

V&T

Historical Narrative

by Stephen E. Drew

1868 - 1872

The Virginia & Truckee Railroad Company was organized in Nevada on March 5, 1868 with the objective of connecting Comstock mines around Virginia City, Nevada, with quartz reduction mills located just east of Carson City along the Carson River. On the return trip to Virginia City, the railroad would bring up needed supplies for the mining community including cord wood and mining timbers. Construction of a railroad between Virginia City and the Truckee River had been authorized by the Nevada Territorial Legislature in 1861 but actual construction on the line was not commenced until 1869. The major controlling interests behind the V. & T. Railroad were principals of the Bank of California and the Comstock mines and mills. Construction of the railroad was financed in part by Ormsby and Storey County bonds having a total par value of \$500,000 and advances aggregating \$735,000 received from various mining companies at or near Virginia City. Principals of the Company included Bank of California President Darius Ogden Mills, financier William Chapman Ralston, William Sharon who was Virginia City Agent for Bank of California and V. & T. General Superintendent Henry Marvin Yerington.

Surveyed by Isaac E. James, the 21-mile standard gauge line between Carson City and Virginia City was completed on January 29, 1870. A 31-mile extension north from Carson City through Franktown, Washoe City and Steamboat Springs connected the Comstock with transcontinental rail service at Reno in August 1872. Completion of the railroad permitted further development of Comstock mines by allowing economical reduction of lower grade ores through reduced freight rates in the mills and by increasing the essential supply of mine timbers and cord wood for fuel. Well-appointed passenger service to Carson and Virginia City was a by-product of the short line's connection with the Central Pacific Railroad at Reno.

For nearly 20 years, the V. & T. Railroad was a major political and economic factor in the growth and development of western Nevada. The railroad employed almost 400 men in a typical month. During 1870's V. & T. stockholders divided handsome dividends of up to \$90,000 monthly while additional returns provided the capital for nearly 40 other V. & T.-affiliated concerns. The 300-mile Carson & Colorado Railroad was built from

Mound House, Nevada, to Keller, California, and was operated by the principals of the V. & T. from 1880 to 1900. V. & T. dividends funded the establishment of Hawthorne, Candelaria, Belleville, Columbus and Cerro Gordo. For decades, the Virginia & Truckee was hailed as the most glamorous and wealthiest short line railroad in the world!

The V. & T.'s first roundhouse, blacksmith shop and car repair facility were located at Virginia City in Storey County. Established in 1869, the first shop was supervised by V. & T. Master Mechanics B. P. Cambell and later I. H. Graves of the nearby Central Pacific Railroad Shops at Sacramento. All iron casting work was handled at the Fulton Foundry on the divide between Virginia City and Gold Hill. Oxen hauled the railroad's first locomotives to the Virginia City shops where they were set-up and test fired. The Virginia & Truckee's first cabooses-coach was completed in the Virginia City shops on November 27, 1869; later renumbered V. & T. Caboose-Coach No. 8 "Julia Bulette", this 122 years old passenger car has been painstakingly restored by Short Line Enterprises and is now owned by the Nevada State Railroad museum at Carson City.

1872 - 1873

With the August 1872 completion of the 31-mile Carson City to Reno extension, Carson City became midpoint on the line and the desirable location to develop a more expanded V. & T. shop facility. Flat open space for the railroad's yard, station and shop facilities was readily available in the county seat and state capitol at Carson City. The site for the V. & T.'s Carson City shops was selected several blocks north of the railroad's mail line through Carson City. The actual building was located on blocks 15 and 17 of Vanwinkle and Proctors Addition straddling what later became known as Fall Street. The west end of the building on block 16 was acquired on September 14, 1871 by William Sharon from local civil engineer, former State Assemblyman and later Ormsby County Surveyor Horace H. Bence. Sharon acquired the east parcel, block 17, on July 5, 1870 from local attorney and Nevada Attorney General Robert M. Clarke. The last required parcel for the building itself was purchased from P. C. Lander of San Francisco effective December 10, 1872. Deeds covering property for the turntable site and spur track leads off the main line to Virginia City were recorded from 1870 to 1873.

Correspondence and records of the famous Virginia & Truckee Railroad abound and the outgoing letterpress copy books of V. & T. General Superintendent and later Vice-President Henry M. Yerington document many of the early decisions and the progress regarding construction of the main shop building. The Yerington Papers are among the significant Nevada research collections held by The Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkley. By October of 1873, the design for the facility was well conceived by the V. & T. and the major unresolved questions were the actual stone material, the

contractor and the roof. Writing on October 31, 1872 to V. & T. President William Sharon, Yerington reported:

"Have had an examination made of the stone for building purposes that lies up near the tunnel. Although it would make a splendid building I am led to believe that its not easy to work & would cost us more for the proposed Machine Shops that if procured from the State Prison quarry. I have had inquiries from several stone masons as to cost of putting up the building -- we delivering the stone -- and ... find Curry's figures to be a trifle less than asked by others. Please advice me what to do ... for its a pity to lose this fine weather & Curry as well as other parties wish to go ahead at once."

Colonel Abram or "Abe" V. Z. Curry was one of the early influential citizens of Eagle Valley. Born in 1815 in Ithaca, New York, 1858 found him in western Utah. Curry is credited with laying out the town of Carson City in September 1858 and is reputed to have said "There isn't a stone building in Carson City that I did not erect". A prominent local contractor and early builder, Curry discovered that extensive sandstone deposit near Carson City at the present State Prison and eventually developed the property into an over 60 acre quarry supplying most of the substantial stone buildings in the community. Curry was warden and contractor for the Nevada Territorial Prison from 1862 to 1864. Territorial Assemblyman 1862 - 1863 and Senator 1863 - 1864, Ormsby County Surveyor from 1866 to 1868, Superintendent of Construction of U. S. Mint at Carson City 1866 - 1869, and Superintendent of the Mint 1869 - 1870. Curry's last job as a major local contractor was the construction of the V. & T.'s mammoth Carson City shops using sandstone blocks from the Nevada State Prison Quarry. Construction of the building began in November 1872 and was completed in July 1873 in time for a grand Fourth of July Ball in 1873. On October 19, 1873, Curry died at the age of 58. His funeral was the largest held to that time in Carson City; the U. S. Mint at Carson City ceased operations for the day out of respect for its first superintendent. Curry is buried in Lone Mountain Cemetery at Carson City.

With ground broken on November 9, 1872, construction of the new shop building progressed through the winter of 1872 - 1873. On January 17, 1873, H. M. Yerington wrote to William Sellers & Company of Philadelphia to quote on machinery for the new shop structure:

"We are putting up some pretty extensive machine shops." Encloses 17 item "List of Machinery for the Machine and Car Shops of the Virginia & Truckee R. R."

Sellers was for decades a major supplier of railroad and machine shop equipment and ultimately proved low bidder on the largest single order of new machinery for the V. &

T.'s Carson City shop.

Affectionately dubbed "Currysburg" by Carson City Daily Appeal, the mammoth 180 x 322 foot shop complex was carefully constructed by a corps of Chinese working under the direction of Colonel Curry. In January 21st letter of Darius O. Mills in San Francisco, Yerington commented:

"As requested, I beg to hand plan of our new Machine & Car Shops, Foundry, Round House & also section of roof so as (to) enable you to see the quantity of Iron girders required, in event of it being decided to use these in place of wooden rafters. I also enclose copy of letter from Mess. Huntington & Hopkins relative to corrugated iron, which fully explains itself. Please advise me as soon as you decide what is to be done so I may write Huntington & Hopkins and if wooden rafters are to be used that I may order these. Business continues to be very lively with us."

In March 1873, Yerington ordered an additional 15 machines from Sellers and forwarded to Mills a drawing of the machine shop roof as designed by V. & T. Chief Train Dispatcher Harry Hunter. The entire arrangement of the tools, machinery and interior configuration of the new shop building was the responsibility of V. & T. Master Mechanic John William Bowker at Virginia City. Bowker, the V. & T.'s third master mechanic, was an innovative railroad machinist; he was responsible for all of the road's shop facilities and shaped to a large degree the short line's early equipment roster. Held in high regard by the railroad's management, Yerington named V. & T. Locomotive No. 21 -- The Virginia City switch engine -- The "J. W. Bowker" in honor of the distinguished master mechanic. Unfortunately, the honor evidently went to the shop superintendent's head as he was caught entering the new Carson Shops full of whiskey on afternoon in July 1875. Yerington promptly discharged Bowker from his \$250 per month job and the namesake locomotive was renamed "Mexico". The original 1875 Baldwin locomotive "J. W. Bowker" is among the equipment on display at the California State Railroad Museum in Old Sacramento.

In a follow-up April 11, 1873 report to D. O. Mills, Yerington remarked:

"... a portion of the corrugated iron arrived here today for the roof. Curry is doing his work right along & all seems to be progressing very satisfactorily."

Nearing completion of the structure in June 1873, Yerington ordered a 54-foot turntable from Sellers and the main shop boiler and heater from H. J. Booth & Company's Union Iron Works in San Francisco. Booth had successfully built the railroad's first three steam locomotives in 1869.

On July 4, 1873, a gala ball was held in the car shop section of the building to celebrate Curry's completion of the building construction. A coat of sizing was applied so that whitewashed walls would not rub off on the festive attire of the guests. The celebration boasted lobsters, terrapin, truffles and unlimited champagne and was attended by everyone from Governor on down. The July 3, 1873 issue of the Carson Daily Appeal took note of the preparation for the ball:

"As before noted, the apartment of the new Railway shops selected for this festive affair is that which is to be occupied by the car builders. This room is 65 feet in width by 163 feet in length. Its walls are white as new fallen snow -- made so by successive coats of white wash; and there is neither a pillar nor a post to obstruct the view from one end to the other. Some idea of the magnitude of the room itself may be gathered from the following single fact relative thereto: There are not less than 50,000 feet of lumber employed in the construction of the floor. Of course this includes foundation timbers, (which rest on solid masonry) sill and everything else. The flooring is three inch planks, firmly spiked to the timbers beneath; and Curry has had these stout planks all planed nicely, and the whole surface of the floor will be so leveled and smoothed as that the fantastic toe may never encounter the slightest obstacle to its triumphant progress.

" A gala V. & T. ball continued annually for at least five years although its location and date frequently changed.

Machinery for the new shop continued to arrive during the summer of 1873 and V. & T. shop forces were kept busy setting-up the new machinery between routine repair work in the shops. J. W. Bowker moved his office from Virginia City into the new shop building and was still supervising machinery installation in November 1873. In a November 12, 1873 letter to Mills, Yerington remarked on a recent visit to the new shops by Central Pacific Master Mechanic Andrew Jackson Stevens:

"Three days ago Mr. Stevens, Genl. Master Mechanic of the C. P. was here and examined the shops very thoroughly. He said they were complete & knew of no better ones on the continent. He said the tools were the best he ever saw and was really pleased with the whole institution.

"Owing to a labor strike and, according to Yerington, "...in consequence of his (Curry) doing better work than the contract called for," it was discovered a month after Curry's death that the contractor had reportedly lost \$4,000 on the job and had died leaving his financial affairs in disarray. In April 1874, the V. & T. made a cash settlement of \$2,000 with Mrs. Curry and Mr. Rice to help cover Curry's outstanding debts. The entire shop

complex cost Yerington considerably more than the railroad had originally estimated. While Curry's construction of the stone walls was only slightly over budget, the V. & T.'s expenses for the iron roof, floors, doors, engine pits, drainage, water machinery and freight charges substantially exceeded the original estimate. In a December 8m 1873 letter to Mills in Paris, Yerington commented:

"There is however a great consolation in knowing that our shops, tools &c are complete, more hardy & perfect than any on this coast by far. This month we are doing all our own work except making castings; those we are getting from Fulton Foundry. Bowker is delighted and says next month will show very conclusively what he can do in the way of saving. In consequence of the facilities offered by the shops we are cutting down wages of machinists, getting rid of over time &c and from the limited chance we have had from testing we are doing our work much cheaper than under the old way & using less men."

1874 - 1900

The shop were completed and in full operation by early 1874. Master Mechanic J. W. Bowker's shop rules were published on February 2, 1874 and remained posted in the huge shop complex for decades afterwards. The strict rules required a 10 hour day -- six and seven days a week -- with two hours wages deduction if an employee was more than five minutes late to work. No shop conversation was allowed except on subjects relating to company business and an employee's violation of any of the rules was immediate cause for discharge! By 1878, the V. & T. employed well over 150 men in their shops including 50 mechanists, 14 men in the foundry, 15 in the car shop, 27 in the smith shop, 20 in the paint shop and miscellany, 22 wood men and over 40 general labors. Many of the 74 train men also performed shop work when not called for train service. The V. & T. shops had a revered reputation for promptness, close attention to detail and pride in craftsmanship.

The overall dimensions of the machine shops measured approximately 320 feet by 180 feet with a 60-foot wide open courtyard between the principal shops. Eight separate shops or departments subdivided the main structure with an additional appendage on the interior courtyard of the south wing. The principal shop divisions were the foundry, car shop, round house, machine and repair shop, blacksmith and boiler shop, engine house, pattern shop and supply. A lengthy 1880 description of each department, its major equipment and function as well as an impressive 1917 inventory of the major equipment in the various shops is found in a separate section.

While the machine shop was obviously the railroad's largest shop facility in Carson City, the impressive stone building was one of over a dozen structures which actually

comprised the V. & T.'s Carson City shop complex. Among the more substantial of the wood out-buildings were the paint shop built in 1877, the tin shop built in 1874, and the material yards and shed built in 1877. Other specialty structures in the Carson City yards included the motor car house, the oil tank, water tanks, turntable, sand house, derrick house and flanger shed. A more detailed listing of the nearly 40 V. & T. structures in Carson City is found in a separate section.

The Virginia & Truckee originally built the Carson City shops only to handle its own repair and construction requirements and those of affiliated and subsidiary lines; the financial benefits of outside work, however, were quickly realized when the large Carson River mills began sending in profitable orders for shop work. Of 51,198 lbs. of castings poured at the foundry in March 1878, for example, 40,889 lbs. were for outside work orders yielding a profit of \$2,687. Shop profit for fiscal years ending 1902 and 1903 exceeded \$10,000 each year which represented 3% of the Company's gross receipts or 16% of the railroad's total profit! The list of orders for outside work for decades read like the "Who's Who" of business concerns throughout Nevada, eastern California and as far as Mexico. Repairs were similarly performed on a variety of cars and locomotives for dozens of railroads including Boca & Loyalton, Bodie & Benton, Carson & Colorado, Carson & Tahoe Lumber & Fluming Company, Inyo Development Company, Nevada-California-Oregon, Nevada Copper Belt, Ocean Shore, Sierra Nevada Wood & Lumber Company, Sierra Valley Railway, Southern Pacific, Tonopah Railroad, and the Verdi Lumber Company.

The V. & T. shops had a reputation for being able to fabricate anything from their own glass to attractive private cars; from a cotter pin to an entire mine hoist; from small, intricate parts to entire wagons or steam boilers. The shops readily handled construction and repairs for industries and private parties throughout the area. Typical non-railroad outside jobs included bells for the local Methodist Church and St. Peter's Episcopal Church to major additions for the handsome private residence of Henry M. Yerington. In 1890 the shops manufactured a 30-foot flag pole topped with a ball and star for the school at Dayton, Nevada, while regularly handling repairs for local, state and federal buildings. In 1878, for example, the shop cast a new three ton iron arch on the first coin presses operated by the U. S. Mint at Carson City. The V. & T. placed one of their shop plates on the machine and the press and the V. & T. plate are among prominent exhibits today at the Nevada State Museum located in the former U. S. Mint building in Carson City.

1900 - 1990

On the heels of every boom is a bust and the periodic rise and fall of the economy of

Nevada and eastern California was quickly reflected in not only the V. & T. Railroad's business but also outside shop orders. Nevada business hit its low in the early 1890's and remained at near depression levels until the early Twentieth Century mining boom. With revenues derived from short-lived business resurgence in Tonopah and southern Nevada, a new Virginia & Truckee Railway Company was incorporated in Nevada on June 24, 1905 to purchase the predecessor company and to construct a 15.28-mile branch south from Carson City to Minden, Nevada. This branch offered transportation facilities to a growing agricultural and grazing district and resulted in substantial new revenue to the railway until a surface highway was constructed between Reno, Carson City, and Minden in the years 1921 - 1922. Known today as U.S. 395, the concrete highway completely paralleled the V. & T. between Reno and Minden and ultimately was the cause of the railway's red ink operations beginning in 1923. Prior to that time, the Virginia & Truckee was the only efficient means of transportation for freight, mail, express and passenger between these Nevada communities.

During the teens, twenties and early thirties, the number of outside work accounts decreased and the remaining clients were either local or successors to long time customers. A listing of Master Mechanic Charles J. Rulison's circa 1908 - 1935 major outside shop work accounts is found in a separate section. As foremen of the shop departments died or retired, their shops were closed. Outside shop orders dwindled and the Virginia & Truckee's own major servicing was handled by the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad shops at Sparks, Nevada. In 1936, the paint shops were closed after 46-year veteran V. & T. Master Car & Locomotive Painter Joseph P. Castle died on April 18, 1936. The foundry department closed in July 1938 and by 1943 the machine shop was also closed and over 35% of the equipment sold. Much of the original machinery was disposed of for scrap during the major World War II scrap drives or was sold for pennies on the dollar to the Purdy Company and A. D. Schader for possible resale.

During 1932 - 1937, Ogden L. Mills, one of the railway's major stockholders, personally loaned the short line nearly \$95,000 to help balance operating deficits. Revenues continued to decrease and the V. & T. was forced to enter voluntary Federal receivership on April 27, 1938. Solid corporate status was not established again until January 18, 1946 under the financial direction of the late Major Gordon A. Sampson. In 1937 the railroad began selling capital assets to meet monthly working capital obligations. Eventually, dozens of the line's historic locomotives, passenger cars and freight equipment were sold to Hollywood studios for use in major motion picture productions. The existence of the majority of Virginia & Truckee equipment today is due in large part to pre-war equipment purchases by the southern California motion picture industry. The disappearance of Comstock traffic and the caving of several wood-lined

tunnels ushered in the closing of the original 21-mile Carson City to Virginia City main line in 1938. The rails were removed and sold late in 1941 and the resulting \$52,000 revenue was applied as working capital on routine maintenance which had been deferred for over a decade.

For the 20-year period from 1928 - 1947, the V. & T. had a net income deficit of \$440,605.75 by U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission accounting practices. As early as 1932, officials of the Virginia & Truckee seriously considered total abandonment of the railway in the wake of annually mounting losses. In a December 1948 study, consultants to the railway proposed a new and more efficient steel machinery shop in place of the 1873 shop building whose

"... roof trusses are in bad shape, need repairs; roof is all rotted out in spots due to age, smoke and weather action, too large for any operation of company; impossible to keep warm in winter at any reasonable cost."

Once housing railroad equipment for serving from throughout the west, the final years of the Carson City shops saw only three pieces of non-V. & T. equipment -- Verdi Lumber Company Shay No. 11, Nevada Copper Belt Railway Motor Car No. 22 and finally Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg's private car No. 100 "The Gold Coast". Pushed inside the shop building during inclement weather, "The Gold Coast" was actually too large for the building and the doorways of track No. 5 had to be enlarged to accommodate the circa 1905 wooden business car. These late 1940's notches for "The Gold Coast" roofline were visible on the two track No. 5 doorways of the shop building. While a far cry from the gala July 4th balls of the 1870's, the car shops were cleared for one last party as several hundred rail enthusiasts assembled during the California-Nevada Railroad Historical Society V. & T. excursion trip on May 29, 1949.

After 80 years of continuous operation, the Virginia & Truckee finally succumbed to the increasing competition of highway traffic; the V. & T.'s last official revenue train operated on May 31, 1950 between Reno, Carson City and Minden. Following local sale of most of the railway's structures and properties, scrappers cleared out the remaining shop machinery. The rails between Reno and Minden were finally removed and the famous V. & T. became a legend. The building stored seven of the surviving V. & T. cars and a locomotive for several years. Offered for sale in 1952, the shop was sold in 1955 to Mr. Paul Louis Larquier. Mrs. Omer Wolf and Mr. Paul Larquier inherited the building from their father in 1958; Mr. Paul Larquier in October 1990 was sole owner of the shop building and property. While briefly rented to the U. S. Geological Survey and Hodges Transportation, Inc. for automotive testing through the late 1960's, the building was unoccupied from circa 1970.

