

# BEFORE IT WAS A PARK

**Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park  
and its Foundations in Comstock  
History**





*In honor of Nevada's 150th anniversary  
1864 to 2014*

*By Jay Howard, LTNSP*

*2014, revised 2017*



## A State Made by Mining

Ron James wrote in his Comstock history novel *The Roar and the Silence*, "It was



the longest telegraph ever sent, but Nevadan's did not intend to do things in a small way. With the paperwork in order, Lincoln signed Nevada into statehood on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1864, just a few days before the November presidential election. Nevada sent back a thank-you in the form of three electoral votes for the president's reelection." Nevadan's were proud of their pro-Union stance during the Civil War. Needed by the United States both politically and

economically, the state of Nevada was said to have been 'Battle Born'. Though we understand this to refer to the battles that had been raging in the east since 1861, Nevada was itself a relatively peaceful territory, other than the occasional skirmishes with Native Americans, and the more serious Pyramid Lake War of 1860. Nevadan's never saw any fighting with Confederate forces, but certainly had their share of fistfights between Unionists and Copperheads. The latter usually losing the argument. During one incident, the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy was raised over a building in Virginia City, which led to a serious altercation between townspeople. Newspapers later reported that Unionists emerged bloody, but victorious. Early in the Civil War there was some concern that Nevada could be taken by the Confederacy, but these fears were never realized. In the fall of 1861, the very first telegraph sent across the continent to the east coast came from Carson City. The message read, "Nevada Territory through her first Legislative Assembly. To the President and People of the United States, Greeting; Nevada for the Union ever true and loyal. The last born of the Nation, will be the last to desert the Flag. Our aid to the extent of our ability, can be relied upon to crush the rebellion."

As early as 1859, residents of Virginia City sent a resounding message to the nation's capital that it intended to pursue statehood and independence from Utah Territory. This was in the form of a 163 pound piece of silver ore worth \$600 for the new Washington Monument, currently under construction. The block carried the inscription 'Nevada.' Political opposition came from Utah but their efforts to maintain control of 'western Utah territory' failed when in 1861 President Buchanan signed a federal act creating the Nevada territory. More politicking ensued, support for statehood ebbed and flowed, but by September 1864, the territorial electorate overwhelmingly voted for statehood 10,375 to 1,284. It did not hurt either that the



fabulous wealth of the new Comstock Mining District caught the attention of President Abraham Lincoln. So later the following month, in an effort to beat the November 8<sup>th</sup> election, Nevada became the 36<sup>st</sup> state of the union and is now officially known as the Silver State. It seems appropriate then, given this high level of consideration for the mineral prosperity of the area, Nevada was not really 'Battle Born,' but 'Made by Mining'!

## *The Comstock*

The prospect of mineral riches brought thousands of treasure seekers from all over the globe to what would become the largest gold and silver strike in the world. It began in the early 1850's with a small group of placer miners working the gold-bearing sands near the bottom of the canyons along the Carson River east of Carson City. Given the large area of placer deposits on the western slopes of the Sierras in California, it was thought that gold deposits were widely dispersed and not concentrated. Logic also dictated that the placer deposits, or flakes, in the lower hills were born of larger veins in the higher hills. As the discovery of gold seemed to slow, curiosity drove early miners up nearby canyons and onto the slopes of Sun Mountain, later known as Mount Davidson. Unofficially, it is said the silver that would later constitute the Comstock Lode was discovered in about 1857 by the Gosh brothers, Ethan and Hosea. The brothers documented their find and collected ore samples but hid things away and never formally reported it. The next year, Hosea struck his foot with a pick and died from an infection of Septicemia (septic shock), and Ethan died later that fall from exposure during a bitterly cold snowstorm while attempting to cross the Sierras. In early 1859, the first two significant gold bearing quartz ledges



were officially discovered. The first was stumbled upon at what would become the mining camp of Gold Hill by James 'Old Virginny' Finney, and some others, including Henry T. 'Pancake' Comstock. The other was a strike at the top of Six-Mile Canyon, just east of what would become the

mining camp of Virginia, by a group of Irish miners. Henry Comstock was able to include himself in this claim as well. The Comstock Mining District was born as reports



of valuable ore reached across the land and the 'roar' began. As you might have guessed, Virginia City was later named after Finney, who was from the state of Virginia and something of a mentor to the other miners. Pancake Comstock, a shrewd and boisterous prospector, lent his name to the mining district. Gold veins were found to travel deep and widen the further into the mountain they went. The level of excitement exploded when the black rock, and strange looking bluish mud which was typically put aside, assayed out at a value of \$876 in gold per ton, and \$3,000 per ton in silver! Throughout the 1860's, individuals and partnerships of miners found incredible wealth, or 'bonanzas', but also met with significant challenges with extracting the valuable minerals from very stubborn ore deposits. Mines were dug in fractured rock that required extensive support structures, what came to be known as square-set timbering. As new depths were reached, hot water flooded the mines that had to be removed by pumping. These challenges led to periods of 'silence' as mines suffered with tapering mineral veins, low-grade ores, lack of milling facilities, and natural resource shortages. All this resulted in periodic economic depression, or 'borrasca', where costs often outweighed the profits of production.



In the late 1860's, significant changes came to the mining district when corporations took control and consolidated the ownership of the individual mine. At one point, the 'Bank Crowd' of San Francisco, supported by William Ralston, and led by William Sharon in Virginia City, owned nearly all of the Comstock mines by loaning money to miners that they eventually could not repay. This then led to foreclosure and ownership by the Bank of California. Ralston and Sharon's bank brought in significant amounts of capital for development, which in turn gave rise to improvements in mining and milling. This tended to stabilize the boom and bust nature of the earlier Comstock but mining remained a speculative and risky business. Over the course of the remaining century, Virginia City and Gold Hill grew to be modern cities, with a peak population of over 30,000 residents. These became places of fabulous wealth where the common man could become a millionaire several times over, such as John Mackey and his partners Fair, Flood, and O'Brian of the 'Bonanza Firm', the well-known and respected Silver Kings of the Comstock. Mackey's Consolidated



Virginia and California Mine was the focal point for the 'Big Bonanza' strike in 1873 which revitalized the District. At one point, it was described that miners were excavating a cavern of gold and silver ore that paid over \$600 a ton. When a room 20 feet high, 50 feet wide, and 140 feet long had been created, it seemed that treasure could be found digging in any direction. The mineral bearing crushed quartz zone known as the Comstock Lode was found to follow a fault line along the base of the mountain over 3 miles long. It was 200 to 1,000 feet in width near the surface and an average of 100 feet at greater depths. Most of the bonanzas were found within 1,500 feet although the mines continued to explore past the 3,000 foot level. Although the glory days of the Comstock were over by the early 1880's, most of the mines remained solvent into the early 1900's pursuing low grade ores from surface areas and tailing piles. This was made possible by improved milling processes such as the move from mercury to cyanide to separate gold and silver from ore. In the end, the mining district produced 500 million dollars in gold and silver, about 29 millionaires, and more than 1,000 mining companies. The District also consumed more than 450 million board feet of lumber and over 2 million cords of fuel wood. Comstock wealth flooded the U.S. and international economy with millions of dollars, supported the substantial growth of San Francisco, provided funds for vital resources during the Civil War and reconstruction periods, and made possible the development of a new state where natural resources were in short supply.

So where does Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park (LTNSP) figure in to all of this? Very prominently, given the fact it can be said the resources of Lake Tahoe made the full potential of the Comstock possible. The area that would become the park had a 'roar' of its own happening by the early 1870's. Two things were needed to support the complicated activities of the Comstock Mining District – vast quantities of timber and a consistent supply of water. Both were in short supply in the Virginia range and supplies proved inadequate as the Comstock grew. Water was needed for the steam engines, make the milling of tons of mineral ore possible, and to support a growing population. Lumber was needed to line over a 190 miles of mine shafts with square-set timbers and build the structures of developing towns. Lastly, cordwood was the extremely important fuel for powering steam engines and heating homes. It would not be long before the Sierra Mountains, and eventually the Tahoe Basin, were seriously considered for these important resources.



Despite what was to come, things would have been a bit quieter along the east shore of Lake Tahoe in the 1860's than in the neighboring Comstock District. Still, a level of disturbance was beginning that would have greatly concerned the Native Americans of the Washoe tribe. The tribe is said to have inhabited the area for at least 6,000 years before the first European Americans entered the area in the early 1800's. Up to this point, natives had used the lake for hunting, fishing, and gathering during the summer season. Sand Harbor and Spooner Lake were important areas for these activities. An archaeologically significant area known as the grinding stones is located



on the north shore of Spooner Lake where Native Americans used natural depressions in large boulders to grind seeds and nuts for flour. Cave Rock, the eroded remains of a volcanic cinder cone, was a highly spiritual religious area used only by the most important Tribal members known as shamans. The Washoe wintered in the valleys below, from Carson Valley north to Honey Lake. By the later 1860's though, the addition of white Americans had begun to change the cultural landscape dramatically. Young Winnemucca of the Paiutes, another tribe further to the east, described the number of whites coming to the territory during a war council "like the stars over your head...can you, from the mountain tops, reach out and blot out the stars." During this period, the southern part of the Lake Tahoe basin was heavily used as a transportation corridor between California and the growing towns of western Nevada. In 1862, a 100-foot trestle bridge was built around the west side of Cave Rock and connected to a wagon trail known as the Bonanza Road, which later became a portion of the Lincoln Highway, the nation's first coast to coast highway. More and more travelers, teamsters, explorers, and entrepreneurs were entering the area daily. A developing fishing industry had started at the lake as well, creating significant conflict with the Washoe. In addition, several small logging and lumber mill operations were established on the eastern shores of the lake.

### *Mark Twain at Tahoe*



Samuel Clemens, later known as Mark Twain, first visited Lake Tahoe in 1861 with the intention of "taking up a wood ranch." Most historians believe he and his partner entered the Tahoe basin on the old Kings Canyon road to the Glenbrook area, but it is possible he traveled from Carson City by following an old Indian route known as the Washoe Trail. This trail, portions of which are now Tunnel Creek road, led to what would later become Hidden Beach. His initial sighting of Lake Tahoe would inspire the words he wrote ten years later in his famous book *Roughing It*, "At last the lake burst upon us, a noble sheet of blue water walled in by a rim of snow clad mountain peaks...as it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface, I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth affords". He also said, "The air up there in the clouds is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious. And why shouldn't it be, it is the same the angels breathe." During his time at Lake Tahoe, Twain began the work of laying out a wood lot. After what was actually a trivial amount of work, he and his partner would treat themselves to leisurely floating about in their row boat called *Balloon Voyages*. He wrote of the lake during these trips, "So singularly clear was the water, that where it was only twenty or thirty feet deep the bottom was so perfectly distinct that the boat seemed floating in the air! Yes, where it was even eighty feet deep, every little pebble was distinct, every speckled trout, every hand's-breadth of sand." Twain would also write of camping at the lake, "Three months of camp life on Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor, and give him an appetite like an alligator. I do not mean the oldest and driest mummies, of course, but the fresher ones." After more adventures at the lake, and not really accomplishing much, Twain's dream of a wood ranch went up in flames when his evening campfire spilled over and destroyed untold acres on the north shore. Was this the first documented accidental wildfire caused by a careless camper? At any rate, Mark Twain had a pronounced love for Lake Tahoe and described having a great sense of solitude except for "the distant sounds of a small timber mill."





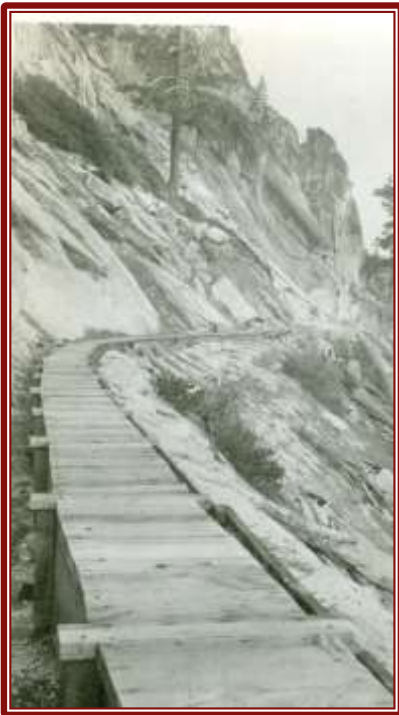
During this same period, the Comstock's insatiable need for timber and water was growing. Since the early 1860's, loggers had been steadily moving up the eastern slopes of the Sierras above Carson City and Washoe Valley and legal battles over water rights between Washoe Valley farmers and industrialists were raging. Many small timber operations began, such as the several hundred acres worked by Michele Spooner with his shingle and saw mill, including a way-station, in the area that is now Spooner Lake, then known as Summit Lake. The Elliot brothers built a small primitive dam at a high meadow and created Alta or Goodwin Lake for their North Canyon and Clear Creek Canyon flumes to move timber. The lake was later named Marlette Lake for Nevada Surveyor General Seneca Marlette. This operation was incorporated as the Summit Fluming Company in 1868. At this time, other early entrepreneurs Walter Scott Hobart operated the Excelsior Mill in Little Valley and Captain Augustus Pray operated a lumber mill at Glenbrook. As the Comstock became industrialized in the 1870's however, demand significantly outstripped supply. Ultimately, three large operations, or combines, were created to supply these resources.

### *Carson Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company*

The first great operation to supply the Comstock was the Carson Tahoe Lumber and Flume Company (CTL&FC) in 1871, owned by Duane L. Bliss and H.M. Yerington, along with other principals of the 'Bank Crowd.' Initial efforts focused on purchasing the many smaller flume and timber companies of the 1860's such as Spooner's wood ranch, the Elliot's flumes, and Pray's mill. Operations were headquartered at their mill site and town of Glenbrook, but significant activities occurred throughout the southern-most reaches of what is now LTNSP, namely the areas around Spooner Summit and North Canyon where thousands of acres were logged. At peak operations, 50,000 acres were owned by the CTL&FC. Three lumber mills at Glenbrook operated with large log rafts brought in by two steam ships from company timber lands in southern Lake Tahoe. A significant hurdle to be crossed



was transporting milled lumber up to Spooner Camp, at what is now Spooner Summit, so that material could be flumed down Clear Creek Canyon to Carson City. This was accomplished by what became the Lake Tahoe Railroad, which crossed 10 trestles, negotiated several switchbacks, and passed through a 487-foot tunnel before reaching the large receiving yard at Spooner. Marlette and Spooner Lakes were used to supply water to the V-flumes, 12 miles through Clear Creek canyon, and down to Carson City where the Virginia and Truckee Railroad (V&TRR) handled further transportation to the Comstock. Operations continued until 1894 when Bliss converted his assets to the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Company. This company provided tourism and transportation services through the 1940's. The tracks of the Lake Tahoe Railroad were pulled up and laid back down for a route between Truckee and Tahoe City. At Tahoe City, the Tahoe Tavern was built and at Glenbrook, the Glenbrook Hotel was built. The Bliss family also constructed the 170-foot steamer *Tahoe*, along with the purchase of other steam ships. The *Tahoe* hauled tourists, freight, and mail around the lake daily until 1940 when the automobile began to replace the need for boat transportation on the lake. To avoid being scrapped for steel, and out of respect for the grand ole' lady, she was scuttled off Glenbrook. The Bliss family had intended the *Tahoe* to become a tourist attraction in shallow water, to be viewed by glass bottom boats. But, upon settling on the bottom, the steamer slid on steep slopes to 400 feet, far out of sight, where she still rests today.



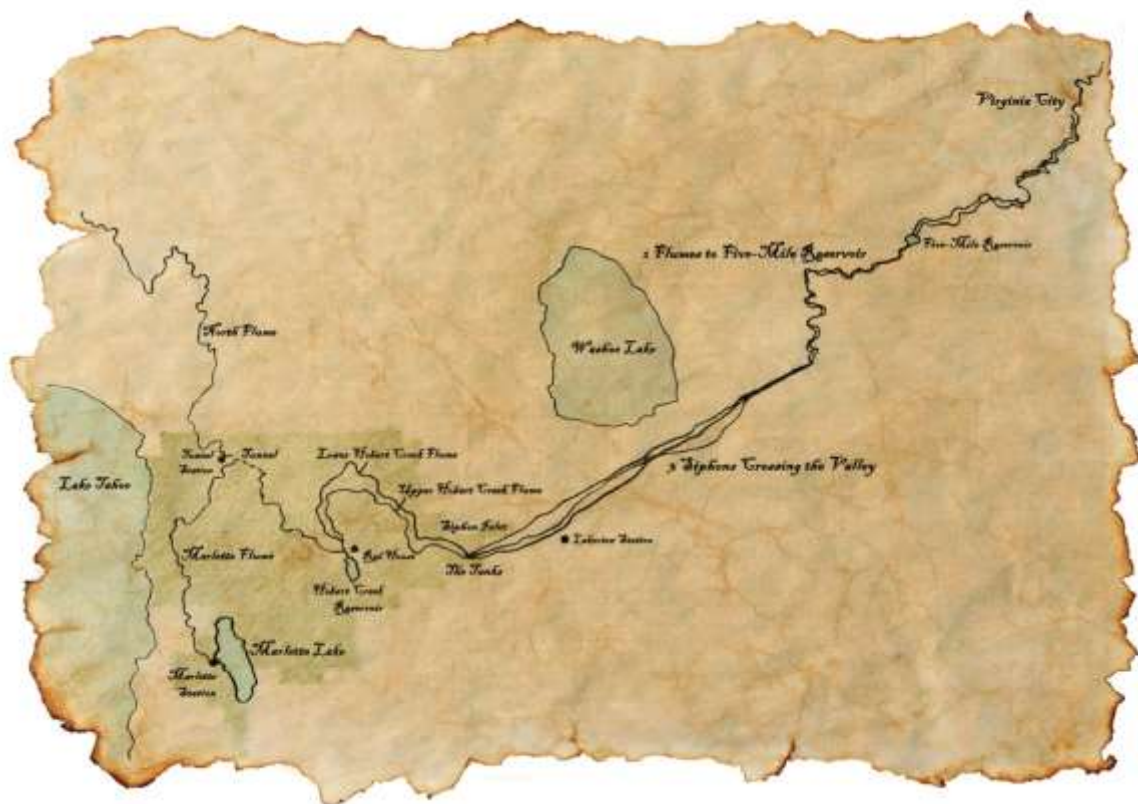
### *Virginia Gold Hill Water Company*

The second operation, and probably most important to the mining district, was the Virginia Gold Hill Water Company (VGHWC) developed initially by Sharon and the Bank Crowd. VGHWC incorporated in 1862 after combining the assets of the Virginia Water Company and the Gold Hill Water Company. While several companies supplied timber, no other companies were able to supply water resources on the scale required. In 1871, Mackey and the Silver Kings assumed control of the company and prepared to move forward with bold expansion plans. The VGHWC hired Hermann Schussler, a German engineer, to design a system of box flumes to carry water that



was collected along the eastern front of the Sierras, through Washoe Valley in an inverted siphon pipe, up to more flumes in the Virginia Range, and then over to the Comstock. A diversion dam was built on Hobart Creek, at the present site of Red House below Hobart Lake, along with 14 miles of wooden flumes. The greatest challenge was the siphon which, when completed, used the head pressure developed coming down the Sierras to push water up and over the Virginia Range. The Risdon Iron Works in San Francisco rolled the pipe in 26-foot sections that were custom designed for the topography of the area. 7 miles of pipeline were laid in just 6 weeks using nothing but manpower and mules. At the time, it was the highest pressure pipeline in the world at over 800 pounds per square inch. Five-mile Reservoir provided storage in the Virginia Range, as well as a place to cut ice during the winter. Virginia City residents celebrated with hours of cannon fire and fireworks when the first trickle of water reached the Comstock in August of 1873. Soon, the water system was delivering 2 million gallons per day over 21 miles to the Comstock.

In 1875, superintendent John Bear Overton expanded the system by adding a second pipeline and flume system, as well as the resources of Marlette Lake from inside the basin. At the time, Marlette Lake was a small reservoir used by the CTL&FC for their North Canyon V-flume operations. The VCHWC raised the dam to 36 feet



and built the Marlette Flume. This same flume bench would later become the famous Marlette Flume Trail of LTNSP, destined to become extremely popular with mountain bike enthusiasts. Marlette water was transported to the company's new 3,994-foot tunnel through the Carson Range at Tunnel Creek, completed in 1877. From the east portal of the tunnel, water was further conveyed to the diversion dam by the Tunnel Flume, and then the Upper and Lower Flumes to the siphon pipes. With Overton being associated with a timber operation in the area, the Sierra Nevada Wood and Lumber Company, he arranged for a V-flume to be built in the tunnel as well that carried lumber to a receiving yard at Lakeview in Washoe Valley. Finally, in 1887, the system was expanded a third time with another pipeline, enlarged flume boxes, and additional storage capacity with the new Hobart Creek Reservoir, now known as Hobart Lake. The 8 mile North Flume was also constructed to bring flows from several creeks north of the tunnel's west portal and above what is now Incline Village. In the end, the water system included 46 miles of box flume, 21 miles of pipeline, a tunnel, 4 reservoirs, and 6 maintenance stations, one being Red House which stands in the park today. At this point, the system was able to transport 10 million gallons of precious water per day to the Comstock.

Maintenance stations were needed in order to operate and maintain the water system. These were places where flume tenders and their families lived year round. Flume tenders were responsible for monitoring the system for damage, making repairs, and generally overseeing operations such as opening and closing flume gates. Maintenance stations for the VGHWC included Tunnel Creek at the west tunnel portal, Red House, Marlette Lake, The Tanks at the siphon inlet, Lakeview Station in Washoe Valley, and Five-mile Reservoir. Work as a flume tender was often mundane, but was not without its adventures, and even dangers.



Winter was an especially difficult time to be in the backcountry. On February 13, 1911, the Hobart dam washed out due to heavy snow and ice. The rush of water and ice destroyed the Red House maintenance station. Mr. and Mrs. Charles Jones, who



lived at Red House, as well as Mrs. Campbell, wife of the flume tender at Marlette Lake who had been visiting the Jones', were swept away with the house. Mr. Jones, naked but alive, was found in a damaged barn that was clinging to the hillside. Unfortunately, the remains of Mrs. Campbell and Mrs. Jones were found the following spring along the creek bed.

In a Nevada State Journal newspaper article dated February 15, 1911, Mr. Jones described what happened. "From what I am able to determine, the dam burst sometime around midnight Sunday. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Campbell were sleeping in one of the rooms in our house while I occupied another room. Mrs. Campbell had been visiting with us for several days. My first impression that anything was wrong was when I received a severe shock. I was dazed by the force of the blow and not recovered from the effects of it when a second shock was felt. The next thing I knew was when I was in the water several hundred yards below the house. It was then that I realized that the dam had burst. It is my idea that the first rush of the waters had been delayed by the snow in the canyon when the flood reached the house, it only tore away half of the dwelling. The part first to go was the portion in which my wife and Mrs. Campbell were sleeping. I immediately tried to climb to the bank of the stream, now a ragging torrent, but the onrush of the water caused me to lose my hold on the brush. I was carried about a hundred feet further down the stream and then cast up on the bank. I tried to stand on my feet, but was so weak and exhausted that each and every attempt resulted in my falling over. I found that I was about three hundred yards below the house and started to crawl on my hands and knees. My underclothes had been torn from my body and I was clothed in a small portion of what had ordinarily been my undershirt. Finally I reached the site where the house had stood and in moments of frenzy, intermingled with moments of unconsciousness, I searched for some time for the body of my wife. Not a stick of the timber of the house remained in its original place. The intense cold caused me to seek shelter and by crawling to the barn, which had escaped the flood, I managed to raise myself to the manger and falling into this receptacle, I covered myself with straw."

The article went on to say that Mr. Jones' endurance in crawling three hundred yards over the snow covered ground, is considered nothing short of remarkable and that he survived the flood is a matter that will never be explained. The water system was quickly repaired but rebuilding Red House had to wait until spring.



Marlette flume tender Jack Ferguson, also known as Fergie, began working for the water company in 1947. He had an ulterior motive though and soon got permission from superintendent Hobart Leonard to build a large sail boat at Marlette. His dream was to sail the South Pacific. By 1952, he completed the Te'Matangi, a 35-foot double-masted 'Block Ketch' sailing yacht. It was built in a boat house at the south end of the lake. Jack built it by hand, using only an Elgin outboard motor modified to run a sanding wheel. The boat was never put into Marlette, yet was pulled by a tractor on skids down North Canyon to Spooner. Ferguson further towed the yacht to the Sacramento River and was said to have been the only person at the time that had built a boat at 8,000 feet (above sea level) for sailing on the open ocean. Jack resigned his position with the water company and literally sailed off into the sunset. Setting sail in the Sacramento Delta, he sailed to Hawaii. There he met and married his wife Jacqueline and, along with his new stepson Lonnie, affectionately known as 'cabin boy', Fergie sailed throughout the South Pacific, to Australia, and eventually New Zealand. The 'Adventure Cruise', a newsletter detailing the Te'Matangi's



progress, included many exploits along the way, including a frightening witness to a nuclear bomb test in 1960. Jack wrote of this experience, "We rolled out of our bunks as night turned into day. It was another world, and while we all watched, open mouthed, we saw a huge white mountainous cloud form where no cloud had been before. First it was a pillar several miles wide

and shooting straight up in the sky and, boiling and churning, formed a mushroom top. Then another pillar formed, and another mushroom. Finally a third pillar and a third mushroom. There was nothing we could do or even say – we could only stand and watch – and wait." The voyage continued and sadly, on the return trip two years later near Hawaii, Te' Matangi hit an atoll and was damaged beyond repair. Jack had to leave his beloved sailing yacht behind and never saw her again.

Long after the excitement of the Comstock, the water system was still needed to provide fresh water to Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Silver City. James Leonard became superintendent in 1906 and continued until his son Hobart Leonard took over



operations in 1940. Hobart became president of the company upon his father's death in 1959. It was in these years that the water system began to fall into disrepair. In 1941, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> pipelines were removed to replace box flumes in the Virginia Range. The North Flume was abandoned in 1944 and the tunnel collapsed in 1957. That same year, the Curtis Wright Corporation, a private contractor for the military, bought the water company and began to implement repairs. Curtis Wright needed the water for a proposed Federal missile testing contract in Storey County. The Marlette Lake dam was raised another 15 feet and flumes were replaced with more pipeline. When Curtis Wright failed to reopen the tunnel, and the contract was lost, they decided to sell the water system to the State of Nevada in 1963. The State made further improvements and operates the Marlette Water System today. Although most of the system has been upgraded or replaced, one part of the original system remains today - the second inverted siphon through Washoe Valley built in 1875.

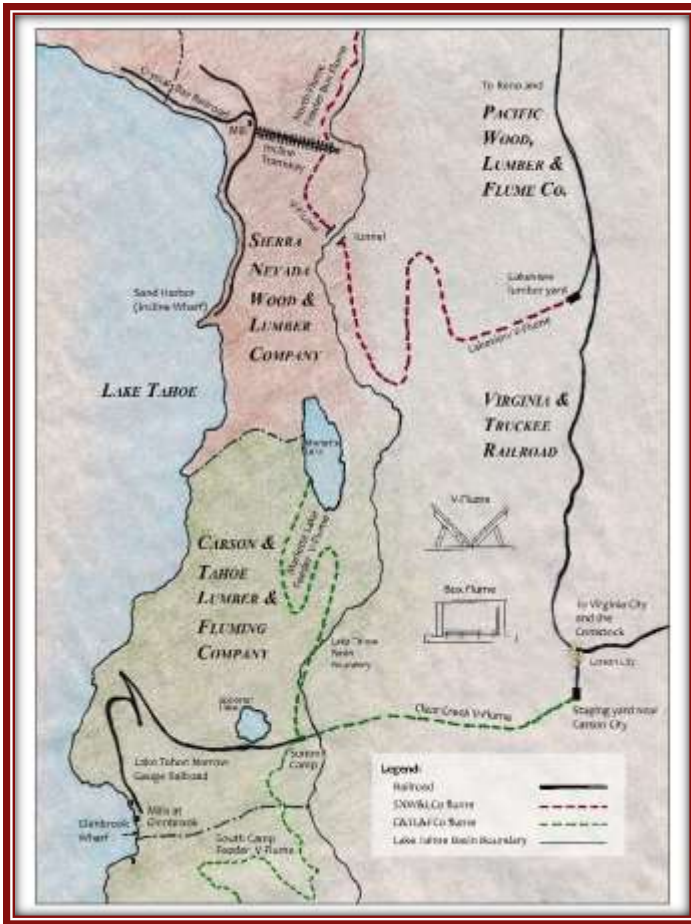
### *Sierra Nevada Wood and Lumber Company*

Walter Scott Hobart, and his partner Seneca Marlette, started the Sierra Nevada Wood and Lumber Company (SNW&LC) in 1878, after moving their Excelsior Mill operations to the area that would later become Incline Village. The company included thousands of acres in what is now the northern portion of Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park.



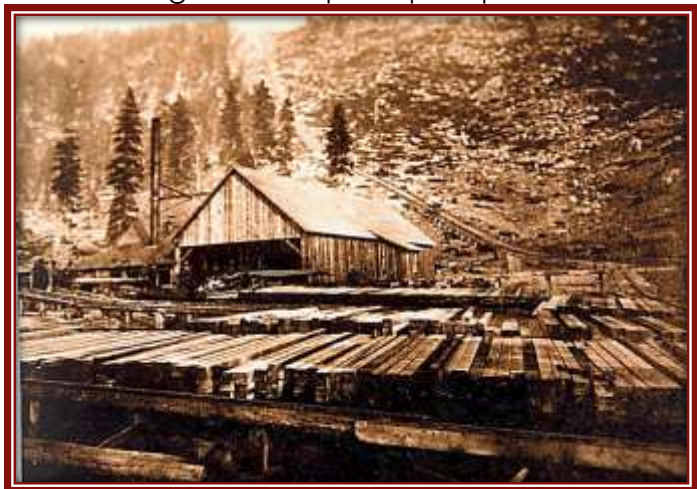
Operations centered on the Incline Mill, at what is now the Ponderosa Ranch, and the Incline Wharf, at what is now Sand Harbor. At this time, Incline Wharf included several company structures such as a pier with rail line out over the water, log train building, store, and lodging facilities. Like at Glenbrook, large log rafts were brought in by the steamer *Niagara* from company lands around the north shore of Tahoe. Timber was taken to the mill by Hobart's narrow gauge Crystal Bay Railroad. Milled lumber was then taken 1,400 vertical feet up the ingenious Great Incline Tramway of the Sierra built in 1880, later giving the name Incline Village to the early mill town. The double tracked, 4,000 foot continuous





cable tram was powered by a 40 horsepower steam engine and ran on 12-foot bull wheels to hoist lumber and cordwood cars up the steep 65% grade. The top bull wheel and support structure can still be viewed from a trail east of present-day Tunnel Creek Road. JB Overton, superintendent of the Virginia Gold Hill Water Company, was also named general manager for the SNW&LC. In cooperation with the water company, North Flume water was used to transport lumber from the top of the tram in a V-flume to the VGHWC tunnel. Lumber was further carried in miles of additional flume to the V&T railroad in Washoe Valley, and then on to the Comstock Mining District.

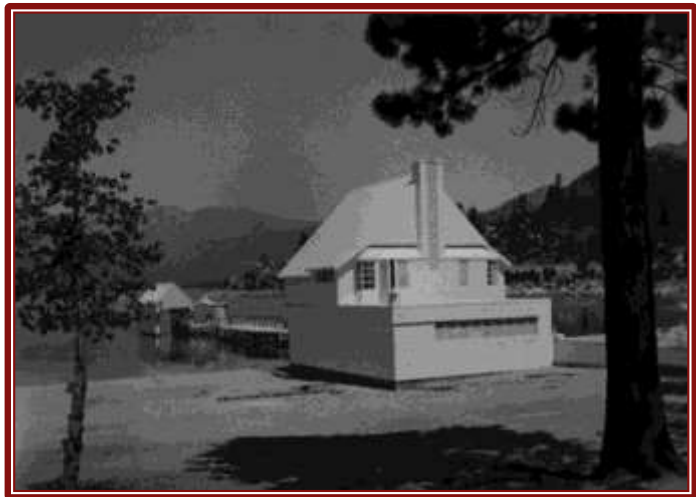
Edward B. Scott, in his book *'The Saga of Lake Tahoe'*, described an accident at the tramline only two weeks after operations began. "Far up the precipitous mountainside, two heavily loaded lumber cars on the Great Tramline of Tahoe crawled toward Incline Summit. Captain John Bear Overton watched as the cars neared the top, listening with an engineer's trained ear to the whir of the endless cable as it circled the lower iron bull wheel and clacked over the idlers. Suddenly Overton saw the black dots





hesitate as though pinned to the promontory. He froze for a moment, then sprinted towards the printing telegraph shack to warn the steam engine tender at the summit. But he was too late. The two lumber carriers on the north track had already reversed direction and started backwards down the mountain. Slowly at first, then picking up momentum with incredible rapidity, they broke away down the rails. Faster and faster they hurtled downward. Now flaming streaks of fire showed under the trucks and clouds of billowing smoke streamed out behind. Loaders and mill hands scattered on a dead run as the lumber-stacked trams whistled across the lower trestle. With an ear-splitting crash the cars tore into the thick stand of sugar pine at the tramline's base, and timbers flew in every direction, splintering into kindling wood." Overton subsequently ordered an investigation and the accident was traced to an over winding of a clutch brake. A newsman on the scene described the incident as "the fastest recorded run on wheels in America." Operations continued until the excitement of the Comstock Lode ended around the turn of the century. In 1896, a new site was chosen for company operations at Hobart Mills north of Truckee, California.

Following the death of his father in 1892, Hobart Jr. inherited his family's wealth and land holdings. Known as the *Slapdash Sage of Sand Harbor*, he exhausted much of his acquired fortune on a lavish summer resort at the site of the Incline Wharf. Located at what is now the boat ramp area of Sand Harbor, the compound included two luxury cottages, a kitchen and dining

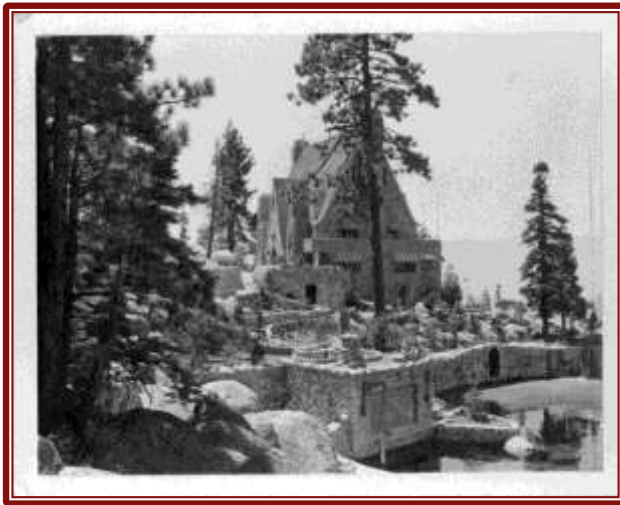


complex, a pump house, a generator building, and three servant's cabins. A skeet range was located near the south end of what is now Sand Harbor's main swim beach. The existing SNW&LC log train building was whitewashed and renovated to serve as a boathouse and clubhouse, with an adjacent pier where Hobart Jr. kept his prized racing boat *Orange Blossom*. Hollywood royalty and the social elite were entertained aboard Hobart's Lake Tahoe yacht, the *Quic Chakidn*, until it was commandeered by the U.S. Navy during WWI. In the early 1920's, Hobart leased the master cottage at Sand Harbor to Frank W. Fuller, Vice President of the W.P. Fuller &



Company paint firm. His son, Frank Jr. and family, continued to enjoy summers at the Harbor until 1966. Fuller Jr. had a passion for flying and moored his Gruman Goose seaplane, and later his Gruman Mallard, on the shores of Sand Harbor. Boaters enjoyed the spectacle of watching Fuller's plane lift gracefully out of the water and rise above the lake. The buildings later fell into disrepair and were torn down in the early 1970's by the State of Nevada in preparation for a new park.

### *George Whittell at Tahoe*



All this was happening within the boundaries of what would become Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park, dedicated by gubernatorial proclamation in October of 1971. As you can now see, the period of the later 1800's was a very important time for the fledgling state of Nevada with respect to the Comstock and overall economic development. As a result, the lands that would become Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park contributed

heavily to the need for resources at the time and would later pay a heavy price environmentally due to the ultimate effects of vastly clear cut forests. It was Dan Dequille who wrote in his 1881 book *The Big Bonanza*, "The Comstock Lode may truly be said to be the tomb of the forests of the Sierras. Millions on millions of feet of timber are annually buried in the mines, nevermore to be resurrected." The 'roar' of the late 1800's was dramatic, but the 'roar' of 100 years later was destined to eclipse anything seen before.

A momentous 'silence' set in after the turn of the century as company operations began to cease. During this period, the majority of timber company lands on the east shore were considered worthless and languished while a desire to own personal estates, along with a fledgling tourist economy, began to grow. These early Comstock events, along with the subsequent purchase of large blocks of cut-over property on the east shore of Lake Tahoe, had the combined effect of keeping these acres together in large quantity, rather than having lands broken up into smaller, privately owned parcels.



In the mid 1930's, San Francisco millionaire Captain George Whittell purchased over 40,000 acres of east shore territory including 20 miles of shoreline, primarily from the old Hobart and Bliss estates. These cutover timber lands reached from present-day Crystal Bay to Zephyr Cove, representing nearly all of Nevada's Tahoe shoreline. Whittell entered into an agreement with other partners who would sub-divide and sell the properties, return his initial investment, with all parties sharing in the profits. In a shrewd business move, the Captain retained the sole right of approval before any parcels were to be sold. Later, George refused to sell any lots and eventually became the sole owner of all the Tahoe lands. Although further plans were put together to build casino resorts at Sand Harbor and Zephyr Cove, this purchase soon turned into a personal desire to build the grand *Thunderbird Lodge*, and enjoy valued privacy. The boat house at the lodge also became home to the famous 55-foot *Thunderbird Yacht*, built in 1940. George Whittell was passionate about fast cars, boats, and airplanes, as well as the many exotic animals he kept. His best friend was Bill the lion, a constant companion given as a gift from his first wife. Whittell spent many leisurely summers at his summer lodge and was once quoted as saying his only goal in life was never to work a day of it.



Over the next several decades, the State of Nevada formed a desire of its own, the creation of a great Tahoe state park to satisfy the emerging demands of public recreation. In 1958, Nevada's governor Charles Russell persuaded Whittell to make roughly nine acres of Sand Harbor available to State Parks for a public beach. For years, people had sneaked across his property to enjoy the water. By granting access to a small part of his lakefront, Whittell hoped that the trespassing elsewhere would stop. Unfortunately for the Captain, State Park officials wanted more. In 1959, Grant Sawyer became Nevada's governor and began a relentless campaign to obtain additional acres for an immense Tahoe State Park, dedicated to the perpetual conservation of the environmentally sensitive land. Whittell's answer to Sawyer and State Parks was a firm "No". Nevada's chief executive decided that a face-to-face confrontation was in order. As Sawyer recalled in his oral history, "I flew



[to the Bay area] on a secret mission and went out to his house [in Woodside, Ca.] and met his wife...but I didn't get any further than the kitchen, and she refused to let me speak to him, although I knew very well that he was in the house." When the Captain learned about the unwelcome visitor, he called the local sheriff and ordered his arrest. The sheriff came to the estate, but refused to file charges against the governor of Nevada. Instead, he escorted Sawyer off the property.

The State of Nevada answered Whittell's obstinate attitude with a lawsuit, expecting judicial enforcement of a public condemnation of the land. In the end, judicial action forced Whittell to sell 5,300 acres for \$3,000,000 in 1967. The loss was an ignoble final chapter for the former playboy who once traveled the world cutting a broad swath. With failing health and decreased mobility, the eighty-seven year old George Whittell died on April 18, 1969. When he heard about Whittell's death, Paul Laxalt, by then Nevada's governor, commented, "The State of Nevada is greatly indebted to Captain George Whittell. Largely through his efforts, much of Nevada's portion of Lake Tahoe is now preserved." History would later describe Whittell as an 'accidental environmentalist' for his unintended work in keeping thousands of valuable Tahoe acres together and undeveloped during a critical period of time in the basin.

### *Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park*



The foundation stones of Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park were laid with that initial lease agreement for Sand Harbor. Through these accidents of history, followed by a fortuitous series of purchases and donations, a fantastic collection of wilderness backcountry and precious Tahoe shoreline was set aside for future generations. Subsequent purchases by the State of Nevada that would make up the



great Tahoe Park progressed throughout the late 1960's.



- 1958 – Lease of 8.6 acres at Sand Harbor from George Whittell.
- 1963 – Purchase of 5,378 acres of the historic VGHWS from the Curtis Wright Corporation. 5,300 acres were given to the park for management in 1969.
- 1967 – Purchase of 5,300 acres from Whittell, forced by condemnation legal proceedings. This included Sand Harbor, as well as 4 miles of shoreline.
- 1967 – Assumption of 3.2 acres at Cave Rock from Douglas County.
- 1969 – Purchase of 1,600 acres in North Canyon from the Whittell estate.
- 1970 – Purchase of 1,140 acres at Spooner Lake from the Whittell estate.
- 1988 – Donation of 542 acres by Jack Van Sickle near Stateline. 28 acres were added in 2001 by the Nevada Division of State Lands for a total of 570 acres.

None of this would have been possible without George Whittell's initial purchase of land and his subsequent reluctance to support private development. Sand Harbor was officially developed as a management area of LTNSP during two phases of construction, 1971 and 1973. This resulted in most of the facilities on site today including paved roads and parking lots, entrance stations, restrooms, a picnic area, group use area, boat ramp, sewage treatment plant (removed in 2004), and park office/maintenance area. The modern Shakespeare Performance Stage was built in 1999. The newest facility at Sand Harbor is the Visitor Center and Food Concession, completed in 2006. The Cave Rock Boat Ramp was built in the early 1960's on the crushed rock spoils of the second of two Highway 50 tunnels, the first bored in 1931 for a two-lane roadway through the rock. The second highway tunnel in 1957 produced a large amount of material, which was deposited in the lake along the shoreline to create a prime park attraction for Douglas County, which was later transferred to Nevada State Parks. The facilities of the Spooner Backcountry



Management Area were developed in the 1980's after a modern dam was built for Spooner Lake in 1982. 13 miles of the 165-mile Tahoe Rim Trail were completed through the backcountry in 1989. Finally, Van Sickle Bi-State Park, currently a part of LTNSP, was developed as a trailhead in 2011 with restroom and parking facilities. This unique property lies in both Nevada and California and is co-managed in partnership by both state park systems.

The dream of a Lake Tahoe state park in Nevada was realized. Soon, the 'roar' was on again with well over 1,000,000 visitors to the park enjoying the historic lands of the Comstock each year. Today, with its 'singularly clear' crystal blue waters, breath-taking vistas, and richness in cultural history, the park is hailed by Nevadans as one of the most beautiful places at Lake Tahoe, signifying an extremely valuable resource of the great State of Nevada. Lake Tahoe

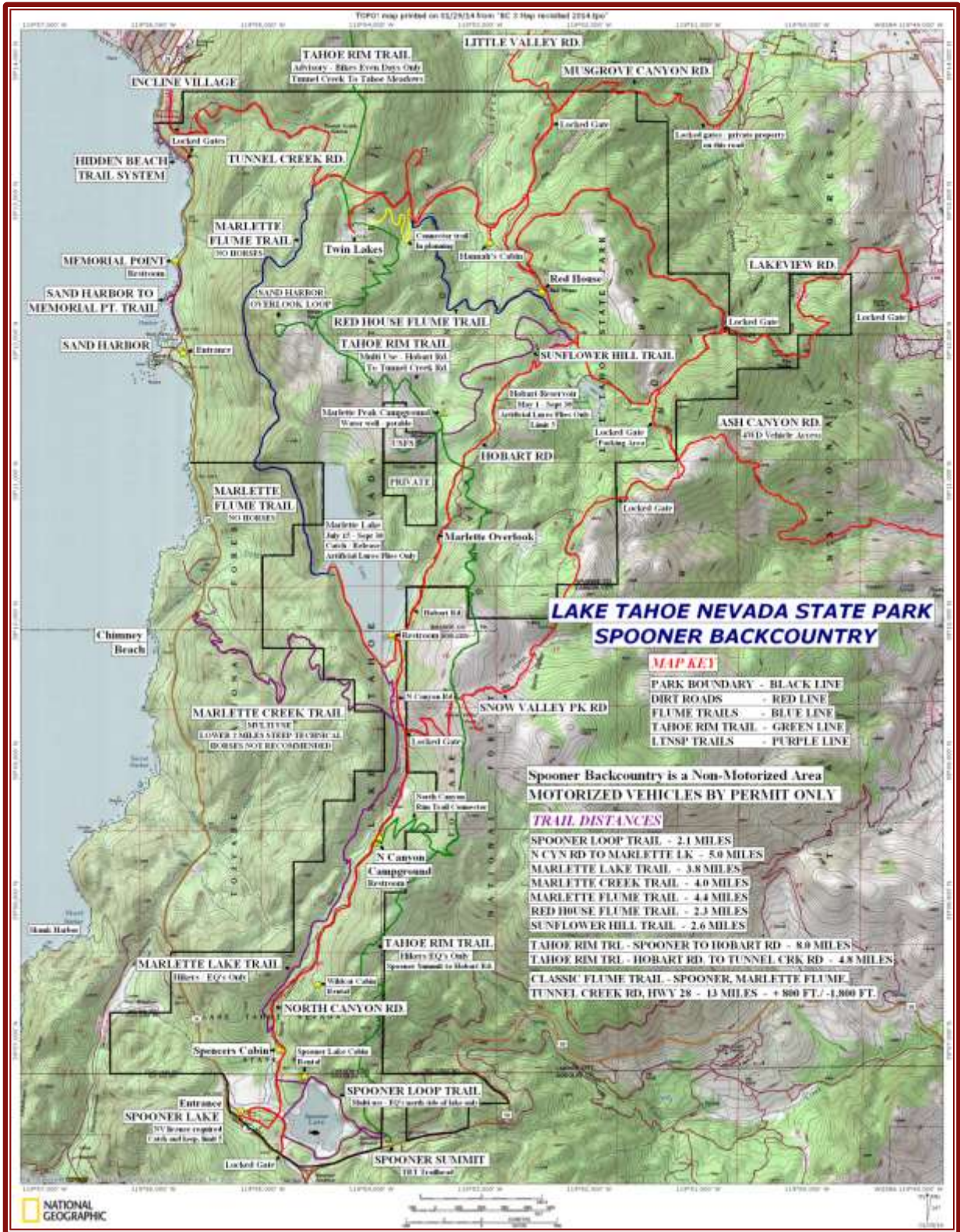


Nevada State Park is representative today of a wide variety of protected natural resources blended with extensive facilities to provide visitor services. It offers a diversity of recreational experiences from the quiet discovery of backcountry trails to a 'fun day at the lake' along sandy beaches and boulder strewn coves. Bring a mountain bike to Spooner and ride the nationally recognized Marlette Flume Trail, enjoy a quiet day at Divers Cove or a Shakespeare play at Sand Harbor, launch your



boat at Cave Rock, or visit the Tahoe Rim Trail from Van Sickle Bi-State Park. Nevada Division of State Parks is proud to manage and maintain the facilities of Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park, and bring to its visitors a unique and memorable recreation experience.





This booklet would not have been possible without the information from publications such as Ron James' *The Roar and the Silence and Castle in the Sky*, L. J. Ettinger's *The Best of Virginia City and the Comstock*, Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, and other great historical narratives.



**Notes on my visit to Lake Tahoe:**

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