

History: Simple flumes play big role in Tahoe timber

Publisher's note: *This is reprinted with permission from the September-October 1989 Lake Tahoe Historical Society newsletter.*

Picture two long slabs of thick heavy wood placed at right angles to each other, braced by trestle legs so that they form a constant and connected downhill trough. It does not sound like much but it was an invention that was vital to the lumber business in the Tahoe basin from 1867 to 1900. The steep slopes, the lack of roadways and the fact that most of the lumber was headed for Virginia City and the Comstock Lode, made this simple device an important link in the transportation chain.



The V-flume was invented by a man named J.W. Haines in 1867. It was so simple to build and operate that it was two years before Haines sought to patent it. It was too late for him to make a profit from it however, for it was in widespread use by then and he lost his patent suit. By 1873, the Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Co. had a twelve mile long flume above Glenbrook and in 1876, Flood & Fair opened a fifteen mile flume east from Mount Rose to Carson City where its logs met at the Virginia & Truckee Railroad headed for Virginia City. By then, there were dozens of other V-Flumes operating in the mountains around the lake.

When a tree was cut, logs were taken to the head of the flume and placed in the trough. There had to be a constant flow of water at least one inch deep, or the boards had to be greased, to ease movement of the logs. Men stationed along the way with long poles kept logs from snagging or catching on anything.

Gravity did the rest. At the end of the trip, logs hit the lake with a resounding crack and an impressive splash of water. There they would be chained together, towed to Glenbrook, hauled up the eastern summit and placed in another flume which took them to the train yard in Carson City.

There are still pieces of aging, cracking wood lying in the basin that were once used in V-Flumes. When lumbering stopped at the turn of the century this once-vital device was left rotting and abandoned but not quite forgotten. This simple, elegant mechanical device illustrates the ingenuity and creative skill of the 19th century Americans.