

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

June, 2013 issue #58



# History Preserved IV

## Views of Summit Valley in Prose and Pictures

"Nothing can be more charming than the woods of the Sierra summit in June, July, and August, especially in the level glades margining the open summit valley, at an elevation of 6,000 to 7,000 feet. The pines and firs, prevailing over spruces and cedars, attain a height ranging from 100 to 200 feet, and even more. Their trunks are perfectly straight, limbless for fifty to a hundred feet, painted above the snow-mark with yellow mosses, and ranged in open, park-like groups affording far vistas. ... Huge boulders [sic] of granite relieve the vernal coloring with their picturesque masses of gray, starred with lichens.... Thickets of wild-rose.... giving an almost artistic variety to the woodland scene. The crimson snow-plant lifts its slender shaft of curious beauty.... Sparkling springs, fresh from snowy fountains, silver-streak these forest meadows where birds come to bathe and drink, and tracks of the returning deer are printed. Once more the quail is heard piping to its mates, the heavy whirring flight of the grouse startles the meditative rambler, and the pines give forth again their surf-like roar to the passing breeze, waving their plumed tops in slow and graceful curves across a sky wonderful clear and blue.. To the citizen weary of sordid toil and depressed by long exile from nature, there is an influence in these elevated groves which both soothes and excites. Here beauty and happiness seem to be the rule, and care is banished. The feast of color, the keen pure atmosphere, the deep bright heavens, the grand peaks bounding the view, are intoxicating.



"Let the pilgrim to these Sierra shrines.... Plunge into the unbroken forests – into the deep canons; climb the high peaks; be alone awhile, and free. Look into Nature, as well as at Nature, so that the enjoyment shall be not merely sensuous but intellectual. A less exclusive and jealous pilgrimage than this, however, will make a man better, physically and mentally. He will realize...the value of high mountain exercise in restoring wasted nervous energy and reviving the zest and capacity for brain-work."

They knew how to talk about scenery in the old days. The quote above is from "Summering in the Sierra" (part I) from Overland Monthly Magazine in 1874. We'll reprint more in the future. In the May issue of The Heirloom there was an excerpt describing

Summit Valley and Soda Springs, but no room to reprint it here.

Alonzo Delano was another visitor to Summit Valley. He had first come through in 1849 as an emigrant on horseback. This excerpt comes from "The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69." He visited in 1868 and wrote the following. I guess '69 was just a more poetic title. Delano wrote newspapers columns under the pen name of "Old Block."

"....we reach the pleasant opening of Summit Valley, which lies nestled at the western base of the great wall and backbone of the Sierra Nevada. A charming glade of a mile in length, by half a mile broad, presents in summer an interesting contrast in its green bosom to the great wall of everlasting snow which rises on its eastern border, the apex of which is more than eight thousand feet." Old Block had visited the valley in 1853 and it had taken "two days of hard riding and arduous travel, by tortuous and difficult paths, in picking our way over and among the rocks, from Emigrant Gap to this lovely valley, a distance which the locomotive now spans with ease,... in an hour and a half."

For 19th century visitors Summit Valley was a wonderful place for a vacation. People traveled by train to the Summit Hotel on the summit and from there went hiking and horseback riding or just played croquet on the hotel lawn. Famous painters arrived to paint the scenery. Other tourists arrived by wagon like "Old Block" and camped in the meadow. (Some day we'll print a story of his camping trip which he did at another time.)

Edwin Bryant may have been the first to describe Summit Valley in words in his 1848 book, What I Saw in California. "Descending the rocky ravine a few miles, we emerged from it and entered a beautiful level valley, some four or five miles in length from east to west, and about two miles in breadth. A narrow, sluggish stream runs through this valley, the water of which are of considerable depth, and the banks steep and miry. A luxuriant growth of grasses, of excellent quality, covered the entire valley with the richest verdure. Flowers were in bloom; and although late in August, the vegetation presented all the tenderness and freshness of May. This valley has been named by emigrants "Uber Valley;" and the stream which runs through it, ... sometimes pronounced Juba..." (pg 232) What I Saw in California was reviewed in The Heirloom in July, '12

For photographers the valley was also an attraction as the photographs here show. Before the dam was actually used to impound Lake Van Norden water, the valley was a broad meadow. The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. runs the length of the valley. You can see the route which is a white line on the right side back of photograph to the right.

The Dutch Flat Rd. saw heavy traffic until the railroad was completed over the Summit. In 1867 it saw 85 train car loads of freight transferred to wagons to go over the summit on the road. Here you see photographs of wagons traveling the road and pictures of the valley before the dam created Lake Van Norden.



111. Castle Peak and Yuba River, from Summit Valley. 102 miles from Sacramento.

Pictures on page 1 and 2 are Alfred A Hart photographs taken about 1867 of Summit Valley



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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



# A Special Walk in Summit Valley 1874



777. Castle Peak, from Summit Valley, Placer Co.



SUMMIT VALLEY, CASTLE PEAK AND SNOW SHEDS  
NATHAN NEW COME



111. Castle Peak and Yuba River,  
from Summit Valley - 101 miles from Sacramento.

"The tourist who stops a few days at Summit Valley, will find a walk along the railroad, through the snow-sheds, peculiarly entertaining. These sheds, covering the track for thirty-five miles, are massive arched galleries of large timbers, shady and cool, blackened with the smoke of engines, sinuous, and full of strange sounds. Through the vents in the roof the interstices between the roof-boards, the sunlight falls in countless narrow bars, pallid as moonshine. Standing in a curve, the effect is precisely that of the interior of some of Gothic cloister or abbey hall, the light streaking through narrow side-windows. The footstep awakes echoes, and the tones of the voice are full and resounding. A coming train announces itself miles away by the tinkling crepitation communicated along the rails, which gradually swells into a metallic ring, followed by a thunderous roar that shakes the ground; then the shriek of the engine-valve, and, in a flash, the engine itself bursts into view, the bars of sunlight playing across its dark front with kaleidoscopic effect. There is ample space on either side of the track for pedestrians to stand as the train rushes past, but it looks as if it must crush everything before it, and burst through the every shed. The approach of a train at night is heralded by a sound like the distant roar of surf, half an hour before the train itself arrives; and when the locomotive dashes into view, the dazzling glare of its head-light in the black cavern, shooting like a meteor from the Plutonic abyss, is wild and awful. The warning

whistle, prolonged in strange diminuendo notes that sound like groans and sighs from Inferno, is echoed far and long among the rocky crags and forests."

The above excerpt came also from "Summering in the Sierra" (part I), 1874 just a few years after the snowsheds were completed.



# The View from Fremont's Peak

"I would advise every one coming to the Summit to spend the Summer to not miss this the grandest scene of all [from Fremont's Peak]. A horseback ride of four miles from Cardwell's [Summit Hotel just outside Tunnel 6] will bring you to the foot of this peak, and then a climb of a mile will bring you to the Summit. We being of the teat-pulling aristocracy and twenty cows apiece being anxiously waiting to be milked, we had to retire from this beautiful scene, one that will be long remembered as the grandest scene of our lives. On our return we saw numerous flocks of grouse and quail and occasionally a bear or deer tracks. Glad were we when our day's work was done so that we could go to bed and dream of what we had seen during the day."

Sacramento Daily Union August 5, 1871 Apparently there was a good sized dairy in Summit Valley if the hikers had twenty cows apiece to milk.

This is a mystery. The Sacramento Daily Union on August 5, 1871 had an article titled "A View From Fremont's Peak." In the typical flowery writing of the day, the story said: "Who has been to the top of Fremont's Peak? I for one have had the pleasure of a tramp to this renowned spot, named in honor of Colonel Fremont, who was the first man to plant the American flag upon the snow-capped peaks of the Sierras. This peak, if not the highest of the Sierras, probably commands the most extensive view of any. Let those who have visited this mammoth pile of granite recall to mind the extensive view they had of the surrounding country."

He goes on to describe the view which sounds magnificent. In search of magnificent views we'd like to take the hike, but where was Fremont's Peak? There is nothing on the maps so labeled. So to solve the mystery we turned to our "Then and Now" columnist, Art Clark. He quickly distilled the clues and went in search.

## Clues to Fremont's Peak from the newspaper article:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Can see Sacramento Valley                                       | Can see Sutter Buttes                               |
| Can see Coastal Range   | Can see looking southeast - Lake Valley             |
| Can see 1/2 Lake Tahoe  | Can see (barely) Donner Lake a couple of miles away |
| Can see 5 little Lakes about 1/2 way to Donner Lake             | Can see looking south - Summit Valley               |
| Can see Summit Ice Co., houses                                  | Can see Tinker's Hotel [Soda Springs]               |
| Can see almost entire CPRR showsheds                            | Can see eastern entrance of great tunnel            |
| which passes under pretty little Lake                           | Can see horses, cattle in meadow at foot of peak    |
| Seen from a distance, it's a high ridge w/large rocks in center | Can see Swallows in its summit rocks                |

To get there from Cardwell's (near Donner Ski Ranch) Horseback 4 miles, then climb 1 mile.

Art also made a chart on the next page analyzing the local peaks.

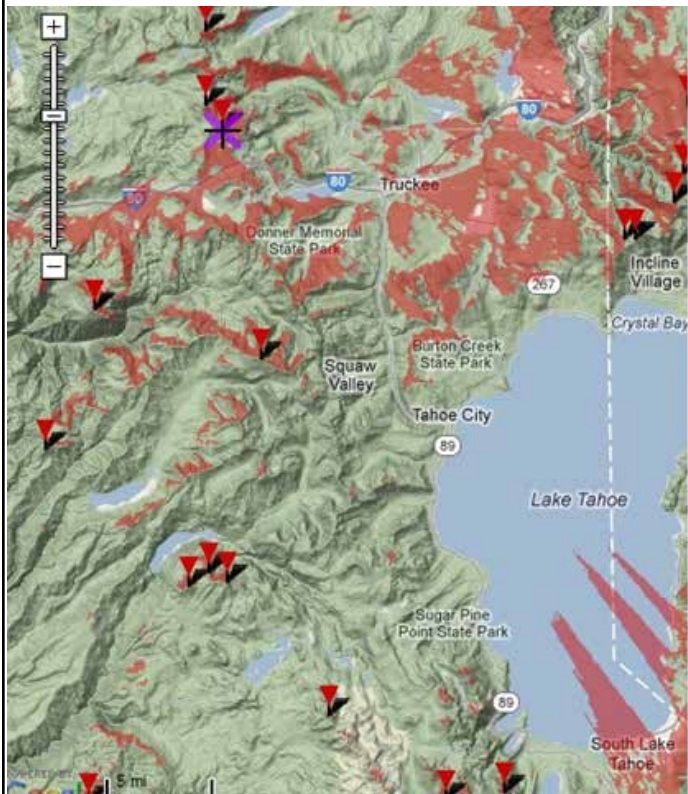
Art's best guess is today's Castle Peak, also previously called Mt. Stanford for the California governor and railroad tycoon. The panorama at the top of these pages was taken by Art from Castle Peak. The local peaks are labeled. The key is on the next page.





Sheet1\_2

	Castle	DonnerSkiR	DonnerPk	AndersonPk	Tinker Knob
Can see Sacramento Valley	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Can see Sutter Buttes	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Can see Coastal Range	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Can see looking southeast - Lake Valley	N	N	N	N	N
Can see 1/2 Lake Tahoe	N	N	N	Y	Y
Can see (barely) Donner Lake a couple of miles away	Y	ALL	ALL	N	N
Can see 5 little Lakes about 1/2 way to Donner Lake	Y	Y	N	?	?
Can see looking south - Summit Valley	N	Y	Y	N	N
Can see Summit Ice Co., houses	?	Y	Y	?	?
Can see Tinker's Hotel	?	Y	Y	?	?
Can see almost entire CPRR showsheds	?	Y	Y	N	N
Can see eastern entrance of great tunnel under little lake	N	N	Y	N	N
Can see horses, cattle in meadow at foot of peak	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Seen from a distance, it's a high ridge w/large rocks in center	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Can see Swallows in its summit rocks	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
4-5 miles from Cardwell's	Y	N	N	Y	N



This map is made on a free website called <http://www.heywhatsthat.com>. By entering a location, either by name or GPS coordinates, the software generates a map, a horizon profile and a list of peaks visible from there. One of the options, used here, is a "visibility cloak." Areas in red are able to be seen from the top of Castle Peak, shown by the purple X. Peaks are marked with red triangles. Another option lets you view it in Google Earth.

## Key to Panorama

1. Mt. Rose
2. Truckee Airport
3. Northstar
4. Lake Tahoe
5. Donner Pk.
6. Mt. Judah
7. Mt. Lincoln
8. Mt. Disney
9. Boreal
10. Crow's Nest
11. Lake Van Norden
12. Soda Springs Ski Area
13. Snow. Mtn.
14. Devil's Pk.
15. Fisher Lake
16. Black Mtn.
17. Signal Peak/Red Mtn.
18. Sierra Buttes
19. Mt. Lassen
20. Basin Pk.
21. Mt. Lola
22. Carpenter Ridge

# Van Norden Dam Part II - The Recent History

Last month we covered the old history or original history of Van Norden Dam but that is not the complete history. There is a more recent story.

## The Dam Itself

“The dam at Lake Van Norden is of earth fill, ripped on the inner slope, and has a wooden core of 3 by 8 inch planking. The Dam is provided with a wooden spillway at its west end. The outlet is a 22 inch pipe of riveted steel through the base of the dam. It is 27 feet high 1637 feet long storing 5874 acre feet” (from documents in the Division of Dams files).

Although Rudolph Van Norden (son of Charles Van Norden for whom Van Norden dam and lake are named) said in his 1903 article the Van Norden dam had a concrete core that may not be true. He was not there when it was built since his father did not come to California until 1893 to run the electrical company, which, incidentally, Rudolph took over after graduating from Stanford.



Lake Van Norden in the mid-1950's. Just above the peninsula in the lower left, note the little dot: Norm Saylor's ski jump.

According to the Division of Dam Safety in Sacramento Van Norden is a sprinkle constructed dam meaning wagons carrying dirt followed one another sprinkling dirt layer after layer. At least parts of the interior of the dam are, or were, redwood boards. There are places where those can be seen. The original dam was placed on the valley floor. The base of the dam was not placed on an excavation down to bedrock. It is that placement on up to 30 feet of glacial til (gravel), that will be important as you read on.

In 1976 the dam was owned by P G & E and during an inspection it was found to be leaking from rodent holes. P G & E thought that the need to fix the dam would be a good opportunity to enlarge it by adding to its height. It was at that point that the State of California told P G & E it had to deal with the substandard foundation. If there was an earthquake and liquifaction at a time of year when the dam was full, the entire 5800 acre feet of impounded water would rush down the Yuba River and cause a lot of damage. So the State told P G & E it had to replace the dam. The plan then was to move the dam 100 feet east and construct the new one correctly.

The old dam which was to be replaced under that plan, had never been compacted and P G & E estimated that using the old dirt and compacting it, they could only build a dam 1/3 the size of what existed. Extra dirt was to come from "borrow pits" in the valley.

The complete reconstruction of the dam was too expensive for P G & E so they gave up on enlargement and having any lake in Summit Valley. They notched dam and let the water out. Where there had once been 5800 feet of impounded water at the height of the season became only a few hundred feet at most. What had been a recreation area for fishing, camping, water skiing, and boating, became the rich and diverse refuge for birds it is today.

In 2011 someone reported to the Office of Emergency Services in Nevada City that the dam remnant was impounding more water than it should. It was out of compliance with State regulations and was large enough to be under the jurisdiction of the Division of Dam Safety. The Division sent someone to take a look and he estimated the dam impounded 300 or so acre feet of water, not less than the 50 that would have put it out of jurisdiction. There followed a demand to the owners, the prospective developers of Donner Summit, Foster and Syme, to fix the problem. The developers could notch the dam so it held less than





50 acre feet, they could replace the dam, or they could drain the lake completely. The developers were in financial trouble and in no position to embark on an expensive project, although they did fix some leaks.

The problem then went to the Truckee Donner Land Trust which had made an offer for the developers' 3,000 acres, the purchase of which was consummated in December, 2012.

### What happens next?

It turns out, due to investigation by a local scientist George Lamson, that the estimates by the Division of Dam Safety were incorrect. The dam impounds about 150 acre feet, not 300+, although that needs to be confirmed with a better bathymetric study.

The State sanctioned options are still there but the Land Trust does not have the money to do major renovation. At this point, the solution is still to be determined.

Donner Summit is rich in resources. There are 500 species of plants, 116 species of butterflies, 16 species of amphibians, more than a hundred species of birds, and many dozens of mammal species. The mammals even include a beaver that Dr. Lamson discovered had taken up residence last summer. Some are special status or endangered. Summit Valley is the richest part of the summit because of the many habitats: wetlands, wet meadow, lake, lodgepole forest, dry meadow, and riparian. If the dam is notched following the State request to remove hundreds of acre feet there will be no more lake and diverse habitats. There will only be the river that ran through the meadow before settlers came. That will enable the now not diverse lodgepole forest to encroach further and eventually take over. Already where the lodgepoles have taken root they create impenetrable barriers.

A real treat is to spend time during mid-summer at what is left of the old Lake Van Norden in Summit Valley. Walk the edges of the lake and be amazed at the number of bird species making the lake a summer home or stop on their migration routes. Take a kayak and explore the lake. Look for historic sites (see our Summit Valley brochure on line or pick up a copy at any fine establishment on Donner Summit). If the State is successful at getting the dam notched and the lake disappears, you won't have another opportunity to explore the Summit Valley riches.

If there are the 350 acre feet the State estimates, then the notch in the dam will remove all the water and what we see by the end of the summer will be what we will see in Spring. If George Lamson's estimate is correct, the notch needs to be much smaller which will leave some water behind until after the breeding season is over.

There are other possibilities however such as a series of small ponds stretching the length of the valley.

Before there was a dam, there was a meadow and a diverse forest surrounding it. Towards the end of the season the river would have dried up as the river below the dam does now. With the heavy deforestation, the resulting forest is full only of Lodgepole pines, the first successional species. Dense thickets are moving into the valley and pioneer trees can be found all over the area. If the water is removed, the thickets will expand and the biological diversity will disappear.



What happens next is to be determined. If you want more information: George Lamson [lamsongf@yahoo.com](mailto:lamsongf@yahoo.com)



Pictures here: top: Van Norden Dam in 1903, Center, 1976 and bottom, 1976 from the Division of Dam Safety files.

# From the DSHS Archives

## OVERLAND BESTS MUD IN RUN TO LAKE TAHOE

"The 'Hummingbird,' which is an Overland car with a soubriquet, covered itself with mud and did considerable 'humming' on its way to Tahoe tavern," says Sales Manager Thiesen of J. W. Leavitt & Co., Overland agents in San Francisco.

"The 'Hummingbird' is certainly A. J. Parrott Payson, and the Overland office received the following letter from R. M. Kingman of the party:

"The 'Hummingbird' is certainly some wagon and covered itself with mud and glory in our recent trip here to Tahoe tavern. We left Sacramento at 7:30 in the morning and arrived at Cisco at 1 p. m. From Cisco to the summit the road is bad, covered with mud and full of deep holes. Rain fell all the way, but the Overland was right on the job without chains.

"Just about a mile below the summit we got stuck in the snow, which was deep. But we got through without any help. We arrived at Truckee at 4 p. m. and pushed on to Tahoe, where we arrived at 6 o'clock. We find that we are the first car party to get here without help and the third to arrive this season. One car which left Sacramento and arrived here had to be helped over the snow, and it was shipped back.

The August, 1866 ad to the right shows that travelers had been traveling over the Sierra regularly. 22 hours from Alta to Virginia City sounds reasonable.

The article to the left is from the [San Francisco Call](#) dated June 29, 1913. Merchants in Tahoe and Truckee would sponsor annual contests to crown the first automobile to get over the Sierra - to open the route for summer. You can see that travel in the old days was not what it is today - 5 1/2 hours from Sacramento to Cisco!

### DONNER LAKE ROUTE

**Wells, Fargo & Co.'s**



**FAST FREIGHT**

—AND—

**PASSENGER LINE,**

—TO—

**CALIFORNIA,**

**Through from San Francisco in 40 hours!**

**From Alta in .....22 hours!**

**ON AND AFTER MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 31, 1866, we will run a**

**Daily Fast Freight & Passenger line,**

From Virginia City to Alta, Cal., through in 22 hours. Leaving Alta on arrival of morning train of cars, reaching Virginia next morning at 8 o'clock. Returning, will leave Virginia at 7 o'clock A. M., connecting at Alta with 10 o'clock A. M. train the following day.

#### **FREIGHT:**

**From San Francisco, ... 7 Cts. per Lb.**

**From Sacramento, .... 6 Cts. per Lb.**

**From Alta, ..... 5 Cts. per Lb.**

**Freight will be promptly delivered at Gold Hill and Silver City, at same rates as at Virginia.**

**Passengers will be carried at lower rates than by any other Line.**

**WELLS, FARGO & CO.,**

**By J. H. LATHAM, Agent.**

**Gold Hill, August 31, 1866.**

**au31-1f**



# From the DSHS Archives

The brochure on this and the next page from the Soda Springs Hotel was sent to us by Nick Chickering whose family owns the old Hopkins Estate in the Old Soda Springs.

Nicks' mother, Jean Chickering, passed away in March. She was the last surviving partner of the founders of Sugar Bowl. She was an interesting and good person. We interviewed her for our December, '09 issue.

This brochure is not dated. We can guess that it was used somewhere around WWII since there is the emphasis on saving tires.

Thanks Nick, for the contribution.

## Come to SODA SPRINGS HOTEL

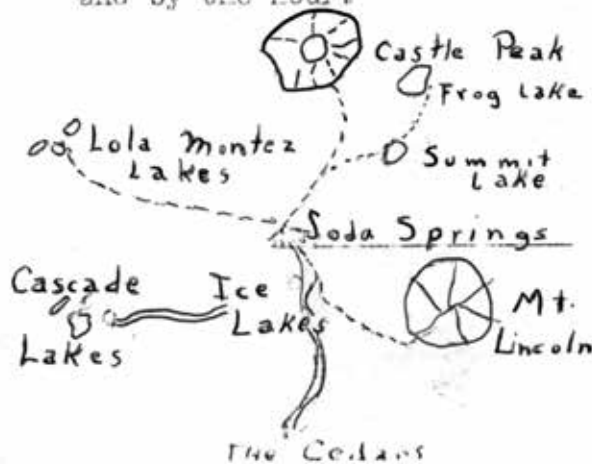


562 P L & R

### RIDING RATES

\$5--Full Day , \$3--Half Day

Special rates for pack trips and by the hour.



Write, or phone Soda Springs 1.

Soda Springs Hotel  
Soda Springs, California  
George H. Shiles, Proprietor  
Ollie Bruck Assistant Manager  
Alicia McEvoy, Hostess

Recreation this year is both  
NECESSARY and PATRIOTIC.

ENJOY A VACATION  
ON HORSEBACK  
AND  
SAVE TIRES

NEW REDUCED SUMMER RATES

GOOD FOOD - INVIGORATING AIR

Riding-Fishing-Hunting-Swimming  
Ping Pong-Sun Bathing-Campfires  
Lunch on the Terrace

On Donner Trail -Highway US 40





# Placer Restaurant Man Shot by Chinese in Stud Poker Game

Auburn Journal December 27, 1923

Peter Urschel sent an email some time ago, about a murder at Emigrant Gap

When working for Placer Co. Public Works Dept. of Surveys Division he came across old survey notes in the office files. One survey was a detailed map of the saloon in the El Wanda Hotel in Blue Canyon at Emigrant Gap (see below). Notes said the survey had been done by the sheriff in connection with a shooting at the saloon. The survey is below.

He made a photocopy and then checked the Auburn Journal archives at the Placer County Library. There he found some articles about the shooting. He transcribed the articles.

Alexander William O'Neill, 28 was the part owner of the El Wanda Restaurant at Blue Canyon. Yee Ben, 48, was a cook working for the SP near Blue Canyon.

One Saturday evening the two were playing stud poker and O'Neil lost owing Ben \$5.00. Ben demanded his money but was refused. Ben left the restaurant for the train car in which he was living and retrieved a gun. Returning to the restaurant there was an argument, cursing and threatening. Ben claimed O'Neil came at him with a knife and that was when he shot O'Neil and then left. He walked to Dutch Flat where he was later arrested by the sheriff as he was buying a train ticket from a conductor. Ben showed the sheriff a cut on his finger which came from O'Neil's knife.

There were two bullet holes in O'Neil.

further article also dated 12/27/23

There was no evidence to corroborate Ben's assertion that he'd been attacked by O'Neil who had a knife. Witnesses said O'Neil was unarmed and that he had only "cuffed" the Chinese when Ben demanded his money.

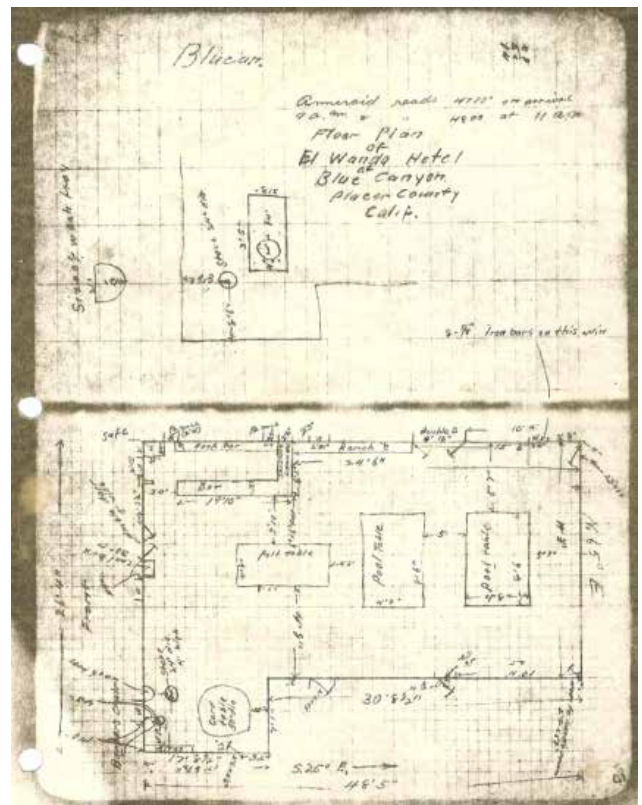
The coroner ruled, "The deceased came to his death by a gunshot wound in the abdomen, inflicted by the Chinaman known as Yee Be, Bennie, and Ah Bing, at Blue Canyon, in the El Wanda Hotel, Saturday, December, 22." The argument had been over a stud poker pot. O'Neil had taken the pot without showing his hole card.

Ben was bound over for trial for first degree murder. according to the 1/31, 24 Auburn Journal

On March 24, 1924 the Auburn Journal reported that "Yee Ben, Chinese cook, who shot and killed William Alexander O'Neil, restaurant man of Blue Canyon, Dece. 22, 1923, is now a prisoner at San Quentin...." He'd been convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to ten years to life.

He would have been convicted of first degree murder but one of the jury "believed Yee Ben had been cheated in the card game that preceded the shooting, insisted that he would not agree to a verdict of first degree murder."

There had been testimony during the four day trial about "crookedness of the gambling game and the true winner of the "pot."" Witnesses varied in their accounts.



# Book Review

## Ancient Rock Carvings of the Central Sierra: The North Fork Indian Petroglyphs

Willis Gortner Portola Press 1984  
183 pages (half of the book is drawings)

Ancient Rock Carvings is an exploration of the rock carvings on Donner Summit. Although the book focuses on the petroglyphs of the North Fork of the American River, the Cedars in particular, it applies also to other nearby rock carvings on the Sierra Crest as far as Meadow Lake or just over the ridge from the North Fork on the Yuba River. The most accessible rock carvings of the type talked about in the book are just off Old Highway 40 at the first curve below the Rainbow or Donner Summit Bridge. There you will find a 20 Mile Museum sign and a monument.

Willis Gortner was an amateur archeologist with a home in the Cedars on the North Fork of the American River. His objective in writing the book was to answer the who, what, where, when, and how of the rock carvings he found on his many explorations. To answer those questions Gortner saw himself as a detective using clues that would develop a complete picture.

In his exploration for clues Gortner covered a number of different subjects: how the petroglyphs were made, who made them, their age, meaning, location, and reasons behind. He ends with his conclusions.

An example of the depth of his study is Gortner's discussion of the age and how that can be determined. If you can pin down who did them, get an approximation of age. You can study the patina of the rock carvings to the surrounding rock. For example Gortner discusses the names carved the Cedars done by tourists at the Summit Soda Springs Hotel a hundred years ago compared to the Native American petroglyphs in the same areas.

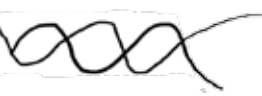
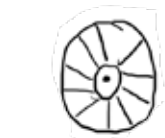
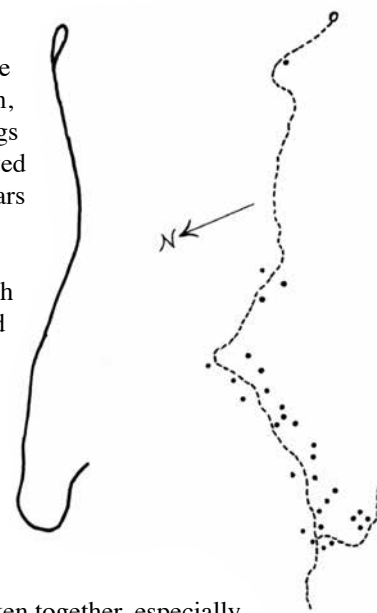
“By contrast, the immediately adjacent but much ancient Indian rock carvings appear consistently weathered dull stain re-appearing in the incised lines, though approaching the depth of color of the pink crust granite bedrock itself. Obviously, the petroglyphs at this many hundreds of years older than the “modern” carvings...”

One can also do carbon-14 dating on artifacts or fire remains nearby. can analyze spear and arrow points found nearby. Their styles changed over the ages so if carvings can be linked to a particular style, then age can be determined. All of the methods are indeterminate but taken together, especially following the analysis of spear points, Gortner feels the petroglyphs on Donner Summit could be 3,500 years old.

## ANCIENT ROCK CARVINGS of the CENTRAL SIERRA: The North Fork Indian Petroglyphs



WILLIS A. GORTNER





Gortner's discussion of the petroglyph locations is interesting. Different from other petroglyphs in other areas, Donner Summit petroglyphs are always on open bedrock outcroppings with views of major peaks. They are never on vertical faces or on boulders. They are on granite as well as basalt. That said, Gortner did not know about some possibly even more ancient petroglyphs on a boulder in one spot in Summit Valley. Other than that all the dozens of rock carving spots in the Summit and environs conform to his analysis. They were also probably located on seasonal game migration routes.

"With no exception, each of the sites that were discovered was within 20-30 feet of a magnificent view of an important mountain, and frequently a panorama of the peaks—Mount Lincoln, Crow's Nest, Anderson Peak, Tinkers Knob, Granite Chief, Needles Peak, Lyon Peak, Snow Mountain, and Devils Peak. Any outdoor person at such a spot will be thrilled by such a sight; the prehistoric Indians who left these petroglyphs must have had some of the same feeling of awe, or it was incorporated in their religion."

The second question people ask, after age, is about the meaning of the petroglyphs. They were probably not doodles given the difficulty of making the glyphs and the time required. Gortner discusses possible meanings and uses: astronomical, artistic, record keeping, maps, personal or cultural records, instructions, passage of time, or totemic. They are all symbols and there are very few animals or humans among the abstracts. The symbolism is obscure but because so many of the elements are repeated within sites and site to site, they "must have had meaning to the prehistoric tribes there."

"A more likely interpretation of many symbols is that they reflect the family totem..." is Gortner's preferred meaning. Maybe, maybe not. We'll never really know. No Native Americans have any knowledge of the meaning of what their ancestors did, assuming the current Washo are related to the Martis Culture. The meanings are lost to history. In this area Gortner could have done a better job by including in his analysis of meaning shamanistic meanings. That gets short shrift. For example, might the many bear glyphs be prayers for good hunting or records of kills rather than or in addition to being totems?

Gortner does make a cogent argument regarding meaning by contradicting some experts who said they cannot be maps. Gortner shows that at least at a couple of sites meanderings on the granite match the river and possible game migration routes. For example, the graphic on the previous page (bottom right) shows a nine foot long petroglyph juxtaposed to a tracing of the North Fork of the American River. The dots represent a few petroglyph sites.

This is a professional treatise even though Gortner was only an amateur. He cites many sources and explores the different subjects completely. In reading Gortner's analyses of the different subjects we learn a lot of interesting facts. For example, in discussing how the glyphs were made he quotes a source explaining how long it took to make rock carvings. They took 30 to 115 minutes at 126 pecks to the minute with a lizard requiring 15,000 blows of a rock against the "canvas" where the petroglyph would be.

Before the bow and arrow, spears were used as well as atlatls (spear throwers). An atlatl thrown spear is only good for 20—30 yards but a bow and arrow has improved accuracy and can go for 70-80 yards. That improves hunting and changes technique. That may have caused societal changes as well.

These petroglyphs are so old they probably predate the bow and arrow. Once the bow and arrow came along, hunting patterns and hunting grounds changed. The people did not frequent the petroglyph sites of old and they did not continue the tradition elsewhere. Maybe they did not need the symbols anymore because hunting became less difficult?

The glyphs were produced by the Martis Culture, possible the ancestors of the Washo of what is today Nevada. The Summit area was a meeting place for the Maidu (Nisenan), Miwok, and Washo whose historical boundaries came together at the Summit. At the summit the California Indians traded shells, obsidian, and acorns for dried fish from Pyramid Lake.

One final fact shows just how difficult petroglyph production is – in case you want to try it out. On a hardness scale of 1-10 with talc being one and diamonds being ten, granite rates at 6-8

Mr. Gortner died some years ago and his book is out of print. It can be purchased on Amazon, though scarcity has raised the price. A search for the book on the internet will also tell you which libraries it is in so you can dive into local petroglyphs there. The family has not agreed to any new editions.

This is the only book about petroglyphs specific to the Donner Summit and so if you are interested in the subject, this is the book to get from the library. That reading may also encourage you to look for his other book, *The Martis Indians: Ancient Tribe of the Sierra Nevada*.



# Then & Now with Art Clark



This is a fascinating picture taken by A. J. Russell the official photographer with the 1867 King Survey of the Western states.

This is looking east from Tunnel 6 towards Tunnels 7 and 8 and was taken almost immediately after construction. Regular readers will remember that a version of this was published in *The Heirloom* in April, '12.

Note the wonderful detail here of the snowsheds' planking and the chimneys so the locomotive smoke could escape. Note too the buildings to the right of the snowsheds. Who lived there? Those houses were on the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. and you can see the road just beyond the houses. Then it ran between the houses and the snowsheds before entering the larger wooden part of the snowsheds in the lower right. There the road turned and crossed the tracks before continuing just in front of the rock ledge in the lower right. From there it wound down the valley. Eventually that route became, mostly, the Lincoln Highway. In 1914 the underpass opened on the other side of Tunnel 7 (just beyond the first rock ridge after the houses). The underpass made travel much less dangerous as far as trains were concerned. Before the underpass automobiles stopped outside the snow sheds. The drivers opened big barn doors and listened for trains. Then they ran back to their cars, started the engines and drove across the tracks.

You can also see in this photograph that Tunnel 7 still has a rocky top. When the tunnels' floors were lowered in the 20th Century to accommodate taller trains, Tunnel 7 lost its top.



# Then & Now with Art Clark



After the Transcontinental Railway was completed, this area was photographed as part of the King Survey of the Fortieth Parallel. After six years of field work, the survey was published in eight volumes.

This view shows the west end of tunnel six and the east ends of tunnels seven and eight. Below the tunnels on the left is the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road.

With so many distinctive landmarks, finding the original photo location was relatively easy. Armed with a print of the original and a good set of hiking boots, a short ten minute hike from the summit was all it took to locate the spot.

Photo location 39° 18.975'N 120° 19.444'W

**THE HERITAGE TRAIL**  
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19 Museums from Roseville to Tahoe!

HT 2013

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# New Exhibits for 2013 @ DSHS

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Summit Valley DUTCH FLAT DONNER LAKE WAGON RD.

At first emigrants crossed Donner Pass and Summit Valley wherever they could. They first used Donner Pass, then Koller Pass, and finally Coldstream Pass. Later some freight crossed the Sierra here on route to Truckee probably using Coldstream Pass. Most of the trans-Sierra traffic went to the Placerville route and Virginia City beyond, until the planning for the railroad.

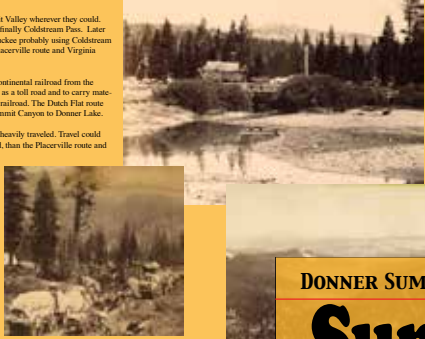
The Central Pacific, which was building the transcontinental railroad from the west, built the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. as a toll road and to carry materials and equipment to the construction sites of the railroad. The Dutch Flat route bypasses Coldstream Pass and goes right down Summit Canyon to Donner Lake.

The road was built from 1862 to 1864 and became heavily traveled. Travel could be faster on the Donner Lake route, as it was called, than the Placerville route and stage companies extended that fact (see "new arrangement" below). There was so much traffic on the road by the time "end of track" reached Chico that 85 train car loads of freight were unloaded at Chico each day on wagon for the trek over the summit.

With the completion of the railroad to Truckee in 1868, the road fell into disuse except as a stock route. Freight and passengers took the railroad and by 1873, The Sacramento Daily Union said,

"Along the route were the remains of many buildings which had been erected years ago before the railroad was completed, but disused as soon as travel was transferred to the great passage-way. Large barns and sheds still stand as wrecks, their roofs crumpled by the weight of snow, and in some cases only the blackened remains of large hotels... that had been consumed by fire..."

When Van Norden Dam was built in Summit Valley the road disappeared under Lake Van Norden for most of the year. When the dam was breached in 1976 to end impoundment of water, the road reappeared and can easily be seen and walked today. It's a good hike trail in summer and ski trail in winter. That nothing grows on the route, which is elevated above the meadow, is perhaps a testimony to the heavy freight that packed the ground.



### DUTCH FLAT WAGON ROAD.

**JUNE 18th, 1864.**  
The Shortest, Best and Cheapest Route to Washoe, Humboldt and Reese River.

From Summit, Reno & Virginia City, with the shortest route to Truckee, and the best route to the mines of the Sierra Nevada.

Wheeler & Co. Truckee, Cal.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Summit Valley

### NATIVE AMERICAN BEDROCK MORTARS, METATES, ETC.

The Martis and the Kings Beach Cultures occupied Summit Valley during summers and left behind evidence of their residence in many places. The mortars, mostly ground into glacial erratics large boulders, are not as "heavy" as the petroglyphs carved into the Sierra granite in many places, but they are maybe much more impressive.

The mortars are almost always several inches deep and granite is one of the "harder" rocks on earth. Imagine the time it took Native American women to grind these holes into the Sierra granite while grinding only foods like nuts, seeds and berries. At the mortar sites women passed on important lessons to the young girls. Generations after generations into beds of culture passed on with each round ground into the mortars.

There are dozens of mortar and metate sites around the meadow. Most are on the north side although there are a few in the center. Some of the sites contain just one or two mortars, while others must have been "party central" as many women at a time worked and talked.

The men were nearby knapping flint, fashioning the rock pieces into projectile points for spears. They too passed on cultural knowledg, edge to the boys, summer after summer, generation after generation, until the flint blades dissolved the ground in thousands and thousands of pieces.

#### WHAT WAS ON THE MENU

For the Martis and the Kings Beach Cultures which came later, the Sierra was a cornucopia - like today's supermarkets. There were all kinds of game from small to large. Birds and fish were caught with nets. Larger animals were hunted with spears thrown with atlatls (throwing sticks). The Martis did not know the bow and arrow. Hunting was the main game.

Gathering was the women's responsibility and there was so much to gather. Acorns were a staple food and good - at least once the tannins (bitterness) were removed by soaking or washing acorns in water. The acorns had to be carried up from lower elevations to the Sierra Crest where there were other seeds, nuts, and berries.

ground into flour and then acorns meal was also treated, by breaks, or made into mush which were heated and then made food or water.

local Native American plants, berries, grubs, larvae, cats and other insects. Sugar cane and other crops were also raised for eating and processing. Wild game included mountain sheep, deer, elk, caribou, bison, and other animals.

There is still evidence of all that in Summit Valley today.



Mortars were used to grind nuts and seeds to make flour or meal. Sometimes berries were ground to make berry meal. Some mortars were also used to grind seeds and other food items.



The Martis also ground acorns to make flour. The acorns were soaked to remove the tannins and then ground into a meal. Some acorns were also used to make acorn meal.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Summit Valley

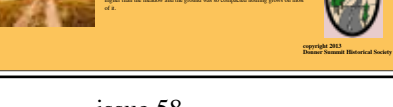
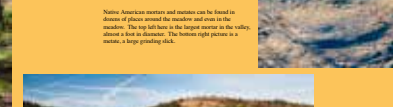
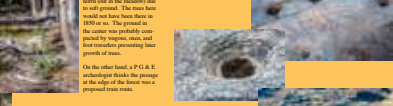
### VIEWS OF SUMMIT VALLEY TODAY

Donner Summit is the richest historical area in California and maybe the entire Western United States. Summit Valley is the richest part of Donner Summit.

Native Americans occupied the Summit in summers for thousands of years. The first wagon trains came through Summit Valley bound for California. The first transcontinental railroad, high way, telephone line, and air route went right through or over Summit Valley.

Summit Valley became a busy place after white men "discovered" it. They built hotels, cabins, saw mills, a dam, ran dairy cattle and sheep, planted an orchard, and constructed buildings related to the railroad. On the transcontinental railroad for example, there were 40 miles of sawmills. Imagine all the carpenters, tree killers, saw mill operators, etc. who were needed for that effort and all the services to support them.

There is still evidence of all that in Summit Valley today.



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Summit Valley

### VAN NORDEN DAM

No one knows who built Van Norden Dam or why but there was a dam in Summit Valley as early as 1874 - see the picture to the right taken by Alfred A. Hart.

At some point the dam became part of the South Yuba Canal Co. which built canals and reservoirs, first to supply hydraulic mining and then for irrigation and electricity generation. Each summer as the rivers and streams become more turbulent - but galled contrast to the swollen and turbulent forces which course through the grand canyons and meadow-like valleys for the remainder of the year - the reservoirs were opened to even out the river flow. The South Yuba Canal Co. became the Central California Electric Co. in 1905, which became P.G. & E. in 1907.

In the 1970's P.G. & E. wanted to enlarge the lake and dam. As they were doing the engineering prior to getting permits, it was discovered that the earthen dam was not sitting on bedrock but on glacial till - sediment. Worse, the dam was built of unconsolidated dirt and had a wood core. It was not very substantial. If there was an earthquake, 800 acres foot of Lake Van Norden water could go rushing down the Yuba River washing away everything in its path. That would not do.

P.G. & E. explored rebuilding the dam but that was too expensive. In the end the dam was breached and Van Norden would no longer hold much water.

#### WHO WAS VAN NORDEN?

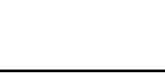
Lake Van Norden was named for Charles Van Norden the son of a wealthy family that could trace to New York roots back to 1648. His brother, Warner, had made an extended visit to California and invested in the South Yuba Canal Co. and Squinting Dam. Eventually the company had 450 miles of flumes, canals, and pipes along one CPR route down to the Central Valley, as well as 30 reservoirs.

#### VAN NORDEN DAM

"The dam at Lake Van Norden is of earth fill, rip rapped on the inner slope, and has a wooden core of 13 by 8 inch pilings (now plank). The Dam is provided with a wooden spillway at its west end (gone now). The outlet is a 22 inch pipe of riveted steel through the base of the dam. It is 27 feet high, 1657 feet long, and stores 3875 acre feet" from documents in the California Division of Dams file, 1971

Charles Van Norden, Warner's brother, was at loose ends and one source said he had health problems. He came to California to represent the family and keep an eye on its investments.

Charles was a scholar, writer, student, philosopher and litterateur of "more than ordinary ability". He was also a Congressional minister, had been president of Emory College, and once escaped death at the hands of the Red Kloa Klan in New Orleans where he had been a minister. He





# Summit Valley

## THE MARTIS CULTURE THE NATIVE AMERICANS

The first known residents of Summit Valley were a group of Native Americans called the Martis Culture. They were only semi-sedentary, occupying Summit Valley in summer and returning to the foothills on both sides of the Carson Range in the winter.

The Martis have left evidence of their presence in many areas of the Summit in the form of petroglyphs, mortars and pestles, and flint knives left over from leopards' prehistoric prisms.

The Martis lived in the area from about 2000 B.C. to 900 A.D. Although archeologists can make hypotheses on why they left for more time when the Martis were displaced, why their descendants were, or where they went.

The Martis Culture arose when the climate of Western Nevada changed from being cooler and wetter. Like Tahoe Lake and surrounding areas, the Truckee River basin increased and the Sierra Nevada snows deepened.

The Martis occupied Summit Valley until about 900 A.D. when the climate became drier. Maybe more importantly, undoubtedly the best and most developed by the time of the Martis. The area required had more grass, greater security, and greater range. It must have changed from an emphasis on the hunt and fish to a more diversified economy. Maybe they were pushed westward. New skills were needed. Maybe they changed. For example, the Martis had worked diverse rockshelters with hand to craft tools and projectile points. Bands cannot be called into the area of higher grass needed in areas to with the change in trees and shrub and other resources. These are not available on the Sierra Nevada range.

The Martis may have traveled to the Yosemite area where about that time distinctive projectile points resembling the Martis' appeared and where there is abundant evidence.

### THE MARTIS CULTURE WAS DISTINCTIVE

- Use of flint and lithic artifacts.
- Long heavy projectile points that are poorly shaped and variable in form.
- Use of various (mostly) oval and round tools as markers to great walls like foot.
- Martis stone projectile points.
- Resemblance to flint knives that improve upon throwing using flint.
- Fluted and notched artifacts.
- Broad weapons.
- Use of both flint and obsidian.
- Fluted darts and spears.

The Martis were the only prehistoric residents recorded by Dr. H. H. Henshaw and Dr. H. Henshaw, now California Indian scholars from USC, while building a cabin at Lake Tahoe in 1911.

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# Summit Valley

## SHEEP INDUSTRY

Almost as soon as the railroad was finished sheepmen discovered the Sierra valley and brought their flocks to the high meadows for final fattening before sending them off on the train for their final destination.

The mostly Spanish herders started to arrive just west of the Spring in the Carson Valley and worked their way to the meadows along the Carson and from meadows to meadows, to the Sierra Coast by the end of the summer.

Lake Van Norden would fill with each winter's runoff. Then in the fall sheep dropped in the Valley River as the summer season progressed. There was little of the lake to cover the flocks to the Donner Ferrying point.

Sheepmen was a top sheep shipping center and sheep were brought to the meadows for the summer. There is even an evidence of sheepmen in the meadows in the meadows of the Donner Ferrying point.

All that is left of the sheep industry in Summit Valley are the remains of the sheep pens, the pens, and the sheepherder's shack just below. Once through, the rest of the flock on the high meadows was "ranged to lead" and would be heard all over the valley in the late summer and fall.

Summit Valley was a busy place after the arrival of the White Man and the "Civilization."

Before all of the activity it was a high meadow. The Valley River begins at its source on the flank of Mt. Tallah in the right side of the top picture and is joined by Castle Creek and a couple of other creeks. It runs through the valley.

**SUMMIT VALLEY, 1874**  
"At Summit Valley (which is associated with the relief of the tragedy) find Donner camp, and is only three miles from Donner pass there is an old stone wall, which has been built out the distance on a very large of abandoned houses."

**It is hard to see across the valley, need a high vantage to see on top peak, a multitude of high mountain peaks, a great variety of peaks. And yet this valley is not entirely flat. It is a great valley, still a great meadow land to the base of peaks 10,000 or 12,000 feet high, where light-ly covered of grass, or volcanic breccia, weather into castellated forms, rise in sharp contrast to the green meadow surrounding the level meadow. A little apart from the rocky ridges, the woods are beautiful, as we have described them, and the horse-drawn land (with) remains one of the prettiest districts with sheep."**

**MORE SUMMIT VALLEY PRIME:**  
"The Martis were the only prehistoric residents recorded by Dr. H. H. Henshaw and Dr. H. Henshaw, now California Indian scholars from USC, while building a cabin at Lake Tahoe in 1911."

**Picture from top:**  
Summit Valley, the old Lake Highway in Summit Valley, showing the valley, the meadows, and the valley. Photo by the author, 1911.

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# One More Thing:

Here we have a link from Ron Rettig of the Truckee Donner Historical Society. The link takes you to a short YouTube video of the City of San Francisco train stuck in the snow in 1952.

<http://youtu.be/e-Yew1UQuQE>

### 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

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

- Benefactor - \$1000
- Business - \$250
- 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.



# 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, August 18. 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 Summit Valley displays on display and the new 2013 DSHS poster.



# McIver Dairy Sign Dedicated

On May 24th several dozen members of the Truckee community gathered at the McIver Dairy site, opposite the Villager Nursery. The occasion was the dedication of the McIver Dairy sign which was a project of the Brisbin Crew (photo below left), a 4-5th grade class at the Sierra Expeditionary Academy. The students had researched the dairy and the people involved and chosen the photographs. They had also gotten the local Rotary Club to sponsor the sign.

The Town of Truckee, for its part had the old buildings repainted as part of their 150th anniversary celebration of the founding of Truckee (and the 20th anniversary of the incorporation as a city).

Mayor Carolyn Wallace Dee gave a speech and, with the help of several city council members (back row bottom right: Council Member Mark Brown, Vice Mayor Patrick Flora, Mayor Dee, Council Member Alicia Barr), cut the ribbon.

You can see the sign (above) at the site or on our website. This is our first 20 Mile Museum sign in Truckee.

