

History: Railroads diminished as Lumber harvest faded

Publisher's note: *This is reprinted with permission from the March-April 1990 Lake Tahoe Historical Society Newsletter.*

By Lyn Landauer

The era of railroads within the Lake Tahoe Basin was short and no trains now run in any portion of the Lake Tahoe Basin. Every summer, beginning in the 1860s, engines, track-layers, and loggers labored to cut timber and move it to the lake, haul it to Glenbrook and thence to the Comstock Mines. The last of the railroads ran from Tahoe City to Truckee from 1899 until 1942. This was the only one that carried more passengers than lumber. All of these lines were narrow gauge except Matthew Gardner's standard gauge near what is now Camp Richardson.



In 1884, George Chubbuck built a narrow gauge railroad running from Taylor's Landing (near Bijou) up into the hills south of the lake. At first the wooden narrow gauge track headed southwest from the lake shore, across the meadow, Heavenly Valley, Trout, and Cold creeks. It passed Chubbuck's headquarters at Sierra House and ended about four miles from the lake. As was the custom with lumber railroads, the line was extended as it was needed. As soon as a stand of trees was logged, track was laid to the next section. Eventually the Lake Valley Railroad line ran as far as Meyers and sent lumber on contract to the Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Company of Glenbrook.

Chubbuck's first steam engine had a saddle tank on top to supply the water. Logs were stacked on flat cars pulled by the engine which had a diamond shaped stack, oil-burning

headlight, and wheels that drove furiously to move its load of logs to the lake. The engineer stopped the cars next to a ramp and the logs would be rolled off into the lake by lumbermen. This slow, heavy monstrosity of an engine was distorting the wooden track so it was relegated to use as a donkey engine. A new engine, new track and other changes were then made.

Chubbuck's operation was slow to fulfill this contract in good time and William Bliss, son of Duane Bliss of Glenbrook, was sent to manage the laying of new 35 pound narrow gauge steel track, extend the line to Meyers and building of the trestle pier into the lake. When the latter was in place, the train ran out onto the pier and logs could then be dumped directly into the lake ready for the tug that would tow them to Glenbrook. In operation by this time were a ten-ton locomotive called the Santa Cruz and fifteen flat cars. Other engines were barged over from the Glenbrook line when necessary. The engineer drove the cars out onto the pier, off-loaded the logs and then moved to the other end of the cab where a headlight faced the rear of the train. He then made the return trip in reverse, with engine and empty flat cars backing into the timber forest.

At its height, the Lake Valley Railroad had eleven miles of track but the operation became unprofitable as lumber reserves diminished. In 1899, along with the other Bliss enterprises, the LVRR moved to Tahoe City. All that was left in Lake Valley was a sagging round house at Bijou and miles of lumber slashings, bark stumps, and sawdust alongside the rotting lumber chutes. A portion of the right-of-way can still be seen just off Al Tahoe Boulevard, as can pieces of track, ties, and other artifacts in various places in the woods. The track was taken up in some places and left where it was or buried in others. Several miles of it were deposited with the Historical Society in the 1970s.

The Lake Valley line was an important part of the history of Lake Tahoe – but it is no more. Only the echoes remain in

traces of the the-of-way and in the remaining worn steel ices of track at the museum. They are a tangible vestige of the days of the railroads in the Lake Tahoe Basin.