

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIC OVERVIEW



This chapter provides a brief history of Truckee. It draws upon historic overview text developed by Kautz Environmental Consultants for the historic property survey. Other publications about the community also provided a contextual foundation. These are *Fire & Ice: A Portrait of Truckee* (Members of Truckee Donner Historical Society 1994) and *Truckee: An Illustrated History of the Town and Its Surroundings* (Meschery 1978).

The first real influx of Euroamerican people to the Sierra Nevada began in the 1840s. This was the initial wave of emigrants who traveled across the western half of the continent seeking their fortunes on the West Coast. By 1846, California had surpassed Oregon as the primary emigrant destination. A popular route across the Sierra Nevada Range, which American Indian groups had used for centuries, followed the course of the Truckee River and continued over what has become known as Donner Pass. This route lost favor temporarily after the 1846-47 Donner Party tragedy.

The discovery of gold along the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada opened the floodgates to the California Gold Rush. However, the Lake Tahoe-Truckee area was not a destination; gold was to be found in the valleys of the American, Bear, Yuba, and Feather rivers on the other side of the crest.

The Truckee River route was one of several options for entry into the California mines, and competition for freight and passenger traffic intensified between settlements along the trails. The Truckee River Basin, where the Truckee River begins its eastward descent, served as a springboard for those attempting to make the ascent of another 1,000 feet. Truckee is situated at approximately 6,000 feet above mean sea level, while the average elevation of the passes in the area is around 7,000 feet.

In 1863, Joseph Gray built a cabin along an ancillary road, establishing what was then known as Gray's Station, a stage stop. Unlike the rampant growth encountered at new mineral discoveries, this was to be Truckee's quiet and humble beginnings. The following year Joseph Gray and George Schaffer began the area's first lumber mill partnership. Other people be-



Early photographs illustrate a variety of designs for canopies along Commercial Row.

gan to settle along the Truckee River, including a prospector named John Keiser and a blacksmith named S.S. Coburn. From 1864-1868, Truckee was known as Coburn's Station, from its association with this man.

By the early 1860s, plans were formulated for a railroad crossing of the Sierra Nevada obstacle. This was preempted by the construction of an improved road through the Sierra. In 1864, the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road was opened over Donner Pass. It followed a nearly identical route through Truckee as the earliest emigrant had followed. This freight and passenger wagon road was situated near the proposed alignment of the transcontinental railroad, as it was designed to facilitate transportation of supplies to points along the rail line. The road formed the final link in a continuous freight and passenger road from Dutch Flat, in California's Mother Lode, to Comstock Mines near Virginia City, Nevada. By the summer of 1864, the California Stage Company, using Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road, established regular stage connections between west and east, and Coburn's Station grew exponentially with the traffic. Knowing that a railroad was in the works, and with the improved stage line in operation, more lumber mills began to make an appearance in and around the area. E.J. Brickell and George Geisendorfer were only two such persons realizing the region's potential, but their Truckee Lumber Company (1867) would become a dominant player in the market.

The year 1868 is pivotal to the story of Truckee because the Central Pacific then conquered the summit and pulled its first locomotive into town, linking Truckee to the West Coast by rail. One month later, the settlement witnessed its first great fire, destroying

all of Coburn's Station except for Gray's cabin and lumber mill, and causing the town to rebuild slightly east. The new town with its new railroad took on a new name, Truckee. The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road became Main Street then Jibboom Street. The Central Pacific's vision of its destiny was much grander, however, than just crossing this great mountain range; it was the spanning of a continent. This goal was realized in May 1869 in Utah and Truckee, as a result, became an important point between East and West.



A turn-of-the-century image of the United Methodist Church and early residences demonstrates the pervasive use of wood lap siding.

In 1914 Main Street in downtown Truckee was designated as the Lincoln Highway, the first coast to coast roadway in the United States. Contiguous segments within the various existing regional road systems were incorporated as interconnecting links in the Lincoln Highway. The route of the Lincoln Highway through



The Truckee area benefitted by its transportation link helping to move goods and people across the mountains and by sending out its own products.

Truckee closely follows segments of the original route of the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road and the Emigrant Trail. In 1927 portions of the Lincoln Highway were redesignated as the Victory Highway, a redundant road system conceived as a memorial to veterans of World War I. While the route through Truckee was referenced as the Victory Highway, many continued to call it the Lincoln Highway, hence causing some confusion in later years. Truckee citizens and prominent business leaders realized the tourism potential of automobile travel along a nationally recognized highway and succeeded in getting the Victory Highway/Lincoln Highway constructed through town. In 1928 the Lincoln Highway/Victory Highway was incorporated into the federal highway system and the route through Truckee was designated as U.S. Route 40.

The Truckee area benefitted by its transportation link by not only helping to move goods and people across the mountains, but by sending out its own products at the same time. The lumber mills, which now numbered in the dozens, were inundated with orders from the burgeoning Comstock Lode in Nevada, and from the continued growth in California. Truckee's alpine environment and transportation connection provided another opportunity: ice manufacture. Lumber companies capitalized on their frozen mill ponds, and soon other companies, devoted exclusively to ice manufacture, were appearing in town. For many years (1868-c.1920s), "ice harvesting was big business in the Truckee Area." It was shipped by rail throughout the west, sent to cool mines in the Comstock and to keep California produce fresh on its journey to eastern markets. Many ice companies operated in the Sierras, and Truckee boasted a few of its own (Trout Creek Ice Company, a.k.a., Henry's Ice Company). This operation was where the present-day Sierra Pacific Company substation is located.

From its origins as a stage stop, to the coming of the railroad and early lumber mills (from 1868 onward), Truckee was a full blown, growing community. It was not without its difficulties, however. Until things began settling down in the 1890s, people knew Truckee as a Lawless Boomtown. Still, some of the finest neighborhoods in Truckee's history would be built during this period, with the largest homes belonging to lumber barons like the Richardsons, Schaffer, and Burckhaultler. The Truckee Lumber Company, desiring employee housing that is appropriate to such



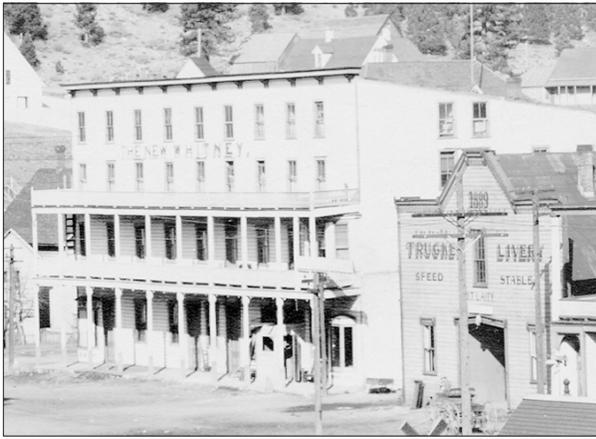
While Truckee was prospering with the lumber and ice industries in full production, a number of modest residences and outbuildings were built.

an important company, designed and built 'Brickelltown' along the west edge of town, near their mill and box factory (Brickelltown being named after E.J. Brickell, a partner in the operation). From its inception, the block was quite uniform in appearance, displaying Victorian Italianate influences on every home.

Agriculture was also clearly a significant part of early Truckee history. This area in the Sierras was a "dairyman's heaven." The region provided summer pasture for herds brought in from central California, and in earlier years there were reportedly 15-20 dairy farms near Truckee, which yielded enormous quantities (60,000 pounds) of "premium quality" butter that was in turn sold at "premium" prices throughout the west's urban markets. Two dairies are occasionally alluded



The Varney-McIver Dairy is located along the extreme western margins of the historical community along Donner Pass Road. It is the only dairy that remains in the Downtown Truckee area.



The Whitney Hotel was one of the many buildings in Truckee to be affected by fire, and to be rebuilt.

to around historic Truckee. The Von Fluee dairy was originally located on the south side of the Truckee River, occupying the lands around present-day River Street. The Varney-McIver Dairy is located along the extreme western margins of the historical community along Donner Pass Road. It is the only dairy that remains in the Downtown Truckee area.

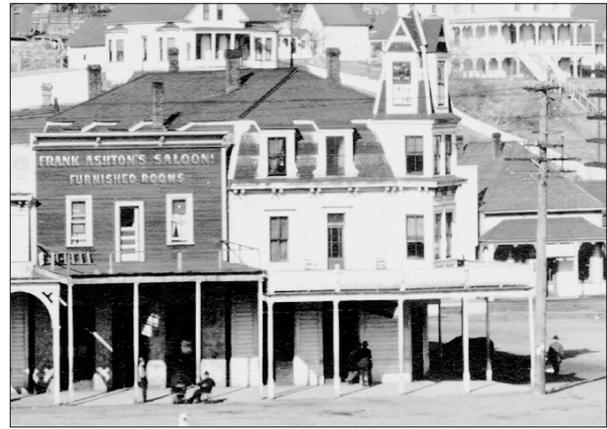
Many fires affected the town of Truckee. Besides the fire in 1868 that attacked Coburn's Station, massive fires swept through Truckee's residential and commercial districts in 1871, 1875, 1881, and again in 1883. With each fire and subsequent rebuilding, Truckee lost more of its early appearance. As a consequence, very few buildings remain from the earliest years of the Boomtown period.

Like a mining town seeing its mineral riches thin out, by the 1890s Truckee too was feeling its resources dwindle. The town's mainstay, lumbering, was dependent upon forests that were increasingly becoming depleted, and by the turn-of-the-century many mills had ceased operation. The ice industry, by providing the means to preserve produce, had proved vital to California's agricultural growth, but was feeling increased competition from artificial refrigeration.

Though this appeared to be a period of decline, Truckee's residential neighborhoods continued to grow, particularly due to a large influx of Italian immigrants. The railroad had made access to the town relatively easy, even in winter, and Truckee, long praised for its beautiful surroundings, began catering to an ever increasing, recreational clientele. By the

mid-1890s Truckee was host to Ice Carnivals, encouraging people from California and Nevada to enjoy the mountain winters. Sleighing, tobogganing, dog races, and the first of two giant Ice Palaces were just a few of the attractions offered to tourists.

Though fires still claimed some of Truckee's large and important properties during this period, the misfortune of entire neighborhoods being destroyed appears to have been avoided. Growth during this period, the lack of wide-scale fires, and subsequent slower development in the later periods have contributed to the survival of much of Truckee's late-nineteenth century historic fabric. Most of Truckee's historic neighborhoods, especially north of the commercial district, are from this period.



An early commercial row saloon and hotel, circa 1913, before fire hit the commercial district, included a distinctive tower at the corner.

Though the lumber and ice industry's days were numbered, the town seemed to have found a new identity as a tourist destination. The town's industrial overtones gave way to peaceful, serene mountain beauty. The introduction of Italian families to the community coincided with the final expulsion of the last Chinese residents by 1886. And the railroad, Truckee's lifeline, was soon to witness and begin competing with the automobile as a primary transportation source.

Long a mainstay of Truckee, the Chinese first arrived with the railroad, laboring in large numbers to build it across the Sierra. Many stayed to settle in the community, which was a tenuous partnership at best. By providing cheap labor, they were both sought by industry and denounced by higher paid, European work-

ers. Their community was frequently raided, harassed, and torn down. By 1878 they were forced to live south of the Truckee River, and a decade later, to move away altogether.

By the early part of the twentieth century Truckee was sharing its moment in the spotlight with its surroundings. Movie companies began arriving in large numbers, using the town as a base camp while filming in the mountains. A particularly significant aspect of this period was the development of the Hilltop Recreation Area for winter sports.

Although the snow-covered hillsides had been play areas for local residents since Truckee's earliest years of settlement, the concept of organized (and economically viable) winter sports was first introduced to the larger community by Charles McGlashan in about 1895. With the decline in the lumber industry, McGlashan had a vision of the area as a winter recreation destination for ice skating, tobogganing, sleigh rides, dog sled races, and ski contests. Ice carnivals with the famous ice palaces became prominent events in the mountain community from this time until about 1916. "Snowball Specials" (i.e., the winter excursion trains) continued to run until 1940 when the automobile became preferred transportation.

In the early 1900s to 1910s, recreational "ski-sport" was beginning to advance across the country. Several regional clubs (Tahoe and San Francisco's Sierra Club) were formed by 1915. Locally, Truckee residents formed their own "Sierra Skiing Club" around 1909. A tow to haul toboggans up "Hilltop" first appeared in the 1910 Truckee Ice Carnival, and when the Truckee Ski Club formed in 1913 they utilized this tow.



The Stone Garage circa 1920, built on the site of Gray's cabin, provided for the maintenance needs of the automobile..

The area presently known as the "Hilltop" was purchased c. 1910-1920 from railroad developer Charles Crocker for use as a recreational ski area. The hilltop lodge was the first building constructed (c. 1928-29) on the property and was built by members of the Truckee Ski Club, the Truckee Outing Club, and Sierra Dog Derby Association. The hilltop was long known for its wooden scaffold ski jump constructed just east of the Hilltop Lodge. Guy Coates indicates that seven time Olympic ski jumping champion Lars Haugen designed Truckee's famous great wooden ski jump. The jump was demolished c. 1950s or 1960s. The ski hill reportedly had one of the nation's first mechanized ski lifts, and the property as a whole represents a significant historic recreational complex for the community, and larger region. The rope tow for the ski lift was installed about 1928, around the time of construction of the Hilltop Lodge. The current ski lift was reportedly constructed c. 1960.



The new Sierra Tavern was built in the late 1930s as part of the Truckee commercial row.



Small hotels, such as the one seen above provided visitors to the Truckee area with a resting place after their recreational pursuits.

To the west and south of Truckee were the Donner campsite and Lake Tahoe, which became more easily accessible with the automobile's arrival. Fishing, camping, boating, and picnics were summer's favorite activities, while winter sports, kept Truckee alive all year long. From the early twentieth century until World War II, Truckee was the area's gateway to year-round recreation.

Fire again paid a visit to Truckee, attacking the commercial district in 1913 and again in the 1920s. The fact that Truckee rebuilt, once again, is proof of its continued economic viability and prosperity in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is also for this reason that the commercial district has a later historic feeling than the surrounding residential communities. The exceptions, of course, are the older brick businesses, such as Cabona's and the Capital Building, whose owners had earlier learned how to prevent fire's destructiveness. For all the large fires that passed through town, numerous smaller blazes seem to have done just as much damage - perhaps not monetarily, but to Truckee's character. The elaborate Sherritt House, both Truckee Hotels, the original Sierra Tavern, the second Ice Palace, the High School, the famous McGlashan mansion, and recently, the commanding Masonic building, not to mention dozens of residences, have vanished from the Truckee landscape for this reason.

As a moment of closure, the Truckee Lumber Company, in existence since the 1860s, finally shut its doors during the Gateway period, ironically due to a fire. By the 1930s, the last remaining ice companies had also ceased operations, no longer able to compete with modern refrigeration technology.

While the economic mainstays of the Truckee area, transportation and logging, have persisted into the twentieth century, the Lake Tahoe-Truckee area is now noted more for its recreational opportunities than anything else. Lake Tahoe, Squaw Valley, and the other areas surrounding Truckee have become a huge playground supporting a wide array of activities. However, the historical imprint of the railroad and logging boomtown is still very apparent in Truckee and its environs.