

SHORT TRACK *GAZETTE*



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Reported by Fred McDowell

Anyone who's read the Igniter for the past couple years, is no doubt familiar with the fact that we are building *something* in the "north forty" area of the museum grounds. In fact, the Short track Railroad began construction of our permanent layout before the paint dried in our new building. Perhaps you've wandered through some Saturday while the saws were humming, the plaster flying and the hammers were hammering...

I'm sure it's obvious that we are building a train layout, but what *is* it? That's what we'd like you to know.

Our permanent layout is called the Donner Pass Exhibit (DPE). It models the historic railroad right of way through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. All of the towns, tunnels and geographical features really exist (or once did) and will be represented as accurately as possible. In contrast, our older layout is "free-lanced" and does not accurately depict any geographical location.

So why the Donner Pass? Why not something nearer San Diego?

Well....somebody already did. Their layout depicting the San Diego area is on display in the San Diego Model Railroad Museum in Balboa Park. Since "necessity is the mother of invention" we looked for another place to model. After looking at a variety of concepts, many with outstanding features, we settled on the Southern Pacific Railroad's mountain route from California to Nevada.

Eliminating San Diego as a "destination" turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We wanted to make something that would really stimulate the viewer. If you haven't noticed, there seems to be a shortage of tunnels in the San Diego area. In fact, (for the most part) it's really pretty "flat" around here, nothing at all like "Donner Pass".

A “pass” usually requires “mountains” (and by nature, tunnels) somewhere in the formula. This also allowed us to include some of the striking beauty afforded by the mountains, trees and rivers of the Sierra Nevada. But that’s not all. Donner Pass was and remains an important aspect to regional transportation in the United States. Part of our mission is to educate visitors on the history of American railroading, its operations-past and present, with a particular emphasis on duplicating the chosen prototype. What better place to pick, than part of the original “transcontinental railroad”?

The real Donner Pass is a high mountain pass in the northern Sierra Nevadas, just about nine miles west of Truckee, California. Named for the ill-fated party of California-bound emigrants that was trapped in the Pass in the winter of 1846, the pass is 7,085 feet high and very narrow. It was originally built by the Central Pacific Railroad(CPRR) in 1868 as part of the first transcontinental railroad. Almost five years of construction effort ended with the successful completion of 1,659-foot Tunnel #6 (aka the Summit Tunnel) permitting the passage of passengers and freight over the Sierras for the first time.

Following a route first surveyed by CPRR's original Chief Engineer, Theodore D. Judah (1826-1863), the construction of four tunnels, several miles of snow-sheds and two "Chinese Walls" were necessary to breach Donner Summit. This constituted by far the most difficult engineering and construction challenge of the entire original Sacramento to Ogden route. The original (Track #1) summit grade remained in continuous daily use from June 18, 1868, when the first CPRR passenger train ran through the Summit Tunnel, until 1993 when the Southern Pacific Railroad abandoned that section for a different track. Today the entire rail system is part of the Union Pacific Railroad, which owns and operates this route.

Originally built as a single track line, the entire route over Donner Pass was doubled as part of various improvements to the whole Southern Pacific system in the early twentieth century. “Our” DPE, models the period from 1955 to 1975 and features extensive double-tracking. Our museum class display will entertain visitors to the AGSEM with a first rate model railroad that is careful attention to detail in all its aspects. Emphasis will be on train operations, scenic fidelity, theatrical lighting, animation and sound. The DPE will also serve to promote the hobby of model railroading by exhibiting the passion and skills of our members. We hope you will come by and support our efforts!