

History: Flumes not just for logs

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By Sheryl Morris

The Great Flume Ride, a tale of five men who supposedly traveled down a logging flume north of Incline Village during the Comstock era, was told January 29th to members of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.



Telling the story and showing slides of old photographs and drawings from the same period was Fred MacKenzie, training and safety administrator for the Reno office of Sierra Pacific Power Company.

An unusually large crowd of nearly 100 society members and guests heard MacKenzie describe the ride, which was the result of a challenge to the five participants.

The daredevils weren't young men, MacKenzie noted. They were in the late 50's and three of them were established businessmen. He said that one was a reporter from New York and another one was a carpenter.

The men first had to construct a V-shaped boat to fit the flume. Two boats were actually made. The second vessel was launched after the first boat took off down the flume in a fast wall of water sans passengers.

When the second boat was launched with the men aboard, no one had taken into consideration the fact that the second boat would be traveling faster than the first craft, MacKenzie

explained.

“Their lives were in the hand of fate,” the speaker continued, “because the flume had no element of control or safety. They just had to hold on.”

The story says that at one point the carpenter fell out but was luckily grabbed and pulled back in the boat.

By this time the distance between the two boats was narrowing, MacKenzie said. The second boat finally crashed into the first craft and “the men concluded they must have been temporarily insane.”

MacKenzie noted that the area of the flume ride was thought to have been in the Sierra, west of the Verdi-Reno area.

In addition to telling the story of the flume ride, MacKenzie backgrounded his presentation with other slides pertaining to the Comstock era of the late 1800's and the use of Tahoe lumber in Virginia City and surrounding area at that time.

He explained that prior to 1870 when the V-flume was invented, lumber was transported to the Comstock from the Sierra by animals. After the invention of the channel, flumes were set up all around the eastern side of Tahoe. One giant flume floated logs from Spooner Summit down 15 miles to the Carson Valley floor. From there the logs went to Virginia City and Gold Hill via the V & T Railroad.

MacKenzie added that Sierra Pacific Power has used flumes for years to provide electrical and water service.