



Donner Summit Historical Society

April, 2010 issue #20

Newsletter

You Think Traffic Is Bad Now?



Until the winter of 1931-32 Highway 40 was not plowed. It was only after the Auburn Ski Club launched a campaign that the road was plowed in the winter. Then people arrived by the car loads to enjoy winter activities parking along both sides of Highway 40 as you can see above. The local newspaper celebrated "record numbers" enjoying the Summit counting sometimes thousands of people. Some people arrived by train, that's sure, but many clogged the roads. Imagine the traffic jams as people all left on the two lane road at once.

Speaking of traffic jams, that's exactly how the road got plowed in the winter and became year-round. Sure that winter travelers would produce enough tax revenue to offset the cost of clearing Highway 40 of snow, the Auburn Ski Club asked the State legislature to pass a bill enabling the highway to be open year-round.

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Pictured above: Soda Springs Hotel. Top two right hand pictures are also the hotel. Bottom right is Norden Store.

Stories That May or May Not Be True About Donner Summit

This begins a series we should have begun long ago since this item and its friends in our computers have been archived for quite awhile. Norm Saylor, local raconteur, spent hours telling our correspondents stories about Donner Summit in the old days. We've reproduced some like "May vs. Shall," (December '08) "Wall to Wall," (Sept. '08). and "Hootin' Scootin'" and two gas station stories (October, 08). Norm has many more in his head just waiting to come out and in addition, our staff has been collecting even more (some Norm has never heard of). Someday they may appear in a book with a title like the title of this article. Stay tuned.

The Gifts from God

It was 1955. Norm Saylor was living in Truckee and he'd gotten a job helping to build a Donner Ski Ranch ski lift. He and his girl friend were on Old 40 at China Wall heading up hill when they saw a truck go tumbling down the side "Oh my God...they're dead." When the truck stopped its descent two guys, defying the prediction and having been thrown free or jumped out, could be seen scrambling up the slope. No doubt they were heading for the highway maintenance station at the top (a round building that sat next to the current Sugar Bowl Academy and which collapsed in the snows of 82-83) for help.

Norm wanted to see what there was to see so he scrambled down the rocks and found the truck was full of frozen turkeys. Not being someone who believed in waste and being a struggling ski lift builder, he grabbed two boxes of the icy birds and climbed back up the rocks to the road. That went well enough that Norm was encouraged to go back for seconds and soon there were boxes of frozen turkeys in the trunk of the car. Back at the Ranch (Donner Ski Ranch) he threw the boxes into the freezer.

Norm is a sociable guy and believes in sharing good fortune so he called his friends, Bob and Maryann Tommie and Dick Buek (the Mad man of Donner Summit which will be another story for later) to report that a turkey truck had gone over the side on the Summit. His friends were like minded about sharing so word spread and soon people from all over headed up Old 40 to get their frozen turkeys.

While lots of scavengers' cars were parked at the side of the road, someone showed up and started taking down license numbers.

Eventually men showed up and cleaned up the mess leaving the truck at Thornton's Garage in Truckee (behind what is now the Bar of America).

The next episode in the story occurred when the F.B.I. showed up and, using the license plate numbers that had been collected up on the Summit, began confiscating the gifts from God. All the frozen turkeys were gathered up and put into a trailer where they were allowed to rot. We can assume the turkeys came across the state lines which gave the F.B.I. jurisdiction.

The new lift opened at the Ranch in December, 1955. Thanksgiving and Christmas were especially good that season with all the frozen turkeys that had been stored in the Ranch freezers. Norm had gotten his turkeys without his license number being taken so he and friends dined on turkey for a long time afterwards.

One summer in the early 50's another truck went over the side as it was coming up to the Summit, just above the horse corral (the first hard left coming up). This was a liquor truck and Norm was excited when he saw the truck overturned with its wheels spinning in the air. He braked and jumped out to see what was salvageable. Unfortunately there was a guy with a badge standing guard who told Norm, "Don't bother." There was no free liquor for the Christmas party that year.



Kingvale Park

Margie Powell is part of our happy historical society crew with a good nose for ferretting out historical materials. It's been a source of enjoyment for many years.

In this issue are just a few pictures she found at the Placer County Archives. The large picture on page one and the picture at the bottom of page seven are part of what she found as well as the three pictures on this page.

The pictures on this page are of Kingvale Park (Kingvale now). They show how the Summit was different in the days before I-80. There were tourist accommodations, inns, restaurants, and gas stations all along the route to Truckee on Highway 40. Those are almost all gone now.

Here you see the gas station at Kingvale, the coffee shop, and a happy couple. Does the couple look familiar to anyone?

The Placer County Archives are a good resource for anyone researching Placer County history. Margie says they are very friendly and helpful. Located in Dewitt Center in Auburn the Archives are open Monday and Tuesday from 9 to 3 (budget cuts).

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A hundred miles into the Sierra Nevada mountains, moving upward toward the Donner Summit and the hairpin turns that led to Reno, the Greyhound stopped for a break at the remote country store and post office at Norden. There was nothing there but a gas station and the bus stop. I struck up a conversation with the middle-aged couple that ran the station [Herb and Lena Frederick] ...and I learned that a ski resort was being reopened nearby Called Sugar Bowl...I looked around at the snow paradise...just below the seven thousand-foot peaks of the Donner Summit...I told the [bus] driver to go on without me and started walking to the resort...I saw the main lodge, a long wooden building with picture windows...That was Sugar Bowl in 1948...and my life was about to change...

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He Worked on Donner Summit



Hitler's Last Soldier in America by Georg Gaertner seems like a strange book to have its review appear in our esteemed historical society newsletter; but it's here because there's a Donner Summit connection.

The premise of the book is probably not something you've considered before. Hundreds of thousands of German POW's were prisoners in various POW camps in the U.S. Some few Germans escaped the camps during and after the war but before repatriation to Germany. They were all caught – except one: Georg Gaertner. He so successfully entered the American mainstream that despite searches and tips the FBI never found him.

The premise is interesting and could be exciting, but the execution is weak. Mr. Gaertner could have benefited from the help of a story teller rather than Arnold Krammer, the professor who'd written Nazi Prisoners of the War in America, earlier. There is a story in Mr. Gaertner's life in America but it is not in this book. There is no plot and no conflict – only Mr. Gaertner's recitation of job after job held over four decades from 1945 to 1985, and there were a lot, and he continually saying he was frightened of the FBI finding him. That doesn't make you want to keep reading.

Still there are interesting parts – the outlines of his escape – though what a good story it could have been, and Mr. Gaertner's time on Donner Summit where

he taught skiing for years.

Georg escaped after two years of prison in New Mexico, in 1945. He'd heard that German soldiers were going to be repatriated to their hometowns back in Germany. In his case, that meant Russian occupied Germany and that was a fate worse than death. So he resolved to escape. Since he was a loner there was no problem keeping his plans secret until he slipped under the wires and hopped a train in the New Mexico desert.

Imagine – age 25 – an escaped prisoner in a strange country, running through the desert, no money, no friends, unfamiliar culture – what would you do first? How could you get food and clothing? There's no excitement in the telling, he just does.

He found work as a dishwasher, lumberman, lumberjack, salesman in a department store, laborer in a can company, and on a farm as a farm worker. He eventually became so Americanized he obtained a Social Security card under a pseudonym. He also tried inventing.

It was as a salesman that Georg began to find modest success. Greater success came when he parlayed his tennis skills into playing in tournaments, refereeing, owning a tennis club, and teaching tennis. He hobnobbed with the famous such as Lloyd Bridges, Robert Stack, and Bill Tilden (tennis great). Always with him, however was the specter of the FBI.

Using his ski skills he taught skiing in Sugar Bowl and became the chief instructor at Norden. One summer, in 1950, he helped remove the wooden towers of the original Sugar Bowl ski lift in preparation for the steel towers. He even eventually owned his own ski school.

In 1951-52 Mr. Gaertner was on the scene when the City of San Francisco train became stuck (see our November, 2008 newsletter) in the snow for many days. Gaertner led an eleven man patrol with food and supplies to the train from Norden (see the picture below). It took all day to go the 17 miles. Once the supplies were delivered Georg picked up mail and messages and skied to Baxter to deliver them. He'd taken the first pictures and sold a few to earn money to get to Sacramento where he sold the rest to news organizations.

The story ends in 1985, when the book was published, and gives us no information about what happened once he'd gone public being an escaped POW.

The story has a lot of potential, told right and told as a story. rather than as a list of events. For example, imagine Georg's feelings as he went into the Norden Store and saw his wanted poster on the wall. Did he worry that his neighbors had seen it? How was he able to take it off the wall with no one observing? Did he ever slip into German risking his freedom by doing so? Did he ever pine for home?

The book, although out of print, can still be purchased on the web which is where I got my copy.

One day I was approached by two men who furtively asked me aside for some questions. They introduced themselves as FBI agents and flashed their badges. For a few moments I thought I was going to faint....I looked nearly hysterical with panic....

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Sugar Bowl today [1948]...a European-style winter paradise...A Southern Pacific train left San Francisco at 9:00 P.M. and arrived at Norden at 7 in the morning, every day of the week. Sugar Bowl also boasted the first chairlift in California, awesome giant wooden towers that ran 3,000 feet from the peak of Mt. Disney down to the front window of the three-story Tyrolean lodge building...Imagine all this for the nostalgically low price of only \$10 per day for a private room with bath, \$1.25 for dinner in the rustic wood-paneled dining room, and 25 cents a ride for the ski lift.

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1948 Donner Summit

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"I went by Greyhound to Sacramento and from there up U.S. 40 towards Reno. An hour outside of Sacramento and we were in the mountains. Snow and pine trees and breathtaking beauty. The sunshine was almost blinding, and the air so crisp that your breath formed a misty cloud in front of your mouth and nose...this was sheer grandeur. I stared out through the frosted window at the snow-covered pine trees and the white mountainsides and slopes in the distance. I imagined myself skiing down the slopes, dodging between the trees, the powder flaring up around me, and the biting wind rushing past my face. I'd forgotten how much I loved skiing and realized that the decision to come up here was in response to some inner drive. I decided to look for a job at one of the ski resorts..."

IDENTIFICATION ORDER NO. 2099 January 15, 1947	FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON, D. C.	F.P.C. 0 31 W 110 20 I 28 W 101
WANTED GEORG GAERTNER , with alias: GEORGE JAERTNER		FBI No. 4,495,528
ESCAPED PRISONER OF WAR		
DESCRIPTION	Photograph taken in 1943.	Photograph taken August, 1943.
Age, 26, born December 18, 1920, in Germany; Height, 5'11½"; Weight, 171 pounds; Eyes, blue; Hair, brown; Complexion, fair; Sex, male; Race, white; Nationality, German; Education, high school; Civilian occupation, draftsman; Languages, German and fluent English; Marital status, single; Scars and marks, scar on left index finger, dimpled chin.		
	Georg Gaertner, a German Prisoner of War, escaped on or about September 21, 1945, from a Prisoner of War Camp at Deming, New Mexico.	
Any person having information which may assist in locating Georg Gaertner is requested to immediately notify the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U. S. Department of Justice, Washington, D. C., or the Special Agent in Charge of the Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation listed on the back hereof which is nearest your city.		
IDENTIFICATION ORDER NO. 2099	(over)	Issued by: JOHN EDGAR HOOVER, DIRECTOR

“Sugar Bowl...was the creation of a man named Hannes Schroll. [He was a champion skier and married an heiress prior to WWII. Together they set out to develop a top-quality ski resort.] “He picked one of the finest spots for snow conditions in California, attracted other wealthy stockholders (blue blooded ski enthusiasts...)... A Southern Pacific train left San Francisco at 9:00 P.M. and arrived at Norden at 7 in the morning, every day of the week. Sugar Bowl also boasted the first chairlift in California, an awesome giant wooden towers that ran 3,000 feet from the peak of Mt. Disney down to the front windows of the three-story Tyrolean lodge building...Hollywood starlets...Above all, Sugar Bowl had spectacular skiing...some of the slopes were as perilous and exciting as any in the country. Imagine all this for the nostalgically low prices of only \$10 per day for a private room with bath, \$1.25 for dinner in the rustic wood-paneled dining room, and 25 cents a ride for the ski lift. The skiers who came to Sugar Bowl in those early days were pioneers of a sport long before it became fashionable.”

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Below is another of the pictured Margie Powell found in Auburn. Who are the men? Where is the picture taken and when? Where are the men off to? What are they carrying? Pictures contain a lot of information (a thousand words) but they also leave us guessing about a lot.



You Think Traffic is Bad Now? cont'd from page 1

The legislature did not appear to care whether the highway was open or not. After all, the mountains were a small portion of the state and California was the land of sunshine and oranges not snow. The Club overcame the prejudice with a brilliant piece of public relations. They invited the legislature to the mountains to see first hand what was needed. Surprisingly, the legislature accepted the invitation and in mid-January, 1931 fifty-six automobiles headed up the mountains to Cisco. It was a beautiful day. There was entertainment, liquor (even in prohibition) and ski jumping.

The second part of the public relations event was inviting the public to a ski jumping exhibition on the same day. Thousands of people availed themselves of the opportunity in thousands of automobiles which followed the legislature's cars. The resulting traffic jam, which blocked the legislature and kept the members from returning to Sacramento as quickly as they might have wanted, was the convincing factor. People were interested in winter sports, even in California. With such large crowds, plowing should certainly pay for itself in taxes on revenues generated by winter tourists.

The next day the legislature passed the bill to keep Highway 40 clear in winter.

Alfred A. Hart at the L.O.C.

Looking for sources of old materials for this newsletter is fraught with difficulties. Material is hard to find, it's hard to get to, there can be restrictions, and people who have very interesting things may not be interested in sharing. As the internet has matured, however, there is a wealth of materials, both primary and secondary, that those who are aficionados of history would enjoy. The internet also saves traveling to far off libraries and museums. For example you can access historic art in museums around the world, including Western U.S. art. You can access old newspapers and search by text. Old magazines and photographs are available as some of the archives of various museums, such as the Bancroft at U.C. Berkeley. Google has been placing out of print books on the internet so that you can, for example, read about Lake Tahoe in 1912, what was like to move to California or be a tourist in California in the 1870's. You will remember from our June '09 newsletter the article that reported on modern Emigrant Trail research and how much easier and more accurate the internet has made that.

As our research staff gathered materials for our 20 Mile Museum, one free treasure source proved to be the Library of Congress. Alfred A. Hart was a famous photographer who visited California in the middle 19th century. He took photographs of many things including the building of the transcontinental railroad. There are many dozens of stereographic images in the LOC collection a perusal of which will provide a lot of fun. You can also download the photographs in different resolutions for added enjoyment.

The Donner Summit photograph at the top of the next page comes from the collection. Many others will look familiar to you such as mountain peaks you've seen or visited, lakes, rivers, railroad trestles, etc. You will also see the insides and outsides of railroad tunnels and snowsheds, towns and railroad stops that no longer exist, and interesting scenery.

Go to www.loc.gov

at the top of the screen click on "Digital Collections"

click on "prints and photographs"

click the "search" button

type in Alfred A. Hart

click on "Official photographs of the Central Pacific Railroad construction, between 1862 and 1869"

click on "Check for online items from this group"

Now you have lots of images to click on and with each image, the option of downloading larger and higher resolution images. The largest option drops 30 plus megabytes of photograph on your computer desktop. That takes some time and space.

Have fun.



above one of the Alfred A Hart historical photographs in the Library of Congress collection. This one is a stereoscopic view of Donner Lake from Donner Summit. Imagine - viewing in stereo before "Avatar."

Alfred A. Hart in General

Until only a couple of decades ago, not much was known about Alfred Hart which is sad because he led an interesting and peripatetic life. Of particular interest are his photographs of the Central Pacific Railroad as it was being constructed. Born in 1816, Alfred Hart began his professional career as an artist and portrait painter. Later he turned to daguerreotypes and moved west. By the mid-1860's he was in California (for a time in La Porte in Plumas County) just as the transcontinental railroad was beginning construction.

Hart began taking stereoscopic pictures (to be used with stereopticons – see our December, '08 issue) which were published for sale. In 1865, for a few years, he became the official photographer for the CPRR.

In his later years Mr. Hart worked as a photographer and artists traveling the country before dying in poverty in California in 1908. His photographs and stereoscopic views still exist in the public domain and are very interesting. A good book, though out of print, is [The Railroad Photographs of Alfred A. Hart, Artist](#) by Mead B. Kibbey of The California State Library. The book was published by the California State Library Foundation Sacramento, California Copyright © 1995 by California State Library Foundation ISBN 0-929722-85-X. Although the foundation does not have any more copies they suggest that the internet may turn up a copy for you and that is indeed what it did for me. They also say they get requests still for the book and from time to time think about republishing it. Feel free to call and increase their interest in republishing.

Interest in the Lincoln Highway? This Could Be Your Chance

The Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental highway, put together in 1913 and it ran right over Donner Summit.

The California chapter of the Lincoln Highway Association hosts annual tours of the Lincoln Highway and one of those tours, the northern and longest, covers the Lincoln Highway from Sacramento to Verdi. The 2010 tour will be on Saturday August 28.

The tour starts at 9 AM sharp at the Madison Ave. Holiday Inn right off I-80 in Sacramento and begins with a short orientation and the handing out of maps. You can choose to travel in their van or you can choose to follow along in your own car. The tour will make many stops along the way over the Summit to Verdi and it will take all day..

The trip covers a lot of the old highway. There is a lunch stop in Nyack but that is short because there are a lot of mile to cover. It would be possible to join in at Nyack when they arrive for lunch at 12:30 or 1 PM. There will also be a half hour stop at the Donner Summit Historical Society in Soda Springs.

You will see the Lincoln Highway in Newcastle, Auburn, Applegate, Weimar, Colfax, Gold Run, Alta, Baxter, and Verdi, along with remnants at Big Bend, Donner Pass, Dog Valley, Prosser Creek, and Stampede.

Registration costs \$25.00 per car if you take your own and \$40.00 per person if you ride in the chapter's van.

Their "cruise and tours" page is located at: <http://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/ca/tours/> and you can download the sign up form which you should mail in at: <http://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/ca/tours/registration.shtml>

Recent Acquisition: Dondero Home Movies

Somebody had a lot of fun with color film and a movie camera in and shortly after 1940 at Sugar Bowl. The hour or so long film was recently donated to the Historical Society.

The hour long compilation of "home movie" scenes comes with an index that runs to more than four pages listing scenes and the people in them. There are almost 200 scenes.



The scenes show Sugar Bowl in 1940, the year after Sugar Bowl opened. There are shots of the Sugar Bowl Lodge with people enjoying the deck and beer, and the single person chair lift. There are shots of people on the lift, practicing rescues from the lift, and falling down getting off the lift at the top. There are cross country scenes of people skiing near the snow sheds.

The ski scenes come in dozens: long sweeping runs in virgin powder, skiing among and through snow covered trees, ski jumping and "hot dogging" on midget skis, as well as shorter runs on typical slopes.

There are other scenes too: longboard races and spectacular falls; the Silver belt and good falls or people sliding down the slope, showing how steep that course really is (see our December 09 newsletter); a toboggan crash; digging a car out of the snow; and beautiful scenery. The picture above is a Silver Belt racer in what must have been one of the first Silver Belt races.

Most of the scenes are family and friends but some include personalities: Hannes Schroll, Bill Klein, Peter Picard, Sugar Bowl founders, and even Jack La Lane. A few of the scenes are of elsewhere: a sled lift at Yosemite, the Signal Hill rope tow (Donner Ski Ranch now).

The DVD is a delightful window on another world. The copy was donated to the DSHS by Tom Crowley Jr., a friend of George Dondero who compiled the movie clips of his friends and family. George, who is 96, has known the Summit for decades and was a member of the Oakland Ski Club.

Someday we will have computers in the Historical Society to show slides shows of the photographs in the archives and to show videos like the one donated.

If you have photographs, home movies, video, or sound recording of Donner Summit, we'd be happy to make copies for others to enjoy.