked today to repair 1,250 feet of mainline Southern Pacific track wrecked by a fire which destroyed a long snowshed. T.F. Custer, SP chief dispatcher in Sacramento, said three crews were dispatched from Roseville at 8:30 this morning to begin repairing the track. He said that the fire is out ... (and) it will be midnight tonight before the tracks will be reopened to traffic. Meanwhile all freight trains are being held in Roseville... Two trains, the east and west bound City of San Francisco passenger trains, were rerouted through Marysville... The fire, just west of Donner Summit, broke out last night in the house of a section foreman and quickly spread to the shed. The shed collapsed onto the tracks and important station and interlocking equipment also was destroyed by the fire.... Three fire trains were rushed to the spot and hundreds of workers fought the fire and cleared the tracks through the night. The sheds are wooden structures designed to keep the heavy snow off the tracks.” [Ed. Note: Only the experimental concrete portions of the Norden sheds constructed in 1925 survived the fire. The reconstructed sheds at Norden after the fire were concrete. The fire reportedly was started by a worker's long johns left over a stove to dry.]





Editor's note: The March PSRHS program is an inside look at railroad operations at Norden through the eyes of those who worked there. The following newspaper article looks at Norden through the eyes of those who worked and lived at this unique facility. While the article has some technical errors (most notably the reference at the end to Chinese workers building Tunnel 41), it provides a brief glance at the mole-like living conditions under the Norden and Tunnel 6 sheds in the 1970s..

The Mole People

By Kenneth G. Payton, Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Mar. 2, 1975

NORDEN, Nevada Co. – They don't mind being called mole people. In fact, they're kind of proud of it. "We were called tunnel people once," said Southern Pacific railroad agent Harry L. Hanns. "We're mole people, though. We live like moles."

The mole people are railroad workers – and their families – who are responsible for keeping signals and tracks free of ice in 50 snow sheds and tunnels from Truckee to Emigrant Gap.

In a world where snow piles 22 feet deep in the winter, their town consists of one store and a post office beside old Highway 40, connected by wooden tunnels with two- and three-bedroom homes and a 22-man dormitory wistfully called the Woolworth Building.

During the heavy snow period they move from building to building through the tunnels, deep beneath the snow pack. Only one entrance leads from the outside.

Beyond, and also connected with wooden tunnels, are the long wooden snow sheds, erected by Chinese workers more than 100 years ago as they helped lay railroad tracks over Donner Summit.

In Tunnel 6, buried on the shoulder of the summit and across the road from Donner Ski Ranch, Danny Carrillo bosses a dozen men who might never see the light of day during an eight-hour shift of shoveling snow and shooting down icicles with 12 gauge shotguns.

They earn \$38.56 a day and pay SP \$30 a week for food. Their housing is free. Accommodations are in the most isolated place on the SP line. Because of the railroad's seniority system, only those with the fewest number of years in service work there.

The gangs have the youngest foremen in the district.

A section hand once chalked "The Hole" above the only entrance to the summit complex.

Today's 10 feet of snow is about average, according to Hanns. He, his wife and four children have lived here eight years.

"I spent 3-1/2 months here without ever getting out during the 1968-69 season," Hanns said. "What people overlook is that others pay \$600 to \$700 a month to vacation here, when I, as a working man, can live here."

Hanns' housing complex, called the Hilton by another worker comparing it to Tunnel 6 accommodations, consists of 11 homes connected by tunnels. They house three telegraphers, a janitor and maintenance men for water service, bridges and buildings, and signals. And their families.

Only eight children live here now, but that may increase many times as the railroad's seniority system allows men to bump men from job to job.

"It takes a special breed of woman to live here," said Hanns, who requested the job in 1967. "We stock up on groceries for 30 days – just in case – and have to pack them three blocks when we bring them home. My wife knits, cooks, does a lot of baking."





The Mole People (cont'd)

“We really like it,” Hanns’ wife Mary Louise, said. “We’ve had chances to leave but couldn’t get the kids away from here. They all ski,” she added as she clicked knitting needles on a half-done wool ski sock.

“We just couldn’t find a better place to raise kids,” she said. “I don’t see where we miss anything. We’re just like one big family. In two-room school houses the kids get more attention. They’re healthier, and we don’t have to look for them because we always know where they are.”

All elementary school children in the Donner Summit area attend a two-room school – at Kingvale – of the Tahoe-Truckee Unified School District.

The SP spent \$16,000 fixing up the inside of the Hanns home but does not paint or maintain the exterior. Hanns has a workshop, four bedrooms, a place for his wife to weave rugs and plenty of room for the children to play chess or run their model trains.

The busiest times are during snowstorms. “Last week we had 10 or 20 avalanches, some 100 to 200 feet long,” Hanns said. “Then we’ve got to get the plows up here from Roseville to keep the tracks open.”

“You have to be a little touched in the head,” said one man who lives in Truckee. That does not bother most of the people here.

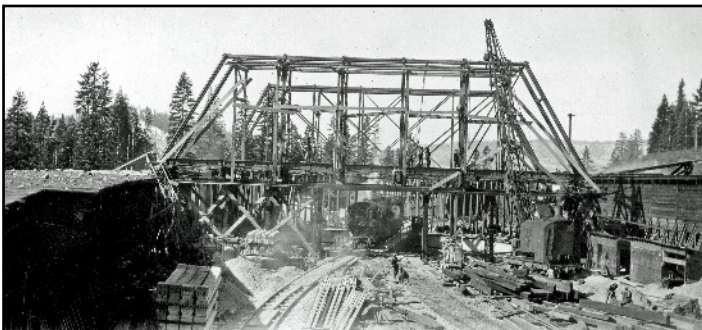
Steven Ellis is a nine-year veteran with the SP. “It isn’t so bad now with nine years,” he said. He was doing janitorial chores in the Hilton while his friend Domingo Guerra was on a vacation-sick leave in Mexico. “I get outside. They’re laying off a lot of men, but from four years back.”

Ellis ordinarily works with the Tunnel 6 crew but with nine years seniority he became temporary janitor. Guerra cannot work in the tunnels. He was once hit in the back with a rail.

Hanns’ title is interlocking tower operation, which is a fancy name for controller of 44 miles of switches and train traffic. His railroading in the winter includes one small window of daylight, a bank of lights and switches telling him where his traffic is and a reinforced concrete snow shed covering the entire Norden depot switchyard.

All of the wooden snow sheds and homes at the depot burned down in the winter of 1961. That was still in the days of steam engines and passenger trains. The depot was rebuilt of concrete to include passenger and even freight loading facilities. They were discontinued in a few years.

Today, from 6,992 feet elevation, crews are dispatched only to keep the tracks open over the mountains and through the tunnels – tunnels like no. 41, which, at two miles in length, is the longest the Chinese built.



Two views of the Norden Sheds and Turntable under construction in 1925. The photo at left shows a cab-forward being turned while construction is still underway. Ken Yeo Collection