



Donner Summit Historical Society

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Newsletter

The Remarkable Dennis Jones

The Father of Commercial Skiing in the Sierra

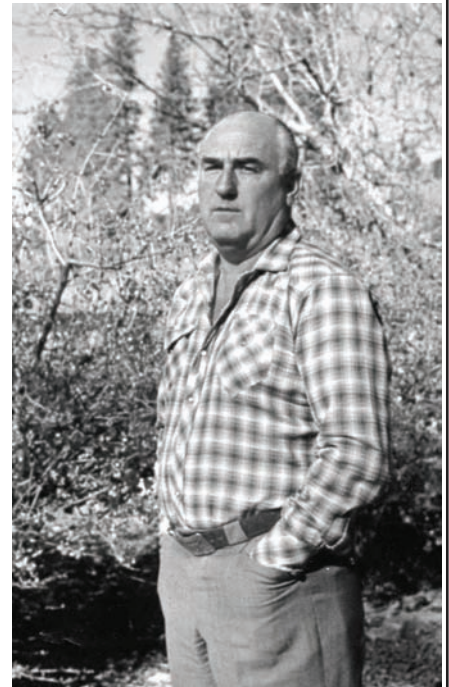
Donner Summit today attracts a different sort of person than other more settled areas of the Sierra. It's always been that way too. The Summit was built by some extraordinary people. Mt. Judah is named for Theodore Judah who laid out the transcontinental train route. Mt. Stephens is named for the leader of the first wagon train across the Summit (see the review of Truckee's Trail on page 9). Tinker's Knob is named for a Summit stage driver who took people from the train station to the real Soda Springs and who met his demise at Tinker's Defeat on the road to the Cedars. Castle Peak isn't named after anyone. There were many others whose names are not left on the landmarks: people who built the Summit ice industry, people who built the dams and the railroad, those who built the highways, and the builders of the ski and tourist industries. They were among the more "average" who ran the sheep, had the dairy industry, sawed the logs, dug out from heavy snows, and thrived leaving us the Summit of today.

To fight the elements and build the Summit they had to be strong. Some were exceptional. Dennis Jones was one of those exceptional people, who built the modern Summit. He is the Father of commercial skiing in the Sierra. Besides building the beginnings of our major modern industry, he was interesting, crazy (or brave), full of energy and ideas, inventive, and entrepreneurial.

First, a little background. In 1924 the land for the Soda Springs Hotel was bought by Oscar Jones for \$5,000. At the time there were no hotels or visitor conveniences between Colfax and Truckee and there would be none until 1927 with the building of the Soda Springs Hotel which opened on December 10, 1927.

Dennis Jones was Oscar's son. He wanted to be a ski bum before there was even a name for peripatetic skiers. Oscar did not think that was a very good idea. He didn't think very much of the ski business either. Clearly it appeared the apple had fallen far from the tree since Oscar was an energetic entrepreneur, but time would tell. Dennis would prove just as energetic as Dad and he'd change the world of skiing.

Dennis had been bitten by skiing; he had learned a bit about skiing from a PGE lineman who used toe strap skis and a long pole. "If he had lots of room, say 30 acres, he could make quite a turn." From there Dennis learned telemark turns and then stem christianas (Christis) from pictures. "I remember skiing into Truckee to get a haircut and go to a show. I'd ski down to Donner Lake and tool on in to Truckee and then take the night train home."



The personal interest in skiing became a business interest in 1929. Dennis cleared the first ski run on Beacon Hill (the current Soda Springs Ski Hill and called it Beacon Hill because of the aircraft beacon installed there). Called the run the Forked Tree Run, it was 40 feet wide. "We'd walk up it, tamp it down, and ski down it." There were also dog sled and sleigh rides. Word began to spread and when a travel agency in San Francisco offered a promotional trip to the Summit, just for skiing, business took off.

The first ski shop in Soda Springs sat across from the current ski hill and in summer doubled as a hay shack for the sheep industry which was the main income on the Summit in the 1930's. The ski shop, also opened in 1929, began with 25 pairs of pine skis with toe straps Dennis had bought from the Auburn Lumber Co. There was one stove in the center of the shop.



"People would come up on the train and I'd rent them those skis. They'd go out there in the snow and get all wet, and within a half hour they'd come back in to get warm. Then I'd rent the skis to someone else." "It was a perfect system," he said.

As Soda Springs became better known for skiing more people came and it became obvious there had to be a better way to get up the hill besides climbing. So Dennis built the first ski lift in California and maybe the West. Called the "Up-Ski," it consisted of a couple of large sleds attached to a cable that passed through a pulley at the top of the hill. As one sled went up the other went down, the upward bound sled carrying several skiers. It didn't work very well and was inconvenient since skiers had to remove their skis to use the thing. In 1935 Dennis built the first Summit rope tow which ran off the back of a Ford (the first one in the world was patented in Switzerland in 1932). The first Donner Summit rope tow would come with Johnny Ellis at Lake Mary - see our next issue, or maybe the one after that, depending.

Also in 1935 the Snowflake Lodge was built as the original ski lodge. That building was recently torn down and sat just off Soda Springs Rd. in the parking lot across from Soda Springs ski hill between the current road and the dam. In 1945 the first ski lift at Soda Springs was built. In its heyday, Soda Springs was dubbed the "St. Moritz of America" or, according to the [San Francisco Chronicle](#), "the winter colony of San Francisco socialites."

Interestingly there was a ski rescue system on Beacon Hill. Bells would indicate where an injury was and a doctor and dog team would be dispatched. Different numbers of rings would indicate different parts of the ski hill. When the railroad started using bells, however, the system became too confusing.

Renting skis was working but Dennis saw there was something missing. "For people to enjoy skiing, they had to know how to turn so they could get down the mountain." "As far as I know,

I had the first organized ski school in the State and probably in the country." It was called the California Ski School and attracted Ray Milland, Claudette Colbert, Doris Duke and Ann Southern. He charged \$5 an hour for private lessons. "My school was the first to teach parallel skiing to beginners. I also began to teach the telemark turn and then the Christy."

Skiing was just beginning to catch on in America in 1932. The third winter Olympics had been held that year in Lake Placid, New York and so people were interested. Dennis would have participated but he'd had a part skiing in a movie in 1931 and so was ruled "professional". In 1932 Dennis headed for Europe to see what was going on there in terms of skiing. Maybe there was something there he could bring back to increase the popularity in America. In Europe he entered an international competition and came in second "after skiing out of control at stop speed down a Swiss Alp with no idea of how to slow down" even if he had time to think about it. "If I was a better skier I would have finished last."

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Apparently Dennis skied like that in America too. He did what is called today “hot dogging” or free style skiing (see the picture on page 2) and was called the "Sierra Skiing Marvel." He was after something more however. “I knew skiing was not going in the right direction in America. It was just a spectator sport – people standing in the cold, freezing, just to watch the professional ski jumpers and then go home. I wanted skiing to be more than that. I wanted it to be a sport of everyone. That was my dream.”



About 1934 the first metal and leather cable binding was introduced and “that was when we were able to first ski with a forward lean.” Before that we always skid on the tails of our skis.” That change enabled a change in skiing and Dennis took advantage. He devised a new way of skiing, the reverse shoulder parallel turn. The old Arlberg method had people turning their entire bodies in the direction they wished to turn. Dennis came up with the counter rotation: as the skis turn right your upper body turns left while the skier keeps his eyes pointed downhill (see the cartoon panel on page 8).



In the 50’s the world went to the “new official Austrian Ski Method” called Austrian reverse. It was the reverse shoulder parallel turn Dennis had been teaching and doing for twenty years.

A heart problem ended Dennis’ days on the Summit. He’d acquired the Soda Springs Hotel from his father and when he left the Summit he sold it to his uncle, Herstle, in 1950. Dennis “retired” to a ranch outside of Grass Valley and died in 1987 at the age of 76.

IT'S EASY RIDING ON THE ROPE TOWS AT SODA SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

Top: Soda Springs Hotel shortly after its 1927 opening.

Above: the rope tow on Beacon Hill. Note the background: no road plowed to Serene Lakes. The buildings in the background were for summer use - the last of the sheep related buildings: barns and hay storage. One must have been Dennis Jones first ski shop.

Right: the front of the Soda Springs Hotel with cars parked along both sides of Hiway 40. The caption to the postcard says, "Alt. 6800 ft. Winter Sports Cars Soda Springs Hotel."



The Coming of the Modern Ski Era

The Jones family was the most responsible for bringing the modern Summit into being. They were the most 'entrepreneurish.' Without the commercial establishments the Jones built in the 1920's on Old 40, which coincided with the building of the Rainbow Bridge (see our December issue), there would have been no modern community on Donner Summit besides the railroad.

The railroad is what held the community together and was the first real commercial activity on a large scale on Donner Summit. Of course in the late 1800's there were other commercial enterprises: some hotels, some sheep ranching, some dairy, and there were ice houses, but by the early 1900's it was really only the railroad activity: maintenance, engine switching, snow clearing, etc. that kept the Summit economy going. There were two bunkhouses of railroad employees, for example, sleeping 60 men. There were houses for railroad families. To support that population there were various other business enterprises: hotels, restaurants, and bars. There were almost no tourists.

By the early twentieth century the Summit community was beginning to fall as the railroad consolidated operations and made them more efficient. It was into that neighborhood that the Jones family arrived. Oscar and Herstle Jones came from Colfax where they had been railroad workers. They must have been prescient as they looked on Donner Summit. They saw something no one else had: opportunity.

The railroad crossed Donner Summit and passenger trains were still a large factor in transportation. One route of the Lincoln Highway crossed the Sierra right at Donner Summit. If people started driving automobiles most going from Sacramento east would cross Donner Summit since it was the more direct of the two Lincoln Highway routes.

So Herstle and Oscar started building. Oscar built the Soda Springs Hotel in 1926-27. Herstle built Rainbow Lodge at the same time and later built the Nyack Lodge. Herstle also had a part in building the Monte Vista Inn (still called the Monte Vista Inn just below Baxter) and the Canyon Inn (now called Dingus McGee's).

"In my opinion they [the Jones brothers] were the people who brought the Summit into the modern, so to speak, era," says local historian Norm Saylor. They built hotels for summer use because the highway was not open in the winter. When highway plowing began in 1931-32 at the behest of the Auburn Ski Club, the Joneses were perfectly positioned to accommodate the growth of winter sports.



As automobile traffic increased particularly after the completion of the Rainbow Bridge, it was obvious that more services would be needed. One of Oscar's sons, Virgil built the gas station across from the hotel in Soda Springs.

Herstle and Bob Blackfort (the last of the guys taking sheep across the Sierra but that's a story for the future) owned Donner Ski Ranch. They had bought it from Oscar and Mrs. Jesse Vanderford (another story for later) who had bought the land from the railroad. Madelyn and Stanley Walton (Madelyn was the daughter of Oscar) built the current Donner Ski Ranch. There had been a rope tow on the site built by Kirby and Lola Schull. (The Schulls had built the Donner Trail Ski

Lodge in 1936-38 and that included the rope tows.)

Of course Dennis Jones followed in the family footsteps improving Donner Summit - see the previous story.

Without the arrival of the Jones family and the development they brought the Summit would be a very different place today.



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CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING

Above: match cover from the Soda Springs Hotel in the Norm Saylor collection. Original is gold colored.

Right: menu (slightly reduced in size from 8 1/2 X 11) for the Soda Springs Hotel from New Year's 1936. Note a complete dinner could be had for \$1.25. The menu was in full color which we've refrained from duplicating to reduce download time for you.

BUDWEISER KING OF BOTTLED BEER.



MENU

Happy New Year, 1936

Filet Mignon Dinner \$1.50

Complete Dinner \$1.25

- Baked Ham and Candied Sweet Potatoes
- Turkey a la King
- Roast of Spring Lamb with Mint Sauce
- Italian Spaghetti with Meat Balls

Sandwiches a la Carte

Italian Spaghetti with Meat Balls.....	75c
Hot Baked Ham Sandwich.....	40c
Hot Roast Leg of Spring Lamb Sandwich.....	40c
Turkey Sandwich.....	60c
Tuna Salad Sandwich.....	35c
American Cheese Sandwich.....	25c
Swiss Cheese Sandwich.....	35c

Salads

Tavern Vegetable Bowl.....	50c
Fruit Salad.....	50c
Lettuce and Tomato.....	35c
Crab Salad.....	50c
Tuna Salad.....	45c

Desserts

Apple Pie.....15c	Hot Mince Pie.....15c
Plum Pudding with Brandy Sauce 20c	
Chocolate Sundae 20c	Ice 15c Plain Ice Cream 15c
Coffee.....10c	Tea.....10c Milk10c

SO NOW WE'RE ON OUR FEET.



see page 10 for this story

The first Ski Trip Over Tioga Pass

Dennis Jones might just have been a legendary man on skis. Certainly his 1932 trip across Tioga Pass with German skier Milana Jank adds to the legend. It also gives us some appreciation for the poet in Dennis. Milana Jank, whom Dennis met during his Europe trip, had once skied from Vienna to Mt. Blanc in 147 days and had done other major ski trips in Europe (Carpathians, Dolomites, Black Mountains). When she turned her eyes to the United States looking for a suitable challenge, she found the Sierra, and suggested to Dennis that he accompany her on a trip across them. Their trip would cover 103 miles from Bridgeport to Yosemite. They carried only twenty pound packs that included chocolate, raisins, a hand axe, and a small amount of clothing.

"The anticipation that had carried us this far was transformed into a kind of exciting fear as darkness fell. It was cold. Very cold. Getting a fire going proved more difficult than we had ever imagined. The usually reliable "Squaw Wood"... the lowest dead branches on trees were covered with snow. Our only hope was to build a fire with small, green branches. This worked but only partially. As we piled branches on, they would flare up giving us heat momentarily and then die down to a smolder. In addition the fire would sink in the powder snow causing a pool of water at the bottom. Realizing it was futile, we scooped a trench from the three foot hole the fire had made to protect us from the wind. Utilizing all available clothing, and with our feet in our packs, we huddled together for warmth for the duration of a very long and uncomfortable night. Even though temperatures were at their lowest when the first light of dawn crept out of the east, our spirits soared at the thought of getting back on the trail. Activity meant comfort."

They left Bridgeport after driving down from Donner Summit to where clear roads stopped. Brother Virgil had to back up two miles after he'd let the couple out because he couldn't turn around. Milana and Dennis spent the first night at the bottom of the Lee Vining Grade with Sierra Pacific Power caretakers who were quite happy to see them.

The next morning they set out early. The wind was so strong "we could hardly keep our balance. We were in the clouds with a fine mist of ice blowing directly into our faces and cutting us so severely that our faces were bleeding. The most dangerous terrain of all, the place considered impossible to cross, was just ahead of us. We were both very frightened, considering the weather and lack of visibility, but neither of us could then think of turning back....At one o'clock we had reached the summit of Tioga Pass. How can I describe our feelings?"

We had battled to reach this spot. The sun was bathing the snow-capped peaks and to the East we could see for miles across the Nevada Desert. Low hanging clouds blanketed everything directly below us. A great many people have had the experience of looking down on a sea of clouds from an airplane, but nothing equals the thrill of achieving this on one's own efforts and in complete silence and solitude....we were a part of this vastness, and the mountain itself, and no matter what happened the trip was worth every hardship."

After reaching the top of Tioga Pass it was hard to discover exactly where they were in relation to Yosemite Valley because all the signs were buried under the snow. Figuring that all the drainages went towards the valley the pair followed the outlet of a lake. It didn't work. They got

lost Which way should they go? They faced having to spend the night in the open without food, shelter, or blankets at 8,000 feet. (see the sidebar on this page). So they dropped 4,000 feet in elevation as fast as they could to get less cold weather before darkness.

As they made camp in the dark they lit a smoky fire that did not provide much heat and melted down into the snow. They dug a trench with their skis, laid the skis down bottoms up and covered those with pine boughs. They took off their frozen boots, put their feet in the packs and waited for morning. "The temperature was about eight degrees above

zero.” They were wearing only a sweater and leather jacket each.

At daybreak with a new fire set, it took an hour and a half to get their boots soft enough to put on. Once they were up and moving they discovered that in the dark they’d stopped just short of a 200 foot cliff. Someone was looking out for them.

After a number of false starts and having to backtrack up thousands of feet they came to the summit of Mt. Watson. “We were warm again, and we thought that we had never seen such beautiful country or excellent snow.” “The dry powdery snow was completely unmarked except for the occasional track of a snow-shoe rabbit or pine marten.”

The way to the Valley was open and the “thrill when we got there...compensated for our freezing night...” They skied downhill very quickly arriving at a lodge and surprising the tourist occupants. The tourists brought along a gourmet cook who provided Dennis and Milana with one of the best meals they’d ever had. Of course anything might have been one of the best meals after their overnight ordeal.

They arrived at the Ahwanee Hotel after covering about 130 miles in 36 hours. “...we had experienced all the thrills mountains hold for only those few who are lucky enough to feel their power but not their full fury...we had...enthusiasm and fear. Probably to conquer fear was our original reason for crossing, but who can say why mountains beckon – yet challenge – and someone answers.”

Nevertheless, years later, Dennis said, “Like joining the army, this was an experience that once is enough.”

Right: Jones gas station in the foreground, Soda Springs Hotel in the back and Beacon Ski Hill to the left.

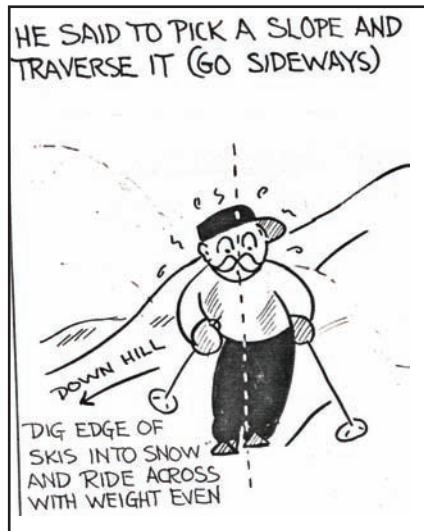
Below: Snow King gas station at Soda Springs.




Dennis Jones: on how to ski

To the right are some panels from a cartoon done for Dennis Jones by Morrie Morrison, a prolific author and illustrator. He wrote numerous sports books about fishing and golf including a series of "Here's How" books. Start at the top left to right, then go to the next row.

What is being described here is parallel skiing as Dennis Jones envisaged it before it was *the* method to ski. Since the clues in the various newspaper articles and these cartoon panels were a little vague the historical society staff consulted with experts and then did some in situ analysis on the Sugar Bowl ski slopes. Essentially it boils down to this: ski instructors were trying to teach parallel skiing by teaching skiers to turn their whole bodies into the turns. Dennis thought that minimalism was the key. Instead of trying to turn the whole body, he advocated moving the arms but not the torso. Try it. When you want to turn thrust the arm opposite the turning direction forward and the arm on the turning side back. Don't rotate the shoulders, just move the arms. For example, to turn left, thrust the right arm forward the left arm backwards. You will get plenty of power.



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Truckee's Trail

We'd like to add book reviews to our newsletter but to do that we need people who read books and are willing to write about the books they have read. To provide some encouragement this issue has our first review: Truckee's Trail by Celia Hayes

Truckee's Trail Celia Hayes 2006, paperback 272 pages.

Third November, 1843..."With a heavy heart and much trepidation, I am resov'd [sic] to leave this place, and remove to California, first for the sake of my Dearest Darling....I fear for her health....She has a delicate constitution and cannot bear another cold winter,...Moses [Schallenburger for whom Schallenburger Ridge on the south side of Donner Lake is named] has been all talk this year past about the marvels of fabled California and its wonderfully mild and temperate climate. He is impatient for emigration and adventure...."

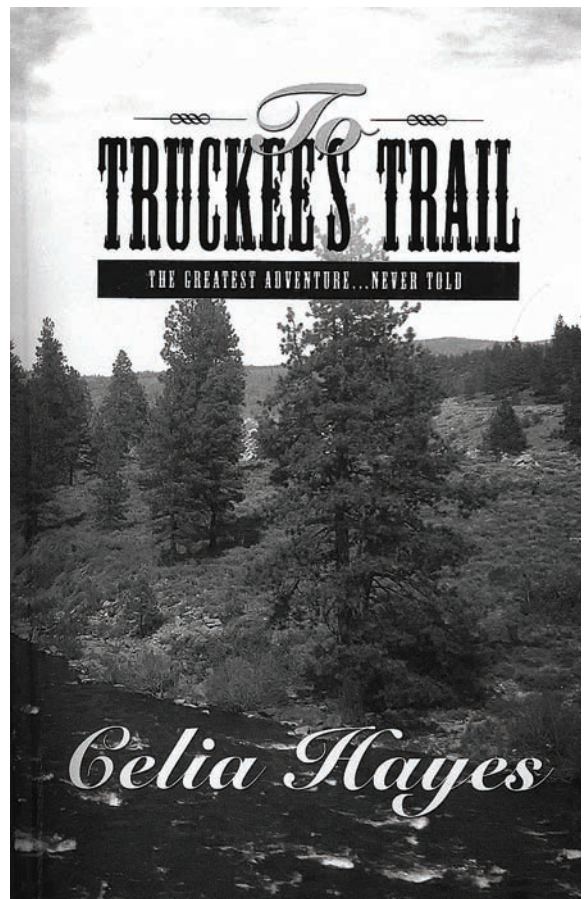
So starts Truckee's Trail, the fictionalized story of the Stephens (for whom Mt. Stephens on Donner Summit is named), Murphy, Townsend Party that crossed the Sierra and Donner Summit in 1844. The book is written in a combination of author's exposition, the fictional diary of Dr. John Townsend, and the fictional reminiscences of 95 year old E.S. Patterson, one of the children on the journey.

While the dialogue and daily activities are fictional the story's outlines are true and reading and reflecting on the story, the reader has to realize those folks in the old days were way tougher than we are today. They were also very brave leaving everything they'd known to go off into the wilderness and face its dangers. You have to do the reflecting though because Celia Hayes has not written an exciting book. The book is a recitation of daily activities and interpersonal dialogue during the fictionalized trip. It could have been so much more.

The book is exciting however, if you reflect on the kind of people making the trip and the hardships they had to overcome. Dr. Townsend talks about his "Dearest Darling's" weak constitution and how the arrival in California would save her. She must have been pretty tough despite how weak she sounds. The trip should have killed her. Ironically she died a few years after arrival because of getting cholera while helping others.

You can also reflect on 17 year old Moses Schallenburger who volunteered to stay alone with the wagons at Donner Lake for most of the winter. That's bravery but all that's mentioned is that "There is no way on earth to cook a coyote and make it edible" and he did some reading.

You can reflect on the Stephens Party escape over the pass due to November snows. It must have been so cold and so wet and so scary. They went up Donner Summit before there was even a route let alone a road. Some went ahead to try and find rescuers at Sutter's Fort while the children and some adults came along later. That later group abandoned the few wagons they'd hauled up the Summit and then ended up staying the entire winter somewhere in the Sierra where a second a baby was born. They lived in two hurriedly erected cabins and were reduced to boiling the hide cabin coverings into "gruel" at the end. Imagine what that was like! The desperation they must felt. They could never get dry or warm. How many feet of snow would fall with this storm? Would anyone come to rescue them? Could anyone even find them? What if they were buried alive by the snow? A trip to the "privy" must have been an adventure and uncomfortable. Ms. Hays doesn't imagine it or relate it however.



Likewise she could have made more of the need to move quickly to get over the mountains before winter but that's only mentioned in passing, "Whoever's going to camp in the snow and eat rocks in six months ain't gonna be me an' boys, seh," said Caleb Greenwood early on. Later on Donner Summit he says, "You know what I've said before. I'd advise skedaddling now," Greenwood said bluntly. "I never trapped in these parts, so I don't know for sure, but I seen it plenty deep otherwise. I'd guess eight, ten feet, but I don't want to be around to make sure." Caleb Greenwood was a fascinating character who could have been fleshed out. He's only an occasional figure in this story though irregular words of wisdom. He must have been much more in real life as the hired guide who'd brought along his two half Indian sons. Why did he take the trip at that exalted age? Why did he guide a group to the Sierra, somewhere he'd never been? Did he have doubts along the way? Caleb was 80 years old on this crossing (Greenwood off Hiway 49 is named for him). Given that she was writing a fictionalized account Ms. Hays could have made a lot out of that or out of other aspects of the trip. Then the trip would have been exciting.

The book covers the daily details of life: wandering oxen, river crossings, pregnancy, locking wagon wheels on downgrades, double teaming on upgrades, marriage problems (unaffectionate husband), and protecting children from hailstorms. Women have the "vapors" and "miasma" caused fevers. The book covers the major events of a continental crossing: Ft. Laramie, putting names on Independence Rock, meeting Indians, Oxen and the family mild cow getting shot, a mother starving herself give her children food, etc. The book also talks about what happened to the Stephens Party: splitting up, separate California arrivals, joining Sutter in his fruitless quest to help the governor of California, and the rescue of the stranded children and adults.

Ms Hays takes some liberties with the story. She has to fill in some details. For example, there is the question of why the ones who went ahead went off with Sutter to help the governor of California instead of heading back up to rescue their families. Hays says it was because Sutter blackmailed them into helping and that the Sierra was too dangerous in winter. Are there really any husbands and brothers who would go off to fight in a battle they had no stake in or knowledge of? Apparently there are and Ms Hays came up with a reason. She also had to explain who went ahead and who didn't so there is a short straw drawing scene and all the pathos and dialogue that would go into that.

There is good prose in the book: "dragonflies with eyes like jewels" and the "dearest little frogs." "I have seen lakes in the high mountains, as blue as sapphires and so clear y ou can see twenty, thirty feet down, and valleys of trees all turned wondrously to gold in the fall..."

Donner Summit is mentioned, "Not so good for wagons, Cap'n. Not 'less you had a month of good weather and a hundred strong men and them with an ax in either hand. Horses? Yeah, easy enough. We blazed it two, three miles, far as we could 'fore sunset. Horses and pack-mules..."

If you are interested in the Stephens-Murphy Party and want to imagine a good story within the skeleton you'll be given, then you should read [Truckee's Trail](#).



Some things never change

The post card is titled, "Snow Soda Springs Cal." The back of another card says, "We bucked snow all night into Truckee. Watta life. Still going well write more later. Charles

Above: 1940 1 cent post card stamp suitable for mailing your post cards from Soda Springs to your friends with our compliments.