

Donner Summit Historical Society

December, 2011 issue #40

The Heirloom

Our Name Change - see above

Observant readers have already noticed the change in the masthead above. We've gotten along for 39 issues of our newsletter with "Newsletter" in the name. Why the change?

First, our hardworking newsletter staff is always looking for improvement and so is open to change. Second, and more importantly, as we consider other organizations' newsletters we noticed a difference. Newsletters tend to be "newsy," about events being held, awards given out, etc. Our newsletter is different. It's almost completely about the history of Donner Summit. The name should better reflect our content. Deciding on the need for a better description then occasioned an energetic search and "vibrant" exchange among staff for the name. We didn't want something ordinary. The California Historical Society's journal is all about history but is only titled, "California History." "Donner Summit History" was not quite what we had in mind. After narrowing the possibilities to "heirloom" and "archive" we settled on "The Heirloom."

Maybe you have some suggestions?

This issue, our first "heirloom" edition, although we're sure you are treating all the previous editions like heirlooms, is a little different because it's so eclectic. We've been accumulating and accumulating and need to get some of the accumulation out for your enjoyment and edification.

The Cisco Boat Sled - Our Archeology Crew Goes to Work

Not everything has been discovered on Donner Summit. For example, just this summer we found more early 20th century signs painted on rocks in Summit Canyon below Rainbow Bridge that advertised to Lincoln Highway mortorists. Not all of the Chinese camps that housed Chinese workers during the building of the transcontinental railroad have been found. There are, no doubt, petroglyphs that have not been seen by white people.

Tom MacAulay, known as the ice man, is an expert in the Sierra ice industry. His grandfather had a small ice making business on Donner Summit in Summit Valley. Instead of using a pond and scoring and cutting ice for shipment before the days of refrigeration, he channeled water through a flume into a building where the water dripped through the floor producing huge icicles below. Tom was poking around in Van Norden Meadow years ago where he thought his grandfather had been producing ice. He found an old ice saw. There's more stuff out there, no doubt.

Trainspotters are those train buffs you see parked at railroad crossings or train tunnels. (This is not off topic.) I was crossing the railroad tracks just outside Soda Springs last spring and was surprised to see lots of people with cameras. They were waiting for the old Southern Pacific rotary plow. A few minutes later, talk about serendipity, along came the old rotary. You can see pictures of it by going to www.exploredonnersummit.com and clicking on the "activities" page and

then "trainspotting." Then click on the "gallery" after reading about the rotary's arrival, <http://www.exploredonnersummit.com/pages/activities.html>.

As you can see I took a lot of pictures that day, but I also talked to the trainspotters. Trainspotting is an interesting hobby which can be covered some other time. In talking, one of them said to me, well you know there's an old boat tow at Cisco.

Well I know what a boat tow, sled tow, boat sled, or UpSki is. The "Remarkable Dennis Jones" built one at Beacon Hill (Soda Springs ski hill today) which you can read about in our February, '09 newsletter. You can read about that first ski lift on Donner Summit, which was an Upski, in the March, '09 newsletter.

None of the pictures to the right are of the Donner Summit lift because none exist that we know of. You can see the idea though. An engine ran a steel cable up the hill like a rope tow but instead of pulling individual skiers up the hill, the boat tow pulled up a sled. As one sled went up another came down. Skiers took off their skis and sat on benches in the sled.

It was inconvenient since it was slow, skiers faced backwards which is uncomfortable and because skiers had to take off their skis to travel uphill. Of course the idea was much better than climbing up the slopes. The coming of ski tows was one of the main reasons that the popularity of skiing increased so much in the 1930's. People could ski with much less effort and so more people were attracted.

There were boat tows at many ski areas besides Soda Springs. At least one of the pictures to the right is from Badger Pass at Yosemite.

Better ideas, like rope tows, "J" bars, "T" bars, and chairlifts came along and the boat tows disappeared.

So when a trainspotter said there was an old boat tow at Cisco I was excited. Could one still exist? Coincidentally I'd just had a tour of Cisco with one of their residents, Hank Goodrich, whose family has been there for decades. He pointed out where the old Auburn Ski Club had been. Talking with Norm Saylor corroborated that and Norm noted that another lodge had also been there, just down from the Auburn Ski Club, the Sitzki Lodge (top of the next page). There were also a store, gas station, lodges, and cabins. At the Auburn Ski Club there was a ski run and a ski jump.



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Like a fireman reacting to a fire alarm, our archeological crew got ready for field work. Indiana Jones hats came out of storage along with our bullwhips and we were off to Cisco Grove. Just east of Cisco along the railroad tracks are Tunnels 3 and 4. Our source said the sled was somewhere around Tunnel 4. We paced along the tracks, looking over the side. We pulled out the binoculars and searched. We should have gotten better directions.



Left, the Sitzki Lodge that sat along Old 40 at Cisco grove just east of the stone buildings that are still there.

Note the spotlight on the left. Did they have the first night skiing?

Uphill, downhill, through the brush, tripping and hoping there were no rattlers, we searched. Just as it was time to go home for a nap, we stumbled over it - literally.

It wasn't even covered with brush. It's about ten feet long and five feet wide. The lower end is rusted away but the upper 3/4 is still solid, though rusted as you can see to the right and below (that's I-80 in the background). There is still a cable attached to the side (bottom right) so naturally our team followed it uphill to see where it ended.

You can see more pictures on page 12.

The sled was in use in the 1930's until the better idea, rope tows, came along. One day the Auburn Ski Club just decided not to use it anymore and the sled has been sitting, waiting for more than seven decades to be found.

Next month we'll have some pictures of the tow in operation at the Auburn Ski Club, courtesy of Bill Clark their executive director So don't let your subscription expire.



Unkown Pioneer's Grave on Donner Summit

There is history everywhere on Donner Summit: the first chair lift in California; old buildings; remains of ice harvesting; Native American petroglyphs and grinding rocks; old ski lodges; the first transcontinental railroad, telephone line, highway, and air route; and even a museum, among many other things. Keep your eyes peeled and you'll see parts of rope tow mechanisms up in the trees, old 19th century signs painted on granite rocks, and dates incised into the concrete on dams and bridge abutments.

Just up the trail to the railroad tracks on the way to Huysink Lake from the Big Bend Ranger Station is an intriguing little monument to an "unknown pioneer" (right). Even though I've been on the Summit for decades I did not know about the marker until Tom and Louise Burns of Serene Lakes told me about it. Naturally I immediately went up to see it and take some pictures. The next step was to decipher the mystery.

Who is the "unknown pioneer" and when was she/he a pioneer? Was she/he an emigrant, a railroad worker, early ski person, or even a hermit living in the mountains? No one on the summit knew so I turned to Phil Sexton, who used to be the ranger at Big Bend and who kept the museum there going. He knows a lot and he's the guy who coined the term, "the most important square mile" to describe Donner Pass.

Unfortunately "a lot" does not include the marker. "I'm sorry to tell you that I never did find any info about this monument. I assume that you've seen the concrete pad with the FS shield embedded in it. The look of this seems to indicate to me that it was done in the 1960s. If there were any records related to this, I never found them... and the cultural resources people had no information either." He went on to say that the USFS Tahoe archives are not in good enough shape to permit research.

"I have some doubts about exactly what might be under that concrete pad. The location makes little or no sense for an emigrant burial, since the road was built to access the CPRR grade. It might have been a feeder off of the Dutch Flat road, but it seems more modern to me. There aren't any features I've found on that road that seem consistent with the 19th century routes I'm familiar with. Further, the terrain here is extremely rocky and the digging would be very difficult. Emigrants at this point were in late season, often looking over their shoulders for the coming winter with memories of the



Donner party, and very tired after four months on the trail. This tells me that they would not have wandered off of the trail to do a burial (there are lots of graves documented that are adjacent to or literally under the trail in Nevada, for instance,) and as you probably know, just downtrail from here is an ephemeral lake and a meadow where the digging would have been considerably easier. It just seems to me that it would have been a lot quicker and more efficient to bury the body in a place where one could actually dig a hole."

"Given this reasoning, if there are remains under there, it seems more likely to me that it might have been a railroad worker if indeed there's anything there at all. If this was located in the 1960s and then someone had this monument built, this would have been a time in the FS when there were not archaeologists on staff."

Maybe a reader has some information?

Snowsheds in Winter - 1874

except from Overland Monthly or Outwest Magazine 1874; other portions were used in our June, '11 issue

If the time is winter, the shed is enveloped in snow ten to twenty feet thick; the light gleams feebly as through diaphanous shell, and the smoke-blackened interior is in sharp contrast to the white drifts seen through chinks and slits. A ride through these winding galleries at this season is weird enough, and the rare glimpses without reveal a scene thoroughly Arctic. The woods are grand with their drooping plumes – white on the upper, green on the lower surface – and the massive trunks are clad on one side with a thick garment of greenish – yellow moss extending to the limbs, which often trail long pendants of gray or black moss from bark or foliage.

Higher up, the treeless peaks and slopes of granite, dazzlingly white, send down roaring torrents. The sea-murmur of the forests has ceased; there is a hush in the air, except for the roar of waters. The cushion of snow prevents reverberation, and muffles the harp of the summer-sounding pine. Here and there in the sheds are cavernous side-openings, which indicate snow-buried stations or towns, where stand waiting groups of men, who receive daily supplies – even to the daily newspaper – in this strange region. The railroad is the raven that feeds them. Without it, these winter wildernesses would be uninhabitable. When the train has passed they walk through snow tunnels or smaller sheds to their cabins, which give no hint of their presence but for the shaft of begrimed snow where the chimney-smoke curls up. And in these subnebian abodes dwell the station and section people and the lumbermen during several months, until the snow melts and its glaring monotony of white is suddenly succeeded by grass and flowers



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From the DSHS Archives

Transcontinental Air Route



This is a new view of the air station that sat above Old 40 and was part of the first transcontinental air route which was in our newsletter in July, '11. It is also the subject of one of our new traveling exhibits which you can find on our website noted below. Pat Malberg, Lake Mary resident, reminisced about visiting the station with her mother in our May, '09 issue too.

The wind is so strong at times on Donner Summit, that the building had cables across it anchoring it to the granite.

website page to find the First Transcontinental Air Route exhibit:
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/exhibits.html>.

Old-Fashioned Hand-Powered Snow Removal Machines for Precision Snow Removal

Nowadays people think back to the days before mass production and pay extra for furniture or metal work produced with hand tools.

With the coming of December people on Donner Summit are starting to think seriously about snow. That's important because we receive on average, 34 feet of the stuff.

Nowadays we have all kinds of snow removal machines from huge rotaries to small walk behinds. In the old days they had much simpler snow removal machines and they were all hand powered. In the old days snow could be removed with exquisite precision

with the hand powered tools. Compare that to the huge machines that simply cut wide swaths through the snow today. Here travelers dig out their automobile after a winter storm on Donner Summit. Perhaps one day we'll have an exhibit of these precision hand-powered machines from the days when craftsmanship was prized.



Doesn't artisanal snow removal, like artisanal bread, sound attractive?

And Then from Elsewhere

In our staff's various searches for Donner Summit historical material, we come across all kinds of things.

One longer term project we are working on is the art of Donner Summit. In pursuit of art that was done on and about Donner Summit we came across Roy Partridge (1888-1984). These etchings belong to the California State Library and are on loan to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The museum gave us permission to publish these in our newsletter and on our newly redone exhibit of the First Transcontinental air route which went over Donner Summit. Take a look at our exhibits page on our website.

These etchings show a view of the station which is pictured on the previous page and



of the air way beacon which still sits atop Donner Ski Ranch.

The beacons were used to guide airplanes along the air route across the country. Pilot publications noted their locations, their flashing frequency, and number. The number was painted on a nearby roof (in this case on the station - see our July 11 newsletter). Pilots then flew beacon to beacon

The Coming of Winter

By Jim L White

Late in the fall of each year, off the north-west coast of North America the storm clouds grow.

At first it is just a darken sky. Then the clouds grow larger and darker, laden with moisture from the ocean they move slowly counter clock-wise around the low pressure in the center. Moving over the land mass, there is an orographic lifting caused by the air flow over the mountains of the Sierra Nevada. This up-lift of the moisture laden air causes the temperature of the vapor to super cool and condense on tiny specks of dust or salt and create this miracle of nature we call snow. Once the ice crystals are large enough to overcome updrafts in the clouds, they fall from the sky as snow.

This crystal or grain of ice can be in many shapes. Hexagonal shaped Stellar Crystals are the shape we most recognize. This is the snowflake of Christmas cards. It has been said that no two snow flakes are the same. No matter what the snow crystal shape, with the coming of winter, snow covers the Sierra Nevada to amazing depths and each year creates what many have called “a winter wonderland”.

The Sierra Nevada mountain range of California stretches 400 miles from Mount Lassen Peak on the north to the Tehachapi on the south. Many peaks rise up to 9000 feet in the north and over 14,000 feet in the south. A massive mountain range, the Sierra can wring out enormous amounts of rain and snow from Pacific storms. The changes that occur to this mountain environment when covered by snow can be spectacular.



Rivers are buried deep under the snow, but continue to run slowly. Trees carry the sometimes heavy load of snow by bending and flexing into sculptures like statues in deep sleep, waiting for warmer days to ease their load. Rough, rock covered mountain-sides become velvet smooth, easy pathways for the backcountry skier.

photo by Jim White

All our high mountain lakes freeze with the coming of winter and are covered in deep snow. A few years ago core holes were cut through the snow and ice on a number of sierra lakes in order to take water samples and check the dissolved oxygen content. It was found the average snow and ice cover was 35 feet at 7000 feet that March. Trout can not survive under the ice without dissolved oxygen in the water. Huge snowfalls can shut out the light to plants in the lake and deprive the fish the oxygen they need to survive. Fish kills after a heavy winter are not uncommon in some lakes.

Wildlife in the mountains with the coming of winter must make seasonal changes to adapt to this new environment. Deer move to lower elevations where browse can be found. Canyons provide deer protection from winds that can be more

damaging than the reduced temperatures. Bears often will den up under a fallen log, or dig a hole under old tree roots to wait for warmer days. During winters with light snowfall, some bears only den during the worst of the storms, but must forage in river canyons where often snowfall is very light .Many birds go south or to lower elevations where living is easier. Some rodents and other underground dwellers do hibernate the whole winter long. Some do not and in spring we can see their tunnels where they have forged the winter away.

Some high mountain resident wildlife just adjusts to the changes and continues the hunt for survival. Snowshoers, XC skiers and snowmobilers can see many life and death dramas by learning to read the wildlife tracks left in the winter snow. Tracks most often seen are those of the Pine Martin, Douglas Squirrel, Coyote, and Snowshoe Hare. Other animal tracks seen mean bringing out the track guide books and the fun of finding something new.

Wind in winter is the architect of cornices and avalanches. Wind transported snow can form cornices on the lee side of ridge tops but ridge tops make good winter travel routes for the traveler who stays back from the edge of the cornices. Below the cornice lurks the danger of avalanches. In cold storms wind driven super cold vapor will strike objects like fence posts or trees and change from a vapor directly to a solid called rime. Rimed trees are often things of winter beauty, their shape reflecting the force of the wind.

With the coming of winter we go to the mountains to marvel at their new beauty. We also go to play in the snow. We play with skis, snowboards, snowmobiles and yes even the lowly inner tube or just a piece of cardboard to slide down the hills. We get joy from throwing snowballs, touching or even lying in the snow. The main thing is to just go and see this marvel nature has newly created. Harrah for winter! Let the big snow storms come!

Jim White started skiing, fishing and hiking the high Placer County backcountry in 1944 when he lived in Sacramento. He started to learn to ski at the Soda Springs Ski Hill with lift ticket checker Carl Buek (Dick Buek's father) often letting Jim's girlfriend Shirley (now Jim's wife) ride for free.

Jim became the Fish and Game Warden for the area in 1957. He later was promoted to Patrol Captain and in 1970 was put in charge of all Fish and Game training and safety statewide.

Jim conducted cold weather survival training, wilderness horse use and snow avalanche programs in the Donner Summit area for various State and Federal agencies, private hydro- electric companies and various colleges. Jim worked on the Ski Patrol at all the ski resorts in the Donner Summit and N. Tahoe ski areas retiring from the Alpine Meadows Patrol after working there for 12 years in the 1970's. Jim retired from Dept. of Fish and Game after 36 years of service in 1990.

Jim now works as a freelance photographer and writer for several West Coast magazines. Jim (83) and Shirley (81) live in Auburn and still ski, hike, fish and camp the high backcountry of Nevada and Placer Counties. He can be contacted at padhorski@wavecable.com.

Jim has previously contributed to this newsletter in April and February of 2011, first with Fong Trainshed Chef and then with Lost Horse.

Nature Friends Lodge

The interior the Naturfreunde or Nature Friends Lodge on Donner Summit. In September, '11 we ran an article about the lodges of Donner Summit. This picture did not make onto the page about the Nature Friends Lodge, which is still in operation. This appears to be a picture from the 1930's.



Book Review

So Rugged and Mountainous

This is an excellent well-researched book if you are looking for history about the beginning of the overland migration to Oregon and California. Even better, for history aficionados is that it is the first of a trilogy of books.

“When we had our first view of the grand Sacramento Valley and saw the pastures covered with fat cattle and horses, we thought we had reached the promised land.”

Mary Ann Harlan Smith pg 309

“The oxen could be trailed from bottom to top by the blood.”

Daniel Rhoads in 1847 about his 1846 trip up Donner Pass pg 309 .

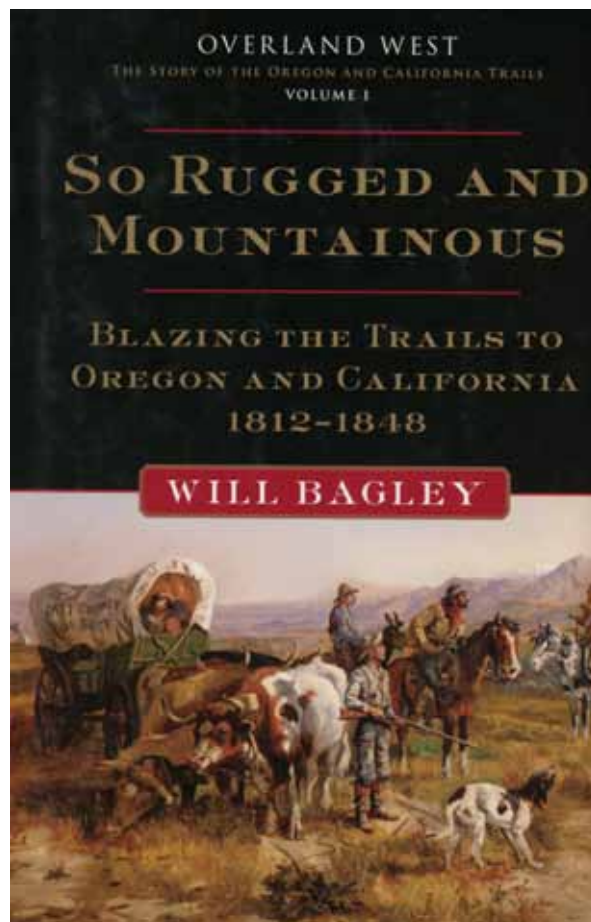
This first one deals with the migration through the news of the Gold Rush in 1848, “The era of pioneer trails to the discovery of gold which would change” everything. It begins with background: Native Americans, Hudson Bay Company, fur trappers, and early trails and explorations.

The book is full of stories, personalities, and wider history than just the emigration. It has some pictures and a few maps. One of the book’s strongest points is the many quotes from the historical participants. This personalizes the history and we can get a sense of how hard things were besides just what happened.

Within the migration history Will Bagley, the author, gives a lot of detail so that with the quotes, there is a real sense of the human adventure. Details include food, how letters were sent home from the wagon trains and the west, how the wagons worked, and how life was on the trails. He does this in sections entitled, “Arise! Arise! Breaking Camp,” “I Walked Half of the Way to Oregon: The March,” “A Splendid Affair for the Plains: Camp Life, Music, and Dance,” “Democracy on Wagon Wheels,” or “To Keep off the Wolves.”

The stories, details, and personalization make the book read very well and not like a dry historical tome.

I look forward to the next two in the trilogy.



Then & Now with Art Clark



Art stitched together five shots below to make a "now" version of the "then" above. The shots were taken from the top of Tunnel 7 (the tunnel immediately east of the main Summit Tunnel 6) He says he found the original to be one picture, so it was probably shot with a rotating panorama camera. Maybe one of these? <http://www.cirkutpanorama.com/cameras.html>.

If you'd like to do some old photograph searching, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/linchigh>



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Snowshed Ferry

excerpted from the Montreal Gazette 4/25/29

Under the heading of Californian Tells of Opportunities for Holding Winter Sports in his State, Wilbur Maynard visited Montreal in 1929 and extolled the virtues of California. He said that it would be easy to hold the Olympics in California in both summer and winter. He had brought lots of photographs with him of dog derbies and he mentioned Scotty Allen as the winner of the Truckee Derby. He said "skiing, bob-sleighting and skating have been held in the Tahoe region without break for many year."

He also reported on "one of the most unique situations, perhaps in the world" which had been "inaugurated by the Southern Pacific Railway."

Passage by auto across the Sierra was not possible for three or four months of the year because of the heavy snowfall. It can pile up to forty feet high and is regularly "ten to twelve feet [deep] on the level." It was not until 1932 that the highway was plowed in winter.

To get around that problem and over the Sierra Southern Pacific to bridge the "white barrier" so the autoist could resume his transcontinental drive, they had specially constructed baggage cars. Autoists drove their cars onto the baggage cars, bought a ticket, and passed over the "snow-bound through 31 miles of snow shed." At the end of the journey the motorist retrieved his car and "receive an equal amount of gasoline previously extracted from his tank at its initial point..."

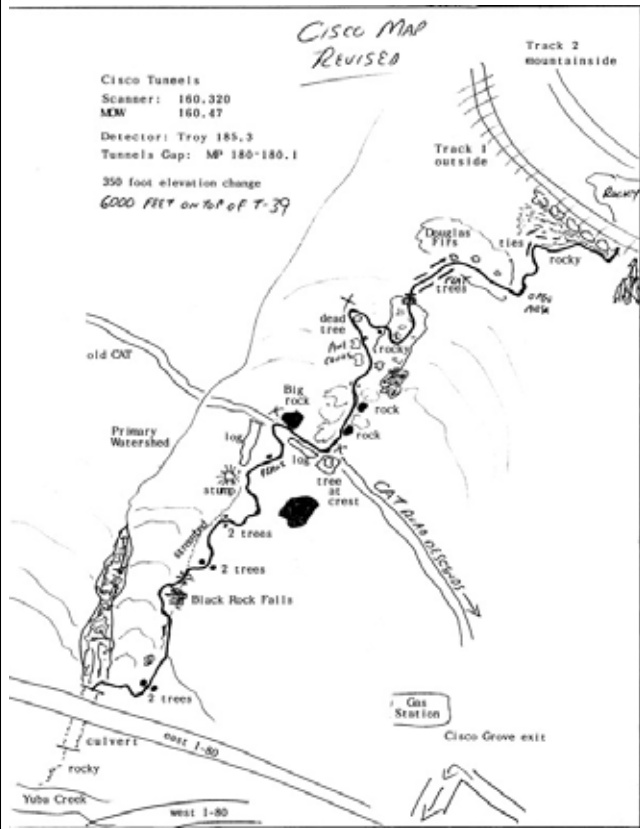
"This is said to be the only snow shed auto ferry in the world. In this realm of snow every point of which is easily accessible by convenient snow shed stations, snow sport lovers of Montreal could find hundreds of natural replicas of their beloved Cote des Neiges in a day's trip. Natural ice has been harvested from Lake Truckee since the early sixties, without missing a year. The fruits of the valley are carried to their eastern destination by the ice harvests of this region and it is here that the Alaska ice trust heard its doom when the summit was penetrated by the Southern Pacific Railway pioneers."



More of the Cisco boat tow. Above the bench supports, the wood has rotted away.

To the right, the tree has grown around the cable over the decades.

To the left, a map provided by a trainspotter.



Help Needed

Marshall Fey is an author and emigrant trail historian. His book Emigrant Trails was reviewed in our April, '11 issue and he weighed in with some comments about Roller Pass and the emigrant route over Donner Summit in our last issue. In January's issue we will have more from Mr. Fey but we won't give the subject away just yet.

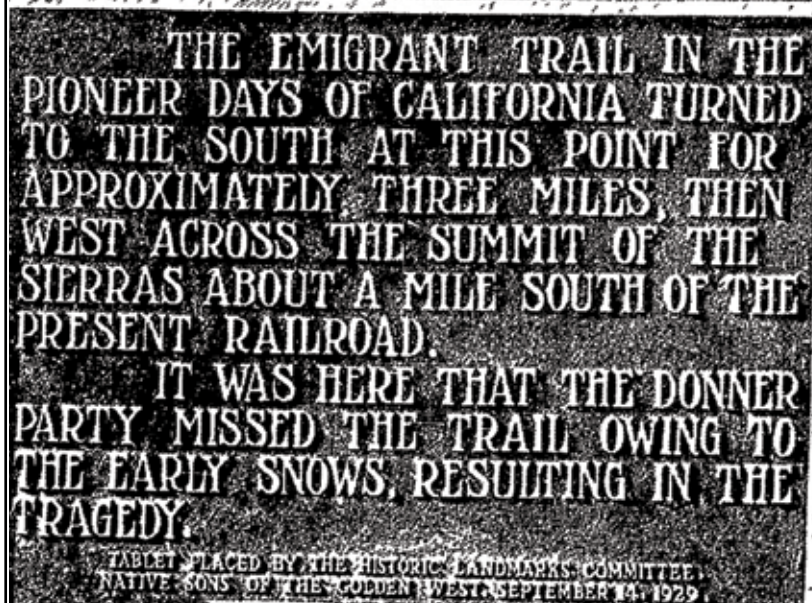
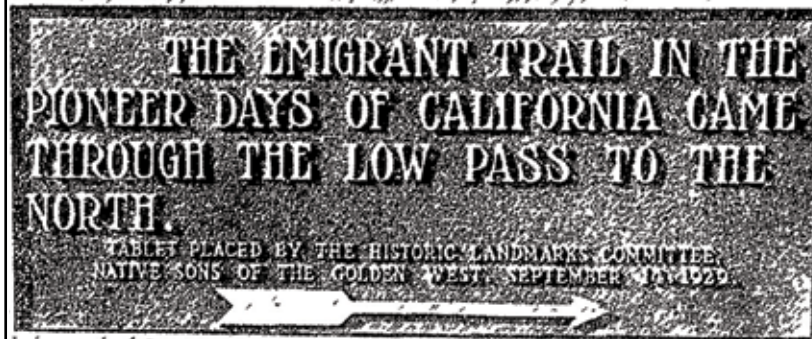
Right now Mr. Fey needs a little help. He wants to see if any of our subscribers remember seeing the trail markers in the accompanying Oakland Tribune newspaper article dated September 15, 1929. The markers were located on old Highway 40. One large stone monument was located across Donner Pass Road from the Safeway Complex. It has been saved and is by the front door of the Truckee Historical society. The other monument was on old Hwy 40 at the intersection with Coldstream Pass Road. It was probably removed when the Interstate was constructed in the early 1960s. The 24x16 inch plaque on a 5x3 foot granite slab, mounted upright, should have been obvious when driving down Highway 40. Some local, tourist or historian must have photographed these monuments.

If you ever saw the markers in place, and especially if you have any pictures of them in place, please contact Marshall Fey at mfeyl@libertybellebooks.com

Markers Dedicated on Old Trail Used by Donner Party

Mark Old Immigrant Trail

If the Donner party members retraced their route over the Sierras today, they would find the trail so well marked that it would be almost impossible to get lost and perish in the snow. These two plaques were fixed to mark the trail yesterday by the historic landmarks committee of Native Sons of the Golden West. They are located on the trail near Truckee.—TRIBUNE photo. Plaque by L. De Rome.



Two bronze trail markers, fixed and dedicated by the historic landmarks committee of the Native Sons of the Golden West, today mark the site of the old emigrant trail used by the Donner party 75 years ago near what is now Truckee.

The markers were dedicated by Joseph R. Knowland, chairman of the historic landmark committee and publisher of The Oakland TRIBUNE.

The event was followed by a dinner given by the Nevada county promotion board in Truckee.

Other speakers included P. M. Weddell, who has spent several years in marking out the emigrant trail, and General C. F. McGlashan,

historian of the Donner party. The dedication was one feature of an all-day program arranged by the promotion board. A motor tour of the historic region, participated in by representatives of the Native Sons, the executive committee of the Sacramento valley regional advisor council of the California State Chamber of Commerce, and members of the promotion board was followed by a meeting of the advisory council.

At the dinner, Charles H. Roberts of Grass Valley, secretary of the promotion board, praised the residents of Truckee and its environs for their support of the historic landmarks project, and urged that the work be continued.