



The story of America's transcontinental railroad is legend. In 1853, Congress authorized surveys of potential routes for the "Pacific Railroad," which were completed in 1855 and identified Northern Pacific, a Central Pacific, and two Southern Pacific routes. The 1862 Pacific Railway Act chose the Central Pacific route due to gold in northern California, silver in northern Nevada, and the absence of Southern Congressmen to advocate for the Southern Pacific route, which would have been a much easier build. The Act specified two railroad charters: the Union Pacific Railroad would build railroad and telegraph lines west from the eastern shores of the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, Iowa, and would meet the Central Pacific Railroad and telegraph line built eastward from the navigable waters of the Sacramento River in California. On May 10, 1869, the two rail lines joined at Promontory Summit, Utah, with an honorary golden spike after building a combined 1,774 miles of railroad that henceforth bound the nation.

By far the biggest challenge for the CP was the crossing of the Sierra Nevada, which required 15 tunnels, the most difficult being the summit tunnel at Donner Pass. The glaciated, pristine granite at the pass formed a solid wall that had to be penetrated with hand tools, animal power, and explosives. Adding to the challenge, heavy snows slowed and stopped winter work at the pass during the winters of 1865-66 and 1866-67. During the latter winter, to keep things moving while slowly carving a railroad grade over the crest, Charles Crocker (the CP's overall construction manager and one of the "Big Four" owners of the CP) directed the tremendous undertaking of hauling and sledging three locomotives, forty cars, and material for forty miles of track over 28 miles of mountain trails over Donner Pass and down into the Truckee River canyon, where light snow made grading and track work possible. The CP followed the Truckee River eastward from Truckee through this location at Boca, California, and the first locomotive from Truckee crossed the California-Nevada state line in December 1867 as work on Donner Pass continued. The first train passed through the Donner Pass summit tunnel on June 18, 1868, and the following day the road was opened to Reno, Nevada, a town-site staked out by the CP's engineers. From Reno, the CP had relatively clear sailing as it wound its way around the normal-fault mountain ranges and across the flat alluvial valleys of northern Nevada and northwest Utah to meet the UP less than year later.

Westward view of the CP (later SP and now UP) and the Truckee River at Boca, California. This part of the CP (1869) was built with material and workers hauled over Donner Pass to Truckee prior to completion of the line to Truckee. The culvert at the far right allows the Little Truckee River to flow under the CP grade and into the Truckee River.



Boca, Spanish for "mouth" or "river mouth," was the location where the CP crossed the mouth of the Little Truckee River. Because of its extremely cold winters and abundance of trees right on the CP, investors developed saw mills, ice cutting companies, and eventually a brewery at Boca. The cold climate of Boca made it perfect for ice companies, and the first business established was the Boca Mill and Ice Company in 1868. Also in 1868, in support of the 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 line at Boca (this location). In 1872, a 2-mile-long railway (not shown on SWRRH Map) was built up the Little Truckee River to transport ice cut from frozen ponds built for the purpose. The Boca Brewing Company was founded in 1875 and utilized the cold temperatures, natural spring water, unlimited supply of ice, and access to the CP to produce and ship out California's first lager. The Boca Brewing Company's product was celebrated at the Paris World's Fair in 1883 and produced up to 30,000 barrels of beer per year before the brewery burned in 1893 and was never rebuilt.

Meanwhile, in 1886, the Lewis brothers opened a sawmill 17 miles north of Boca to access the nearest uncut timber. They started by hauling their lumber from the mill to the CP 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 (by then Southern Pacific) mainline at Boca (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. Also during this general timeframe, I'm not sure when, the 2-mile ice spur came under SP control.

In 1905, the B&L was sold to a subsidiary of the Western Pacific Railroad, then planning to build its Feather River Route. The WP shipped all of its construction materials on the B&L 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. Portions of the grade between Boca and Loyalton were again used in the 1930's by the Hobart Estate Company for its logging operations. Track is still in place north of Loyalton, where it operated as the WP Loyalton Branch until about 2000.

Eastward view at Boca, 500 feet east of the Little Truckee River. The double track is the CP (1869), now one of UP's transcontinental routes. The flat area in the foreground was once the site of the SP (former CP) Depot. The truncated siding previously continued as the 2 mile ice spur. The SP Depot was on our side (north) of that siding, the B&L (1901) end-of-track was on our side of the SP depot, the smaller B&L Depot was on our side of the B&L track, and a crossover track connected the ice spur siding to the B&L. The B&L track ran along the left side of the flat area and continued away from the viewer onto the cut grade at the far left edge of the photo, directly to the left of the distant UP tracks. This cut grade leads to a switchback, where B&L trains reversed direction to climb the hill to the left (north) and then on to Loyalton.

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Closer eastward view of the switch to the SP ice spur and the B&L (1901) cut grade (far left) leading to a switchback. The snowcapped Carson Range in the distance diverts the Truckee River and the CP alignment due north for 10 miles, before turning east along the north side of the range toward Reno. Lake Tahoe, the source of the Truckee River, occupies the south (left) end of the intervening Valley.



Eastward view 100 feet west of the previous location; the flat area is just beyond the rocky outcrop on the left. The SP ice spur ran between the rocky outcrop and the CP/SP/UP mainline and began curving to the north (left) in the gravel area in the foreground.



Northwestward view at the same location as previous. The SP ice spur began curving to the north in the gravel area in the foreground and through a shallow cut grade beyond.



Southeastward view of the curving cut grade for the SP ice spur.



Northward view of the SP ice spur, which ran just to the west (left) of the foundations of an ice house in a slight cut grade. The ice ponds and north end of the spur were inundated by Boca Reservoir, whose dam across the Little Truckee River and spillway are visible in the distance. This foundation is 400 feet north of the CP/SP/UP mainline.