

## SHORT LINES

# Storybook short line

Nevada's Virginia & Truckee had all the ingredients to be a classic of its genre



Not long before the fabled Virginia & Truckee shut down in mid-1950, handsome Ten-Wheeler 26 heads the daily mixed train at Carson City.

Lucius Beebe, California State Railroad Museum Library & Archives BC1677

**I have a weakness for lost causes, and that goes double** when it comes to short lines. My ideal certainly would never pass muster with the American Short Line & Regional Railroad Association.

To me, the consummate short line runs through impossible but beautiful country. Its fortunes are tied to something that booms and goes bust. Its legacy is disproportionate to its actual economic value. Its history is populated with bigger-than-life characters. It has to have cool steam locomotives. And ultimately, flat broke, it has to limp off into the sunset.

That could be the definition of several railroads, but it's the essence of Nevada's Virginia & Truckee, a storybook short line if there ever was one. The V&T was organized in 1868 in the state capital of Carson City and chartered to build north-easterly toward Gold Hill and, later, Virginia City, two towns in the heart of the Comstock Lode, the fabulous concentration of silver deposits. The lode didn't last long — it was in decline by 1874 — but not before it turned Virginia City into one

of the West's great boomtowns.

The V&T did indeed conquer impossible country. In 14 miles its original line climbed 1,358 feet by means of a tortuous series of horseshoe curves, fills, and tunnels. In 1872, V&T encountered considerably less resistance when it built north 31 miles through high desert to connect with the Central Pacific at Reno.

Later, in 1906, a 15-mile extension south to Minden was comparatively easy — and absolutely necessary. The Comstock ore had played out and the only reliable source of business was the agriculture around Minden. Compared with the line to Virginia City, the south end was a startling visual contrast, a flat, pastoral railroad landscape.

The V&T had its compelling characters. One of the earliest was Darius Ogden Mills, the wealthy New York banker who moved to California for the Gold Rush in 1849, stayed in the West, and eventually invested in V&T. Later in life, his philanthropy left a mark across the Bay Area

and back in New York. He died in 1910.

Mills' grandson, Ogden L. Mills, was a congressman and unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate in New York who became President Hoover's treasury secretary. Perhaps the gloom of his Hoover association rubbed off — Mills owned the V&T during its sharp decline. The road went bankrupt in 1939, one year after he died.

Then came Lucius Beebe, railroading's flamboyant man of letters. Beebe and his partner Charles Clegg moved to Virginia City in the late '40s, when Beebe bought the *Territorial Enterprise* newspaper, and they embraced the West with characteristic flair. That included the V&T — or what was left of it.

Clearly headed toward oblivion, the V&T became Beebe's great cause, and he wrote extensively to draw attention to the railroad's plight. You could hardly blame him for the fixation. In its last years, the V&T was achingly picturesque. The line to Virginia City was gone, torn up in 1941, but down below the mountain Beebe and

**In its last years, V&T was achingly picturesque.**

Clegg recorded just about every linear foot of the railroad. Steam was everywhere: in their portraits of mixed trains running through the Washoe Canyon, posing outside the arched doorways of the Carson City enginehouse, waddling past cottonwoods on the way down to Minden.

In 1947, in *Mixed Train Daily*, his greatest book, Beebe had this to say about his beloved railroad: "Probably no operating railroad in the United States is as picturesque as the V&T as it flashes across Truckee Meadows and rounds the high, winding track at Lakeview. Even divorced from its romantic past, which it never can be, it would have style; it is something to gladden the eye and catch the heart with its going. And the past neither time nor any other agency can take from it."

If he were still around, Beebe might be heartened to know that some of the original V&T remains in business. The Virginia & Truckee tourist line has operated out of Virginia City since the 1970s, when it began running over a couple of miles of restored track down to Gold Hill. Dramatic expansion came after 2005 when the Nevada Commission for the Restoration of the V&T Railway began investing millions of dollars on the twisting right of way from Gold Hill down to a place called Eastgate, on the edge of Carson City. The V&T offers rides on both segments.

Carson City is the home of the Nevada State Railroad Museum, a small but first-class museum that's a shrine to the V&T. Among the many Virginia & Truckee items in its collection are the exquisitely polished 4-4-0 *Inyo* and McKeen motor car 22. There's more to see north of Carson City on the drive up to Reno, where the old right of way is visible in places.

The best way to get a feel for the V&T is to drive up to Virginia City, stop along Highway 341 at a knoll on the south edge of town, and watch as one of V&T's steam locomotives comes chuffing out of town. From that windswept hilltop, Virginia City doesn't look much different than it did in 1950. You can imagine Beebe and Clegg down there in some saloon, knocking back highballs and plotting once again to save the good old V&T. ■

*KEVIN P. KEEFE joined the TRAINS staff in 1987, became Editor in 1992, and retired in 2016 as Kalmbach Publishing Co.'s vice president, editorial. His weekly blog "Mileposts" is at [ClassicTrainsMag.com](http://ClassicTrainsMag.com).*

