

**LAKE TAHOE**  
**OUTLET WORKS**  
**AND**  
**Gatekeeper's Cabin**

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**North Lake Tahoe Historical Society**

## Lake Tahoe Outlet Works and Gatekeeper's Cabin

The first outlet works were constructed in 1870 by Col. A. W. Von Schmidt. The stone and timber crib structure soon passed to the Donner Lumber & Boom Co. who continued to regulate, for a fee, the water flow for floatation of logs and later, power generation. The timber and power helped to shore up the wealth of the Comstock Lode. By 1913, the U.S. Reclamation Service completed the present structure to serve the Newlands Irrigation Project. Contractual flow regulations demanded tending of the gates for which a cabin was built in 1910 to house the gatekeeper. The cabin served until 1968, was destroyed by fire in 1978 and the present cabin was completed in 1981.

NORTH LAKE TAHOE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

"A low, grassy flat, covered with myriads of tall, slender willows which march into water to a considerable depth, and almost hide the outlet from view on the lake." Such was the 1868 description of Lake Tahoe's only outlet and the beginning of the Truckee River's descent to the Great Basin. This untamed river had already fulfilled its role as a lifesaver to the emigrants, was continuing in its role as a life source to the desert Indian tribes and had yet to fulfill its role in lumbering, ice and power.

In the wings a plan had been devised by A. W. Von Schmidt to provide a limitless supply of water to the City of San Francisco. The focal point of the plan was a dam to be built at the outlet of Lake Tahoe. In his Tourist Guide, Edwards voiced what then appeared to be a common conception when he stated "More water runs out of the lake each day and goes to waste than would be sufficient to supply New York, with its million inhabitants, with Brooklyn and Jersey City thrown in." That the water was going "to waste" in the minds of many people reveals the source of an ongoing conflict, the resolution of which is still being contested today. It may have seemed only logical that since Tahoe lies approximately two-thirds in California, that the only outlet lay entirely in California and downstream users (Nevada) were relatively few, California might indeed appropriate as much of the lake's water as it saw fit.

Von Schmidt, as President of the Lake Tahoe and San Francisco Water Company, allegedly secured a half section of land surrounding the outlet and rights to 500 cubic feet per second of the river's water. The following year, 1866, he announced his plan to supply San Francisco with water for an estimated \$8,000,000. After the Attorney General of Nevada raised questions regarding the legality

of such a proposal, and resistance began to mount to the proposal, Von Schmidt, now as chief engineer, tersely replied that the dam would be built in any event! He also claimed that Congress had granted the Company all the rights required. But Von Schmidt was not alone in planning to dam the river's flow.

James, in Lake of the Sky, states that the outlet laid within a land grant section bestowed upon the Central Pacific Railroad. If correct, the passage of the outlet's control to the Donner Lumber and Boom Company is easily explained. One need go no further than recognize the backers and head executives of the D.L. & B. Co., Leland Stanford and Mark Hopkins, to explain why, on April 4, 1870, the California Legislature authorized the D.L. & B. Co to construct a dam 500 feet from the lake's outlet. While many sources continue to attribute the dam's construction to Von Schmidt, it seems unlikely that he could ever legally have gained control of the land on which the dam was built. That the dam was in the control of the D.L. & B. Co. in short order is not in contention.

In either case the flow of the Truckee River was regulated from the Fall of 1870. "At its upper end it is harnessed in to serve the lumber manufacturer, with a narrow gate opening in the center of a strong dam that could easily choke it off entirely if closed." In fact there were three gates centered within the stream bed. On each side of the gates, timber cribs filled with earth and stone held the lake's water back. The purpose of the dam was to control the flow of the river, particularly during the summer months, so that logs could be floated to the lumber mills in and around Truckee, Von Schmidt's water plan for San Francisco quietly faded away.

In order to repay the \$25,000 spent to clear the river channel and construct the dam and outlet works, the D.L. & B. Co. charged a fee for the transportation of logs down the Truckee. Fifty cents would allow transport of 1,000 (board) feet of timber and twenty-five cents a cord of wood. This was allowed under a twenty year franchise which also allowed control of the lake's level a maximum of five feet and mandated the construction of a fishway at the dam.

Von Schmidt did not give up his efforts to sell San Francisco water from the lake. In 1870 he announced the details surrounding such a sale. He would transport 200,000,000 gallons of water per day through a tunnel beneath the crest of the Sierra. And since all that tunnel work would have to take place anyway, a tunnel large enough for the railroad was proposed. Two 6 ft. diameter pipes would carry the water, while the trains would run in a chamber immediately above. To offset the heavy construction costs, the proposal would continually save the trains 1,000 feet in elevation gain, shorten the trans-Sierra route by seven miles and eliminate the need for maintenance of eleven miles of snowsheds. The aqueduct system would also deliver water to the mines and mills of the gold country.

Von Schmidt, in defense of his proposal, was quick to point out his estimate of the outlet flow, 800,000,000 gallons per day. Months prior to announcement of the plan, a Nevada newspaper already warned of armed resistance to the diversion of Lake Tahoe's water. While newspapers in San Francisco spoke of enough water in the river for both states, their Mayor T. H. Selby vetoed Order 990 of the Board of Supervisors, authorizing a 30 year, \$6,000,000 bond issue to finance Von Schmidt's plan. The Mayor, looking after the public funds, recognized that the City would be left with no

Co. and its financial backers, the Comstock Pumping Association. On September 29, 1900, power flowed to Virginia City. Before the end of the year the Floriston Mill was on line.

The Donner Lumber & Boom Co. began to demand rent from these downstream users under threat of draining the source and driving them out of business. Herbert and Mortimer Fleischacker, the latter president of the Truckee River General Electric Co., bought the outlet from the D.L. & B. Co. in 1902 for \$45,000. The transaction included 54 acres around the lake's outlet, but excluded a strip of land connecting the river, downstream of the dam, with the lake. T.R.G.E. Co., acquired the littoral rights which would allow the digging of a new channel through this strip of land if desired.

After over thirty years of continuous operation, the dam was aging poorly. The winter of 1904 tested the old structure, almost to destruction. The lake level rose 8 inches in one day while the outlet gates were closed. Their closure was deemed the lesser of evils, since the river was judged too high to be considered safe. In fact the river had washed away one dam and submerged two or three others downstream. "A quantity of heavy lumber was used to build a long wooden apron upon which the water poured as it rushed over the dam...Its foundation timbers, set in sand and gravel, were 'badly decayed' and had to be shored up." While the preparations were made to warn those downstream in the event the dam failed, the water rose. The dam held, but the lake hit eight feet above low water and considerable damage was manifest both above and below the dam.

A new era dawned with the Federal Reclamation Act of 1902. The U.S. Reclamation Service

organized the Truckee-Carson Irrigation District and filed an appropriation to all surplus waters of Lake Tahoe. Together with rights to waters of the Carson River, an irrigation project near Fallon, Nevada began to take shape. The Newlands project, named for Senator Francis Newlands of Nevada, proposed to irrigate, literally to reclaim, 206,000 acres of desert. The Reclamation Service purchased the remaining land of the D.L. & B. Co., hoping to dig a new channel to bypass the dam. The Service was enjoined by Duane Bliss and W. S. Tevis, after which it attempted to purchase the outlet property from the Truckee River General Electric Co. Again, nothing came of the negotiations because of a change in the ownership of the Truckee River General Electric Company.

No further progress was made until 1909 when, spurred on by the Secretary of Interior, an agreement was reached to split the costs of construction of a new dam equally between the government and the Truckee River G. E. Co. Within the terms of the agreement the Electric Co. retained ownership of the outlet but the government bore the operation and maintenance costs. Minimum flow restrictions would apply for the sake of power generation and a large variety of rights and options downstream were given the utility. Based on this agreement, construction began on a new dam in 1909. Construction also ceased in 1909 after a part of the new structure was built.

It appears Gifford Pinchot, Chief Forester, carried the message to higher levels in the Federal Government that this agreement was illegal, giving away virtually everything to the utility. To avoid a direct confrontation in a public hearing, President Taft appointed a commission which cooled the passion and postponed resolution of the issue.

tangible assets and continual bills for water. He urged the City to find a source that they could own outright, not one which was rightly part of the public domain.

That year, the funding of the Von Schmidt proposal reached the California Legislature. In this proposal, \$10,000,000 would be authorized to transport 20,000,000 gallons of water to San Francisco while delivering 100,000,000 gallons to the mining and agricultural uses across the state. The proponents of the plan, through Senator Cornelius Cole of California, introduced a bill in the U.S. Congress. This bill proposed granting land to the water system's builders, similar to the land grants given the transcontinental railroad's builders.

Both of these proposals drew fire immediately. Nevada threatened armed and legal resistance, claiming "robbery of a neighboring state" and further emphasized "It is not destined that you shall dilute your whiskey with the pure distillation from the clouds of heaven." Around the nation the cry was heard to prevent the public domain from being used for other than national purposes. Neither proposal succeeded.

Von Schmidt revised his plan in 1875, ceasing to concentrate on the lake's outlet. He finally did build a dam four miles downstream, but his new tunnel project fell on deaf ears. We now bid farewell to Alexis Wlademar Von Schmidt.

The dam was operated for twenty-seven years on the fee schedule established by the Donner Lumber and Boom Company, despite the fact that authorization had only been granted for a period of twenty years. The level varied six feet despite a five foot

limitation. About 1900, the Truckee Lumber Co. was accused of devastating the river from Tahoe to Truckee. In Sierra Nevada Lakes, the Hinkles strongly state "The river had already been ruined by the D.L. & B. Co."

The dam was operated by the impoundment and subsequent release of a large quantity of water, flushing the logs downstream. The inevitable log jams were manually broken apart. In other parts of the river, and presumably at the lake's outlet, gates were opened one day a week, usually Sunday, to carry downstream the more sluggish logs and clean out the numerous pools. Logs were thereby transported long distances cheaply, but not always reliably. There was some local pressure, primarily by the lumbermen, for the C.P.R.R. to extend rail service up the Truckee River. While this would eliminate the uncertainties of the log's river transportation, the C.P. executives could not justify the expense. It took a private venture, the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Co., to open narrow gauge service between Truckee and Tahoe City in 1900.

The D.L. & B. Co. had continued to charge fees through 1897 for the transportation of timber. Three years later the L.T.R. & T. Co. could carry the timber without the log jams. The main revenue sources of the dam were disappearing just as new downstream uses for water were appearing.

In 1899, the Floriston Pulp and Paper Mill was under construction. Downstream, a hydro-electric generating station was conceived to serve the new mill, the mines of the Comstock and burgeoning town of Reno. The powerhouse was a product of the newly formed Truckee River General Electric

Through 1911 no movement of the stalemate occurred, so Reclamation Service Director F. H. Newell, together with the new owners of the Electric Co. proceeded with their plans to widen the channel and lower the low water level another 51 inches. Had they succeeded in this venture the entrance to Emerald Bay would have been closed during low water conditions. In reaction the Tahoe Protective Association was formed. In 1913 President Wilson's new Secretary of the Interior, F. K. Lane drew up an agreement during meetings and talks in Truckee. The dam construction was completed that year including a revision of the originally planned eight gate structure to a seventeen gate structure. That structure is the one presently regulating the river flow at Tahoe City.

By consent decree in a friendly suit, the Dept. of Interior bought out the Electric Utilities outlet holdings and rights for \$129,000. The outlet would be regulated to maintain 500 cubic feet per second in winter and 400 CFS in summer. With the Control of the outlet assured, the government began construction of the Gatekeeper's Cabin in 1913.



## The Gatekeeper's Cabin Era

Art Smith was controlling the gates when the log cabin structure was built. Early pictures, dated July 1913, show construction taking place. Simultaneously the squatter's cabins which occupied the site were torn down. The public controversy intensified with a Reclamation Service proposal in 1919 to raise the lake six feet higher than normal. The reclamation project in Nevada was deeply committed and farmers, fearing fraud, were very concerned over the reliable supply of water from Tahoe. For the next five years heated debates over pumping of the lake for additional water took place. Finally an agreement was arranged in 1924 which would allow 300 CFS during the irrigation season to be pumped around the dam.

In 1927, W. A. Simmonds assumed the position of gatekeeper. For his livelihood, he ran a rental cabin business surrounding the gatekeeper's cabin in the summer months. He was probably looking out his window on a July night in 1930 at a time when the lake was extremely low when he and other Tahoe residents noticed a steamshovel digging a ditch along the edge of the Truckee River. While Constable Watson called Auburn to secure an injunction, many of the leading (armed) citizens of Tahoe City went to discuss the situation. The foreman of the crew showed an authorization from California Governor Rolph to lower the lake's rim three feet. Knowing that hardpan, requiring blasting and slow progress, would soon be reached the makeshift army retreated.

At dawn the following day a party of fishermen trolled the site of the proposed ditch. Having what appeared to be an excellent day, the fishermen kept the construction crew frustrated in their attempts to blast. In fact the catch for

that day had come from the refrigerator at Tahoe Tavern. After sunset the thunder of dynamite was heard in Tahoe City. Shortly thereafter the Secretary of the Interior received notice that all the fish in the lake were being killed. Once again the Tahoeites had created the scene, having chloroformed minnows for the occasion. The diversions provided the necessary delay while the injunction was duly delivered. The state and Federal governments followed suit as the publicity broke.

By 1934, and corresponding to the resumption of pumping, the time was right for a workable agreement. That year the agreement calling for the construction of Boca reservoir, establishing high and low water levels and prohibiting artificial diversions of the lake, was adopted.

Undoubtedly the job of gatekeeper was made easier with agreement of the formerly warring parties. Despite hostilities over the water, the navigation and tourist industries had firmly entrenched themselves since the turn of the century as replacements to the lumber industries. Hollywood had discovered the Sierra Nevada for its on-location potential. Lake Tahoe was the setting for "Rose Marie" in 1935. The leading lady, Jeanette McDonald stayed at Simmond's Resort, the Gatekeeper's Cabin, during the filming.

By 1939, Boca Dam was constructed, relieving some of the pressure on Tahoe for water. The Truckee-Carson Irrigation District maintained a watermaster to regulate the flows amongst the various sources of the Reclamation project. The Gatekeeper at Tahoe had three regular duties. First the gates on the dam had to be adjusted to control the release of water. Next the level of Lake Tahoe was recorded every 24 hours. Finally a weather station was maintained on the lakeshore just east of the cabin. This station required

daily reading and maintenance. Upon completion of these duties the gatekeeper would become an innkeeper, in season. Although the gates are motor operated (one motor on a carriage), the loss of power would require considerable manual effort. When operated the operator "really earns his money on such an occasion."

W. A. Simmonds was the gatekeeper from 1927 through 1949, when Art Frodenberg took over at the position. The war years had seen the demise and destruction of the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Co. and the steamer trade of Tahoe. Seasonal and quiet, the area changed little through 1960 when the Olympics came to Squaw Valley and Art's son-in-law, Daryl De Walt, took over the gatekeeper's duties.

That year, the Corps of Engineers built a concrete weir below the dam. The weir re-established the rim elevation of 6223.0. The Reclamation Service's 64 acres were surveyed and monumented that summer. The 14 plus acres around the outlet works, where cabins and rooms could be rented in the past, became a year round trailer park in 1958, when sewers made such occupancy feasible. From 1960 to July 15, 1968, Daryl De Walt maintained a tradition that had been in the family since 1927. On that day the official use of the building and the status of the dam tender ended. The uses of the water flowing through the dam, and the quantities needed to meet contractual and legal requirements, have not changed the Federal Watermaster now maintains the flows on behalf of the T-C I. D.

For ten years the cabin stood in disrepair, remaining unused and seemingly unwanted. The North Lake Tahoe Historical Society was unable to raise sufficient funds to turn the building into a museum. In 1978, children playing with matches under the steps of the cabin started a fire which razed the structure. Local interest appears to have been sparked by the loss, to the point where, through local contributions the reconstruction of the cabin was made possible. The present structure was completed in June, 1981, on the original foundation and closely following the design of the original cabin.



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