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Speeding across the lake on a chilly day, June 1958.



SCOTT HERRING

Tahoe Blue

Around 130 years ago, a man visited Lake Tahoe looking for a bargain. The Comstock Lode, that sublimely rich vein of silver near Virginia City, had made Elias “Lucky” Baldwin a man of wealth and property. The old-growth forests of the Tahoe Basin had provided wood for his mines. Much of the forest was gone, and he bore responsibility for its destruction. Now he turned his sights to the south shore. He walked among trees so big they were like monuments to a passing era. Something inside of him moved.

He bought a south shore hotel, and later built his own resort here, named Tallac for a nearby peak. Over the next years he bought land, far more than he needed—eight thousand acres in all. He issued a statement that hardly makes sense for a Comstock millionaire: “My land acquisition will save this vast forest from the beauty-destroying ax of the woodsman so that the magnificent pines and cedars may be admired by generations to come.” He seems not to have understood the irony, but he was not the first man to experience a conversion once his fortune was made.

Baldwin wasn’t lying, and he cared nothing for public relations. In future years he would suffer severe financial reversals, but he never logged his eight thousand acres. Scarcely educated, Lucky Baldwin was a frontier rogue, a product of the pre-railroad West, and a great lover of opulent display. Yet the magnificence of the south shore tamed him. The resort he built at Tallac was a model of elegance, decorum, and restraint. His private residence was a one-story cottage with two pines growing through the roof, literally; he had his builders work around the trees, a gesture that perfectly symbolizes his attitude toward “his” forest.

Recently, I found myself on the south shore often, because a publisher I was working with thought a book about Tahoe might be worth printing. The book would explain why controversies about the lake are so harsh. During my research, I came to believe that the landscape itself has a say.

Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 1, Number 2, pps 92–97. ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2011 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2011.1.2.92.



Lake Tahoe around 1908.

Nature, even in this century, controls us more than we think. At Tahoe, nature allows us to live only within its own margins, which limit how we think about the place. Take Baldwin's resort. The location made his design choices for him, led him to build a low-key resort in classic rustic architecture: steep shingle roofs, walls of unpainted wood, nearly all materials of local origin. Yes, he was copying earlier styles—but why those styles, out of all the others available? Why not something more garish? Baldwin could have built a comic opera nightmare, a castle like Mad King Ludwig's in Bavaria. Yet the forest led him in another direction.

To understand Tahoe is to understand that it was, early in its history, deemed a work of art. Along with Yellowstone, Yosemite and other masterworks, it was placed at the top of an aesthetic scale and made the subject of comparison. John Muir commented that "its waters are everywhere as keenly pure as any." Joseph LeConte, stopping by the lake while returning from Yosemite—and so having seen a few natural wonders lately—said that the lake created in him "a never-ceasing and ever-increasing sense of joy, which naturally grows into love."

Compare another deep blue lake not far away. The lake is not famous, but its name is: Donner, named for the emigrant party that spent the winter of 1846 trapped there. The Donner Party was short of food from the start, and eventually, as one of them recalled, they were "without anything to eat but the dead."

If only they could have eaten the irony their story represents. The town of Truckee has grown to reach out and

lasso the lake with vacation homes. Most of the lakeshore is somebody's backyard, with docks for jet skis or boats engineered for maximum speed, noise, and pollution. Donner Lake is totally given over to human consumption, overwhelmed by recreation. "Keep Tahoe Blue" is a common sticker on California Jeeps and Volvos, yet rarely will you hear of environmentalists targeting Donner Lake, or see a bumper sticker that says "Don't Cannibalize Donner." Tahoe is special, and not just because of its size. It is more esteemed, nearer the sacred, even though the two lakes are not radically different. But here, *expectation* is crucial.

"I measure all lakes by Tahoe," Mark Twain wrote in *The Innocents Abroad*. He compares Tahoe to Lake Como and the Sea of Galilee, and finds both wanting. He visited the Tahoe basin in the early 1860s, and honors the lake, in *Roughing It*, as a magnum opus: "The view was always fascinating, bewitching, entrancing." He elsewhere called Tahoe the "masterpiece of the universe." The lake does what landscape paintings did, in his era at least. It teaches, enriches, relaxes, and inspires.

It is easy to look at Tahoe today and wonder what all the fuss ("Keep Tahoe Blue") is about. Given that most of the shore was logged flat long ago, and given its present heavy development, the slogan makes as much sense as a bumper sticker that demands we "Keep Vegas Wholesome." The shore of Tahoe, crowded with gambling joints, mostly looks about as wild and pure as Disney World.

The Tahoe that Twain and other pioneers saw was as pure as a North American landscape could be, and their way of seeing it has never died. Parts of the basin still resemble



Relaxing on the shore with a beer, 1960.

what they saw, but some people have higher ambitions for Tahoe. The political brawls that happen here arise when those ambitions are frustrated.

Recreation managers sometimes talk about “purist” versus “social” visitors. Purists go to the outdoors as to a museum, to relax, to learn, to be inspired and enriched. The social camper is there for fun, and may see nothing special in the setting. The landscapes of North America can be set on a scale, depending on whether they appeal to the purist or the social visitor. Among the remote national parks, Denali and the backcountry of Yosemite and Yellowstone weigh in at the purist end. National Recreation Areas like Lake Powell and Lake Mead, heavy on the houseboat parties, are wholly social. Every wild landscape finds its spot on the continuum. We instinctively place artwork on this same kind of scale: difficult, expensive, quality art for the purist; “low,” easy-to-comprehend art for everyone else.

Tahoe started at the top, along with the art of Thomas Hill and Albert Bierstadt, or to go farther afield, Rembrandt and Shakespeare, and is now near the level of the airport thriller and *Dogs Playing Poker*. For most visitors, contemplation is not on the agenda. Tahoe is a place of adrenaline-soaked thrills, gambling, skiing, parasailing. The purist objects to the heavy development of places like South Lake Tahoe, but objects all the more to its recreational purposes.

Bad enough that there are high-rises here; worse that they are casinos.

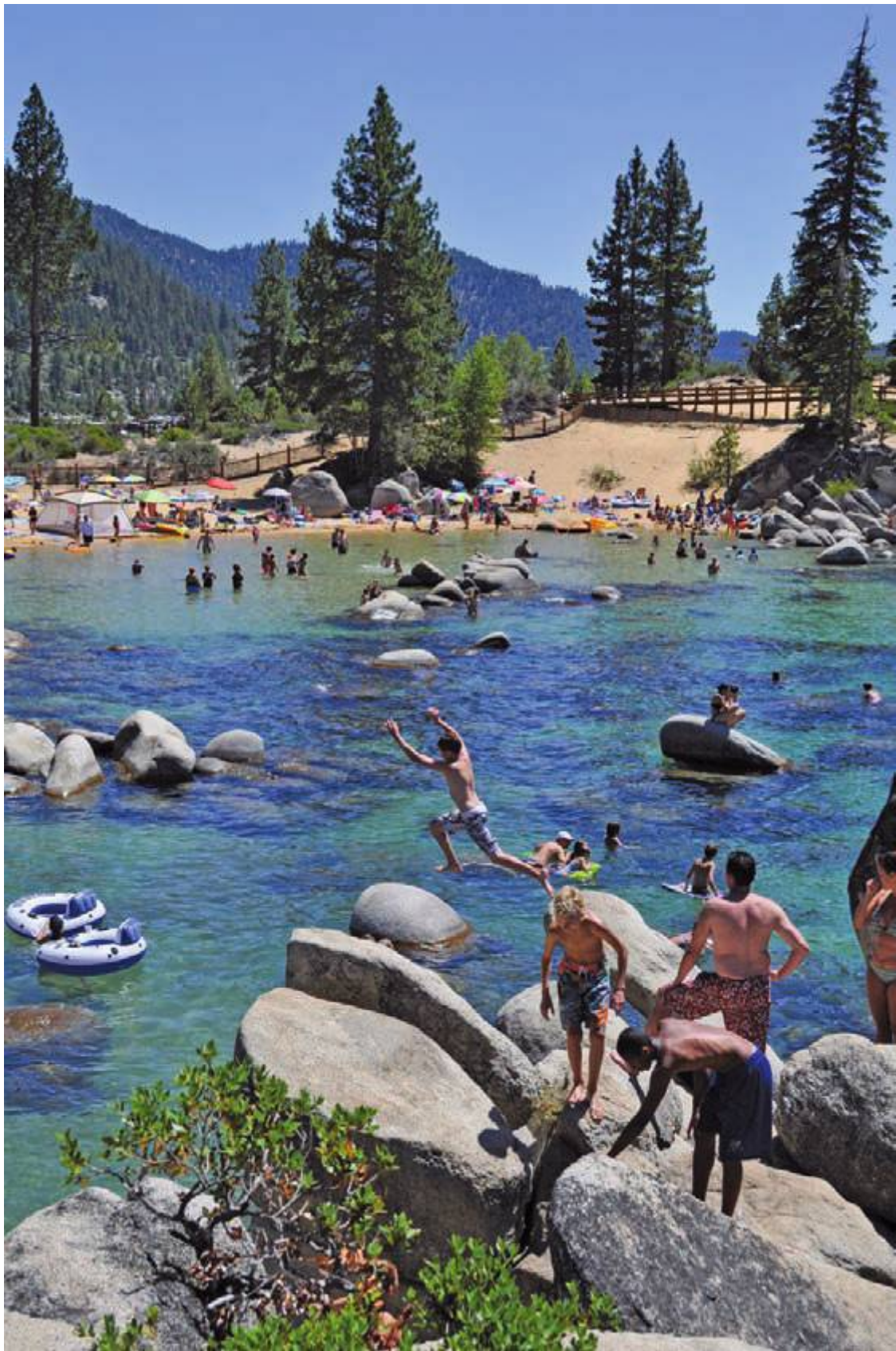
The factional battles would look mythic if they didn't rage so often in everyday reality. The border between Nevada and California, running down the center of the lake, marks the no-man's-land between two characteristic American philosophies. Nevada is the purest bastion of frontier libertarianism, a place of legalized everything, swinging uneasily between admirable self-rule and wretched excess. California is the national center of tree-hugging progressivism. On one side, there's not enough government; on the other, too much. The two sides shake hands over Tahoe and come out fighting.

Let's take opening a business as one example. In California, the new business operator needs a squad of lawyers and a reinforced platoon of tax accountants. In Nevada—to borrow from a Tahoe realtor's website—there is “No Sharing of Information with IRS. No Corporate Income Tax. No Gross Receipts Tax. No Franchise Tax. No Inventory Tax.” The general attitude in Nevada is, *Have at it*.

But Tahoe is not a postmodern construct. It is a real place, and it has a say in these matters. The life in these glacial mountains is as seasonal as it ever was. Humans have had to adapt. And thinking back to Lucky Baldwin, we know that Tahoe can change people so deeply that their behavior completely departs from anything they've done before.

On a June day, just before my Tahoe research project blew apart for lack of funding, I stood on the beach at Camp Richardson, near the town of South Lake Tahoe. A local garage band, hired to play there, burst upon the scene. The music must have been audible ten miles out to sea. Halfway through the set, the band slammed into Led Zeppelin's “Immigrant Song,” giving the lyrics a local spin: “On we sweep with threshing oar / Our only goal will be the Tahoe shore!”

At that moment, I no longer cared if Tahoe stayed blue. This region was, I decided, a quarantine zone, my private term for those places in the wild parts of our country where all the tourists go. Old Faithful is a quarantine zone; so is Niagara Falls; so is the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. There, people and cars and “visitor facilities” are held together like atoms in a molecule, because, in fact, people *enjoy* being jammed together. In the California Sierra, Tahoe is the greatest quarantine zone, rivaled only by Yosemite Valley.



Jumping into Tahoe's Sand Harbor, 2010.

The garage band drove me down shore, toward old, less-developed Tahoe. The remains of Baldwin's Tallac Resort, removed by his daughter Anita in the 1920s when it became a financial drain, lie near Camp Richardson. The Forest Service maintains that the resort's ecological impact disturbed her; Anita had, perhaps, inherited her father's unusual priorities. The demolition crew did a thorough job, but traces remain. I kicked around like a tourist at a Greco-Roman dump, trying to piece it together. I ignored the forest until an odor crossed my path. Butterscotch, or vanilla—always hard to say. That meant Jeffrey pines. The Jeffrey is common in the Sierra, and identifying one is easy: bury your nose deep in the bark and inhale. If it smells like butterscotch or vanilla, it's a Jeffrey. I always check over my shoulder to see if anyone's watching when I make this test, because it must look odd.

I entered a stand of the trees. They got bigger as I walked away from the shore. I thought there must be some other species involved, but each individual proved to be a Jeffrey, until I found myself within a stand of giants. The trees were three or four hundred years old. They looked like sequoias, but they were all Jeffreys. I walked on, disbelieving, as if I had found a temple in that Greco-Roman dump. Quarantine areas are often beautiful, in places—frustrating for purists.

They are the only old-growth Jeffrey pines I have ever seen. They are here because of Lucky Baldwin. He bought this tract in 1880, when forest nearly everywhere else around the lake was going or gone. Because of his foresight, parts of the Tallac Historic Site look like Redwood National Park. Baldwin's jaundiced eye was an unlikely place to have found anything but dollar signs, and standing there, I could only imagine what spoke to him, what made him see this place differently. I suspect it was the place itself. It had power once. It still does. Tahoe is in the eye of the

beholder. It's a museum, playground, business, or church, depending on who you are.

In Tahoe, the environment shapes humanity, not just vice versa. Think of it as a conversation. We tell the place that it will have to change, but the place tells us where and how to build our houses. When we ignore its demands, we pay the price. During one of my research trips, I drove up Fallen Leaf Lake and over the high ground to the east, where I seethed again at the sheer sprawl of greater South Lake Tahoe, and the perfect sameness of its vacation homes, done in a style I think of as Total Wood. And one week later, all those homes were swept away in the Angora Fire, a terrifyingly intense blaze that destroyed over 300 structures. Total Wood burns, and the only way to stop it from doing so is to cut down all the trees around the houses. Or not build in the forest in the first place.

Let us also consider the habit Tahoe people have of building into the sides of slopes. It is a source of grim mirth among geologists, for an undercut slope always collapses eventually. No matter what Rube Goldberg bulwark you have constructed to protect your house, the mountain is coming inside. If the bulwark has held for twenty years, check back in another twenty.

Up here, ice and gravity and fire call all the shots. It can be rough, yes. But some people find that roughness beautiful.

I started by calling Tahoe art, and ended by making it sound like a plague-ward. While the most gaudy works of art that nature produces usually turn into quarantine zones, it's also true that the tacky tourist trap can keep the backcountry—starting twenty feet past the last dumpster—as unpopulated as that grove of Jeffrey pines. So I would simply like to say a word in favor of those relatively small, compact nuthouses: they serve to keep the rest of the landscape relatively sane—and as unshaved as it was when Lucky Baldwin strolled through it, checkbook in hand. **B**