

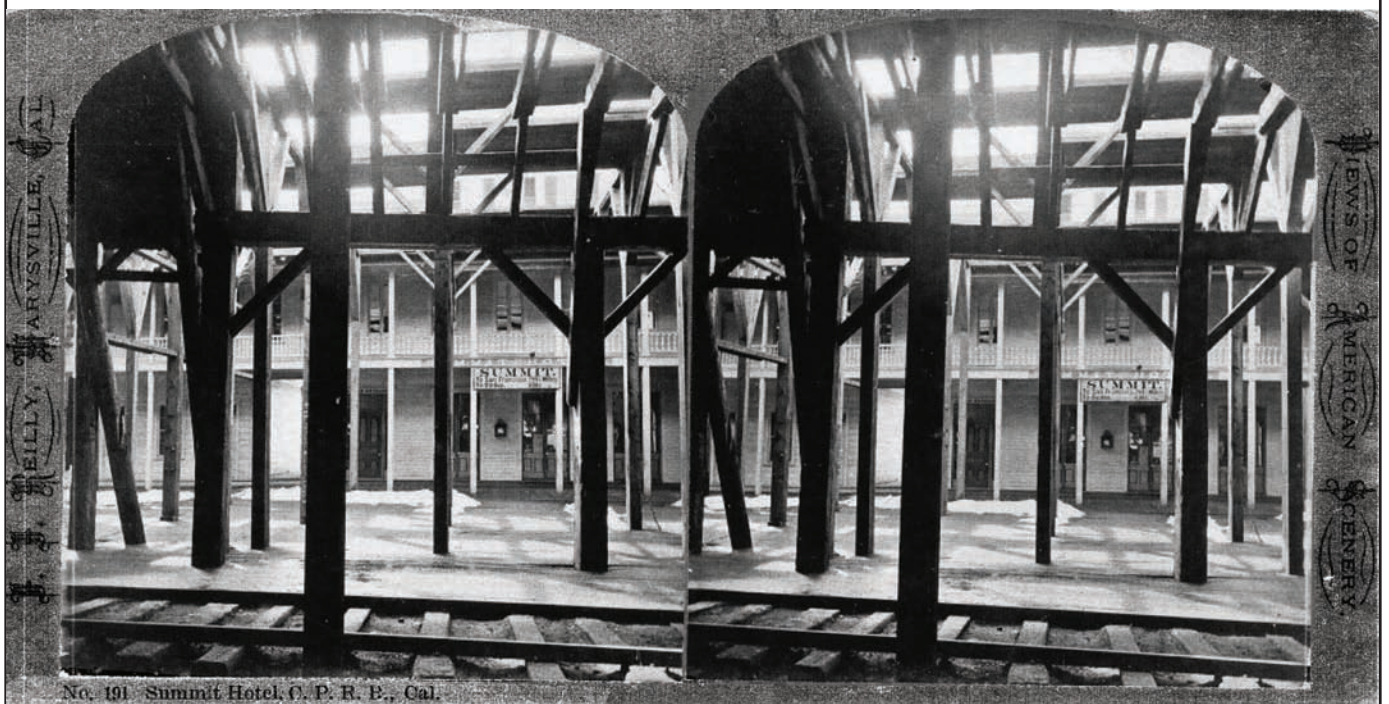


Donner Summit Historical Society

january, 2009 issue #5

Newsletter

## Great Picture But Where is it & What is it?



Our research staff was perusing Norm Saylor's collection of Donner Summit history and memorabilia when we came across this. This is a wonderful picture of Donner Summit history. Norm's eyes lit up as I pointed to it. That's no big deal because Norm's eyes light up at whatever we come across historically and it's like putting a nickel in the old jukebox. That's why visits to Norm last hours. That's a good thing.

This is an old stereopticon picture, a picture of which is on the next page. Stereopticons were the forerunners of televisions in the old days. Imagine the fun sitting around looking at the walls. Instead of wall watching family and friend get together could include viewing these double images of the world. Imagine being able to connect and see tigers in Asia, elephants and pyramids in Africa, the president on inauguration day, the wonders of the world, right in your own living room. And you could see it in 3-D! It was almost as good as the internet. The old days were not as boring as some might suppose.



This stereopticon picture is looking through the Donner Summit snowsheds at the Summit Hotel (which had a three story outhouse and someday we'll put a picture of that in this newsletter). Look closely at the picture on page one and you can see "Summit Hotel" on the sign. So the picture must have been taken opposite today's Donner Ski Ranch down at the railroad. Note too that the stereopticon on this page has the same picture on it. What a coincidence don't you think?

The railroad snow tunnels were not just covers to keep snow off the trains and allow unimpeded travel. There were facilities in the snowsheds as well as you'll see later on in this newsletter.

By the way, speaking of Norm Saylor's collection, have we mentioned we need a museum to store and display it and other things we've been promised?

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## Summit Winter Fun in the Old Days

The following was a presentation given by Margie Powell (pictured below left) at the Prosperity Summit held at Sugar Bowl to revitalize the economy of Donner Summit. DSAA president Pat Malberg asked Margie to give a short history of Donner Summit. The ads on pages 3 and 4 are of 1952 vintage. We follow with other pictures of what Margie mentions in her article from the collection of Norm Saylor.

What's so great about Donner Summit? What do we have here that made it so popular? What do we have so much of? We curse it when we have to shovel it, but skiers love it. You know! SNOW



It was the winter Olympics at Lake Placid in 1932 that awakened interest in skiing in the United States. But there were precursors in California prior to this event. There was a precursor around 1913 when Lincoln Hutchinson introduced skiing to visitors at the splendid Summit Hotel near Tunnel Six. In 1925 Hutchinson built the first ski lodge at Norden.

Another early activity was when Oscar and Herstle Jones built Soda Springs Hotel in 1926 and in 1929 packed a trail from the Summit to Donner Lake. They took skiers in sleighs to the Summit and then picked them up at the lake and brought them back up.

Another boon to the area was Wendell Robie (often considered the father of skiing in California and pictured on page 7) who founded the Auburn Ski Club in 1928 and later convinced the State legislature to plow the snow off Highway 40 making it the first year round transcontinental highway in 1931-32.

The 30's saw a building frenzy on Donner Summit. The Nature Friends Lodge (see page 7) was the first private lodge, the Claar Tappan Lodge was built by volunteers from the Sierra Club, nearby was the U. C. Berkeley ski team lodge. Joel Hildebrand, a professor at Cal had carloads of snow delivered to the Berkeley Hills and put on skiing demonstrations. He also invited Austrians Bill and Fred Klein to teach a ski school at Claar Tappan and later went over to Mt. Lincoln. You know the rest of the ski history, as one ski hill after another opened and by 1939 skiers were skiing both sides of Highway 40.

All these skiers needed housing, food, and gas stations. Soda Springs and Norden provided these services. A local once bragged that the Summit could sleep 3000 people on any given weekend.

The two largest hotels Soda Springs Hotel and Beacon Hill Lodge (page 4-5) and later Donner Summit Lodge (see old ad next page) and Ice Lakes Lodge

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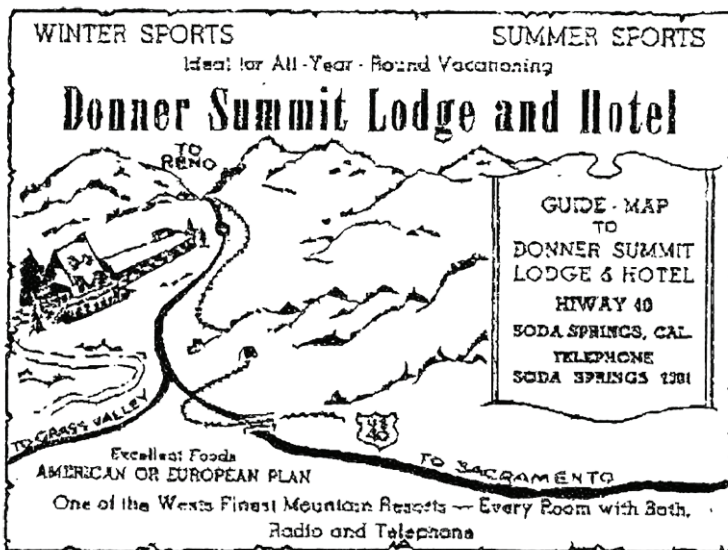
provided not only rooms, but recreation winter and summer.

The hills were alive with rope tows, pomos, T-bars, J-bars (See page 6), and eventually chair lifts. The "Snowball Special" run by Southern Pacific (this will be in our next issue because we ran out of room in this one and you should have something to anticipate right?) stopped at the Norden Ski Hut where skiers were free to ski at any of the areas on Donner Summit. And this was THE place to ski at that time, not only the best, but the only. This was before Squaw, Alpine & North Star. Sadly, after the war Southern Pacific discontinued this service, what a shame.

Coming up to Soda Springs with a ski club from Santa Rosa we rented one of the little cabins at Ice Lakes. Before we could ski at Soda we had to side-step up and down the hill to groom it. After skiing all day we went to the Soda Springs Lodge for card games, food and fun.

In the winter besides skiing there were many other activities planned by the hotels: for instance wooden hobby horse races at Beacon Hill (page 4), the jockeys being the guests. (San Franciscans might remember these at Roberts at the Beach) People were thrown either over the head or slipped down the rear of these disjointed-rocking horses. It's very funny if you haven't tried it. As the evening wore on it was harder to stay astride to the amusement of the onlookers. If wooden horses weren't to your liking there was dancing at Rainbow every Saturday night.

The large lobbies invited guests to play games and the dining rooms had special events such as a Saturday night Chinese dinner complete with a Hammond organ concert at Soda Springs. Or out at Ice Lakes there were barbechicks and barbesteaks. At the pool at Beacon Hill Lodge (page 5) a beauty contest was held in February. The winner became Queen of the Mardi Gras later in the year. Movies were also shown in the large lobbies and there were special places for the teenagers to gather.



was coming the other way, I closed my eyes, as I was sure there wasn't room for both of us.

Another plus in Soda Springs was Lake Van Norden. The Yuba Water Company had acquired Summit Valley in 1900 and built a dam creating a reservoir. Called Van Norden after the superintendent of construction it became a magnet for campers, picnickers, fishermen and boaters. This attraction disappeared when the dam was breached in 1976.

Strings of horses were available for rent at Donner Summit Lodge, RainbowLodge and Soda Springs Hotel, so riders could explore the many trails all around the area. The year round heated pool was a popular swimming hole at Beacon Hill Lodge and one summer counted 80 children signed up for Red Cross lessons. And of course there was fishing, hiking

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- ROOMS
- SHORT ORDERS
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*on Weekends Only*
- BEER and SOFT DRINKS ●

*located between*  
**CISCO GROVE**  
and **SODA SPRINGS**  
**ON HIGHWAY 40**

From Sunday evening until Friday noon of any week during this season you could have a room at any one of the above named lodges, two meals, two ski lessons, and unlimited use of the lift. All for \$42.50 a person. If you wanted a shorter week, only three days, the cost was only \$25.50. Remember that is in 1950 dollars, but still a good deal.

Tourists also came in the summer. Highway 40 was the most traveled road in California. On any given day in the 50's there were about 8200 crossing the pass. On weekends this number grew to over 12,000. It was the main portal in and out of California, so even people just traveling thru stopped for gas and food. If they chose to stay there were many activities. I remember coming up Highway 40 on the way to Donner Lake with my aunt and uncle. There were snow walls on either side of the narrow road, and when a Greyhound bus

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- \* Cocktails
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- \* Folk Dancing

Saturday Cocktail Hour . . .  
 from 4 P.M. 'til . . .

**ERNIE and MARGO NORDSTROM**  
 Phone Donner Summit No. 1

and in the fall Ice Lakes Lodge greeted hunters with their antlered trophies.

Life magazine came to the Summit to do a shoot about recuperating airmen from Korea at Beacon Hill Lodge. Local girls were recruited for the dances held there. And this was not the first time that servicemen came to the Summit. In 1941 the Army Air Corps built a Ski Lodge for officers from Sacramento Air Depot, Hamilton and March Fields; it was located between Norden and The Summit Highway Maintenance Station (see page 8). Details of the ski school program were not disclosed by Army authorities. (This little piece of information was in a Dutch Flat newspaper). The Boys from Beale called Ice Lakes their "Official" playground.

In the 50s Fran Couillard, who with her husband ran the Soda Springs Store and gas station, wrote a weekly column called Summit Scene for the Sierra Sun. They showed that the locals were having a lot of fun too. There were costume parties, birthday parties, wedding and baby showers and just about any excuse to have fun. Much of what I have learned about this time period is from her articles.

George Stewart, an author of many books about Highway 40 and Donner Pass, called U.S. 40 the "Main Street of America", but with the building of Interstate 80 in the 60's, gone were the days of motoring through the center of towns and in 1964 with completion of a new Donner Summit segment of I-80, traffic by-passed Soda Springs and Norden.

As the cars disappeared so did the need for nine gas stations, stores, restaurants and three hotels. When the Beacon Hill Hotel burned down in 1976 it was not rebuilt. The Soda Springs Hotel was converted to condos.

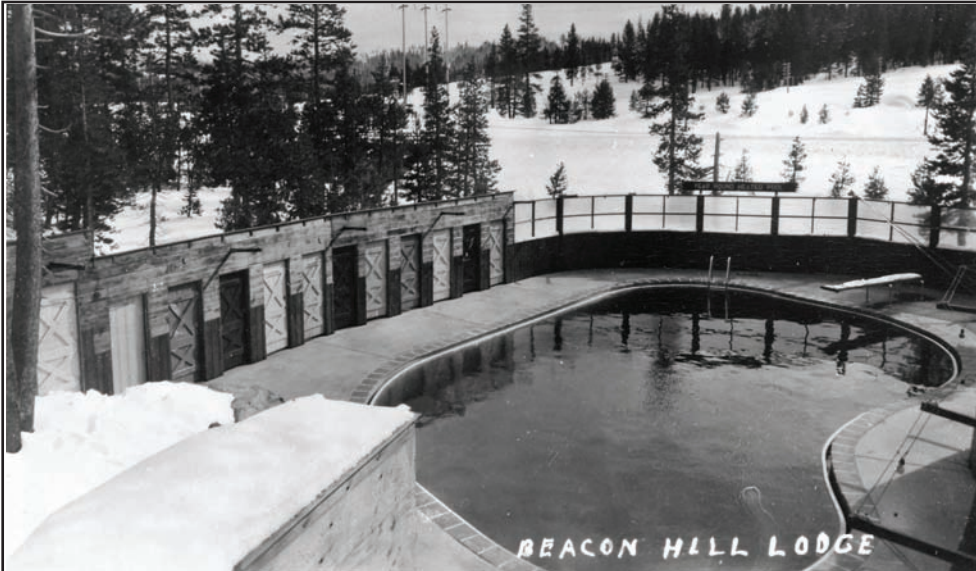


BEACON HILL LODGE On Highway 40 *CIRCA 1950* B-7365 From Eastman's original collection.

There are still thousands of skiers that come in the winter to enjoy our snow, but the fun of staying at the wonderful old hotels is gone. And gone too are the gas stations, the stores, the restaurants and the people who ran them, but perhaps on a quiet winter's evening you can hear the music and laughter that once was so common here on Donner Summit.



"BEACON HILL LODGE," SODA SPRINGS CALIF.



Left: Beacon Hill Lodge swimming pool

Below left: Rowton Service Station and store just across Soda Springs Rd. from the old hotel which are now condos. This would later become a cheese store, laundromat and now ski shop.

Beacon Hill Lodge pictures left and above. Above you can see today's Soda Springs Ski Hill in the background (called Beacon Hill in the old days because of an aircraft beacon atop it. You can see the remains of Beacon Hill Lodge, just down from the Soda Springs Hotel (now condos). Walk from the edge of the road to the embankment overlooking the river and you can see the remains of the swimming pool. Elmo Marion owned Beacon Hill Lodge. It burned down in 1976.



## 1950's Summit Fran Couillard

According to Fran Couillard, who wrote articles for the Sierra Sun in the fifties, the summit area could accommodate three thousand guests. Where did all these

people stay? Below are some pieces from her columns.

After an early snowfall in November prompted the ski areas to open their runs, a week later 10 inches of rain replaced the snow, turning front yards into rivers of mud that found their way into many basements. Donner Lake and the Truckee and Yuba Rivers were at flood stage washing out bridges and trestles. The caretaker at the Cedars reported that Onion Creek was 100 feet across.

After six weeks of no snow the snow returned leaving 31 inches by mid January. There were no double paned windows to provide protection from a January 5th temperature that dipped to 14 below zero.

In February Beacon Hill Lodge held a costume party and bathing beauty contest. (the pool was still open), the winner would have the honor of being the Queen of the Beacon Hill Mardi Gras. Meanwhile the Bay Area Alpine Club took over the Ice Lakes Lodge for a long week-end.

In September, Ice Lakes Chalets reported that visiting hunters brought in seven deer. In March, 85 skiers entered the 3rd Annual Donner Trail Memorial Cross Country Ski Marathon, a 26 mile trail from the Summit to Emigrant Gap. Twenty-four trophies were awarded, and all for an entry fee of 50c. The winter of 1951-52 brought record - breaking snows; over 800 inches of precipitation and over 300 inches of maximum snow depth. That is the same year that a passenger train was stranded near Yuba Gap.

Margie Powell



Left and below the J Bar and rope tows on Beacon Hill. Bottom the Rowton Garage with the Soda Springs Hotel and Beacon Ski Hill in the background.



TOP OF No. 2 ROPE TOW ON BEACON HILL, SODA SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

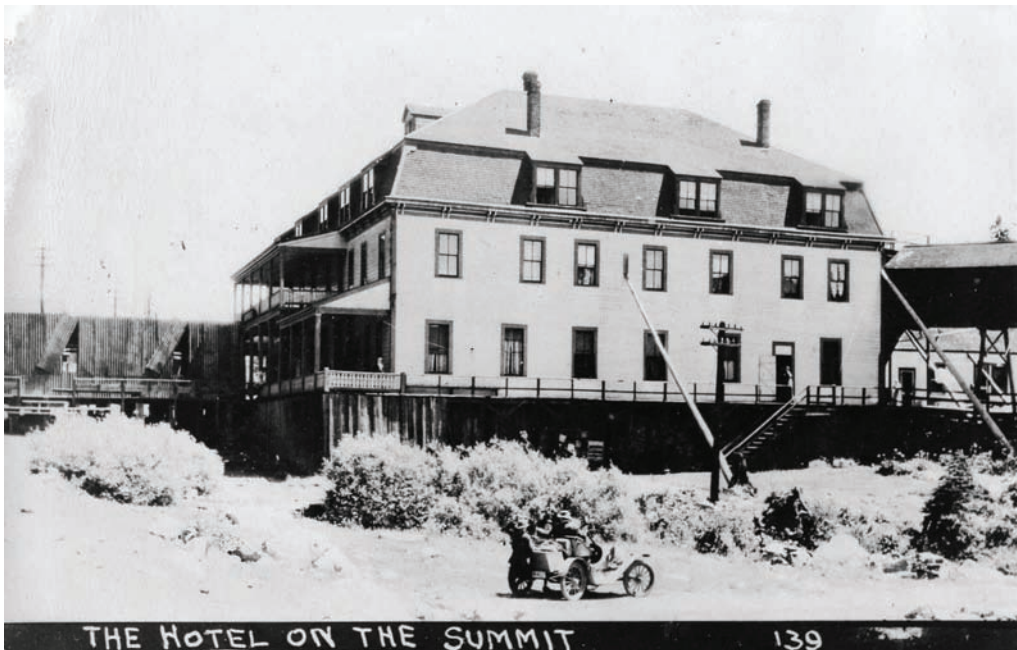


SODA SPRINGS HANNAH SUMMIT CAL.



## Where is it? Last Month's answer


for the answer this is at Cisco and is still there and was/is apparently not the leftovers from a house fire because the back of this postcard says that "Irene" "had a wonderful rest and many grand trips." She hoped to "have a place of our own in the mountains some day." Dated: 1942



Top the Summit Hotel opposite today's Donner Ski Ranch.  
above Nature Friends Lodge  
to the left Wendell Robie is on the left.

Want your ad in the DSHS newsletter?  
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Men's 12 Bed Dorm.— Single Day Rate . . . .	\$1.50	\$1.00
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1 Day . . . . .	5.00	5.00
2 Days . . . . .	10.00	9.00 <small>SAVE \$1.00</small>
3 Days . . . . .	15.00	12.00 <small>SAVE \$3.00</small>

\*MEALS—Delicious Food at Regular Mess Hall Rates