



Boca, Spanish for "mouth" or "river mouth," was the location where the Central Pacific (1869) crossed the mouth of the Little Truckee River. In 1868, during construction of the CP, the Boca Lumber Company logged the lower watershed of the Little Truckee River and used the river to float logs to its mill on the CP at Boca, where the logs were cut into ties and other lumber in support of CP construction. In 1872, a 2-mile-long railway (not shown on the SWRRH Map) was built up the Little Truckee River to transport ice cut from frozen ponds built for the purpose. In 1886, the Lewis brothers opened a sawmill at this location 17 miles north of Boca to access the nearest uncut timber. They started by hauling their lumber from the mill to the CP (1869) using horses and wagons, then switched to steam traction engines in 1888. These huge machines weighed 29 tons and were basically steam locomotives on six foot diameter steel wheels. The steering was accomplished by a single front wheel and they hauled four to six trailers loaded with lumber behind them. As logging continued to move north in the 1890's, the Lewis' built a mill at the ranching town of Loyalton in the Sierra Valley, 9 miles north of the 1886 Lewis Mill. In 1900, the Lewis's incorporated the Boca & Loyalton Railroad to build a standard gauge railroad to the Loyalton mill and in the summer of 1901 completed the line from the CP (1869), by then Southern Pacific, at Boca northward past the original 1886 mill (this location) to Loyalton. Loyalton became a lumber boomtown and there were many narrow and standard gauge spurs and branches from the B&L (1901) to serve the logging camps and mills. The ranchers of the Sierra Valley shipped beef cattle, dairy products, sheep, wool, hay, and grains south on the B&L. In the following several years, the extension of the B&L continued northwest across the Sierra Valley to Beckwourth, where it crossed the narrow gauge Sierra Valley Railway (1896). Lawsuits and a physical confrontation occurred before the crossing was allowed, and spurs were built west to Portola and north up Grizzly Creek and the Clover Valley (not shown on the SWRRH Map).

In 1905, the B&L was sold to a subsidiary of the Western Pacific Railroad, then planning to build its Feather River Route and connect to the B&L in the Sierra Valley. The WP shipped all of its construction materials on the B&L (1901) during 1908-09. Once the WP was completed, freight traffic on the B&L dropped off between Boca and Loyalton and in 1917 the WP abandoned the line between Boca and Loyalton, including this location near the original 1886 Lewis Mill. Portions of the grade between Boca and Loyalton were again used in the 1930's by the Hobart Estate Company for its logging operations (not shown on the SWRRH Map). Track is still in place north of Loyalton, where it operated as the WP Loyalton Branch until about 2000.

Southward view (toward Boca) of the B&L (1901) at the site of the 1886 Lewis Mill; the tracks were removed in 1917 and the grade was repurposed as Smithneck Road, which follows Smithneck Creek all the way to Loyalton. Informational displays commemorate the B&L and Lewis Mill.

The Boca and Loyalton Railroad

The Lewis brothers originally hauled their logs and lumber using horses, mules, oxen, and wagons. When Captain John Roberts joined the mill operation around 1889, he brought with him a fleet of traction engines (also called steam wagons) from his riverboat operation in Sacramento. The huge engines looked like steam locomotives on six-foot steel wheels. Within a ten-year period, the Lewis brothers and Roberts decided to build a standard-gauge rail line from the mill south to the town of Boca on the Truckee River. This became the Boca and Loyalton Railroad (B&LRR).



◀ Traction Engine.

Courtesy Nevada State Historical Society, Reno, Nevada

▼ B&LRR Train.

Courtesy Plumas County Museum, Quincy, California



The railroad was incorporated on September 25, 1900, and within a few months tracks had been laid from the Lewis Mill to Boca. At Boca, lumber could be transferred to the main railroad line that was then operated by the Southern Pacific. Next, the B&LRR was extended northward down Smithneck Canyon to the town of Loyalton, where the headquarters and engine house were located. By November of 1901, the railroad had reached the Plumas County town of Beckwourth.

In 1915 the railroad went into receivership. It was sold at foreclosure in 1916 to the Western Pacific Railroad, which was planning to build a line through the Feather River Canyon. Once that route was completed, freight traffic between Boca and Loyalton declined. That section of the B&LRR line was abandoned and the rails removed in 1917. Modern Smithneck Road follows or parallels part of the B&LRR route today.



▲ B&LRR Crew Poses with Visitors.

Courtesy California State Railroad Museum, Sacramento, California



Northward view (toward Loyaltan) of the B&L (1901), now Smithneck Road, at the same location as previous.

The Lewis Mill Site

1880s to 1920s

Lewis Mill once covered about 91 acres here along the confluence of Smithneck and Rock Creeks. The mill processed locally harvested timber and, during the height of its operation, provided valuable building supplies to a booming mining industry. While little is left of the actual sawmill, archeological remains can still be seen. If you explore the area, watch your step and take only photographs –state and federal laws protect these cultural remains.

The mill was built and operated by the Lewis brothers, Dick, Horace, Hiram, and W. Spurgen. The exact dates of operation of the mill (also called the Lewis Brothers or Lewis and Peck Mill) are difficult to pinpoint. One account claims work began on the mill in May of 1888, with a George Fletcher supervising construction. Whatever the exact construction date, “the mill was going full blast” by the fall of 1890, according to the Sierra Valley newspaper.

It is unclear exactly when, or why, the mill closed. A Captain Roberts, who had joined the operation with the Lewis brothers, took the millworks from this location to build his mill in Loyalton. By 1926, the official Tahoe National Forest map shows the location of the “Old Lewis Sawmill,” a clue that the mill was out of operation well before that time.

Photo of W. Spurgen Lewis



History of Logging and Lumbering in the Region

Lumbering and logging were economic mainstays of this region for more than 150 years. Logging first began after the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859, to provide timbers for the mines. When production in the mines began to fall off in 1867, the lumbering business also suffered.

A second period of logging and lumbering in Truckee and Sierraville began as the Central Pacific Railroad reached Donner Summit in 1866-1867. Instead of wood for mines, mill operations in the Truckee Basin supplied the railroad with cordwood for fuel, lumber for construction, and ties for the roadbed. This second wave of industry thrived through the late nineteenth century.



The photo above and the two below are of an unidentified mill and workers in the Loyalton area circa 1905.



The Mill Complex

The local Sierra Valley newspaper provided this description of the Lewis Mill during its operation:

“The mill, itself, has a fine yard for decking logs and for drying lumber. The circular saw and the carriage are powered by a fifty horse-power steam engine, running under 100 pounds [of] pressure. The mill cuts 28,000 feet a day and employees thirty-five men, including the lumber-pilers and woods crew.”

Sierra Valley Leader, October 4, 1889

By January 1901, the *Plumas Independent* newspaper described the operation as a “model sawmill.”



This grainy photograph is the only identified photo of the Lewis Mill, circa 1900.

Courtesy the Sierra Biome, Loyalton, California.



Crew with peavy hooks used for transferring logs to rail cars.

Courtesy the Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nevada.



The photographs above and at right are identified as unnamed mills in the Loyalton area and may or may not show activities at the Lewis Mill.

Courtesy the Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nevada.



“Steam donkey” used for moving logs.

Courtesy the Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nevada.



We have moved 2 miles south to the summit of the B&L (1901) on the drainage divide between Smithneck Creek to the north and the Little Truckee River to the south. This drainage divide is part of the Pacific Crest; Smithneck Creek flows to the Feather River and ultimately to the Pacific Ocean and the Little Truckee River flows to the Truckee River and ultimately to Pyramid Lake, a terminal lake in the great basin.

Northward view (toward the previous location, Loyalton, and the Feather River) of the B&L (1901)/Smithneck Road at the grade summit. There was once a turning wye here but I could find no evidence of it on the ground or in satellite imagery.



Southward view (toward Boca) of the B&L (1901) at the same location as previous at the grade summit.