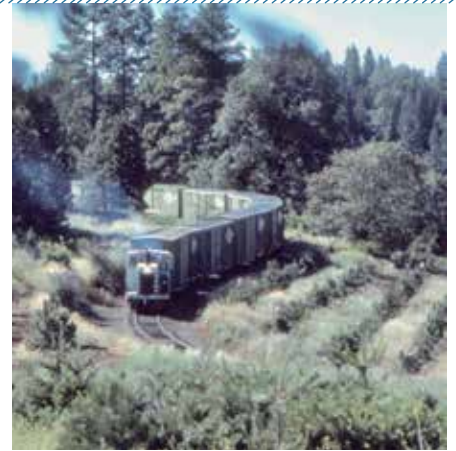


BY DAVE STANLEY

# Apple Hill RAILROADING



For 85 years, the distant blast of a locomotive whistle could be heard echoing through forests of ponderosa and sugar pine towering high above the foothills that encompass the town of Camino, Calif. Nestled along U.S. Highway 50 at an elevation of 3,133 feet and located in the heart of El Dorado County, Camino (Spanish for “path” or “way”) boasts a population of just less than 180.

Since 1964 it has been affectionately known throughout northern California as “Apple Hill” with its large number of fruit orchards and Christmas tree farms that dot the region and draw thousands of tourists annually.

While apples have been and continue to be a large revenue producer, it was logging of the El Dorado National Forest and a pair of associated lumber mills that sparked the construction of Camino’s two railroads. The first was an extensive mill-owned 3-foot-gauge network bisected by the south fork of the American River and connected by a 2,650-foot cableway. The second was an 8-mile standard-gauge common carrier for moving finished lumber products to a Southern Pacific connection in Placerville.

**Above: No. 102 is eastbound negotiating an S-curve west of Camino in February 1978. The lumber load is destined for finishing at the mill. Above right: No. 102 eases downgrade just west of Camino with the first trainload of empty leased cars being returned to Itel in 1986.**

## TWO NORTHERN CALIFORNIA LUMBER SHORT LINES ARE LONG ON HISTORY

---



No. 102 works westbound between Camino and Smith Flat in June 1986 with some of the road's signature green boxcars. Three photos, Dave Stanley

**Michigan-California Lima Shay  
No. 5 heads back to the mill for  
another trainload of lumber.**

Michigan-California Lumber Co.



**NARROW GAUGE AND THE CABLE**

Early logging of the area, known as the Georgetown Divide, was managed by American River Land & Lumber Co., formed in 1889 with the intent of “driving” logs 40 miles downstream on the American River to a dam and sawmill located in Folsom. To access the river, a 2,900-foot chute to the water was built on a 30-degree incline from a point that would later house the north end of the cableway. With the unpredictable rise and fall of water levels, this method of operation was less than stellar and the company folded in 1899, its assets absorbed the following year by the El Dorado Lumber Co.

In 1901, the new owner began construction of a steam-powered, rough-cut sawmill nine miles north of the American River canyon at Pino Grande. A planing mill and box factory soon followed in Camino.

The building of its narrow gauge railroad also commenced, taking a meandering route nine miles north from Camino to reach the south cable site, negotiating grades as steep as 7 percent (later re-engineered to 3.5 percent). Nine additional miles of track were laid from

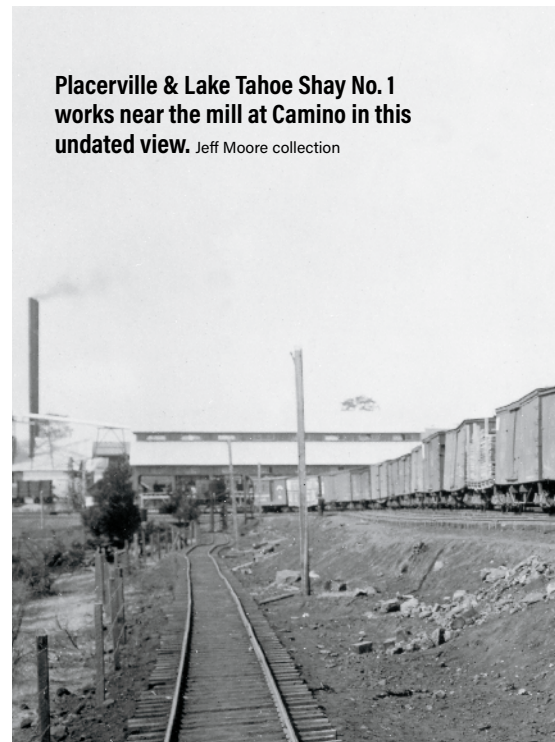
the north cable house (Cable Point) to Pino Grande, followed by another 15 miles that extended the line to Camp 14. As additional camps were established throughout the forest, dozens of new spurs were constructed.

Ownership of the two mills changed hands in 1911 and again in 1915 before new owner R.E. Danaher Co. sold all properties, including both railroad operations, to Michigan-California Lumber Co. in 1918. By now, more than 60,000 acres of timberland were under Michigan-California control and its narrow-gauge network expanded accordingly. Over time, the lumber company employed 19 wood-fired steam locomotives, including 12 two-truck and a trio of three-truck Shays, a Climax, a Heisler, and a pair of 0-4-0 tank engines. Those that survived into the 1940s were converted to burn oil.

By 1927, the cable system was showing extreme wear and was ripe for rebuilding. Construction of a newer, stronger cableway, located 40 feet west of the existing one, commenced in 1928 and was completed the following year. The cable’s operating system was converted

from steam to electric power and was now capable of moving loaded flat cars weighing up to 58,000 pounds. Up to 40 cars a day traversed the gorge in a 26-foot-long carriage traveling 20 mph while suspended 1,200 feet above the

**Placerville & Lake Tahoe Shay No. 1 works near the mill at Camino in this undated view.** Jeff Moore collection



American River. Over its 48-year lifespan, the cable hauled 25 billion board feet of lumber.

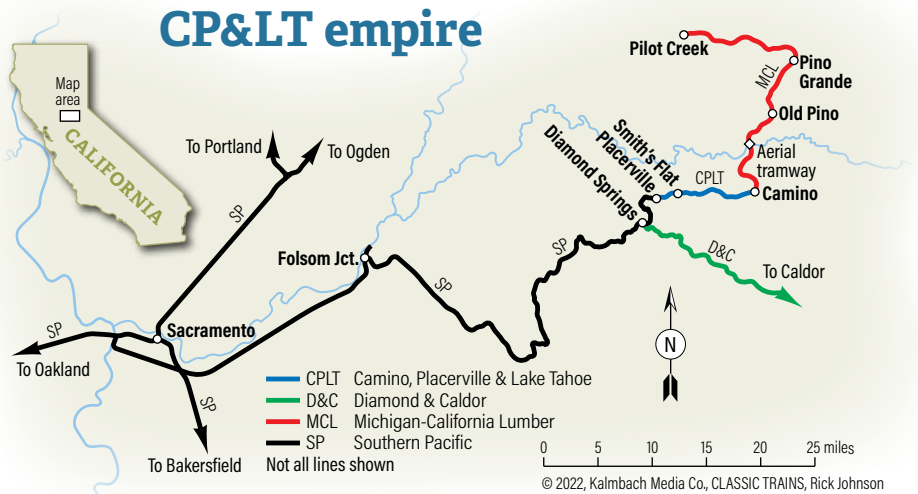
Mill operations changed dramatically after a lightning strike on March 17, 1949 resulted in a fire that destroyed the south tower of the cableway, rendering the line useless. The Pino Grande mill and drying kilns were shut down and all operations were relocated to the Camino plant. Logs that had been transported by rail to Pino Grande were now being trucked to Camino and by 1951 the narrow-gauge railroad was scrapped.

### COMMON CARRIER

Grading of the standard gauge Placerville & Lake Tahoe Railway began in late 1903, a winding route that climbed 1,250 feet in just over eight miles. Seventy-five curves, eight timber trestles, and grades up to 5% were necessary to connect Camino with the settlements of Smith Flat and Placerville. With construction completed, rail shipments of forest products commenced shortly after the company incorporated on April 11, 1904. Newly acquired Lima-built three-truck Shay No. 1 provided the motive power for next 28 years.

Renamed the Camino, Placerville & Lake Tahoe Railroad following a foreclosure sale in 1911, any serious notion of building east over the Sierras to its namesake lake was soon cast aside.

Michigan-California assumed control of the Class III short line in 1918 with the lumber company's purchase of the Camino and Pino Grande mills. Passenger and mail service, which had begun in 1905



**CP&LT No. 2 takes water at Blakely Springs. The property owner granted water rights to the company in exchange for a pass for himself and family, including future children!** Mac Le Febre



**The aerial cableway carriage is seen from the South Tower during a 1938 fan trip.**

D. S. Richter, Jeff Moore collection



**The victor meets the vanquished: GE 44-ton No. 101 works alongside Shay No. 2 in a November 1953 publicity photo. The railroad expected to cover the purchase cost of the diesel within six years, figured at a \$12,000 savings each year. The single diesel unit replaced two steam locomotives by working faster, especially on the grades up to 5 percent, and eliminating the need for water stops. The railroad would later acquire a second 44-ton diesel from Burlington Northern. The steam locomotive is preserved at Travel Town Museum in Los Angeles' Griffith Park; regrettably, Shay No. 1 was scrapped after dieselization.** CLASSIC TRAINS collection



**Before its transformation into CP&LT No 102, GE 44-ton No. 3, a former CB&Q unit, approaches the east crossing of U.S. Highway 50 in March 1972.** Dave Stanley

with the construction of a home-built coach, was operated until 1937. Freight only afterwards, traffic levels grew substantially as World War II neared, with an average of 1,000 carloads of pine lumber departing Camino annually for markets around the world.

Other commodities hauled at varying

times included crushed rock for a nearby highway project and equipment destined for a hydroelectric project on the American River. Over the ensuing years, improvements were made to the physical plant including the replacement of several timber trestles with earthen fill.

A second three-truck Shay was added to the CP&LT roster in 1932. Purchased from Hammond & Little River Redwood Co., Lima-built Shay No. 2 served its new owner until dieselization of the line in 1953. That year, the railroad invested \$60,000 in the purchase of a new 44-ton diesel from General Electric. Numbered 101 and carrying GE construction number 31231, the 380-hp locomotive soon proved its worth to CP&LT, enabling the carrier to retire both Shays in 1955. The "One Spot" was scrapped that year while No. 2 found a new home in Los Angeles where it's prominently displayed today inside Griffith Park at the Travel Town Museum.

Also departing the roster with the arrival of 101 were the railroad's two cabooses, no longer required with the elimination of the fireman's position. The train crew could now ride on the head end of the train.

The addition of woodchip traffic about 1960 saw an increase in train tonnage. In his book "California's Lumber Shortline Railroads" author Jeff Moore

describes a scary incident that occurred in early 1961: The crew set out from Camino with three heavy woodchip loads. Partway down the grade the brakes failed, and the engineer threw the diesel into reverse in an attempt to stop the train. The woodchip cars continued pushing the small machine downhill, and the train crew bailed off. However, the runaway only progressed for a short distance before the three loads derailed off to the side of the tracks, leaving the locomotive on the rails. The diesel immediately started back up the hill, but was moving at a slow enough speed at the point it reached its crew to allow one of them to climb aboard and bring the locomotive to a stop.

One peril CP&LT crews faced was the crossing of Highway 50 at grade, twice, creating the potential for disastrous auto-versus-train collisions. This was especially true in later times with higher speed limits compounded by a steep descending grade for westbound vehicles. The sight and sound of skidding vehicles and brake smoke swirling around a short freight train easing across four lanes of asphalt was quite a spectacle!

In 1971, a second 44-tonner, the former Chicago, Burlington & Quincy 9106, was purchased from dealer Birmingham



Rail & Locomotive. Numbered as Burlington Northern No. 3 but still adorned in CB&Q dress, the 1941 Erie graduate was immediately pressed into service as CP&LT's original 44-tonner 101 had become inoperable.

What followed was a "locomotive makeover." The engine hoods from 101 (which featured GE's newer design of front- and rear-end air ventilation) were removed and fitted onto the chassis of BN 3, replacing its less effective side-air ventilation system common on early GE center-cab diesels. This swap would help alleviate overheating issues on CP&LT's demanding grades. Assigned number 102, the former Burlington unit was repainted into Michigan-California's traditional orange and black scheme, and some years later into the company's newer lime green and white colors.

To the average observer, the railroad's future appeared to brighten in 1977 when CP&LT entered the incentive per diem boxcar market. That year 50 double-door boxcars were leased from ITEL, followed three years later with a sublease of 50 additional cars from the McCloud River Railroad. The optimism, however, would be short lived as a severe recession and a shift to trucks would soon be at hand.

## STEAM REVIVAL

For 13 years the hills north of Camino were devoid of the sound of steam railroading. That changed in late 1964 when Sacramento native Hal Wilmunder, a former SP fireman and a great-grandnephew of Mark Twain, came to town with his collection of narrow gauge equipment, giving birth to a new tourist line: The Camino, Cable & Northern Railroad. From a small depot and yard located at Larsen Drive and Second Street in Camino, and utilizing Michigan-California's abandoned roadbed, Wilmunder and his volunteer crew positioned new ties and spiked down rail. Just over a mile of track was laid, with aspirations of someday operating steam trains all the way to the edge of the American River canyon at the former site of South Cable.

CC&N's first train ran in November 1964 with a Porter-built 2-6-0, numbered 3. Passengers riding in open-air cars were treated to a short excursion through rolling hills and apple orchards for a mere \$1 ticket, with trains departing Camino every forty minutes. Six steam engines graced the CC&N roster including a Porter 0-4-0T, a Baldwin 4-6-0, a Baldwin 0-6-2T, a Heisler, and a three-truck Shay that previously earned its living hauling logs for West Side Lumber. A 47-ton GE



**Camino, Cable & Northern conductor Fred Rothschild rides the footboard as former West Side Lumber 3-truck Shay 14 backs away from its train at Camino.** Dave Stanley

center cab diesel and a small railbus were also used on occasion.

Hal Wilmunder never realized his dream of expansion, thanks to complaints from area dwellers, and Camino, Cable & Northern ran its final train in 1974. Through the years, his equipment found new homes, and all have been preserved.

The Camino, Placerville & Lake Tahoe soldiered on until 1986, delivering Michigan-California products to Southern Pacific and servicing the Placerville Lumber mill in Smith Flat as well. Unfortunately, deteriorating economic conditions within the lumber industry spelled doom for the short line, which made its final runs in June of that year. Scrapping of the line commenced soon thereafter. The Camino mill fell into disuse and the property was sold in 1994 to Sierra Pacific Industries, which made improvements and continued to turn out lumber until July 2009. Today the mill is gone, leaving behind only memories of a once proud operation and the railroads built to serve it.

The apples, however, are still as sweet as ever! 🍏

*DAVE STANLEY, creator and former producer (1978-1993) of the annual Winterail multimedia slide show, retired in 2015 after a 41-year railroad career. He would like to thank Pat Davis and Jeff Moore for their assistance with this story.*



**CP&LT 44-ton No. 102 crosses a bridge entering Placerville in April 1981.** Ronald N. Johnson