

STRANDE

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STREAM

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High in snow-swept
Donner Pass, the *City
of San Francisco* was
marooned! Here is the
dramatic story of how
the Southern Pacific
dug it out

By **Howard W. Bull**
Photos: **Southern Pacific**



LINER

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outhern Pacific diesel units 6019, 5914, and 6013 cooled their flanged heels at Norden, Calif., the summit of the Sierra Nevada grade, on the morning of January 13, 1952. The Alco PA-PB-PA trio squatted at the head end of train 101, the swank streamliner *City of San Francisco*, marking time on the snowshed-covered westbound siding. The day before there had been trouble on the Hill, as SP men call

the Mountain Division between Sparks, Nev., next door to Reno, and Roseville, Calif., neighbor of historic Sacramento. Yesterday's *City* had made milepost 182, 10 miles down the mountain west of the snow-swirled sum-

mit, only to stall its doubleheader of steam and diesel power in a huge snowslide. The train had to be dragged back to Norden and eventually was sent on its way down the eastbound track — the same route that this day's 101 would pursue.

Veteran engineer Tom Sapunor and fireman Gordon Painter made use of the forced stop at Norden to fill the diesels' steam generators with water — just in case. At 11:23 a.m. they rolled out of the high-timbered siding, along the shed-protected main line, past the covered turntable, and down the westbound rails toward the interlocking office. Sacramento Division Superintendent M. L. Jennings stood beside the main, giving a stop signal. Beside him was J. T. Fulbright, roadmaster. Sapunor brought 101 to a stop. The big boss of the Hill swung up the lead diesel's ladder to cab level.

“Tom,” he addressed the engineman, “you’re going down the eastbound against the current of traffic.” Jennings explained that Bill Brennan, road foreman of engines, was down at Crystal Lake, about 15 miles west, where he would cross the streamliner over again onto the westbound rails for normal operation.

Jennings dropped back to the frozen ground while Roadmaster Fulbright climbed into the cab on the fireman's side and took the middle seat. Train 101 moved forward slowly through the lower crossover just inside the cathedral-like sheds, then out into the blizzard. The diesels gained speed as Sapunor opened the throttle after the rear car had cleared the crossover. The howling wind made plenty of throttle necessary even on the downgrade. Norden, the top of the SP at 7,000 feet above sea level, faded in a swirl of snow.

Block signal protection is afforded in each

This view toward the rear of the snowbound *City of San Francisco* is from the first car behind the locomotives, a UP baggage car. Tunnel 36, used by eastbound trains, is in the distance.



direction on both tracks of the Hill, and automatic train stop further safeguards movement. When trackside sources of power fail, batteries are cut in. So Sapunor and Painter knew they were well protected, though the storm raged and their right of way was an alley the width of a rotary plow cut through ice and snow.

"Clear!" shouted Painter.

"Clear!" echoed Sapunor. The language of the rails and the sentinel guardians of the steel highway were in action.

Roadmaster Fulbright had brought with him news of the previous day's *City of San Francisco*. The plush yellow train had struck a gigantic snowslide down the westbound iron. Deadhead crews and linemen were riding the steam helper's cab. Engineer Bell of the AC cab-forward 4-8-8-2 had sustained injuries, and most of the men in that cab had been cut by flying glass. Fulbright and Assistant Superintendent Bob Miller had come along on an eastbound rotary plow.

Sapunor and Painter learned from Fulbright that two other cab-forwards sent to rescue the diesels on yesterday's *City* had left the rails at Troy. Yet another was on the ground at Gold Run. The Mountain Division was having trouble — plenty of it.

"That's it! We can't make it!"

Much of the way, the *City* snaked down through a deep cut of ice and snow. The blast of the blizzard alone was enough to keep fresh drifts piling up before PA No. 6019's plow pilot, but in addition, dangerous ice cones arched out over the top of the cut, threatening to tumble more tons of the heavy white stuff into the path of the train.

Tom Sapunor continually inched out the throttle as the relentless wind cut down into the canyon at a terrific rate. The train skimmed out into the open for a brief run between newer, heavier drifts that blocked the way. Still, the PAs' plow sent the drifts into bits of swirling snow. Atop Donner Summit the weather station registered a wind velocity of 100 mph. The needle was against the peg, and the barometer hung around 22.88 and 22.90.

"Red fusee!" shouted Painter.

"That must be Bill Brennan," Sapunor said. "He's going to cross us over to the westbound." He eased off on his throttle as the snowsheds of Crystal Lake loomed out of the snow ahead. The light from the red fusee moved slowly up and down, easing him down for the crossover.

Sapunor let his trainload of 226 passengers plus crewmen roll slowly onto the crossover. Bill Brennan swung onto the lower step of the cab ladder, cautioning Sapunor to watch out for slides beyond Crystal Lake. He dropped off again, and train 101 ventured once more into the full force of the Sierra storm.

Sapunor widened on the throttle as the rear car cleared the switch points within the snowshed. Engines roared and traction mo-

tors sent flanged wheels biting hard at the frosty railheads. The train was making 28 or 30 mph. Once again on the westbound main, the *City* skirted an open ledge, exposed to the full fury of the blizzard. Sapunor opened the throttle wider — but speed decreased.

Around eastbound tunnel No. 35 on the westbound track swung the straining train, plowing through snow that rose to 12 feet on its left, the slope side, and clung tenaciously to the outer right-side cliff 5 to 6 feet deep. The streamliner, now barely crawling, made its way part way around the rocky point that shields the more protected eastbound line. The diesel engines roared and the motors whined in crescendo — but even 6,000 h.p. was no match for the conditions, and the train stopped.

"That's it!" shouted Sapunor. "We can't make it!"

Reversing his motors after the forced stop, the engineman attempted to back his train out of the towering drift, but diesel-electric traction was not enough. Perhaps steam power could have backed that train, perhaps not. The *City of San Francisco* was stalled.

"I'm going to the phone at Yuba Pass," announced Roadmaster Fulbright. He was out of the cab, churning through the snow, and out of sight on a half-mile trek to the phone.

Superintendent Jennings and Assistant General Manager E. D. Moody were at Norden, and so was T. E. Billingsley, terminal superintendent. Floods elsewhere required attention, too, but the Hill received the major consideration. General Manager R. E. Halla-

well and General Superintendent of Transportation C. H. Grant bore the brunt of it. While men and machines fought the storm on the mountain, these men kept tabs on the progress being made. They reported often to SP President Donald J. Russell. The dispatcher was out of the picture; Jennings and Moody were dispatching trains, snowplows, and engines up and down the mountain. Telephones were important, too, and the plucky linemen were keeping the wires hot.

Fulbright made it to the phone at Yuba Pass and reported the situation. Assistant Superintendent Bob Miller promised a rotary and a 4-8-8-2 right away. "We'll get them out."

Fulbright found the *City* frozen fast when he returned to it. Brake rigging, under-floor tanks, everything — frozen solid. The storm raged on. A modern Donner Party was marooned on the bare face of the wild Sierra with a 100-mph blizzard for company!

Road of rotaries

The Overland Route became a road of rotaries, for the whirling blades of the big steam-driven plows were the only hope.

The day before, Elmo "Ed" Hardison and his engineer, Lee Moore, had been called from the roundhouse in Roseville. The message: "Deadhead east on a cab hop. 11:30 p.m. on duty." Now these men were on rotary No. 7222, pushed by AC-8 No. 4188, at Emigrant Gap, 5 miles down the mountain from the immobile streamliner.

Bob Miller's plea for help sang out over the wires. Hardison and Moore were the first to



The first non-railroaders to reach the stranded streamliner were Pacific Gas & Electric linemen (from left) Jay Gold, Roy Claytor, and Charley Swing. Gold died on January 21, 1952, two days after this photo.

Pacific Gas & Electric



An amazing sight in 1952: Three modern diesel locomotives and a 15-car streamliner, trapped for days by snow on California's Donner Pass.

San Francisco Examiner

reach the *City*. They plowed up the eastbound main, past the frozen streamliner, crossed over at Crystal Lake, then moved west toward 101. Within a car and a half of the stalled train they halted. Then they broke out the shovels. There were only three men in the outfit, but they relieved each other, and finally they dug right up to the *City's* marker lamps. But the train, now truly icebound, would not budge. Then an air pump failed on rotary No. 7222 in back of 4188 behind the ill-fated train.

Engineer Frank Neugebauer and fireman Jack Paight, with conductor Lawson and brakemen Lee and Nunn, also had been called out of Roseville early in the storm, and were manning rotary 7205 with AC 4245 pushing. Engineer Rolland Raymond and fireman Bob Dahl mauled the 4245 up the grade out of Emigrant Gap. By noon of January 13 they reached Norden, and soon after that they heard about the *City of San Francisco*.

They turned and plowed back to the Gap, turned again, picked up Bob Miller, and plowed up the westbound track to the *City*. Then they started shoveling. Tom Sapunor personally dug out the 6019's pilot. He tried to pull the *City* free again with his PAs, but the cold had a firm grip on it. Engine 4245 could not help, of course, because rotary 7205 was between it and the streamliner, and the blade end of the plow had no coupler.

Frozen fingers in stiff gloves

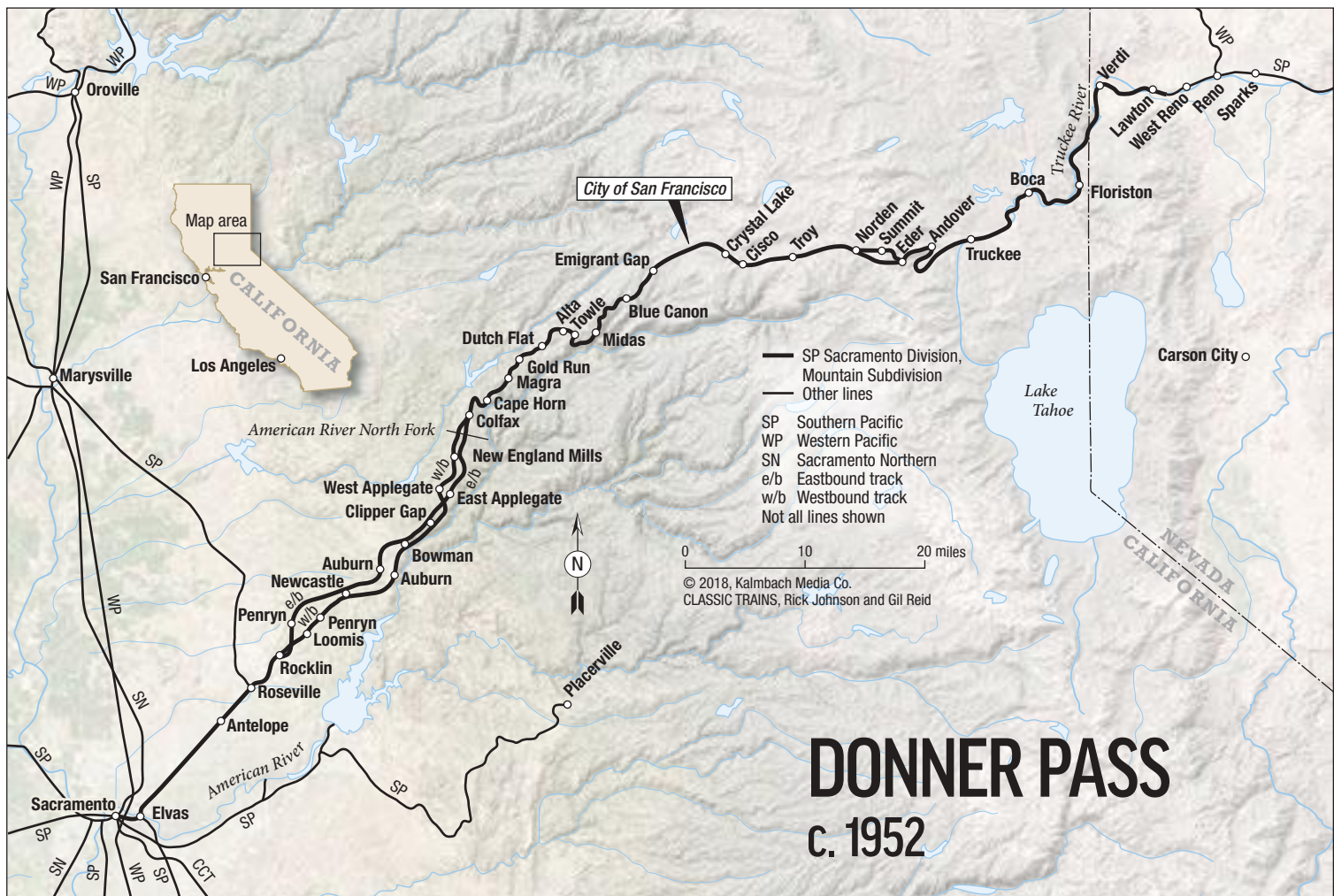
The first night closed down on the *City of San Francisco*. Extra 2768 East, a 2-8-0 with a caboose, brought in 35 section men. They dug all night to try to free 101, but the wind only lashed more wickedly and the men's fingers froze to their stiff gloves. It was good that engineer Sapunor had filled his PAs' steam generator water tanks to capacity. They were sorely needed to keep passengers and crewmen warm and alive. When the diesels' water supply finally gave out, AC 4188, coupled to the rear, took over the train-heating duties.

There was yet no alarm aboard the snowbound *City*. It was a lark to most of the passengers, who felt sure they'd be free before long. Conductor Clyde Baldwin kept them advised of rescue efforts.

The morning of January 14 was bitterly cold. Ed Hardison herded the shivering, exhausted section men into the small confines of his rotary plow and squeezed them alongside the hot boiler to thaw them out.

Later in the morning, SP officials stranded on the train with the passengers called these men and all the crewmen into the streamliner's dining car. Food was plentiful, and coal lugged from Crystal Lake on the backs of some of the section men kept the stoves going. So the real heroes of the event ate.

The passenger' spirits were high. Eddie Tschumi, dining-car steward, announced that lunch was being served on the house. Bob Miller assured everyone that assistance was on the way. It *was* on the way — but many



long, hard, weary hours off.

Rotaries were storming the mountain, not once or twice, but again and again. But the blizzard wasn't letting up. The temperature was down to 22 degrees, and the gales were fierce.

Bob Miller was everywhere, mostly riding the rotaries. Occasionally he'd walk back to reassure the City's passengers and crew.

"Relief trains? Sure. We've got two of them coming — one from Sparks, one from the west. One's close now — at the Gap." Then he'd be gone again into the wind and snow.

"That man needs rest," opined Dr. Walter H. Roehll, a passenger.

But the assistant super couldn't rest; rescue was near. A scant 5 miles away at Emigrant Gap a rescue train with doctors, nurses, food, and sleeping accommodations chafed at the bit, waiting for the track to be cleared to the stalled streamliner.

Women and children in 101's forward coaches had been transferred to the Pullmans, but Miller knew that rescue before long was imperative. So out again, wading waist deep through the snow he went, west toward rotary 7205. There was a railroad to get moving. No sleep, no rest — a man can take just so much. By the time Miller staggered into the plow's cab, he had reached his limit, and

he collapsed in a heap on the deck.

"Hey Frank! It's Miller!" conductor Lawson shouted to the 7205's engineer.

"Got to get him up to the streamliner," rasped Frank Neugebauer. "Up to that doctor." The engineman urged the whirling teeth of the rotary faster. Behind them the 4245 shouldered the rotary on.

Dr. Roehll came from the streamliner as soon as the rotary reached it. "Rest — lots of it. That's what he needs."

Lawson's crew backed the 7205-4245 down toward Emigrant Gap again. Maybe an engine could still get in from the west to free the City, or maybe the relief train could churn up to it that same perilous way. Perhaps, too, a pair of rotaries with a 4-8-8-2 sandwiched between them could get down from Norden above the streamliner. They were on the way: plows 7207 and 7208 with AC 4284 between them.

But Lawson's outfit, backing down the westbound track, got stuck in the drifts behind it. Lawson got to a phone and called Norden. Superintendent Jennings told him, "I've got two rotaries coming down the eastbound. Wait for 'em. Don't try to move."

They waited until finally they saw a figure on foot emerging through the blizzard like a ghost. It was a crewman from the 7207-4284-



Ski patrol members Bob Cooper (left) and Jack Holland were among those who trekked in with food and medical supplies for 101's passengers.

7208 set that had come down from Norden on the eastbound track.

"We're stalled, too!" the man reported. "Not far ahead of 101. Can you get back up the westbound and come alongside?"

Once again, 4245 shoved 7205 back up toward the *City*. They found the two rotaries and 4-8-8-2 from Norden under a mammoth snowslide about 600 feet west of the streamliner's diesels. The section men that had come up on Extra 2768 East were there, digging with shovels. It was no use — and there was danger of another, bigger slide. Bob Miller, working with the men again, ordered everyone out of the area, back to the relative safety of the *City*.

A short time later, however, several crewmen returned on their own to the frozen snowfighting equipment. In trying to free rotary 7208, Rolland Raymond, AC 4245's engineer, was killed when the plow overturned on top of him.

Weasels and Sno-Cats

Aboard the streamliner, where news of the tragedy had not yet been received, cheerfulness still prevailed.

"Those section men tramped all last night beating down a path just in case rescue does reach us. They'll do it again tonight," said a passenger. "How about raising a purse?" In a short time \$80 had been gathered.

"I heard SP's got a snowplow . . . coming from the Union Pacific," offered someone else. "This outfit's trying, anyway!"

Southern Pacific was trying everything humanly possible to effect a rescue. So were others. The Sixth Army, under Maj. G. C. Cotton, loaded small tracked-vehicles called Weasels on flatcars and took them to the farthest point of penetration. But they couldn't make it. A Pacific Gas & Electric Co. Sno-Cat got through, but one vehicle could not take 226 people out. So it brought supplies in — and

word of rescue efforts by rail, highway, and air. PG&E's Jay Gold, who died a few days later of sheer exhaustion, Charley Swing, and Roy Claytor manned the Cat. Claytor was the first man from outside to contact the isolated train, and his mere presence gave the passengers a needed lift.

The men of the California Division of Highways were hard at it, too. They thought they could get through to the train from Emigrant Gap and Herschel Jones' Nyack Lodge, about 4 miles west of the train.

Would one of the rescue trains make it first? Nobody knew, but everybody prayed and hoped.

The telephone company was on the job all this time, keeping the lines of communication open and answering as best they could the frantic appeals for word of loved ones aboard the stranded *City*. It operated a mobile two-way radio-phone automobile, which helped

On the afternoon of January 16, passengers make their way along the path beside the train to Highway 40. Autos and other vehicles then took them to Nyack, where they boarded a special train to Oakland.



to locate and save a truck of precious food-stuff for Nyack Lodge.

Assistant Road Foreman of Engines Charlie Carroll meanwhile recognized an essential but irksome task. He organized a latrine patrol, and with cans from the train's baggage car he and various crewmen performed the necessary operation.

Then another, potentially deadly problem arose. When the batteries under the Pullmans died, crews set up portable propane-fueled generators to recharge them. Carbon monoxide from the generators found its way into the cars, causing people to fall ill. That night and the next day, before the source of the problem was identified, Dr. Roehll and an SP doctor now aboard the train tended to the stricken and reported no serious cases. But it was a close call. Rotary 7222's fireman Ed Hardison was overcome in one of the Pullman rooms and could not make his way to safety. Sid

Paradee, a passenger from Ohio, found Hardison and dragged him and another man to fresh air at the car's vestibule end.

"My legs just crumpled under me," said Hardison. "It was a Godsend that Mr. Paradee found us."

Crazed cook

January 16 broke calm and clear. The wind had died. A Coast Guard helicopter soared overhead. Visions of food, supplies, and perhaps a doctor descending by parachute with accurate news of a real rescue went through the mind of every person. Rescuers dropped supplies, medical aids, and food, but the doctor could not be safely parachuted.

"Look out, Colonel!" someone shouted, as an Army man made ready to catch some food stocks floating earthward fast.

"I'll catch 'em," he answered. And he did. Eggs! Some new stripes were added to his al-

ready spangled uniform.

Yet no rescue was in sight. Was it the calm before the next storm? A minor one broke at that moment.

"My third cook!" cried the chef in 101's dining car. "He's crazy — look at him go!"

Ed Hardison heard and saw the gaunt, scrambling figure of the terrified cook dive through an open diner window into the snow beside the train. Deep, fresh drifts all but engulfed the man.

Hardison produced a ball of twine, strung it out so he wouldn't get lost himself, and started in pursuit of the terror-stricken man. Careful cajoling persuaded him to follow the snow drift up to the head end. He returned to the train — and, unbelievably, to his duties in the kitchen.

Tension, partly a product of the dead calm following all the howling wind and furious snow, was high. Still, no rescue came.



Workers load luggage onto a Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Co. Sno-Cat and trailer, which will take the bags down to the highway.

As train 101's passengers and their luggage are moved to safety, several miles to the west a rotary snowplow, pushed by an AC 4-8-8-2 running in reverse, churns its way toward the stranded equipment.



A big hook and three bulldozers work to extricate the *City of San Francisco*. The job was not completed until January 19, six days after the train became snowbound.



Restless for rescue

The passengers were feeling the strain too, and a number of them formed a committee bent on hastening their rescue. Bob Miller told them, "Your idea is fine, but first let me go to Crystal Lake again. I'll find out what Mr. Jennings has worked out for us. I know they'll get us out of here."

On this venture through the snow Bob Miller collapsed again and was cared for in a trackside shanty by other crewmen.

Meanwhile, engine 4188 had run out of water and could no longer supply steam — the *City* was now without heat.

The snow trail to the highway near the stalled train had been packed hard by the weary, persistent tramping back and forth of the section men. It was ready for the eager feet of passengers. January 16 was silent, calm, and clear as a bell.

"They're through! They got through! We can get out down the highway!" broke the silence. The hopeless inertia of more than 200 imprisoned humans transformed itself into movement.

"The Highway Department got 40 open," reported a crewman returning from the high-

way turnaround. Highway 40 is the transcontinental road over the Sierras. Dogged determination on the part of the state highway crews had blazed a way clear. It was just a short distance through a perpendicular cut through solid ice and snow to freedom.

Highway Department cars and private automobiles from Nyack Lodge crawled up the canyon, swung into the turnaround, and waited to make the final rescue.

Women and children made the jubilant exodus from the train, protected from the stinging cold by pillowcases with eyeholes cut in them. Blankets wrapped them against the weather. There were a few stretcher cases — none serious.

The autos took the passengers, crew members, and officials out down the sheer-walled canyon to the Lodge and to the waiting rescue train at Emigrant Gap. Most of the people went directly to the train. Steaks and the trimmings were on the house and beds were ready. Doctors and nurses took charge where they were needed.

Leaving the streamliner, Dr. Roehll turned to the Army colonel. "Colonel, we can fight an army, but we can't fight the elements."

Powerful caterpillars and bulldozers from A. Teichert & Sons and Luntz Construction Co. in Sacramento dragged the diesel units and the cars free up there on the mountain. But the human cargo was safe.

At Southern Pacific headquarters in San Francisco, the news of the freed train eased tired minds. Wrote newly elected President Donald J. Russell:

"The people of Southern Pacific again have lived up to their proud tradition of proving equal to every emergency. During the time the *City of San Francisco* was caught in the Sierra snow by one of the worst storms in history, all concerned worked together in the unceasing round-the-clock effort to liberate the passengers and the train. It was an inspiring demonstration of teamwork that wrote another epic chapter in the history of Southern Pacific. . . . Every man and woman who participated in this successful endeavor has my sincere thanks and deep appreciation." ■

FOR MORE about the *City of San Francisco's stranding on Donner Pass*, see Robert J. Church's definitive book *Snowbound Streamliner* (Signature Press, 2000).