

A Haven for Hoboes

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In the early 1980s Ruben Ruhkala painted this picture of Rocklin's jailhouse, a temporary home for hoboes.

The Central Pacific Railroad Company built the eastbound leg of the Transcontinental Railroad from Sacramento through Rocklin in 1863 and 1864. Rocklin's quarries supplied granite blocks for tunnels and culverts, and riprap for rail beds, as the tracks rose toward Auburn and over the Sierra in the mid 1860s.

According to railroad historian Chris Graves, in 1867 the Central Pacific opened a roundhouse in Rocklin to service the extra engines that eastbound trains needed for the 90 mile strain to the Sierra summit. The facility supplied wood for fuel and water for steam for both eastbound and westbound trains and was a major hub of railroad activity until it closed in 1908 in favor of more

spacious facilities in Roseville.

Rocklin's location at the terminus of the westbound trans-Sierra run made it a magnet for freight train hoboes. Sensing that they were at the valley floor after a tortuous boxcar ride downhill from Norden, hoboes disembarked to rest, and sometimes to wander in the area seeking better lives.

Of course then, as now, hobo-style train travel was illegal and Rocklin's residents probably thought of the hoboes in their midst as blights on the community.

But not all of Rocklin's hoboes were derelicts. In his autobiography *Sisu, Even through a Stone Wall*, Finnish immigrant Oskari Tokoi tells that he and his friends travelled extensively as freight train stowaways in the western states between jobs as hard working miners and loggers in the late 19th century. Tokoi arrived hobo-style in Rocklin in 1896 and avoided detection by hiding in the hayloft of a stable near today's Rocklin train station. He found work in a granite quarry and later opened a quarry of his own. He married a local Finnish girl and returned with her to Finland where he entered politics. He became the first premier of a free Finland when the Bolsheviks granted Finland its independence as they came to power in Russia in 1917.

According to research by Rocklin Historian Ruben Ruhkala, in the early 1880s Placer County purchased land at the corner of today's Pacific and Bush Streets and built an approximate 8' x 10' granite jailhouse. Ruhkala suggests, from his conversations with Rocklin old timers in the early 20th century, that the jailhouse was originally intended to house criminals but that it eventually was also a respite point for Rocklin's hoboes, a place to stay for the night out of the cold. "The only requirement was that they had to be locked up at night because they might steal the bedding" he said, "true, there were a lot of bars in town, but Rocklin never was a Wild West town in need of a big jail."

As a schoolboy in the very early 20th century, Ernest Willard, who became Rocklin's first police

chief in 1946, unlocked the jailhouse door to free the hoboes each morning on his way to school. Willard's father, George, was Rocklin's town marshal then and was apparently too busy with his ox- cart drayage business to attend to the hoboes. Earnest Willard still had the jailhouse key in his possession when he served as honorary marshal of the Rocklin Jubilee parade in 1983.

In the early 1980s Ruhkala painted a picture of the jailhouse as he and other old timers remembered it from the early 1920s. The painting now hangs in the Rocklin History Museum.

Rocklin's population declined after roundhouse operations moved to Roseville in 1908 and a quarry worker strike in 1915 closed most of Rocklin's quarries. The Jailhouse fell into disuse and new owners dismantled it in the early 1920s to use the granite blocks for the foundation of their new home on Bush Street.

But Ruhkala remembered that, even though most freight trains no longer stopped here after the roundhouse closed, a few hoboes continued to disembark at Rocklin well into the 1920's. Rocklin's grade school abutted the tracks near the Rocklin train station then. When classes dismissed at 3:00 Ruhkala and his chums sometimes sauntered across the tracks to the area of the post office at the corner of today's Front Street and Rocklin Road. From there they could see the 3:30 westbound freight train as it slowed to allow the mail car attendant to snatch Rocklin's outgoing mailbag from a post beside the tracks. The boys watched as hoboes jumped from the moving train, sometimes misjudging the speed and sometimes injuring themselves as they stumbled and tumbled and sprawled on the gravelly rail bed.

Ruhkala's mother had eleven children and often greeted hoboes at the door of the family home about one half mile from the jailhouse. "She always had something for them to eat" he said.