

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

December, 2012 issue #52



Auburn Ski Club & Popularizing Winter Sports

“It takes courage to start from the top of a scaffold built 85 feet high on the crest of a hill that is 45 degrees at better than 50 miles per hour.”

San Francisco Examiner January 14, 1935

The “sky riders” as one headline called skiers flying over a Berkeley street in January, 1935, were flying in a bid to change skiing from a spectator to a participant sport. The event came from Donner Summit.

“Snow may be just fun to you and I but to the Auburn Ski Club it is a real sport and on which they hope to make this state just as important as it is in all others.”

San Francisco Call Bulletin
January 12, 1935

Into the 1930’s skiing was a spectator sport. People watched ski jumping and slalom competitions. Very few did cross country skiing. There was no downhill skiing like today. To make skiing popular, changes were needed: ways to get up mountains without climbing, places for skiers to stay, roads that were open in winter time, and equipment that made skiing easier.

For most of those changes to happen it was like the chicken and the egg. No one would build lodges or pay to keep the highways open if there were no visitors. No one had an incentive to invent ski lifts if there was not a demand. But skiing could not become popular without changes.

Into this conundrum came The Auburn Ski Club (now headquartered at Boreal Ski Area on I-80) and its founder, Wendell Robie. Winter sports were increasing in popularity in the east and in Europe in the early 1930’s but California was known for its sunshine and oranges. The Sierra and things like Donner Summit’s average 34 foot snowfall were well-kept secrets. In fact, people couldn’t really get to the





higher elevations of the Sierra in winter.

California was gaining recognition as a skiing center although its slopes were not as well known as those in the east. For example Berkeley professor Dr. Joel Hildebrand had been selected as the manager of the “U.S. Olympic games sports team” and the team trained on Donner Summit.

At Cisco Grove the Auburn Ski Club built ski jumps, ski trails, a slalom course, and a lodge (much of that now covered by I-80). The ski area was built for members’ use of course, but a major goal of the club was to popularize California winter sports. Through creative publicity, the club was successful in convincing the State to keep Highway 40 open year-round beginning in 1931. They held ski jumping exhibitions not only for the competition but to attract the public and increase

the awareness of winter sports. Cisco Grove became a center for winter sports activity attracting athletes from across the nation and Europe. The publicity that came from that was not enough though to accomplish the dream of making winter sports popular to a wide segment of the population.

The creative minds at the Auburn Ski Club came up with a novel idea in 1934 to attract attention to winter sports and what the Sierra had to offer. It was hard to get people to come the mountains to see what winter sports were all about. The logical conclusion then was, bring the winter sports to the people who were not in the mountains.

“To stimulate interest in California’s winter sports” (S.F. Chronicle 1/13/35) the Auburn Ski Club decided to hold a ski jumping exhibition in Berkeley, California. That’s a tall order because Berkeley, although it is hilly, is not known as a winter sports mecca. It does not snow in Berkeley for one thing. It’s a city for another, and it has no ski runs.

The first year of the event was 1934 and it attracted thousands to watch but the club lost money. 1935’s even was bigger. It had a bigger jump, more fencing, more spectators, the Auburn militia was used for policing, and the event was sanctioned by the California Ski Association.

The club spent thousands of dollars building a ski tower, organizing, hauling tons of snow (14,000 cubic feet) from Troy (just up the hill from Cisco Grove and today a road off of Old 40) and transporting and lodging competitors.

Snow came Friday and trucked up Friday and Saturday guarded by three “blue coated watchdogs of the law.” to prevent the ski hill from being stripped bare by Berkeley boys and leaving it “as bare as a turkey’s interior framework the day after Christmas.”

Oakland Tribune
January 13, 1935



Berkeley Gazette January 14, 1935

editor:
Bill Oudegeest
209-606-6859
info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

Unless otherwise noted, the photographs and other historical ephemera in The Heirloom's pages come from the Norm Saylor collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society

An 85 foot tower was built at the head of Hearst Ave. adjacent to the U.C. campus (see page 1). This was a big tower. Its jumping run had a 45 degree angle and was 170 feet long. It was six feet wide at the top and 12 feet wide at the bottom and used 10,000 board feet of lumber.

The area was fenced to prevent “free riders” but even so more thousands of people watched the event for free than paid the 25 cent and 50 cent admissions. The Oakland Tribune estimated that 13,000 watched and only three thousand paid.

In 1935 seven train car loads of snow arrived in Berkeley from the Sierra at the beginning of January but it was raining and the snow melted. The club

decided to try again the next weekend and another seven carloads of snow arrived. The snow was unloaded into trucks and driven up the hill. There crews shoveled the snow onto the tower and the landing area.

The first weekend’s snow was offered to the Berkeley Recreation department after the first attempt was postponed. Berkeley refused the “gesture of good will” because of the “danger to life and limb.... in the free for all snow battle that would be certain to ensue.” (Berkeley Gazette 1/4/35)

The 1934 event showed the need for adequate policing because in 1934 kids took away enough snow so that, “when the champion skiers went to stop, they frequently landed on earth instead of snow, and it was too bad.” (San Francisco Commercial News 1/15/35) Police had to guard the snow filled rail cars to protect those from the Berkeley kids too.

The competition attracted “sky riders” from across the nation. 30 “ace jumpers” were sent by ski clubs from Chicago to Oregon, and California.

Each jumper got one trial jump and then “2 leaps by each man... were used for scoring.” (Oakland Sports Tribune 1/14/35). Form counted equal to distance and was judged by three judges including Wendell Robie. Each category was scored on a twenty point system so that 40 was the maximum. The longest jump was by Roy Mikkelson, 139 feet. Mikkelson was a clerk at the Auburn Lumber Co. and a 1932 member of the U.S. Olympic team and national champion in 1934.

Between the jumps, there was an exhibition of fancy skiing by the former women’s national cross country ski champion, Sigrid Stramstad Laming.

More of the story and lots more pictures next month.



Rolf Wigaard came in second
Oakland Post Enquirer January 14, 1935

This article would not have been possible without the help of Bill Clark, executive director of the Auburn Ski Club and the Western States Ski Sport Museum at Boreal. He loaded our research staff down with a huge folder full of press clippings, pictures, and a couple of books of bound ski magazines. Thanks Bill.

T.C. Wohlbruck, Collector

In the past two issues of The Heirloom our major articles were about T.C. Wohlbruck, his photography and his pioneering, developing his “canteen service stations.” Today Quick Marts and 7 Elevens can be found everywhere but in those days when cars were new, the idea was a real innovation. He built some of the first at Emigrant Gap, Echo Summit (which still survives), and Donner Lake.

Besides his entrepreneurial spirit and photographic abilities, T.C. also had a love for history which led to collecting and preserving. Eventually he built a giant collection of western memorabilia. He had all kinds of wagons, trucks and cars. He also collected, according to his nephew, western furniture, ore specimens, tapestries, paintings, harnesses, saddle guns, and artifacts of the Donner Party. At least part of his reasoning for building his canteen service station at Donner Lake was to preserve the site of the Donner Party encampment. Tourists were carrying off pieces and he offered to be caretaker as well as entrepreneur.

Summers were devoted to exploring and investigating and he ranged far in his collecting. Some of his investigating was local though. The Donner Emigrant Memorial was supposed to have been placed on the site of the Breen Cabin. That spot had been located by a Donner Party survivor. T.C. thought differently and he went with C.F. McGlashan, and John Cabona in 1921 to do some investigating.

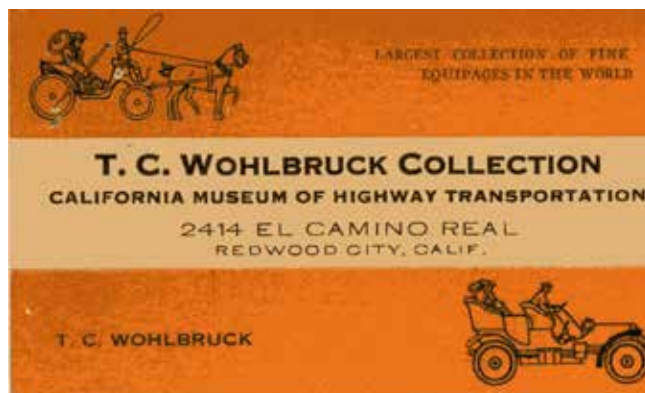
They found the site some distance from the monument just under the topsoil. There they found hearth stones, charcoal, and other artifacts.

In a 1934 letter (See page 6) to the “Century of Progress” international exposition in Chicago Wohlbruck asked whether they would like to rent all or part of his collection of vehicles for the coming summer, “it’s the “largest and most attractive lot of horse drawn vehicles and early automobiles in the entire world.” The whole collection was in “as is” condition in “no way made over....”

“I have in all about one hundred and fifty horse drawn vehicles and seventy five early autos. The carriages are of every conceivable style and description dating from the ox cart, covered wagon that actually crossed the plains in the early fifties, genuine Concord coaches, a road coach built by Kimball and Co. of Chicago and it won the first prize at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893.... sporting rigs of every nature and description...wax figures of olden days, with wigs of natural hair dressed as of the seventies, eighties, and nineties costumes galore of those periods....

“...I have been told my collection is not only colossal but wholly in a class by itself.

“...My equipages have been purchased from the original owners, Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, Mr. Walter Hobart, Mr. W.H. Crocker, Senator Clark the copper king of Montana “Lucky” Baldwin in short, most all of the multi-millionaires of the west, the Pullmans of Chicago etc.”





T.C. Wohlbruck "exploring and investigating"

To house his ever growing collection T.C. had a museum at 2414 El Camino Real in Redwood City (bottom previous page). The contents later moved to San Jose in 1935 but there the collection never opened to the public.

T.C. offered his collection to the State of California but was refused. Just before he died he signed an agreement to sell the collection to the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan. It took 30 flat cars to transport the materials to Dearborn.

Some of his collection went to the Los Angeles Museum where at least one automobile can be seen during special first Friday of the month tours. Much of his other material in Los Angeles is not on display according to a museum official.

San Francisco Mercury Free

CALIFORNIA, MONDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 30, 1936.

Ted Wohlbruck, Antiquarian, Dies Suddenly

Rites Today For Noted School Photographer, Old West Collector.

A life dedicated to preserving relics of the old West for the education and enjoyment of future

As Flames Razed



Bear Valley, Bear and Yuba Rivers from Lookout Point, Emigrant Gap, California.

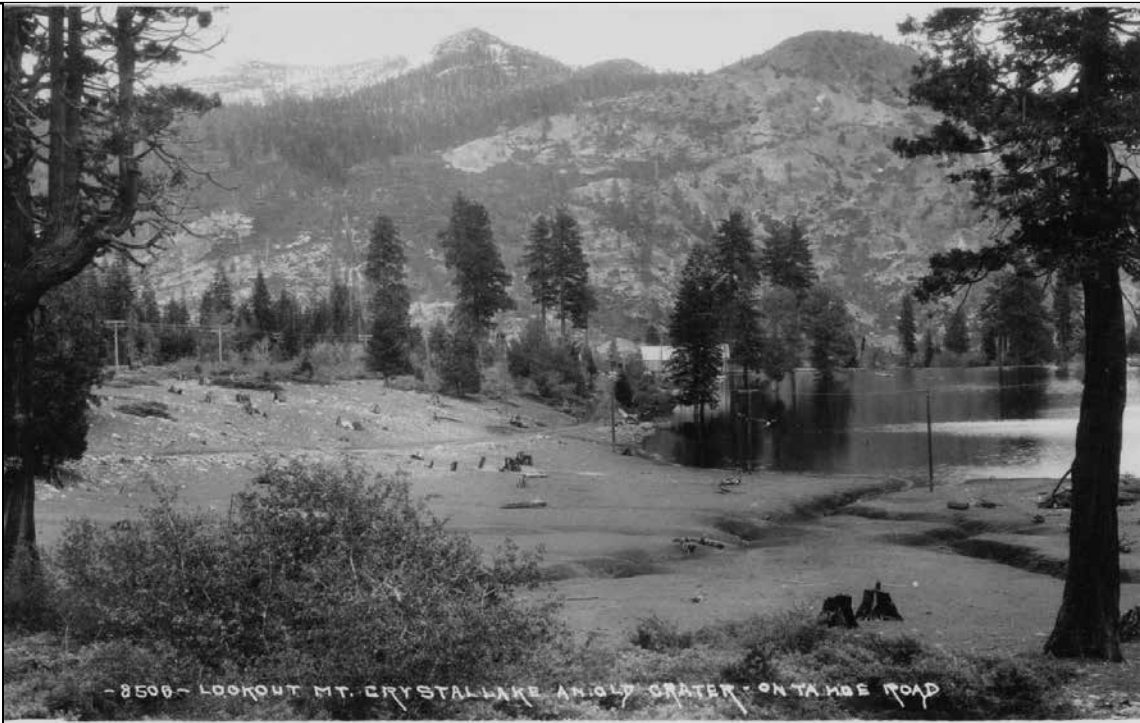
WOHLBRUCK'S LOOKOUT POINT

Cafe—Coffee Shop—Lunch—Soda Fountain Service.
Ham (what am I) and Eggs with Hills' Freshly Made Coffee All Day. S. F. Prices.
4-Pump Gas Station.

The Best for a Little Less

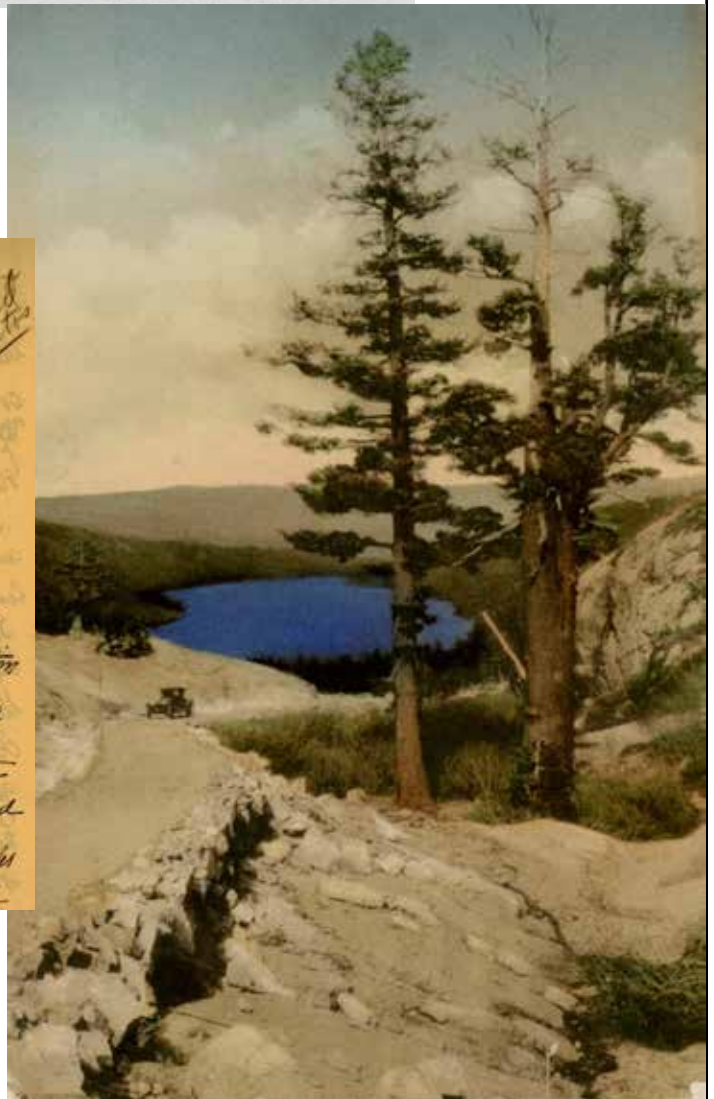
one of T.C.'s postcards of the Donner Lake Camp which sat at the western end of Donner Lake.





Left, T.C's postcard of Crystal Lake which is off of today's Yuba Gap freeway exit. The train used to stop at the Crystal House Hotel there and the Lincoln Highway (left side of the picture) went by.

Below, postcard of Donner Lake from Donner Summit, the Lincoln Highway is on the left.



Above is the 1934 letter T.C. wrote to the "Executive Committee" of the "Century of Progress" in Chicago offering his collection for the exposition, "I believe I can substantiate my claim that I have the largest and most attractive lot of horse drawn vehicles and early automobiles in the entire world..."

His proposal was refused.

More from the T.C. Wohlbruck Files

Right, a post card of the Lincoln Highway at Emigrant Gap, site of one of the "canteen service stations." Traveling along I-80 you can still see this spot up above the freeway.



Below, a postcard of the Lincoln Highway along the Yuba River just about where the I-80 overpass is today.

Bottom, postcard of Lake Van Norden not long after it had been enlarged. It had been built by the Yuba Canal Co. in 1900 and enlarged by PGE in about 1915. The dam was breached in 1976 after an attempt to raise the dam by a foot was rejected by the State.

The ad is for T.C.'s photo studio in Reno in case you have photo needs.



**LEAVING RENO
CHRISTMAS PHOTOGRAPHS
AT HALF PRICE**

**POSITIVELY LEAVING JAN. 1st.
FOR WASHINGTON, D. C.**

Have large quantity of exclusive, high grade artist proofs, folders, etc.—latest styles and large assortment—which I must dispose of at once. My loss, your gain. Sit at once. Get first choice. Nothing more acceptable for Christmas gifts than a good photograph of the children, the family, or the old folks. No extra charge for groups. Same high standard of finish and workmanship, \$2.00 up. Nothing over \$12.00. These are all the \$35 kind. Please Sit for appointment.

The Craftsman Studio
T. C. WOHLBRUCK, Prop.
119 1-2 Virginia St. Reno, Nevada



The car in the photo above and to the right, or one like it, appears in many of Wohlbruck's postcards. It is speculated that the auto is T.C. Wohlbruck's traveling car.



From the DSHS Archives



Snow Travel in the Old Days



Top, after the horse drawn sleds were abandoned after a tragic railroad accident (not suitable for a family publication) Sugar Bowl used tractor pulled sleds to move skiers from the Norden train station to Sugar bowl. Middle left, Soda Springs, 1943. That's a Tucker Snowcat right at the corner of Old 40 and Soda Springs Rd. Middle right, Bombadier school bus being tested by PGE. Bottom, a 1937 snowmachine, an automobile fitted with treads. Donner Summit gets an average of 34 feet of snow a year.

Book Video Review

The Transcontinental Railroad

Our reviews department decided to branch out this month with a video review instead of our monthly book reviews. This video came to our attention because Phil Sexton, who works at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento recommended it for the re-enactments of hard rock drilling. Faithful readers will remember we were looking for information about how the drilling for the Summit tunnels was done and with what. That's another story though.

This video gives a good overview of both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads as they built the transcontinental. They do not go into the detail that the various books on the subject do but it gives a different perspective just because it's a video and so it's visual. It's also faster than reading a book.

Through interviews with railroad historians, the use of 19th century photographs, beautiful contemporary photographs, quotations and re-enactments the viewer learns about the building of the railroad, the technical manifestation of Manifest Destiny.

The video covers the background of gold, the Civil War, military needs, and Congress' desires. It goes into the personalities like Theodore Judah the salesman, visionary, surveyor, entrepreneur, and chief engineer who actually started the ball rolling.

Familiar stories are covered: The Big 4, Indians, criminals, graft and corruption, and the meeting point in Promontory Point Utah six years after the start in Sacramento in August of 1863.

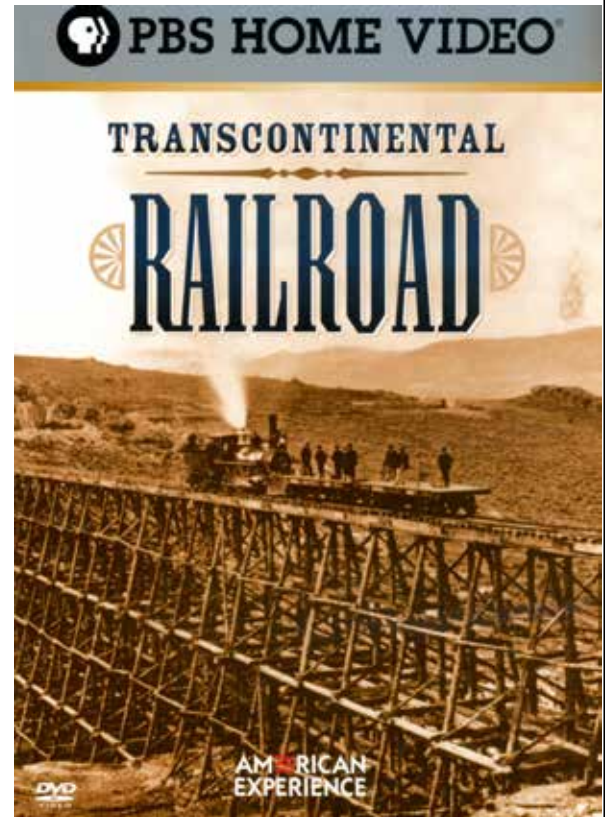
Finally the video covers the effects of the railroad to the Indians, the nation, trade, game, the environment, towns and development of the west, communication, and unification of the country.

It is a good introduction to the subject as it switches from Union Pacific to Central Pacific as it follows the history of the building. The visuals and re-enactments should sit in your "mind's eye" if you decide to delve further into the subject by reading any of the many book about the railroad. You will find reviews of some of those on our website.

Maybe of most interest for us is the story of the crossing of the Sierra Summit. The viewer learns about the Chinese, danger and living conditions; Tunnel 6; nitroglycerine; how much more difficult the Sierra challenge was compared to the UPRR's work; how tunnel 6 was built; and the bypassing of the Summit so construction could continue in the Truckee canyon while Tunnel 6 was still being built. There are a number of good scenes re-enacting hard rock drilling with tools like those used by the Chinese in 1866 and 67 when the Summit tunnels were being constructed.

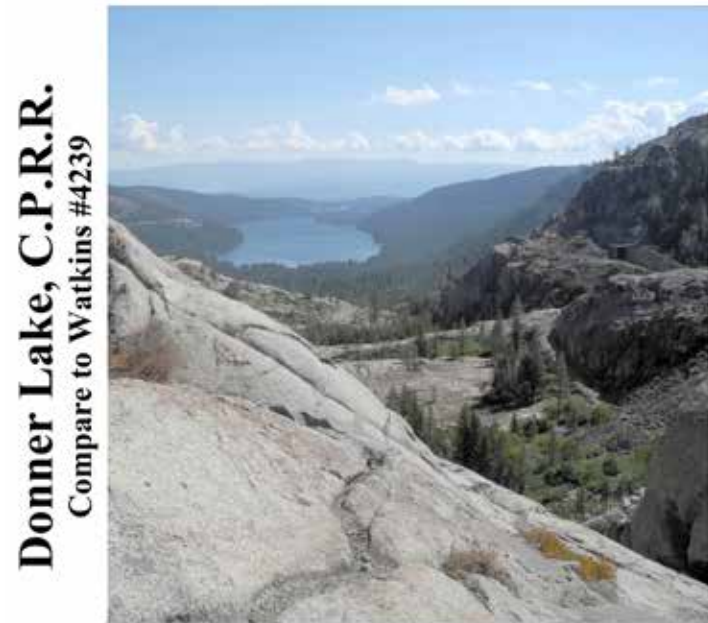
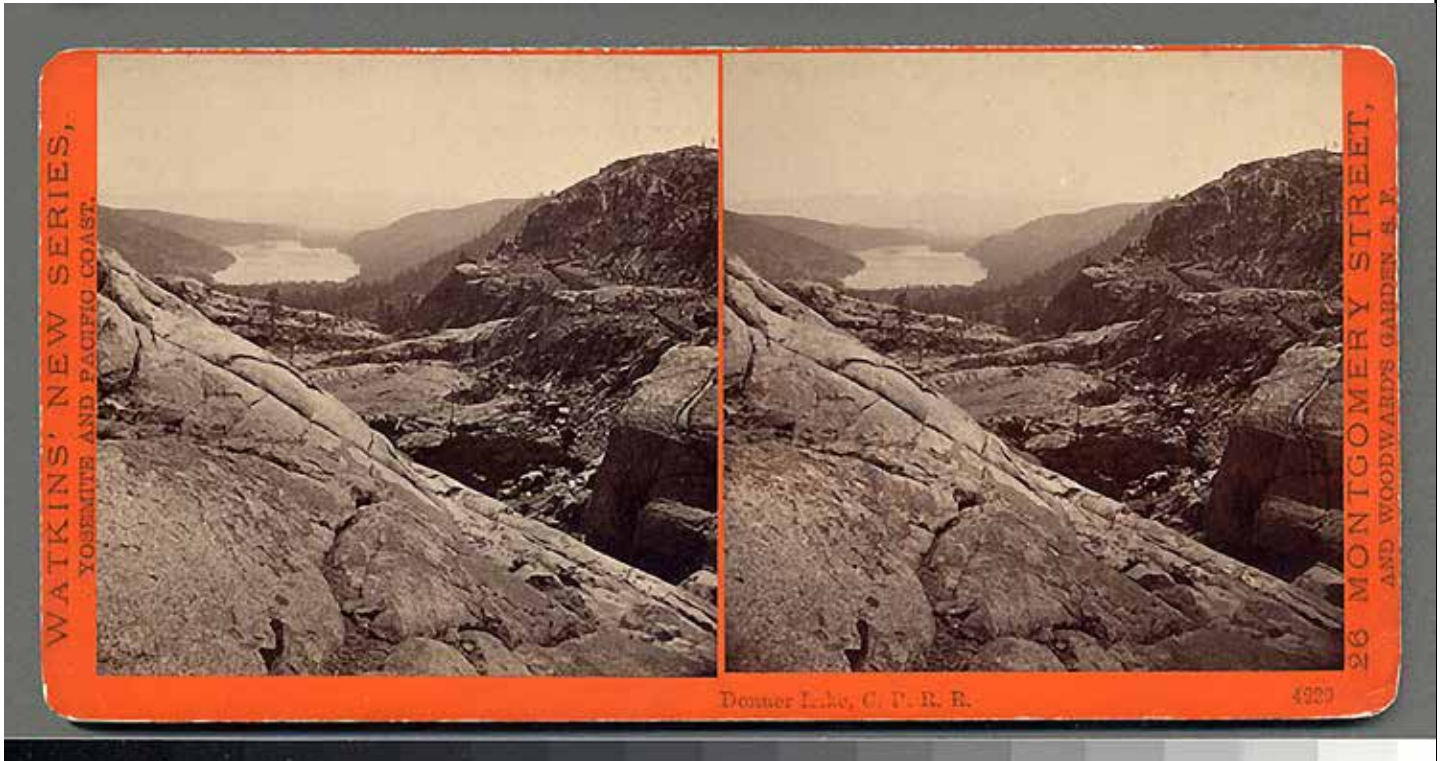
All in all, the video is easily worth the \$20.00.

The video is available from
American Experience
PBS Home Video
120 minutes
ISBN 0-7936-9121-4

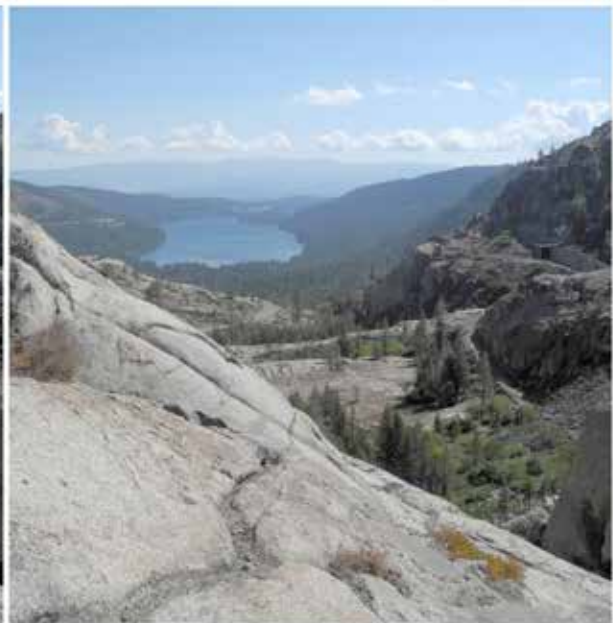


Then & Now with Art Clark

View of Donner Lakes from Donner Pass. After Carleton Watkins' photograph archive was destroyed in a fire, he headed back out to replace his collection - hence the "New Series" Title. That means this would have been taken in the 1870's.



Donner Lake, C.P.R.R.
Compare to Watkins #4239



Donner Lake, C.P.R.R.
Compare to Watkins #4239

Art's Sierra Scenes

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org

Membership 2012

I/we would like to join The Donner Summit Historical Society and share in the Summit's rich history.

_____ New Membership

_____ Renewing Membership

_____ Individual Membership - \$30

_____ Family Membership - \$50

_____ Patron - \$500

_____ Benefactor - \$1000

_____ Business - \$250

_____ Business Sponsor - \$1000

Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

_____ Friend Membership - \$100

_____ Sponsor - \$250

If you would like monthly newsletter announcements, please write your email address below VERY neatly.

About the Postcards in This Issue

The T.C. Wohlbruck postcards in this and the earlier issues of The Heirloom are postcards tourists could have bought in T.C. Wohlbruck's canteen service stations.

They are only a small part of Norm Sayler's collection at the Historical Society in Soda Springs. Stop by and see more.

FELL FROM THE TRAIN.

John Collins Escapes With a Dislocated Shoulder and Some Bruises.

A passenger named John Collins fell from the west-bound overland train shortly after midnight yesterday evening, east of **Summit Station**, while somewhat under the influence of liquor.

He was missed shortly afterward by his traveling companions and they reported it to the conductor. An engine was sent back to look for him, and he was found about three miles east of the station and brought in. It was found that his left shoulder was dislocated and he was considerably bruised, but on the whole he was very lucky, owing to the fact that the speed of the train, in going up the heavy grade, was not great.

from the Sacramento Daily Union on December 11, 1895