California narrow gauge in the 1940s
and salvaged for the war effort during the early 1940s, the line served as a link between the Transcontinental Railroad and Lake Tahoe.

The railroad hauled natural resources extracted from, and converted in, the Tahoe Basin, out to the Southern Pacific railhead at Truckee. It also brought in a mainly Truckee-based workforce as well as imported necessities for lakeside residents. As the gold and timber supplies played out, the railroad continued to operate, serving newly built tourist hotels on Lake Tahoe.

The garden railway

Our LT&T depicts what the Lake Tahoe Railway & Navigation Company might have been like had it survived into the late 1940s. Truckee is at one end of the railroad. A mountain, with Brockway Summit on the near side and Lake Tahoe on the other, is at the opposite end. In between is a V-shaped outcrop that includes upper- and lower-level towns. The upper track represents the actual line between Truckee and Tahoe City, including stations at Truckee, Squaw Valley, and Tahoe City. The lower
track represents a planned-but-never-completed route from Truckee through the Martis Valley, up over Brockway Summit, down to Kings Beach, and around the lake to Tahoe City. It includes stations at Donner, Martis Landing, and Brockway Summit.

**Natural setting**

Standing in our backyard, among half a dozen huge redwoods, it’s easy to forget which of the hundred-plus trees are 1:1 redwoods and which are 1:22.5-scale lemon-cypress miniatures that brightly illuminate the otherwise-heavy shade.

The initial design concept for our backyard, a “clearing in the woods,” predates the railroad by over a decade. Twenty years ago, Jack Verducci worked with us to construct the LT&T, which remains pretty much as built then. We removed shrubbery along the back and side fences to provide the railroad’s footprint. A concrete-block wall went in next, to secure the rocks and dirt representing the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Then we cut and filled the roadbed through the mountains to produce the 3% grades, four bridges, a 10’-long curved trestle, and six tunnels for the cheapest and easiest route. We then laid LGB flex track.

After nearly two decades, the rapidly growing 1:1 redwoods had upended much of the concrete-block retaining wall and dislocated most of the track. In the worst case, one grade had increased from under 3% to nearly 15%.

With the help of GR’s Nancy Norris, we recently realigned most of the roadbed, adding a dramatic 10’ bridge scratchbuilt by Lake Phillips, to eliminate problematic lumps and bumps. The net result was a much-improved maximum grade of 2.5%.

Using her trademark cantilevered vertical rocks, Nancy was able to achieve several objectives. These included broadening the radii of the curves at each end of the line by a foot or so, building retaining walls in strategic locations to provide space for several additional small towns and three industrial spurs, and “daylighting” a tunnel that had collapsed below the town of Truckee.
**Intriguing details**

Visitors often comment favorably on the realistic structures, life-like vignettes, and decrepit equipment on the LT&T. We have nearly 40 twenty-year-old, cast-resin buildings scattered across the site, in the largest town of Truckee, and in five smaller settlements. Most are from (discontinued) Railroad Avenue kits, several are (old) Verducci custom-built structures, and a few are kitbashed Pola products.

After 15 years outdoors and way too many coats of (brushed on) paint, all of the structures were soda blasted and we now store them indoors during the winter. They are on their second (spray) repaint (though some roofs have to be repainted every season). We have recently added aluminum-angle bracing inside the structures to strengthen them. Timber tunnel portals have been replaced with stone ones.

Hundreds of people, animals, and vehicles, arranged in realistic groupings,
bring each scene to life. Probably the most interesting arrangement of these is the town of Donner, where the LT&T runs down the middle of Main Street, inspired by a classic O. Winston Link photograph.

**Motive power and rolling stock**

Five ancient, weatherbeaten steam locomotives, including three diminutive LGB Moguls, an ancient Forney, and a husky LGB articulated cab forward, share prime-mover duties.

Most of the 40 pieces of rolling stock are also old, weatherbeaten, and barely serviceable, as repair parts, lubricants, and paint were rationed for non-critical uses during WWII. The only “presentable” equipment is a fleet of passenger cars used mainly on the Limited, which are being restored to their bright-yellow glory by LT&T’s shop force.

**Unique operations**

Conveniently, the approach we take to operations is generally consistent with real life, where trains were made up or broken down at either end of the line in Truckee or Tahoe City. Modeling this allows us to focus primarily on over-the-road trains that link these towns (see sidebar). AirWire radio-control throttles keep the battery-powered locomotives moving, while recently upsized, air-powered Sunset Valley switches keep them on the right track.
Next steps
The LT&T is mostly in good shape at this point. Several next steps are on the agenda, though: repairs, replacements, and new projects.

After 20 years of heavy use, our locomotives and rolling stock are in need of cosmetic repairs. Missing brake wheels, handrails, and other details will be repaired or replaced. Weathering also needs to be reapplied. We will have to find a replacement for (discontinued) Floquil spray paint but we still have plenty of Bragdon Weathering Powder to finish the job.

At some point, the 20-year-old curved trestle will have to be replaced. We may extend the trestle two to three feet out over the pond.

The one new project under consideration is bridging the gap between the railroad and the shed next to the garage. We will build adjustable shelving in the shed for housing the trains, which are currently stored on rolling food-storage carts.

About the author
Don, a retired management consultant, and Sue Watters lived and worked for many years in Australia, Japan, the UK, and the Netherlands, in addition to North America. They now work and play together on the LT&T, which is truly a joint venture. Sue has had an important hand in design and placement of key railway features. Her primary focus now is on placing and caring for the plants, buildings, people, animals, and vehicles. Don’s emphasis is on configuring, maintaining, and operating the trains. Both have been active Bay Area Garden Railway Society (BAGRS) members for over 20 years.

For the past seven years Don and Sue have been joined by friend and fellow BAGRS member Bill Rutledge, who has been an important part of the train crew. He helps new train-crew members and visiting youngsters learn our operating scheme and he teaches them how to use our AirWire controllers.