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**SUMMER 2019**  
140th Edition

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By Steve VanDenburgh

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**THE NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM**  
An Agency of the Nevada Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs



# SAGEBRUSH HEADLIGHT

NEWSLETTER OF THE NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

## Nevada's Deadliest Railroad Catastrophe Eight decades later, its cause is still uncertain By Steve VanDenburgh, courtesy of the Nevada Appeal

August 12, 2019, marked the 80th anniversary of a major railway disaster in northeastern Nevada that cost two dozen lives and injured at least 100 passengers and crewmen. Even today, it remains our State's most infamous railroading calamity.

On that summer night in 1939, the nearly

*(Continued on page 4)*



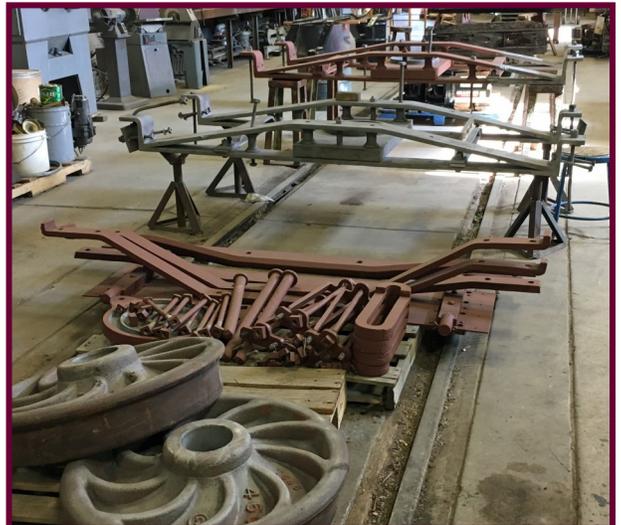
Onlookers view the City of San Francisco wreckage at the Humboldt River bridge site in Palisade Canyon, soon after that deadly 1939 derailment. Northeastern Nevada Historical Society Archives, Elko.

## Restoration of Transfer Flat Car No. 1 Begins By Chris de Witt

The current project in the restoration shop is that of the Virginia & Truckee No. 1 transfer car built in 1881. This car was used to transfer narrow gauge locomotives over the standard gauge V&T. Following a restoration feasibility study concluded earlier in 2019 by Stephen Drew and Mike Collins, the transfer car

*(Continued on page 3)*

Parts from the transfer flat car are in the process of being cleaned, repaired, and repainted in the restoration shop.



## VISIT THE MUSEUM

Open 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
Thursday through Monday  
(closed Tuesday & Wednesday)

Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day

### Museum Admission:

Adults 18 & Over - \$8.00  
Children (Under 18) - FREE  
Museum Members - FREE

## STEAM TRAIN & MOTORCAR RIDES

Rides run every weekend May through September with select dates in October, November, and December. The complete 2019 operating schedule is available at: [carsonrailroadmuseum.org](http://carsonrailroadmuseum.org)

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**Lara Brown**, Museum Store Manager: Designer

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2180 South Carson Street  
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## Message from the President of the Friends of the NSRM, Barry Simcoe

As I write this we are halfway through the Labor Day Weekend. Great weather, good crowds, three locomotives, smiling faces, and fantastic Friends volunteering. You are what make this museum work and set it apart from other museums. Your spirit, dedication, interest, and overall positive interaction are superb and add the extra ingredient to put us over the top.

We have several major events this fall: Harvest Train, Nevada Day, and, of course, Santa Train (three weekends). All your help will be appreciated. If you are not on the operating crew and have not been involved before you may contact museum staff, Rebecca Bevans at (775) 762-3354, or myself to see where you can help.

Also, consider joining our Events Committee. These meetings are the starting point for future event scheduling. If you have any ideas or would like to be involved in the process please attend. We welcome any ideas and have implemented several of them during past events. Contact the museum at (775) 687-6953 x224 to find out when the Events Committee meets.

Once again I want to say how much the museum and the Friends appreciate all the time and thought you put into the museum. If you have any questions, comments or concerns regarding the Friends please feel free to contact me.

*Thanks,  
Barry*

**Note: FNSRM Board Meetings are scheduled for December 2, 2019 & February 3, 2020. All members of the Friends organization are encouraged to attend.**

Email: [barrysimcoe@sbcglobal.net](mailto:barrysimcoe@sbcglobal.net)  
Phone: (775) 379-1353

## Transfer Flat Car No. 1

*(continued from page 1)*

came into the shop to be disassembled.

Restoration shop staff are cleaning and repairing the car's metal parts. During the cleaning process, hitherto undiscovered information came to light. It appears that the iron axles are original by virtue of the stamping found on them. The wheels, however, are a mix of many dates, one of which predates the construction date of the car by seven years. This wheel is from the Risdon Iron Works, whose products were commonly used under the V&T ore cars. Two other wheels will be replaced in the restoration be-



One of the parts from the "transfur" car.

cause of defects.

The museum has replacement wheels acquired from the previous owner when the

car was privately owned prior to 1987.

The car will receive Pennsylvania Railroad-style link-and-pin couplers which are forged, not cast. The car will not have air brakes as restored.

Timbers have arrived from a mill in Oregon and from the East Coast to finish the project. The trucks will be completed first after which the body will be started. Completion is targeted for spring of 2020. NSRM is anticipating placing a narrow gage locomotive on the finished car as a display. The project can be seen in the restoration shop at NSRM. 🚂

## NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM NIGHT PHOTO SHOOT

Join us for a Night Photo Shoot, November 16, 2019, led by Steve Barry, editor of *Railfan & Railroad* magazine, a life-long railroad enthusiast and author of *Railroads: The History of American Railroading in 500 Photographs*.

Participants will be able to photograph the McKeen Motorcar No. 22 built in 1910, Virginia & Truckee No. 25 Baldwin oil burner (pictured), and the wood-burning, 1875-built *Glenbrook*. There will be a mandatory safety briefing at 12:30 p.m. At 1:30 p.m. the photo shoot will start and continue throughout the evening. Sunset is estimated at 4:45 p.m.

Participants **MUST** bring the following:

- Sturdy shoes since you will be walking on uneven ground.
- Camera capable of being adjusted for long shutter speeds. Please have used and know the features of your camera before this event.
- Remote release or cable release for your camera.
- Please keep in mind any participant not adhering to the safety directions of official staff will be asked to leave the property and no refund will be given.



Safety is important at the NSRM.

The regular registration fee is \$150. Friends Members or Active/Retired Military receive a discounted registration fee of \$125. There is a 30 photographer limit, so register soon using the following link:

<https://www.nsrn-friends.org/photoshoot.html>

For more information, contact Adam Michalski, Curator of Education, at 775.687.6953 x.224 or email him at [amichalski@nevadaculture.org](mailto:amichalski@nevadaculture.org). 🚂

## Nevada's Deadliest Railroad Catastrophe *(continued from page 1)*



Dramatic southward view of upended Pullman sleeping car "Chinatown" looming over the wreck scene on the night of the derailment. Earl Franzen photo, Northeastern Nevada Historical Society Archives, Elko.

new, westbound *City of San Francisco* (COSF) streamliner derailed in Palisade Canyon, about 35 miles southwest of Elko. The crash demolished a sturdy Humboldt River span and left gruesome residues of jumbled train cars, track, bridge components, and bodies in and near the

stream.

Passenger A. C. Munger, of Omaha, described the mid-evening tragedy: "I had just gone to bed... Suddenly, there was a violent bump, apparently caused by part of the train leaving the track. This was followed by a succession of bumps and swerv-

ing as the cars started piling up in the creek bed [Humboldt River]...

"It was a terribly lonely spot..." and "an incredible sight to see that big train piled up like matchwood. The steel bridge across which the engine jolted was literally torn to shreds as it was struck by gyrating cars. One piece of bridge steel was thrust clear through one car and came out on the other side. Some of the scenes were ghastly."

Subsequent rescues and cleanup at the isolated site, as well as construction of a temporary bridge there, required substantial

efforts. As a result, the Southern Pacific Railroad ("SP") – which owned the right-of-way as well as a share of the sleek passenger train itself – quickly assembled an impressive array of workers and equipment from rail centers both east and west of the wreck scene.

The Sparks contingent included Guido Ceragioli, a 49-year-old Italian immigrant and rail-car repair specialist. Guido's son Rudy, who was 14½ at the time, remembered that event: "My dad was at the wreck site for a couple of weeks. They lived in bunk



Southern Pacific Company

\$5000 REWARD

Southern Pacific Company will pay a reward of Five Thousand Dollars (\$5,000) for information leading to the arrest and conviction of person or persons responsible for wrecking train No. 101 (Streamliner "**City of San Francisco**"), near Harney, Nevada, about 9:30 p.m., Saturday, August 12, 1939.

Information should be furnished to D. O'Connell, Chief Special Agent, Southern Pacific Company, 65 Market Street, San Francisco, California, or to the offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U. S. Department of Justice, 111 Sutter Building, San Francisco, California, or 301 Continental Bank Building, Salt Lake City, Utah.

J. H. DYER, Vice President in Charge of Operations,  
Southern Pacific Company.

San Francisco, California,  
August 15, 1939.

Following its Board of Inquiry hearing, SP chose this eye-catching poster to publicize the railroad's reward offer for information regarding alleged sabotage. Northeastern Nevada Historical Society Archives, Elko.



(Above) A northwestward panorama of the wreck on the morning after the derailment. Three diesel-electric locomotives and the first two train cars are to the left; the principal pileup of cars and bridge components is in the center of the scene. Trailing cars are to the right. L. B. Hanneman photo, NSRM Collection.

cars that composed part of the wrecking crew train... By the time the crew from Sparks arrived at the wreck site, most of the dead and all of the injured had been removed.” But the Sparks workers “did find some bodies in the wreckage.”

Fortuitously, two separate and parallel tracks snaked through Palisade Canyon in 1939: (1) SP’s original 1868 Central Pacific route, which had been partly realigned in the early 1900s and later became the permanent westbound component of a very useful “paired-track” scheme; and (2) Western Pacific’s 1909 line, which was designated as the eastbound component.

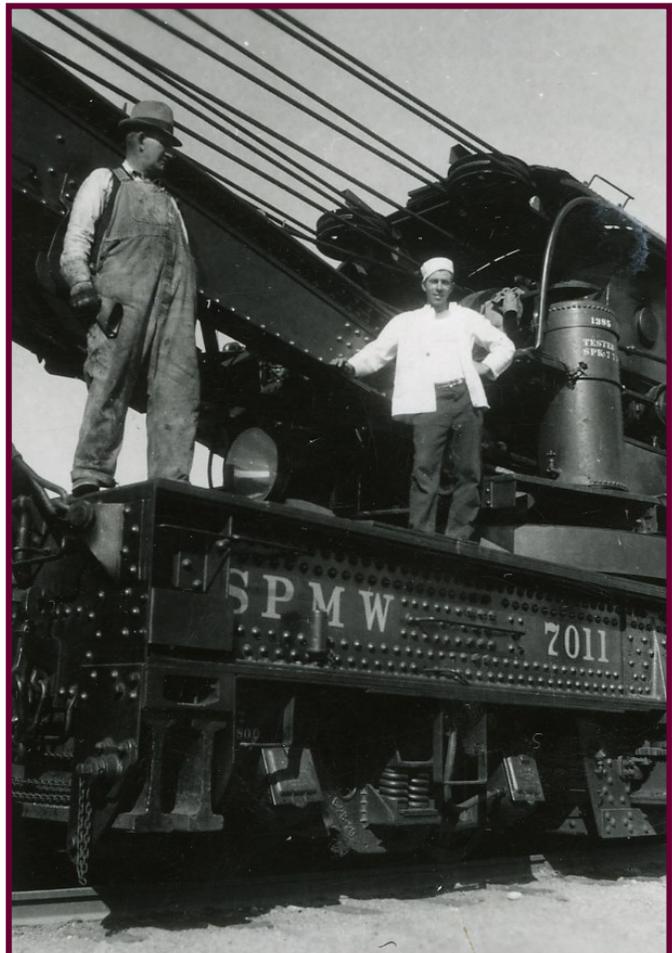
Immediately after the

*COSF* derailment, westward trains from both railroads temporarily joined their eastward counterparts on WP rails in the canyon, while the wreck was cleaned up and the SP bridge and track were rebuilt.

Meanwhile, SP convened a formal Board-of-Inquiry hearing in Carlin – the small, dominantly railroad-ing community about 14 miles northeast of the disaster.

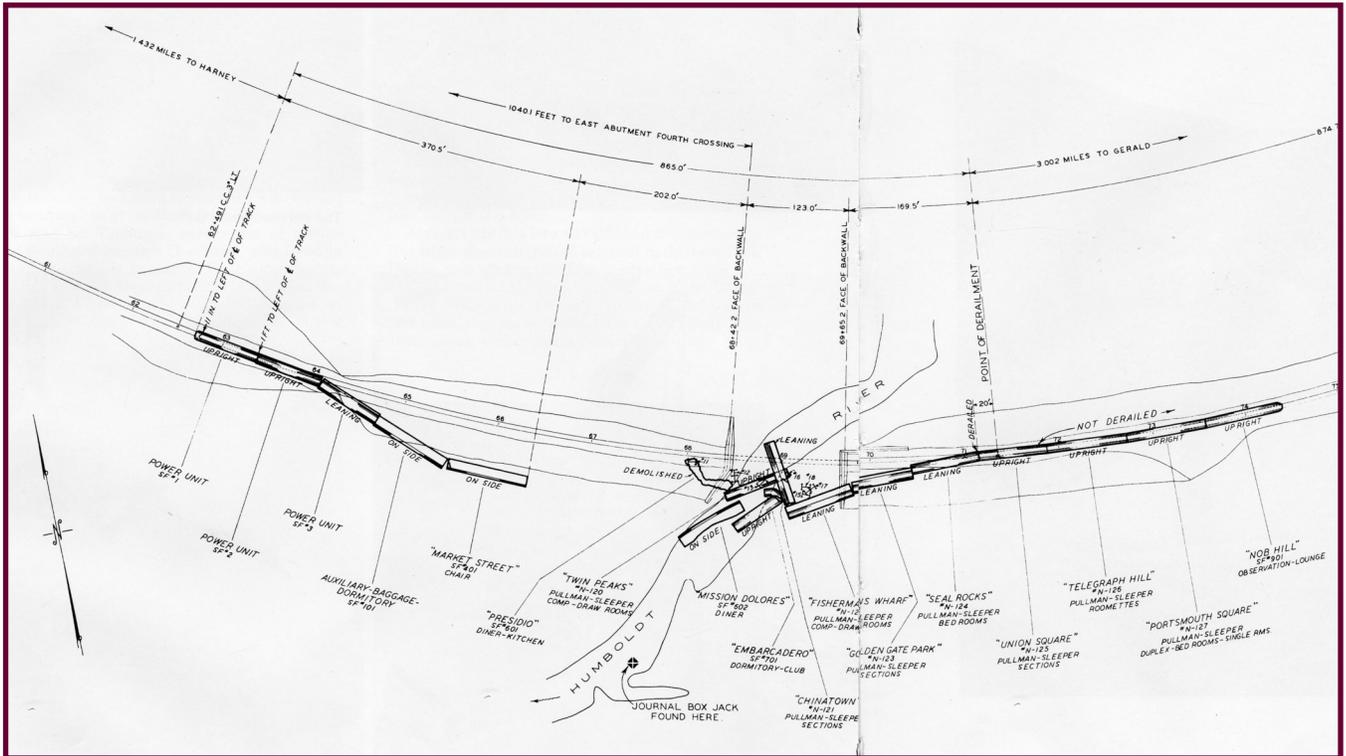
Possible reasons suggested for the *COSF* catastrophe included excessive train speed; an undetected hot-weather “rail kink”, or buckling; unintentional track-maintenance lapses; and premeditated rail tampering. Each of the first three alter-

(Below) Southern Pacific car repair expert Guido Ceragioli (left) and an unidentified co-worker pose on the platform of the massive crane No. 7011. Guido and other Sparks-based workers participated in the cleanup efforts following the crash. Rudy Ceragioli Collection, NSRM.



(Continued on page 6)

## Nevada's Deadliest Railroad Catastrophe (continued from Page 5)



The principal component of the Southern Pacific Company map showing the train wreck scene (see the north arrow for orientation). Passenger car names and other information are included. Drawing appeared in *Tragic Train*, by Don DeNevi (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1977).

natives theoretically could have led to an SP cover-up effort; in contrast, the fourth possibility would have constituted malicious sabotage.

SP's inquiry board concluded that an intentional criminal act had caused the Palisade Canyon wreck. Later, technical experts from the U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), who also thoroughly investigated the episode, agreed independently that premeditated sabotage was to blame.

On March 3, 1941, in San Francisco, a Federal Court ruled on behalf of the railroad in response to a damage suit by two passengers. The pre-

siding judge, whose impressive name was Adolphus Frederic St. Sure, said, regarding the passengers' claim, that "A suggestion so incredible cannot be sustained against the indisputable physical facts and testimony..." This legal opinion set a clear precedent for other wreck-related damage suits that were still pending.

However, alternative views regarding the 1939 pileup contrasted with those of the railroad, the ICC, and Judge St. Sure. For example, Howard Hickson, who served as Director of the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko during 1969-93, wrote a

1980 retrospective about the train crash and its aftermath. In that article, Hickson said that "Although the disaster happened forty years ago, doubt still exists in the minds of many residents of north-eastern Nevada as to the true cause... Many local people believe the railroad claimed sabotage to avoid paying millions of dollars in law suits..."

After the Board of Inquiry hearing, SP continued its lengthy and comprehensive investigation (in cooperation with the FBI) which attempted to identify and prosecute the alleged sabotage culprit or culprits. During that half decade, more than a thousand people

were interviewed, and many dozens of suspects were detained, questioned, and then released. But no-one was brought to trial.

Even today, eight decades after the Palisade Canyon

calamity, an unequivocal conclusion has not been reached regarding the specific cause. Some people decided long ago that railroad negligence was responsible, whereas others remain equally adamant that sabotage was to blame. By now,

though, almost all who were directly and intimately involved in the wreck or its resulting investigations are no longer alive to authoritatively defend either claim.

Howard Hickson may have said it best in 1980: "There will always be a big *IF* casting suspicion and doubt on the true cause. If someone had been arrested, charged, and convicted, perhaps the controversy would not exist. There are still so many unanswered questions." And the mystery remains, on its 80th birthday.

*In 2008, a westbound Union Pacific freight train on former Southern Pacific rails passes the site of the 1939 City of San Francisco wreck. SP's Humboldt River bridge here is long gone, replaced by an earth fill and man-made stream channel. Eastbound trains use the adjacent ex-Western Pacific line. Steve VanDenburgh photo.*



*Friends of NSRM charter member Steve VanDenburgh is a 52-year Carson City resident, a mostly retired USGS geoscientist, and a nearly life-long photographer and railroading enthusiast. 🚂*

## Congratulations on 30 Years of Service, Rick!

*August 19, 2019, marked the 30-year anniversary of employment for Rick Stiver at the Nevada State Railroad Museum. Rick hired on as a restoration specialist and came to the museum with a can-do attitude. Rick's commitment to fine work has made him an invaluable member of the NSRM team. He has been quietly doing great work in the background for decades. The museum would*

*not be as respected as it is in the world of railroad preservation without his efforts. Rick's mark is on virtually every restoration on the property.*

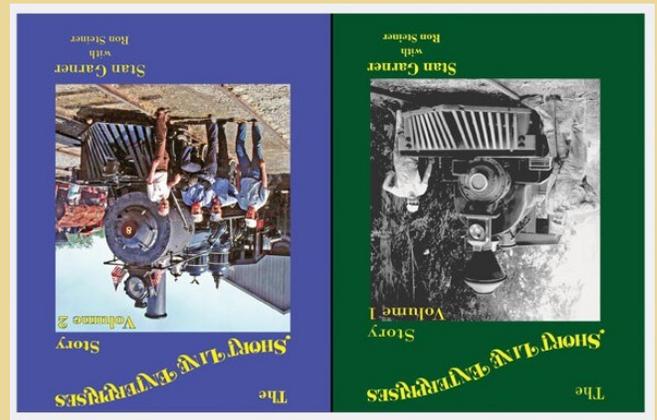
*To commemorate Rick's 30-year anniversary Governor Steve Sisolak signed a proclamation to honor his service and dedication to NSRM. Thank you, Rick, for your contributions to the museum!*



# NEW BOOKS IN THE MUSEUM STORE!

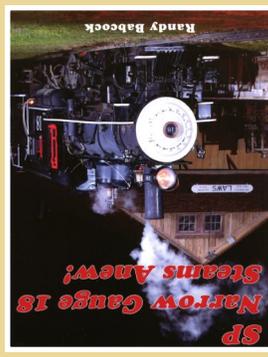
The Short Line Enterprises Story, Volumes I & II  
By Stan Garner

Volume I – 260-Page, Soft Cover – \$64.95  
Volume II – 373-Page, Soft Cover – \$74.95  
Both with Two-thirds in Color!



Friends of the NSRM Members receive 15% off of every purchase!

Proceeds from sales at the Museum Store are used to fund museum projects and programs.  
Thank you for supporting the Nevada State Railroad Museum!



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Soft Cover — \$19.95

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Sierra, Vols. I & II  
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