

The Donner Summit Heritloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

June, 2012 issue #46



The Transcontinental Railroad Tunnel 6

an Extraordinary 19th Century engineering feat built with tenacity, fortitude and courage

If only the Sierra might be pierced. Atlantic magazine December, 1867

The “undertaking was preposterous” but they did it.

Von Nostrand’s Engineering Magazine, January 5, 1870

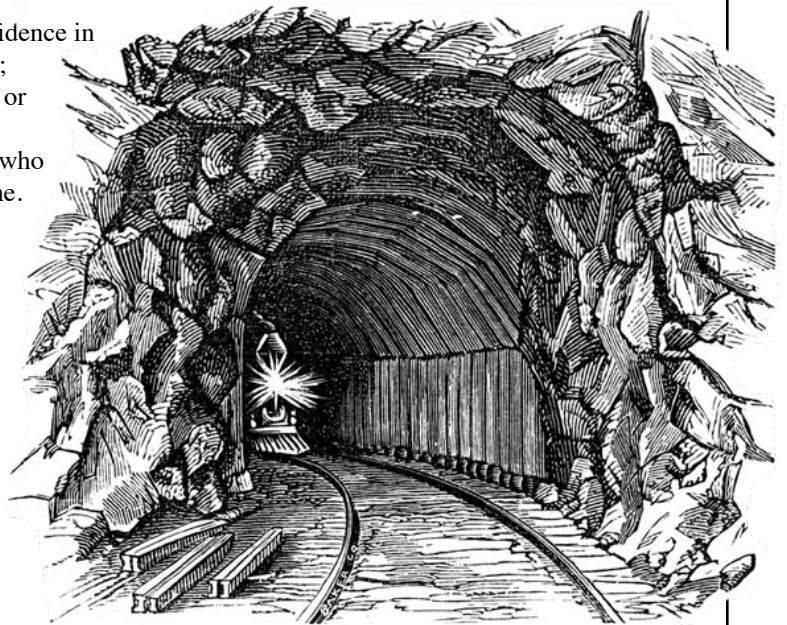
1866 – Bam, bam, quarter turn; Bam, bam, quarter turn; bam, bam, quarter turn. All day long, three shifts a day, day after day, week after week for two years, Chinese workers pounded away at the solid granite. One worker held a drill bit, turning it a quarter turn as two other workers pounded the bit with 8 lb. sledges. At four separate faces teams worked making progress that was measured only in inches a day as they cut through 1659 feet of solid granite. Once a hole was drilled, it was packed with black powder, the fuse was set, and the workers ran. When the smoke cleared, other workers hauled out the rubble - all by hand; they had no machines.

Imagine the courage holding a drill bit. Imagine the confidence in your friends. Imagine the accuracy of the sledge handlers; imagine their concentration, hour after hour in the candle or lantern light breathing air filled with stone dust and black powder. Imagine the courage of and the trust in workers who set the explosives. They had to do it just right - every time.

Working the solid granite from opposite ends went too slowly so they blasted a shaft straight down the middle to open two more faces. Hauling the rubble by hand: too slow. A donkey steam engine was brought in to haul up the rubble.

When all four faces joined up, they were off only a little. Amazing.

That was Tunnel 6, the longest of the 15 tunnels of the Sierra Crossing.



THE HERITAGE TRAIL

Placer County Museums Tour

18 Museums from Roseville to Tahoe!

2012

August
11 & 12

The 5th annual Heritage Trail event will be held on August 11-12, 2011. Eighteen participating museums from Roseville to Tahoe are planning fun activities for the entire family. All of the museums will be open from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm on both days and admission is free.

Visitors can grind wheat for biscuits, explore the wonders of a granite quarry, view the world from a 19th century farm wagon, pan for illusive flakes of gold, listen to Native American stories, and watch a blacksmith in action. Many of the museums will also offer fun food and beverages such as hand-churned ice cream, root beer floats, cookies, and lemonade.

All the museums are easy to reach from Interstate 80. Five valley museums are in South Placer. Six Auburn museums are located within one mile of the Historic courthouse. There are eight mountain museums located in Foresthill, Colfax, Dutch Flat, Donner Summit and the North Lake Tahoe areas.

The official Trail Guide is posted online and copies are also available in local museums. To access the most up-to-date information, visit www.theheritagetrail.blogspot.com or call 530-889-6500.

DSHS will display new exhibits about Tunnel 6 and the 20 Mile Museum.

1st Annual

**Margie Powell
Memorial History Hike
August 4, 2012 9:30 AM**

Margie was one of the founders of the DSHS and when she passed away last summer the community promised to do annual memorial history hikes.

This first hike will hit the historical sites in Donner Pass on Old 40. It will be fascinating as you hear stories right at the history. In the evening there will be a video and presentation about the transcontinental RR to Donner Summit.

It's all free. Get a flyer at the link on the main pages at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org or www.exploredonnersummit.com

Sugar Bowl Lake Mary Evening to benefit DSHS



Sugar Bowl's Lake Mary Cabin Dinner Series will return this year with great food by Chef Alan Davis. The Lake Mary facilities sit above Lake Mary and dining is on a deck overlooking the lake. DSHS will be a beneficiary of one of the summer evenings, July 22. Seating is from 5:30 to 9:00. Reservations are a good idea (530) 426-7002.

Besides a varied menu selection of homemade soups, salads, seafood, wild game, vegetarian dishes, pastas, wines and desserts, the DSHS will have its new Tunnel 6 exhibits on display.



editor:
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“The Central Pacific R.R. Co. have commenced the tunnel on the line of their road, at the summit of the Sierra Nevadas [sic]. It is to be 1600 feet in length, and the work will be prosecuted night and day until completed.”

October 14, 1865 Placer Herald (Auburn)

Tunnel 6

The first American transcontinental railroad crosses Donner Pass at an elevation of 7,000 feet, through an area that gets an average of 34 feet of snow a year. The route follows the plan laid out by Theodore Judah for whom Donner Summit's Mt. Judah is named.

The idea of a transcontinental railroad had been around since the 1830's and government surveys had explored different possible routes. It was not until Theodore Judah came on to the scene that the idea gained traction. It took a lot of planning, “wheeling and dealing,” Congressional action, overcoming opposition, skullduggery, and a story with sometimes soap opera tones before actual construction began in 1863. And then, during construction, there was more of all that before the rails spanned the continent.

That first year the Central Pacific only laid 135 yards of track. The backers, the Big Four, Huntington, Crocker, Stanford, and Hopkins had to back the start of the venture themselves. There was no bank financing to be had and no government money until miles of track had been laid.



The railroad was finally finished in 1869 when the Central Pacific met up with the Union Pacific at Promontory Point, Utah. Then travelers could speed along at the unheard of rate averaging 22 mph. Cross country travel had taken 4-5 months on a wagon train and 25 days in a stagecoach. Traveling by train cut the transcontinental journey to an incredible 10 days. It was an amazing time.

The transcontinental railroad was an amazing feat and the most difficult part of the feat

On the Sierra Challenge

Doctor Strong led Huntington, Stanford, and Crocker to the summit. They looked down from the summit where Judah said the track would go a thousand feet down to Donner Lake.

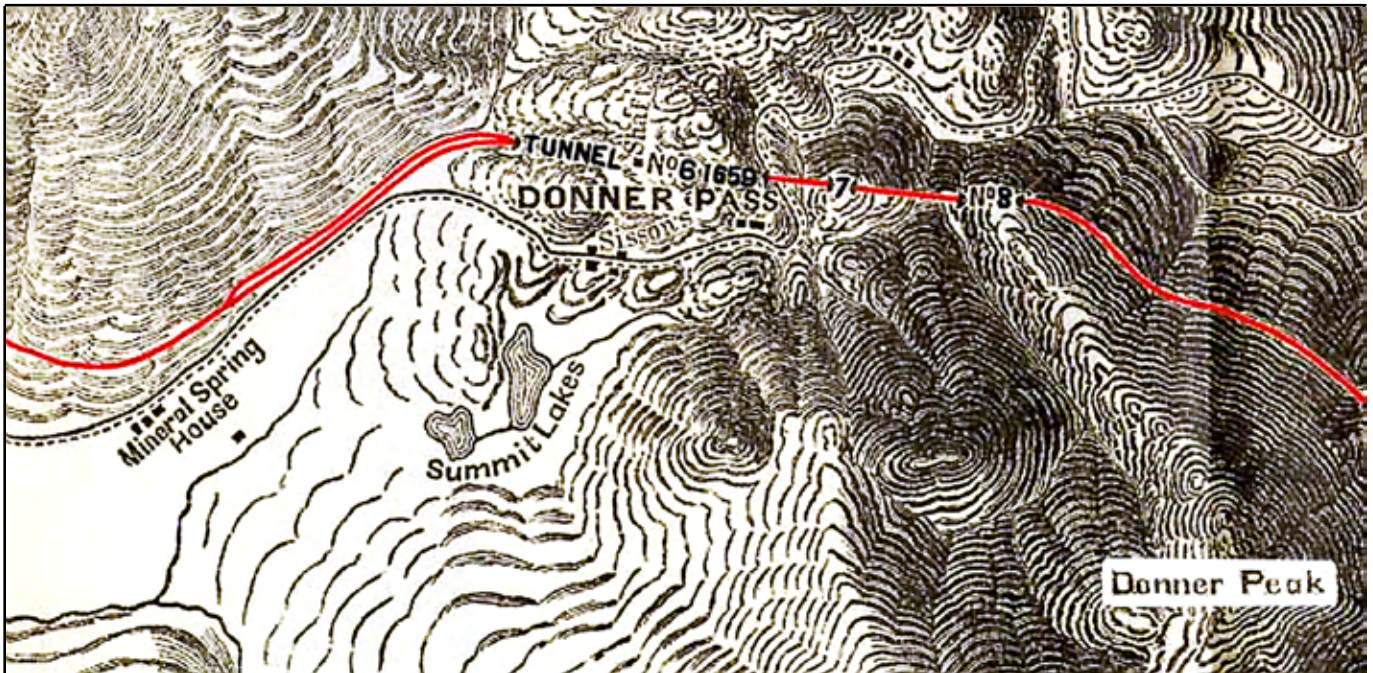
It was impossible.

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do Crocker,” said Huntington after a thoughtful silence, “We will build an enormous elevator right here and run the trains up and down it.”

“Oh Lord,” moaned Crocker, “It cannot be done.”

pg 111 Empire Express

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



Topographic map of Tunnel 6's location (note also tunnels 7 and 8 to the east). This comes from the [Manual for Railroad Engineers](#), 1883 and was drawn by Samuel Montague and Lewis M. Clement CPRR Chief and Ass't Chief engineers responsible for building Tunnel 6 and the CPRR line. "Summit Lakes" is now just Lake Mary which turned the two lakes into one with a railroad built dam to store water for steam powered locomotives.

was crossing the Sierra. Few thought it was possible by railroad. The mountains were too high and the grades would have to be too steep. To cross the Sierra the CPRR had to bore 15 tunnels through solid granite, the longest 1659 feet long right at Donner Summit. Work crews would have to endure storms, extreme cold, avalanches, accident,

There are so many stories that go with the building of the transcontinental railroad: how they built it, the Dutch Flat Swindle, moving the Sierra (Truly! They moved the Sierra closer to Sacramento), Indian attacks, danger, robbery, and much more. Those stories are all covered in many books, some of which will be reviewed in coming issues of our newsletter and which are on our website. In [The Heirloom](#) we will only deal in this series with the railroad and Donner Summit. In this issue and the next few we focus on Tunnel 6. Then we'll move on to the first locomotive in California and its relation to Donner Summit. Then the first locomotives to cross the Summit (they did not do it in the traditional method). We'll give the railroad a break in our newsletter for awhile but then we'll come back to the snowsheds – 40 miles of them across the Summit. Can you imagine, if you are familiar with the Summit, Theodore Judah, who set out the route, said snow would be no problem! You just push it out of the way. They tried that with huge bucker snow plows and as many as 10 locomotives pushing from behind to get rid of the stuff, but that's a future story.

The Summit Tunnel (1866-67)

When the Southern Pacific took the tracks out of the Summit Tunnel not many noticed. In the years since the tracks were removed in 1995 the tunnel has become a tourist attraction. Some residents make it a "must do" when out of town guests arrive. Photographers like it just as a tunnel, but also for interesting images as maybe you can see from the contemporary portfolio of Tunnel 6 photographs in our last newsletter issue. Walking through the tunnel is an experience, especially if one has a flashlight and shines the beam upwards midway through to see the shaft.

Tunnel 6 is the original 1867 tunnel for the Transcontinental Railroad and there is a lot of story that goes with Tunnel 6.

The central Pacific had to build 15 tunnels to get over the Sierra and Tunnel 6, on the top of Donner Summit, is the longest at 1659 feet (16' wide and 23' high). Just walking through we see the tunnel, but the story behind it and the effort to construct it should make you stop and imagine. Touch the wall. Listen closely.

Lewis Metzler Clement who was an engineer for the CPRR, was given the job of the Summit Tunnel. He'd been hired by Theodore Judah, who had laid out the Sierra route, to build the Summit Tunnel. Clement came to California on a wagon train and worked himself up from an office assistant to the engineer who would build the actual route over the Summit after Judah had died.

When the CPRR track reached Cisco in the Fall of 1866 workers were sent immediately to the Summit to begin work on the biggest part of the project, the Summit Tunnel which would be the longest of the fifteen Sierra tunnels. A crew had been sent the year before but did not make much progress because of the snow.

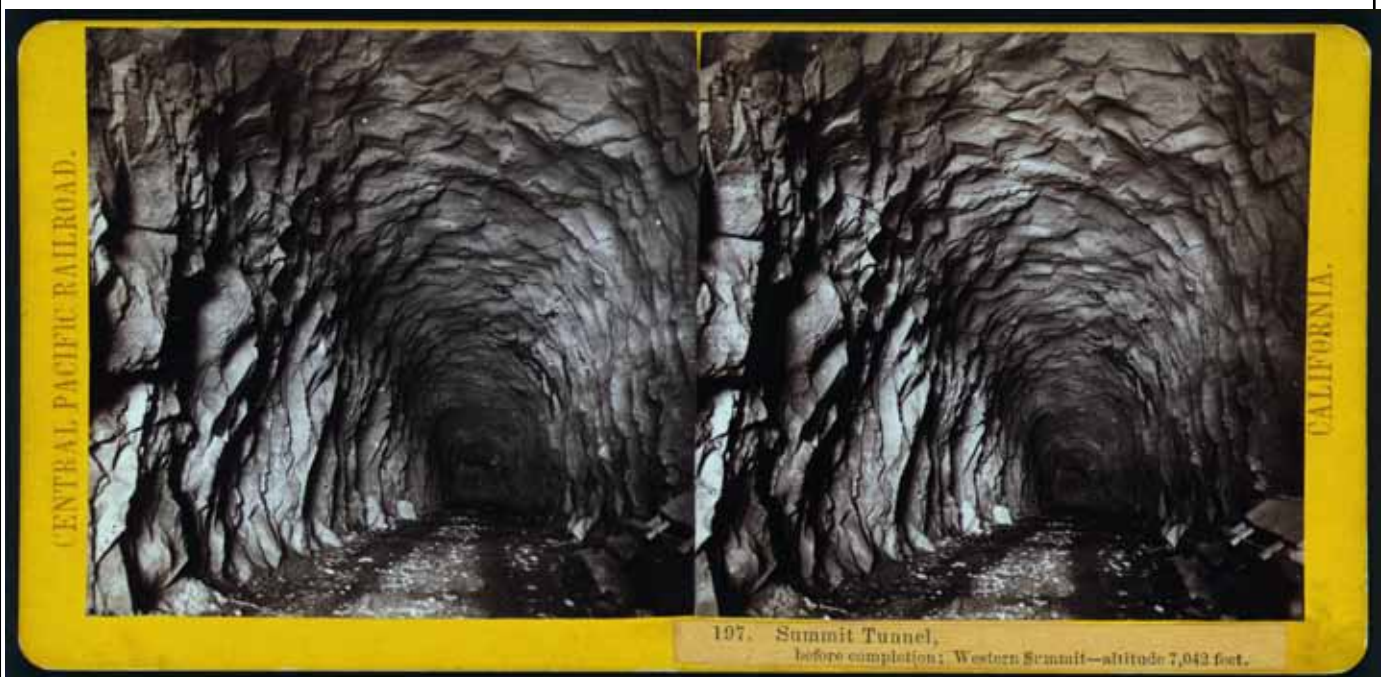
Workers immediately began at both ends of the tunnel. The tunnel would take two years of solid work before being completed in 1867. It was the most grueling work. The Chinese crews had to cut through solid granite making only inches of progress a day.

The work was progressing so slowly, even working from two ends at once, that the command was given to open up two more faces. A 90' 8 X 12 shaft was blasted down at the center from above the tunnel route and when it was completed two more work crews could work at two more rock faces. Excavating the shaft was troublesome too, with workers advancing sometimes less than an inch a day. It must have seemed a Sisyphean task. Would they ever finish?

Of course there was the solid granite to get through but instead of wheeling the debris out as they could at the other two faces, all the debris from the shaft had to be hauled up first. That was done first by hand but that was too slow so an old steam engine, which interestingly was the first locomotive in the state, was brought up from the Sacramento Valley. With its wheels removed it served as a donkey engine hauling the rock up so it could be disposed of.

This Summit tunnel is 1860 feet long, and is being made of ample width and hight [sic]. It is by far the hardest and most difficult nut that ever engineering skill has been called upon to crack on this coast. Its path lies through the closest-grained and hardest, and therefore, for industrial purposes, finest of granite. The head of the work of progress on our half of the continental road first butted against this obstacle last September, 108 miles from Sacramento, at the greatest altitude attained on the road. At first it was supposed, from the inconvenient location of the ground, the length of the work: and the obdurate nature of the material to be pierced, that this tunnel would not be completed in less than two years.

from
LETTER FROM DONNER PASS.
CORRESPONDENCE OF THE
UNION.
Nevada county, April 22. 1867.
Sacramento Union



Alfred S. Hart stereoscopic view of the incomplete Tunnel 6 ca 1866. Hart was a CPRR photographer

Bam, Bam, quarter turn; bam, bam, quarter turn; bam, bam, quarter turn. All day long three shifts a day Chinese workers pounded away at the solid granite. According to a reporter, a gang of three could drill three holes 1 ¼" in diameter and 2 ½ feet deep in 12 hours. Those 1 ¼ inch holes were for nitroglycerine. In 1866 and 67 the holes had been 2 ½ inches across. Those were packed with black powder.

One brave worker held the drill bit that two others took turns hitting it with 18 lb. sledges. After each hit, the bit holder turned the bit a quarter turn. Eventually the hole would be deep enough for explosives. Workers on the four tunnel faces progressed inches a day. For this they were paid \$30 to \$35 a month.

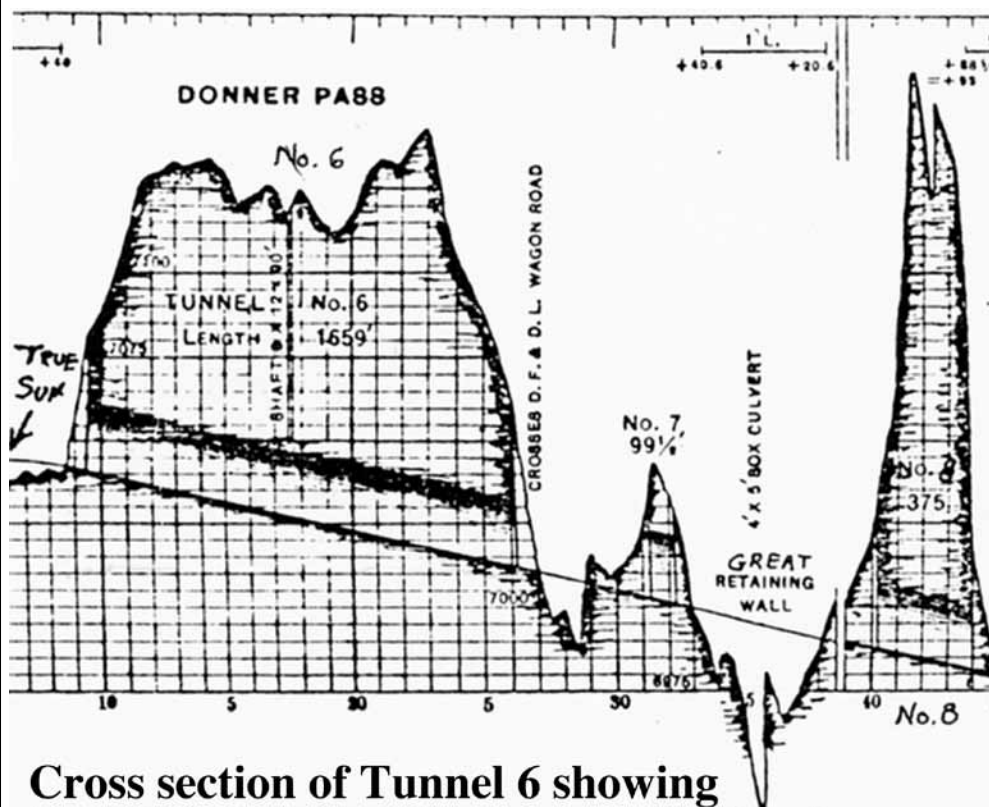
After two years of solid work a last blast in the morning of May 3, 1867 broke open tunnel 6. When Clement measured the tunnel, the connection was only off by inches. That was amazing especially considering that the tunnel goes downhill heading east and curves slightly (see below).

Besides the grueling work, the workers faced avalanches and heavy snows. The winter of 1866-67 had one of the highest snowfalls on record: 40 feet. Workers didn't see daylight for days at a time as they moved from their living sheds to the work faces through tunnels dug into the snow. There were a total of 44 storms that winter with one multi-day storm dropping 10 feet of snow. One avalanche took away a cabin filled with Chinese workers who were not found until spring. There was so much snow the snow tunnel leading to Tunnel 6 had to be lengthened by fifty feet so the workers could still have access. The lowest temperature recorded that winter was 5.5 degrees.

The cold also brought with it pneumonia and frostbite. Imagine the discomfort: living without seeing the sun in the continual cold, in un-insulated snow sheds and then the grueling labor, day after day after day.

The track on the line of the Central Pacific Railroad was laid to the Summit last evening, and the rails through the tunnel will be in place by an early hour this morning. Thus has been completed the most difficult portion of the company's labors. As compared to what have been encountered, the rest of the route to Salt Lake has not obstacles worth mentioning. The day the first locomotive passes through the tunnel will be a bright era not only in the history of California, but in that of the United States.

Sacramento Union 11.30.1867
from Empire Express



Lewis Clement saw the first Central Pacific train roll through the Summit Tunnel on November 30, 1867, after two years of continuous labor.

Today boring machines are used to bore tunnels. A circular boring machine can bore a tunnel 20' in diameter at a rate of about 50 feet a day. Tunnel 6 today would take about a month, rather than the two years it took in 1866-67.

Cross section of Tunnel 6 showing the 30 ft elevation change over its length

Railroad Madness –

Several sore-headed journals... deluded by an unfounded report, have presumed that the managers of the Central Pacific had entirely changed their route, and were force to go through Summit Valley, not being able to penetrate the rock in the supposed old direction. The truth is, the company is still at work upon that rock or tunnel, and intend for to be for some time. It was their design over two years ago to go through Summit Valley, and it is their present design, and has been for some time, to lay a temporary track over the summit, and use it for travel and freight while the tunnel is being completed. When that is done, the business will go right through that rock or tunnel, which the mistaken journal referred to understand cannot be penetrated. To some ill nature remarks of the Chico Courant in this connection the Dutch Flat Enquirer replies quite correctly...

We take the above ill natured remarks from the Chico Courant... which accounts for [their not] being better posted upon one of the greatest enterprises ever started. ... the surveyors stuck their pegs in Summit Valley nearly two years ago, and the laborers have been steadily progressing to that point since the first shovel full of dirt was thrown up at Sacramento.

Sacramento Daily Union July 2, 1866

Sources

As our staff was researching this story it turned out there are many primary and secondary sources. One source railroad buffs would like is cpr.org/museum which has many pictures and a variety of textual materials such as songs, travelers' reports, books, etc. A local source is the little museum at Big Bend (if the USFS puts it back) as well as, of course, the picture archive of the Donner Summit Historical Society in downtown Soda Springs.

some good books to read for the whole story.

Empire Express

A Great and Shining Road

High Road to Promontory

The Railroad Photographs of Alfred A. Hart, Artist



Left from Carlton Watkins
"new Series" of Pacific
Coast Views: Summit Tunnel
Eastern Portal

Above:
Tunnel 6 Fall, 2011

From the DSHS Archives

In the Old Days...

Before refrigeration and freezing the only ice you had in your house was delivered. That ice had to be harvested from places where ice formed naturally. It was harvested in winter and then stored until delivery.

The first ice harvested and sold in California came from Alaska. Once the transcontinental railroad was built access to icy California regions was a possibility and there followed ice price wars, monopoly and finally, refrigeration.

One of the first California sources was Donner Summit. You can read about the "Ice in Ice Lakes" (now Serene Lakes) on our "Stories" page, <http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Stories.html>

That's part of the background for the following newspaper article from 1870. We have added paragraphs but otherwise not changed the original text.

The Ice Question Again, - Marysville Appeal of May 6th:

We yesterday morning gave a brief account of a bet that was made between Mayoux, agent of the Summit valley ice, and Jake Tomb, agent of the Little Grass valley ice, as to which would last the longest, or was the slowest to melt.

About ten o'clock yesterday, the judges having been appointed and preliminaries settled, two large pieces of ice, each weighing 131 pounds, were placed upon the awning of Dr. Wilkins and England's drug store, where they were exposed to the sun during the most of the day. With the thermometer at about 90 degrees in the shade, the day was an excellent one for the carrying out of the test. The "Summit" chunk was broad and rather flat, while the "Grass valley" specimen was longer and sat upon end.

About noon and from that time until dark there was great excitement among the friends of the respective chunks, and bets ranging from \$2.50 up to \$100 were freely made on the result, until the money thus placed at risk aggregated over \$1,000. It became evident after a few hours that Mayoux's Summit valley ice was getting the best of it; that it stood the test better without melting. Tomb's ice showed deep furrows, and "came up groggy" at a late hour in the afternoon, while Mayoux's ice melted slowly and evenly in the happiest manner imaginable.

The interested parties then commenced betting upon the time that the Summit valley would out last the Grass Valley, and a large amount of money was bet, on two, three and four hours, with odd stakes against five and six hours. Up to a late hour last evening "bets on time" were being made, and the probabilities are that some \$1,500 will change hands on the melting of these two cakes of ice.


Another bet has been made as to the respective transparency and clearness of the two qualities, Mayoux betting \$80 to \$20 that his ice is the clearest and best. Each party is allowed to choose two judges, and they choose a fifth, a majority to decide. The decision will be made at two o'clock this afternoon. At dark last evening lanterns were placed upon the awning where the two melting cakes were deposited, and watchmen were selected to keep vigil during the night and see that neither chunk was disturbed. There is a lively rivalry between the two ice companies, which are running a spirited opposition in this city and to which of these novel wagers have led.

from the Sacramento Daily Union May 7, 1870

So, if you were wondering what people did to keep themselves occupied in the absence of social media, now you have one idea. There was no follow up article to tell us who actually won, nor was there ever a notice of a resolution to the lost Summit Ice Co. horse, right. At the same time as this article there were some ads in the San Francisco papers for an invention called refrigeration.

Henry Fisher California Candy Manuactory, No.
118 J. Street, between Fourth and Fifth. The most delicious Ice Creams made from pure Cream. Cakes, Caramels, Tea, Coffee, Iced Sodas.

LOST!

 **MAY 3d, ONE DARK BAY HORSE**, about 15½ hands high, White Saddle Marks on the Back. Any one giving information or returning the Horse to Summit Ice Company, 149 I street, will be liberally rewarded. my7-3t

More from The Old Days

Summit Fish Stocking

The first fish stocking on Donner Summit took place probably in 1866 when the first settler at Ice Lakes (Serene Lakes) Fitz William Redding Jr. brought fish up from the American River to his cabin on the lakes. His brother, Benjamin Bernard Redding, was a big proponent. Benjamin, B.B., became a land agent for the CPRR and so came across Ice Lakes where his brother bought land from the government. B.B. Redding went on to become California Secretary of State, the first state printer, and fish commissioner.

B.B. once claimed to have caught 200 fish in one day in the No. Fork of the American River, the back side of Donner Summit. That was where his friend, Mark Hopking of the Big Four, had an estate.

B.B. started the Summit Ice Co. on the land at Ice Lakes his brother had bought, his brother having died after his first winter in the Sierra.

This article is interesting in that the State started planting so long ago and that Donner Summit snow was a problem even in June, which is not a surprise to today's residents but is, and apparently was, to those from the "flatlands."

Eastern Trout in the Rivers of California.

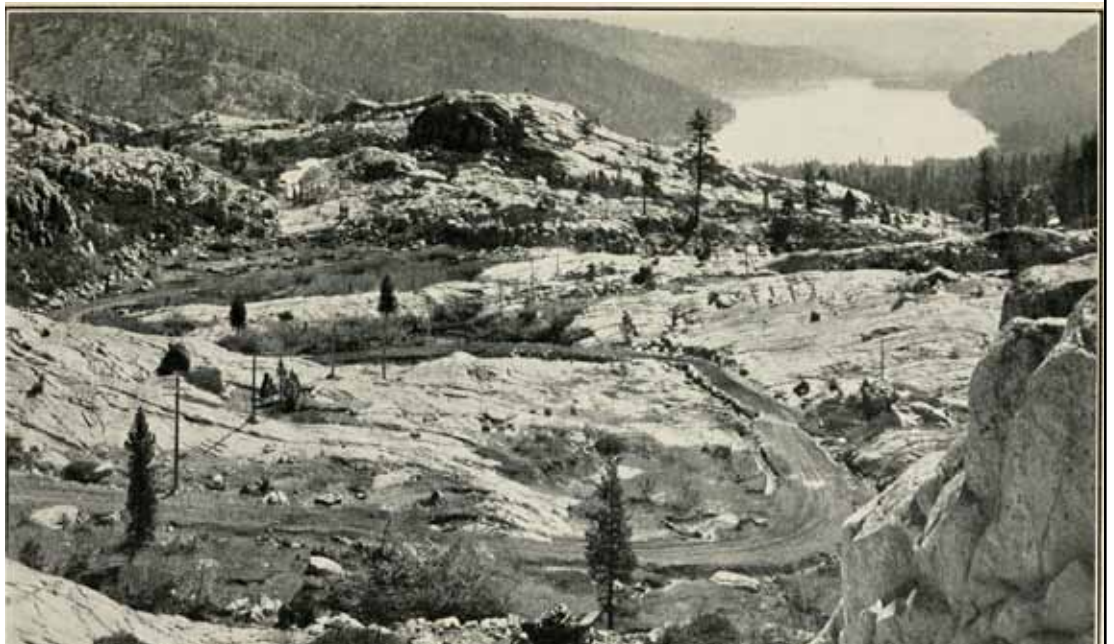
A few days ago two thousands Eastern trout were placed in the north fork of the American river by the Superintendent of the California Acclimatizing Society under directions from the Fish Commissioners of the State. The fish arrived in good order, but the Superintendent had some difficulty in getting them from Summit Valley Station [today's Soda Springs] to the Mineral Springs [today's original Soda Springs at the Cedars] on the American river, where they were to be placed, but, thanks to Sheriff and Jones, the owners of the hotel [at the Old Soda Springs], who got the snow off the grade for him and supplied him with all the comforts accessible in that snowy region, he got them over the mountains in good shape. The American river [sic] at this place is one of the finest streams for trout that the Superintendent ever saw, and he thinks that Eastern fish will flourish there, if they will do so anywhere in California.

Sacramento Daily Union June 6, 1873

Times Have Not Changed

As time passed on, it was discovered that our Representatives in Congress failed to press the matter; that they were more intent upon securing votes to elect them to office than to forward the interest of our people in building a railroad...."

"The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69" by Old Block, 1868



Lincoln Highway on Donner Summit above Donner Lake ca 1915

Then & Now with Art Clark

Palisade Rocks

Compare to Houseworth 841



Palisade Rocks

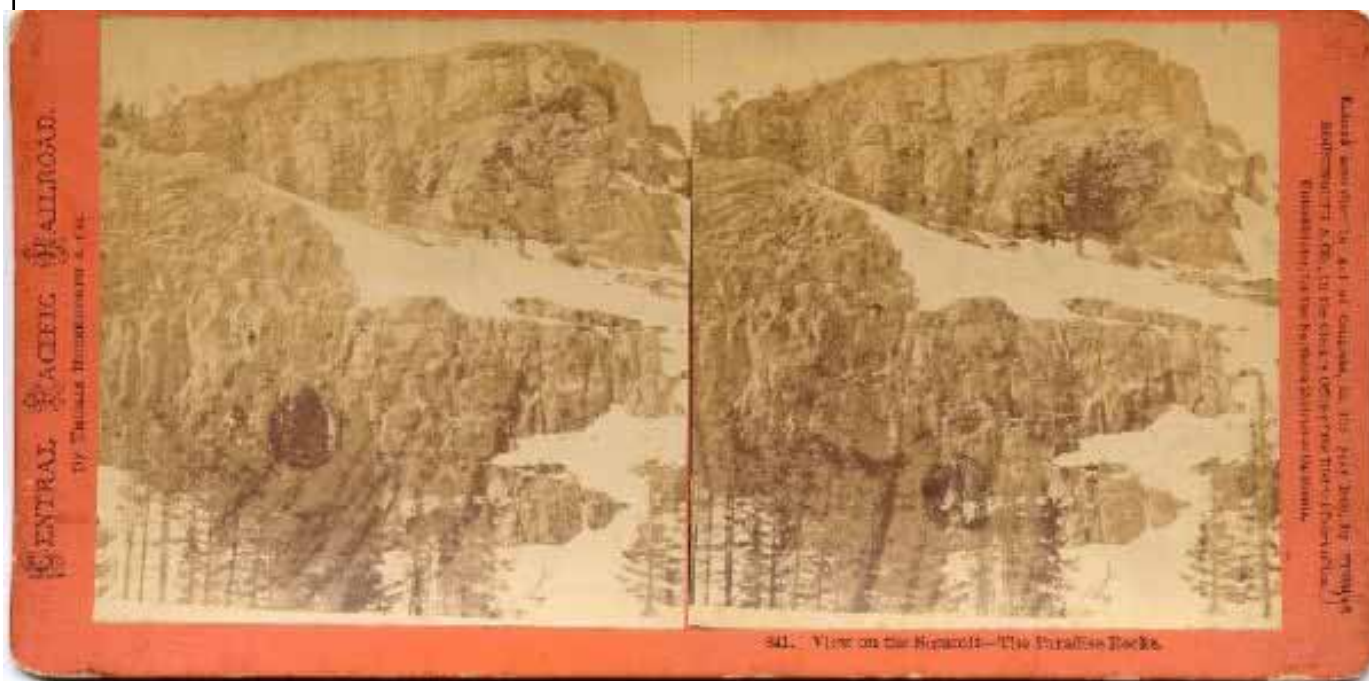
Compare to Houseworth 841



Art's Sierra Scenes

This view is from near the Petroglyphs below Rainbow Bridge between the Petroglyphs and the Subway, looking west at Mt. Stephens. It is described variously as 'Palisade Rocks' or 'Paradise Rocks' by different photographers including C. E. Watkins, A. A. Hart and Thomas Houseworth. Neither name seems to be in use today.

The photos are taken from This is approximately the location: 39° 18.996'N 120° 19.260'W
Old 40 drops through the picture from the left to the right heading for Rainbow Bridge, which is out of the photo to the right.



Book Review

We have a few of these books at the DSHS.

Caleb Greenwood was 18 when he shot a sheriff who was serving a judgment on his family in Virginia. Caleb had to disappear quickly but his need added a story to Donner Summit history.

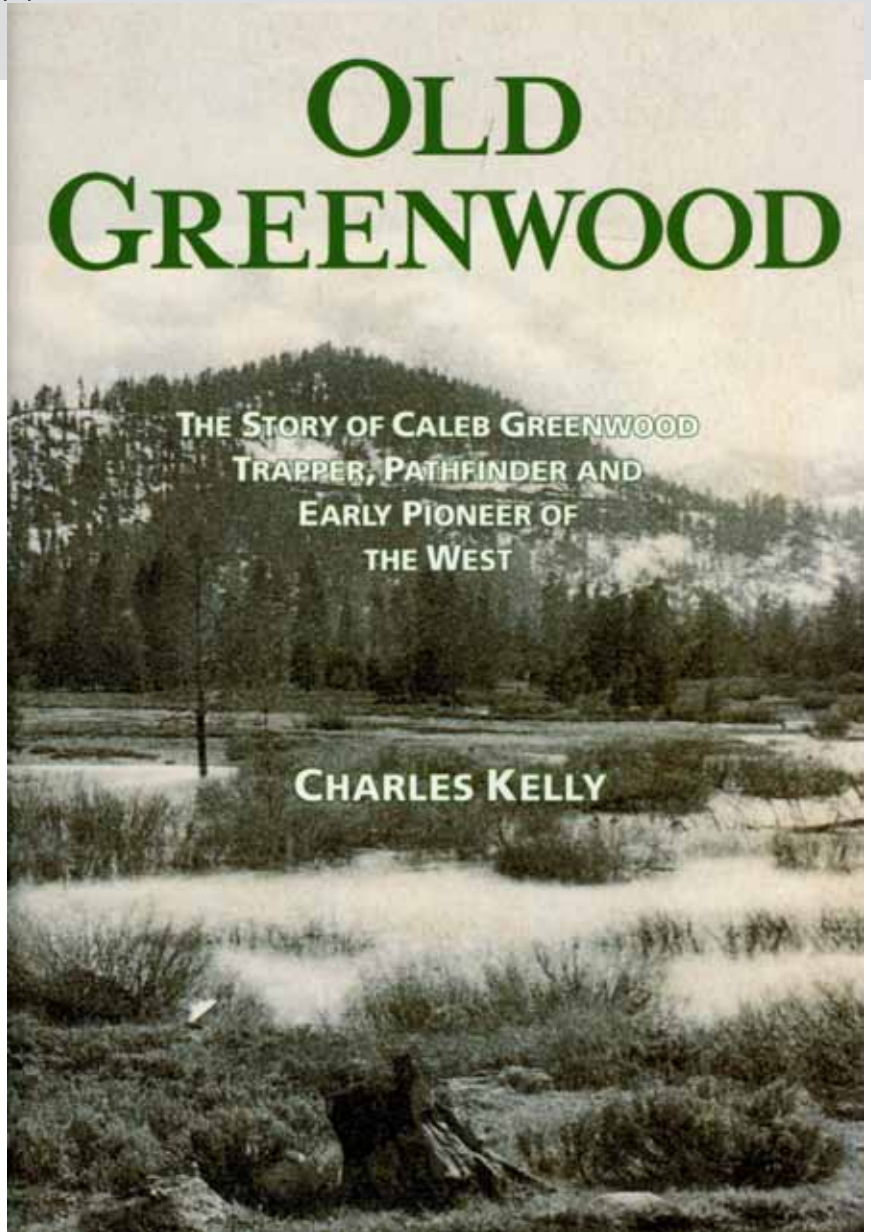
Although Caleb Greenwood had never been all the way to California he nevertheless guided the first wagon train to reach California with wagons and he did it when he was 80 years old. As if that was not enough for an 80 year old man, he made subsequent trips guiding other trains and improved on the original route he took guiding the Stephens Party. At age 84 he was part of the second relief party heading to rescue the Donner Party. Today the town of Greenwood, CA is named for him.

That all came from Old Greenwood the Story of Caleb Greenwood Trapper, Pathfinder and Early Pioneer of the West. Picking up the book with the modern jacket and the 2005 printing date makes one think it's a modern book but one need not read too far before one looks more closely for a copyright date. There are some dated and prejudicial terms such as "diggers" for Native Americans, his "dusky bride" who was Native American, and "didn't speak with forked tongue."

Further investigation shows that book is a reprint of the 1936 edition. This reprint was done to help publicize the now defunct Old Greenwood development in Truckee.

Regardless of the reason for the reprint and the date of the old book, the story of Caleb Greenwood is an interesting story and another example of how they were tougher in the old days. Unfortunately it's hard to write a lot of history about a man who was not in the news and did not leave much evidence of his life and so the book is short, only 129 pages. The book has a lot of guess work and family legend. We do learn some about the famous explorer though. When he came west in 1783 he probably engaged in the fur trade but he only appeared sporadically in history's pages. He was married at age 50 and had five sons and two daughters. He died in 1853 at the age of 90.

The book is short and it does make an interesting read about one of the hardier characters of western history.



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.

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

_____ New Membership

MAILING ADDRESS _____

_____ Renewing Membership

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

_____ Individual Membership - \$30

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

_____ Family Membership - \$50

_____ Friend Membership - \$100

_____ Sponsor - \$250

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_____ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

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



EMIGRANT TRAILS

Marshall Fey

A History and Guide
to the Emigrant
Routes from Central
Nevada to the
Crossing of the
Sierra Passes

Includes How to Follow the Trails By
Hiking, Biking or Motoring,
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2925 West Moana Lane, Reno, NV 89509
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www.LibertyBelleBooks.com

e-mail: mfey@LibertyBelleBooks.com

The Hidden Wonder of the World



Nimbus Films is offering "The Hidden Wonder of the World, the Transcontinental Railroad from Sacramento to Donner Summit" for sale, for just \$19.95.

For the first time the hidden wonders of one of America's greatest construction and engineering feats are revealed on camera. Come along and visit the abandoned granite tunnels, stunning trestles, gigantic cuts and breathtaking scenery traversed by the Transcontinental Railroad. People come from all over the world to see these hidden sites. Now you can travel to the summit of the Sierra Nevada and marvel at how

the master engineers and builders of the 1860s accomplished this heroic deed. Perfect for history, railroad and travel fans!

To order a DVD, please send a check for \$19.95 to Nimbus Films, 4520 Shari Way, Granite Bay, CA 95746. Or Visit transcoshow.com to order online.

This includes shipping and handling.

To see the DVD on the beach at Serene Lakes, see page 2

Finally, Roller Pass

Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass Roller Pass

"As we came up to it the appearance [sic] was exactly like marching up some immense wall built directly across our path, or perpendicular to the dividing ridge."
Elisha Perkins on approaching Roller Pass in 1849

Things to do right here

To really appreciate the Emigrants' struggle to get over the Sierra you have to see Roller Pass and look over the edge. Just go forward from this spot. If you are really energetic, scramble down the route. Keep walking down below to the meadow. Emigrant wagons camped there, waiting one at a time to make the long up. As you struggle back out, imagine helping to guide a wagon or carrying a child. Imagine doing it over and over.

If you still feel like hiking, take the Baldy Loop trail which will take you to the top of Mt. Judah, West. When a view. The trail will guide you the other side to just below Donner Peak. Hike up there, to the top, and back straight down a thousand feet by Donner Lake.

In early summer hikers' wilderness are also spectacular, particularly on the crest on the north side of Mt. Lincoln just a quarter mile up the SCT from here.

Donner Summit is magnificent!

"We arrived at the main difficulty here here to the summit in one mile to an ascent on the road of a hour."
Joseph Hackley, 1849

"When we struck the main ridge of the mountains, every heart was filled with terror at the awful sight!"
William Tucker 1846

History

"Will we beat the Sierra now? Will the water flow? What will this desert end? How much more will we have to leave behind us the desert? The men are so tired. The wagon is so old."

The emigrants to California were tougher than we are. Imagine leaving all your friends, family and most belongings back in the East. Imagine traveling wet miles a day on good days for months on end, cooking over open fires using buffalo chips for fuel, anticipating and experiencing catarrhs, and battling, wearing, and losing. But now that life would be better. The emigrants had covered a thousand miles since spring and fit. In by the time they reached the Sierra. Now there was just one more hurdle. California was within sight, but that last hurdle - what a hurdle.

There was no road up to Donner Pass, in fact there was no route. The wagon trains came through Colusa Canyon just south of the current pass (the way the Emigrants should have gone had they not chosen the route) and then almost straight up Roller Pass between Mt. Lincoln and Mt. Judah. It was so steep the wagons were brought up one at a time - double teams of oxen pulled wagons up with chains 400 feet long, straight up to the pass. The showing here is not an easy proposition and if you stand at the top of the pass and look down you will agree. The showing follows an emigrant diary entry description. From 1837 through 1875 it is estimated that less than 10,000 emigrants took Roller Pass (about 30% of those heading to California).

At the top - imagine? They could see of Summit Valley - California! They'd made it. Imagine their feelings. Now their brains which had only functioned, were in sight, nothing could stop them now. No more worry, but here comes fresh, wet and muddy a hole. For some about Roller Pass trail end November, '11 (perennial in our website (below)).

The sign prepared by Sugar Bowl

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Two years ago we installed the first 27 signs. Last year we installed another six but that still left one of the original group still looking for a home. We tried to place the Roller Pass sign in a couple of different places directing people to Roller Pass but we had no luck. The sign has sat in our DSHS sign production facility for two years. (Read about Roller Pass in our November, '11 and April, '12 issues).

Then, this spring the solution - place it at Roller Pass on Sugar Bowl's leased property. That's exactly what will happen when the snow has melted enough.

Interestingly enough, there are no signs at Roller Pass ever since a wooden one place long ago was destroyed by the elements.

We had to rewrite the sign for its new location. This sign is guaranteed for a decade and the heavy steel stand for decades longer. You can find a legible version of the sign on our sign page at <http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>