

The Donner Summit

Heritloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

October, 2013 issue #62



Donner Summit Sentinels



There is a lot that's fascinating on Donner Summit. There are wildflowers in the meadow, raptors floating overhead on the air currents, huge trees, petroglyphs and grinding rocks, the old wagon road and the emigrant trail, catfish in the ponds maybe planted by the Chinese railroad workers, old buildings, the site of the first chair lift in California, and a number of old characters to enliven things.

The Junipers on Donner Summit, the Sierra Juniper, are particularly fascinating. I was dismayed to learn that the oldest Juniper, about three thousand years old, is not to be found on Donner Summit, but we do have some exceptionally old trees. The Junipers have chosen a most harsh environment. The summit gets an average of 34 feet of snowfall a year. Although Theodore Judah, who laid out the transcontinental rail route, studied the evidence and concluded that snow would be no problem, it was. Eventually 40 miles of snowsheds had to be built to protect the track (see the picture above. That's Donner Peak on the right and the snowsheds just below). That snow piles up and covers the Junipers sometimes. At other times the winds howl and blast

go to page three



The problem with Determining Age

You count the rings in a tree stump or core in order to ascertain the age of a normal tree. You can do that with a Juniper if you can find a flat stump or have a corer and good magnification. The wood of the Juniper is so dense and the rings are so closely packed that counting is difficult.

There is another issue too. Look at the picture at the bottom of the next page. The cut stumps do not remain flat. They are very irregular with little peaks of wood jutting up. You do not want to sit on them or lean on them because the little peaks are sharp. Whether that is from the blasting of the winds or some other process our Dendrochronology dept. does not know. The close ups above shows how closely packed the rings are. In two spots we counted 14 rings in a quarter inch and that was not exact. Doing a little simple math, this tree with an approximate two foot circumference was more than a six hundred years old when cut. Determining circumference is difficult too because the trees grow in irregular shapes.

Whatever their ages, the trees have seen a lot and an enjoyable afternoon can be spent exploring the trees and admiring their shapes.

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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



Above: Crystal Harling's and Marianne North's tree overlooking Donner Lake. See last month's [Heirloom](#).

the trees clean of snow "sandblasting" them with ice crystals. The winds can be so strong going through the pass that the weather station that sat opposite Signal Peak above Old 40 for the transcontinental air route (see our July '11 Heirloom), had to be held down with cables thrown over the roof which were anchored by bolts drilled into the granite. Lightning flashes and thunder booms over the trees. Low clouds hide them and summer sun beats on them.

Despite Mother Nature's inconsiderate treatment, the Junipers continue their growth sometimes growing in diameter at the amazing speed of a couple of inches a century. Their wood is so densely packed that if one wants to count rings, a dissecting scope (lower powered microscope) is needed.

The Junipers have stood over Donner Summit for centuries. The Junipers greeted the first Native Americans four thousand years ago and watched them scrape their petroglyphs and grind their mortars into the granite. These trees saw the first wagons to reach California. The four Donner Party rescue parties passed the Junipers on the way to Donner Lake and then back on the return trip with the rescued. The transcontinental railroad and highway, the transcontinental telephone line, and the air route all passed by the Junipers. Walk up to the harshest spots you can find and although you may find nothing else growing, you will find the Junipers.

"Junipers ... on the summit...are awesome examples of what time, weather, and location can do to junipers.

The size, the different colors, from rich redwood, to dull grays, the lichen, and rocks they slowly emerge from and bend their old branches around.

...I take... photos, ... I paint, some times I sketch, sometimes I just sit under them and eat my lunch. I am always out looking for old junipers.

Crystal Harling
-see the September, '13 [Heirloom](#) and Crystal's Juniper painting

Our research department has been interested in discovering the age of our Junipers but the accepted method, an incremental corer, costs \$160 or so which seems a bit steep for one use. (If any readers have one to loan out, we'd be interested.) An alternative would be to find a stump, count the rings, and then compare the stump's girth to a live tree's. Unfortunately there are no acceptable stumps.



Right: close up of the rings in a Juniper. see the problems with aging on the previous page

More on the Sentinels

On the same day we went out to put Art Clark on the cliff you see on page 14 we also went exploring for Sierra Junipers. There are many venerable examples.

The photograph to the right is just amazing. The tree measures 11 feet in circumference. If we take 14 rings to the quarter inch, it means the old tree is 3,696 years old. Since experts say the oldest Juniper is in the Stanislaus National Forest, down south, and that is only 3,000 years old, this one is less than 3,000 years old. Whatever this tree's age is, it's old. Imagine all that it's seen on Donner Pass.

The phot the right is from below with Art Clark unpacking his lunch. The photo below is from above with Castle Peak in the distance.

While standing above the tree Art saw a Night Hawk (below right - well camouflaged) just sitting on a rock. Art walked a little closer and it only flew away when Art had approached within a couple of feet. Then Art saw why. It had been sitting on two eggs (below). She did come back. Tree's location: 39° 18.821'N 120° 19.493'W Take the PCT from the Summit up Mt. Donner.



Sheep Part III

The Underpass

In Part I about the sheep industry on Donner Summit in our August issue we introduced the subject and then followed in September with more pictures and a cute story. The subject was not done though. There was still one more little story having to do with Donner Summit and then, as long as we were at it, Whiskey Creek.

Making the Commute Easier

Sheep began making their way up to the high Sierra meadows in the 19th century and as they did the traffic they met was not a problem.. They did not meet much traffic on the way up the various canyons anyway. When they arrived at the high meadows they fattened, were brought to Soda Springs, shipped out on the railroad (and later trucks), and the shepherders and the local community had a BBQ.

As the population increased and traffic went faster there was more danger when roads were encountered but those roads were two lane and traffic probably had to slow at the uphill as it followed the slowest vehicles. With the coming of the freeway, I-80 though, things changed. That traffic is serious traffic and the multi lanes enable slow traffic to be bypassed.

The planners of I-80 must have been thinking about the situation and the sheep. The sheep had to go to work foraging and fattening and the traffic had to get to Tahoe, Reno, and beyond. They solved the problem by constructing an underpass under the highway so the sheep that needed to get to the meadows under Castle Peak could get to work easily.

If you want to find the underpass, it's not difficult, and if you do you'll see how the Sierra has changed in the fifty years since the coming of the freeway. Just east of downtown Soda Springs on Old 40 is the Central Sierra Snow Lab. Park your car and walk up the road. There are a few houses. Bear left at the intersection on the dirt road and do not head up to Boreal. Follow the road towards the freeway (the noise will get louder) and follow the winding route. You'll wander around and then end up at the view above. When you emerge on the north side of the freeway, you'll notice that it's all dense forest. Fire suppression and normal forest growth have removed any route for any sheep you may have brought and the meadows are mostly closed in, covered by trees. There will be no more bells tinkling as the sheep move up or down from pasture to pasture.

The stereo here is by Art Clark who came at the underpass from the north side of the freeway, having started at the fire station in Soda Springs and worked his way up.



Shepherd Accommodations

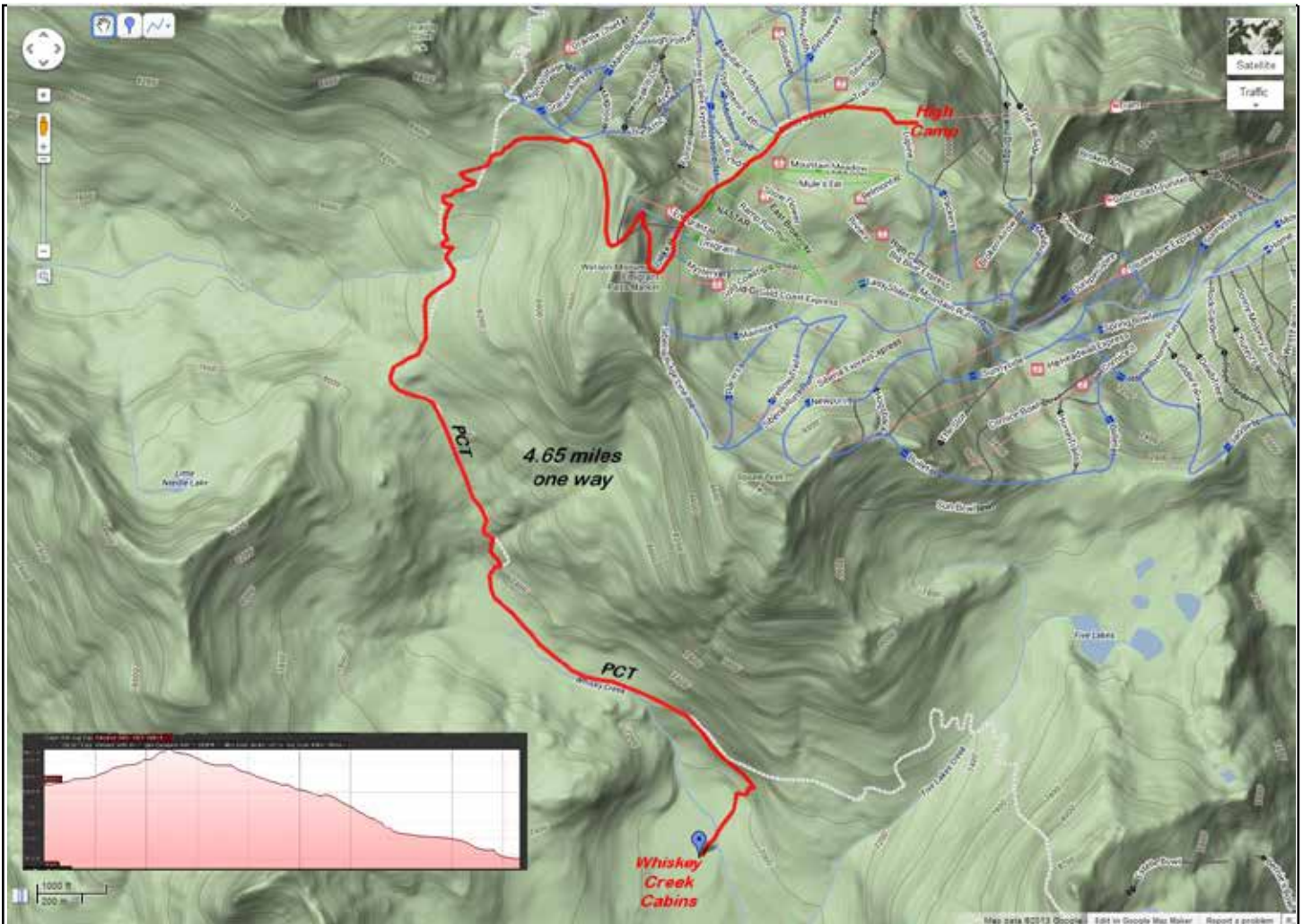
In our last issue we included a picture of the only shepherd's cabin left in Summit Valley. Old timers say most of the shepherds used wagons as their dwellings. The one cabin ruin must be fairly old and accommodated a number of shepherds in or around it. There are many large square spikes in the surrounding trees which would have allowed a lot of things to hang up. The accommodations were not attractive however.

A trip to Whiskey Creek, though, shows how the "other half" of the shepherds lived. There are a couple of well constructed log building that were no doubt cozy in the summer months including the oven building (the picture directly below here). The aromas of baking bread must have been very inviting.

Thinking about it now, though, the accommodations may have been so permanent at Whiskey Creek because there are no roads to transport wagons. It's a nice hike to Whiskey Creek but be aware that the trip back is mostly miles of uphill. To get to Whiskey Creek start at Squaw Valley and take the tram to the top. There hike to the Watson Emigrant Monument at the top. Just follow the road. When you get to the top of the ridge head down following the trail to the intersection with the PCT. Take the left fork and then stay on the main route keeping Squaw Valley peaks on the left. Keep going downhill 4.65 miles to the the marked intersection for the Whiskey Creek turn off. Watch for it so you don't go too far. Then it's about a half mile down the trail. You will come to a stream and over that, just uphill, are the buildings you see here.

Take food and water. Be aware that the hike back is all uphill until you get to the Watson Monument and it's tiring. You will, though, have seen some beautiful country: nice view, meadows, aspen, and some very large trees. You will see why the sheep liked it. There's a map on the next page for your convenience and fun.





Map showing the route from Squaw Valley's High Camp, to the top of the ridge at the Watson Monument and then down the PCT to Whiskey Creek. Note the distance and the elevation change. Be sure to watch for the Whiskey Creek Trail sign on the PCT. If you miss you will keep going south on the PCT - next stop Alpine Meadows. Map by George Lamson

One More Sheep Story

There were a lot of sheep in Summit Valley at one time. So there had to be some infrastructure too: corrals, loading ramps, and housing for those in charge.

Across from the DSHS in the trees, three houses were built in the 1930's by Oscar Jones who built the Soda Springs Hotel. Two are still there. The evidence of the third is just the foundation. One of those houses is to the right and belongs to Starr Walton Hurley whose parents started Donner Ski Ranch. Oscar Jones was her grandfather. Starr is famous in her own right. Besides being on the DSHS board, she is a former Olympic skier. See "Starr's Story" in our December, '09 [Heirloom](#).



Donner Pass -- Sublime



Photo by George Lamson

On Donner Pass “It was bitterly cold, but from the almost pointed summit, the grandeur and wild, confused desolation... was sublime indeed. North, east and south, peak rose beyond peak in endless succession while in the west the eye looked far down into a chasm where very ravine and gorge shone and glistened with the spotless white of vast snow fields. Beyond, instead of the expected Sacramento Valley, nothing broke the magnificent expanse of the mountain chains.”

Isaac Wister, Fall, 1849

Quote from [With Golden Visions Bright Before Them...](#), a new book about the emigrant experience during the Gold Rush. Look for the review in our November [Heirloom](#).

From the DSHS Archives

Right: construction of the new highway - Highway 40. 1926.

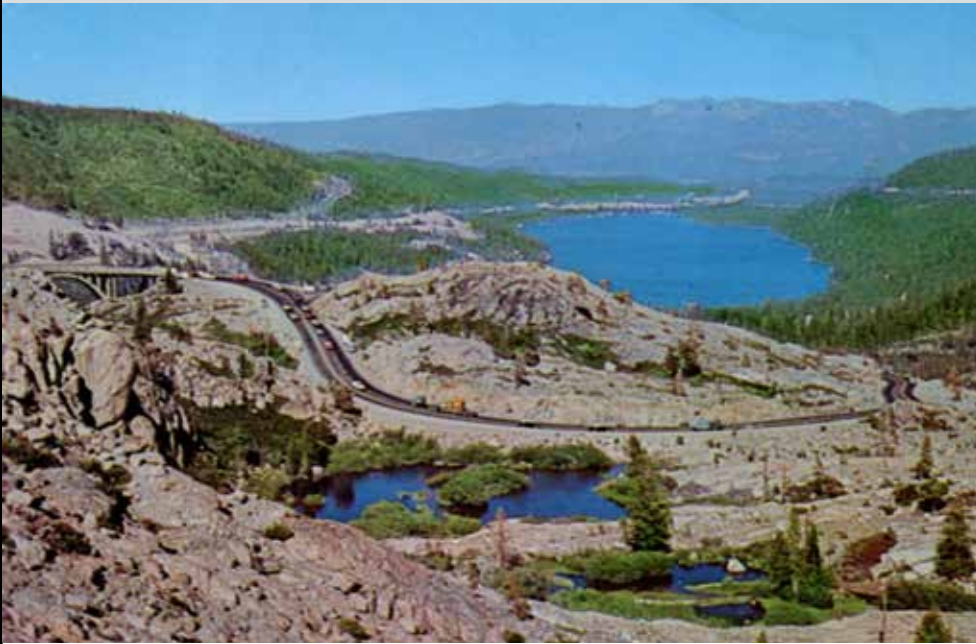
Summit Valley, 1849

“We decended from the Summit into a valey 4 miles distance and camped finding good grass the decent is precipites and rocky this valley is 1 Mile in width and several miles in length with a fine stream of water running through it and is covered with nutritious grasses we did not arive in camp untill after dark and the wether was cold water freezing while staning by the fire.” [sic]

E. Lewis, 1849



From the DSHS Archives



This postcard was photographed in the 1950's and shows cars on Old Highway 40 above Donner Lake. The caption on the back says, "Donner Grade, from Donner Summit. This breathtaking scene from Donner Summit crossing the Sierra Mountains, elevation over 7200 feet, over Hi'way 40 from California toward Nevada.



Two gents beside the second Summit Hotel sometime late 1910's or early 20's.

The hotel burned in 1925. See our

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Jim Gould Cisco, Calif.
 Member Donner Trail Assn.

ads from the Sierra Sentinel May 31, 1942

Book Review

Sierra Crossing

First Roads to California 179 pages

Thomas Howard 1998 University of California, Berkeley Press

Our research department was on the trail of Donner Summit routes. The Stephens Party took Donner Pass in 1844 but by 1846 everyone was using Roller and then Coldstream (except the Donners). The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. goes down the original Donner Pass or today's Summit Canyon. It was built by the CPRR to facilitate railroad construction and carry freight as a toll road. Between the emigrants and the 1864 completion of the Dutch Flat Rd. did anyone travel the route? The trip up Donner Pass was so difficult that wagons had to be disassembled. Did someone build a road to ease travel or did they continue to use Coldstream Pass until the Dutch Flat Rd. was done?

One avenue of research was the California State Railroad Museum's library. They must have some information and so a query was sent. The librarian there recommended this book as being helpful.

It wasn't. The Truckee Route and Donner Summit is given short shrift. The Dutch Flat Rd. is barely mentioned and only at the very end. But that's not the only reason to get this book which is available at the library.

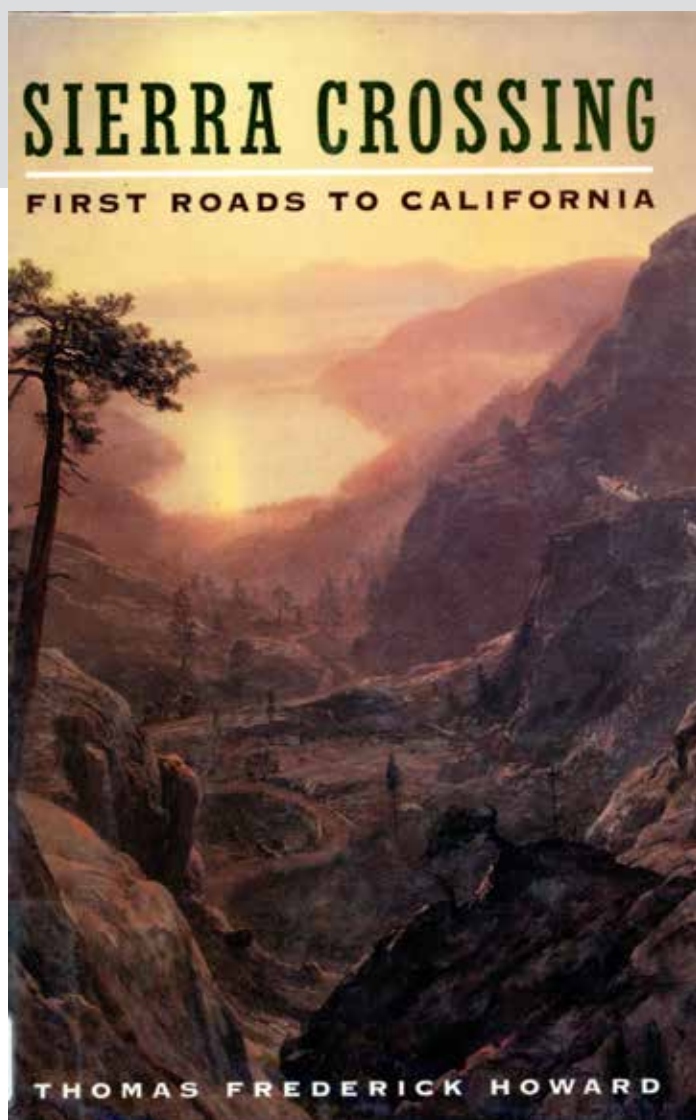
If you are interested in general California history and the stories and facts about the who, what, where, when, and political machinations of the routes to California and road building over the Sierra, you'll be interested in this book. There are so many routes and that means a lot of history is covered.

The book covers all the routes to California by giving their stories: when they were made, who made them, who promoted them, and what happened to them. Some of the better used routes are analyzed more than others.

Howard starts the whole story with the first trappers and explorers, then moves on to the emigrants, first road building attempts, State action, stagecoaches, National action, and then the coming of the railroad.

You learn about the explorers: Walker, Chiles, Fremont and their backgrounds. You learn about the stories behind the different routes: Truckee, Carson, Beckwourth, Lassen, Henness, Big Trees, etc. You find out that different California towns promoted different routes, the routes that led to their towns and competed with each other. They even sent agents to Ft. Hall to convince emigrants to take their particular routes. There are lots of emigrant quotes when the emigrant routes are discussed.

If you like general history books about California history this book does a good job with this obscure topic. Who knew there were so many routes. If you are looking for something in depth or for something in particular, then you probably won't want this book. It's good for general history reading but not historical research. The lady at the library was wrong.



One strength of the book is the use of quotes to illustrate the human element of the travel to California. This quote is by J. Ross Browne who traveled over the Sierra early and then after civilization had tamed travel. His quotes are very illustrative of travel at the time and he complained about it well. In this excerpt he rues the old days. This quote was written in 1864. Unfortunately it is about the Placerville route as were his other quotes and so I could not pay much attention. Otherwise I'd have repeated some of them here.

With the development of roads and stage lines, "Yet I must confess the trip to Washoe has, to me at least, lost much of its original charm. No longer is the way variegated by long strings of pedestrians, carrying their picks, shovels, and blankets upon their backs; no longer are the stopping-places crowded every night with two or three hundred adventurers inspired by visionary thoughts of the future; no longer are the wild mountain passes enlivened by grotesque scenes of saddle-trains and passengers struggling through the mud and snow; it is all now a regular and established line of travel; too civilized to be interesting in any great degree, an too convenient to admit of those charming discomforts which formerly afforded us so much amusement. Only think how the emigrants who crossed these mountains in 1848 would have stared at the bare suggestion of a Pioneer Stage—line.

There is only a small bit in the book about the Truckee Route, the railroad and the Dutch Flat Rd. In that the author has an interesting insight worth repeating here. The Truckee Route to California quickly fell into disfavor because it was so hard coming west. It became the preferred route later for the railroad and the highway route because of the ease of approach from the west. Improved technology surmounted the problems on the eastern flank of the Sierra. Now it is a prime route over the Sierra.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

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

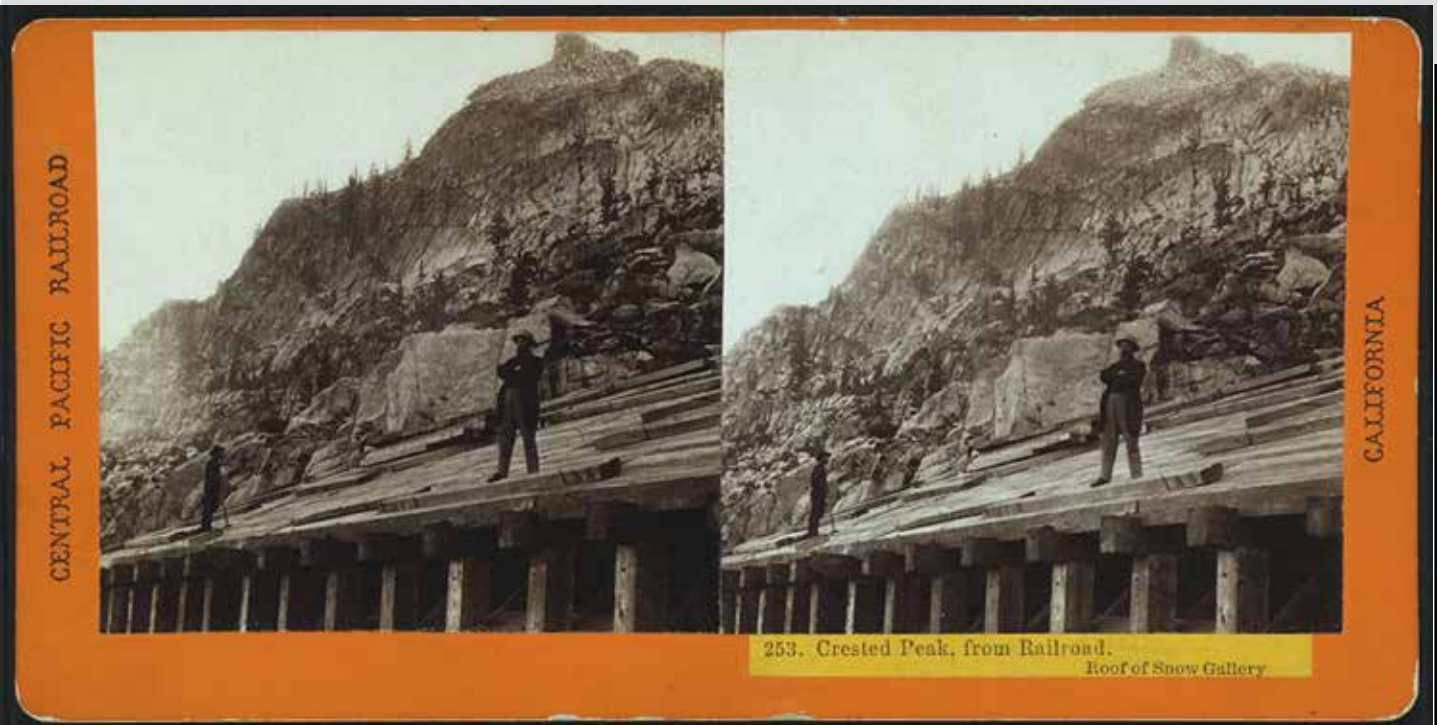
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Then & Now with Art Clark



Two versions of the original Stereocard have survived. This one is the original by Alfred A. Hart. Carleton Watkins obtained the negatives and reprinted it, cropping out the top of Donner Peak. The composition changed entirely, and the symbolism between the standing figures and the peaks above was gone. If you want to go see this view, you're lucky. There is an opening in the current concrete snowsheds that allows you to walk through the tunnel and step outside. Not only can you admire the mountain, but just turn around for great views of Donner Lake, Mt. Stephens and Stewart Peak.

Photo location 39° 18.919'N 120° 18.974'W





Lakeridge (Andover) Snowsheds about 1915 -

Photographer unknown - This scene was part of a promotional brochure put out by the railroad to illustrate and promote the route through the Sierras. The east end of Tunnel 13 exits Schallenberger Ridge here and continues down to Coldstream Valley and then Donner Lake. Tinker Knob and Anderson Peak are on the horizon. Bill Oudegeest noted the inner and outer snowshed walls, which allowed a section to be rolled back inside on its own rails. This also provided a way to isolate sections of the snowshed in case of fire. Makes one wonder if it was rolled by hand, or if they used a locomotive to pull it back?

In 1925 a second tunnel and track were built next to the original.
Photo location 39° 18.787'N 120° 14.652'W



For Future Generations



Our "Now" for a Future "Then"

Faithful readers have seen our monthly Art Clark "Then & Now's." Last month we covered the intricacies of their production and the previous month (the August [Heirloom](#)) we exhibited some guys overlooking Donner Lake in the old days, with Art Clark playing the model for our "Now's." That gave our editorial staff an idea. Our research staff had just come across the two pictures of the guys which were taken decades apart. What if we made a good photograph that someone might just come across decades hence? Might they then combine our "Now" to their "Now" and come up with a "Then & Now" for themselves?

With the mind we enlisted Art Clark for another round as model.

Here Art is above on an outcropping from Mt. Donner overlooking Rainbow Bridge with the freeway in the distance. What will that look like in 100 years? Will automobiles still be the most common form of U.S. transportation? To the right is another view showing the heights Art will climb for our readership. There was no safety harness. Art is a purist.

Pur a reminder on your calendar for 100 years hence and see what they come up with.



Volunteer at the DSHS



In the note that introduced the September [Heirloom](#) we talked a bit about volunteering and a new project for the DSHS. Here we can go into a little more detail.

The DSHS is primarily a photo museum. There are thousands of Donner Summit photographs to peruse. There have been some problems with that however.

The photographs mostly sit in many binders and the unlabeled binders are a bit daunting. Where should one start? What is in them?

Second, they are all Norm's originals. What happens if there is a fire or some other catastrophe.

Third, the photos are hard to use for those doing research or looking for specific things.

Other museums lock up their originals, they curate their collections with labels and other information, and they digitize their collections for posterity and research.

Norm Saylor's collection is incomparable and irreplaceable. For years we've talked about best museum practices but being short on help and money the best practices have not been engaged in for the collection.

The DSHS also has a nice library of history books and a large collection. None of that has been curated or cataloged either.

Cheryl Lebel spent some time listing the books and making a little guide for going around the museum. But more needed doing. Judy Lieb came in at the end of August and labeled all the binders and cataloged all the books (see above).

Judy talked to George Lamson who then worked up the skeleton of a database for the photographs, books, and artifacts. To make it usable it needs to be filled.



The DSHS board then used those volunteer efforts as an excuse to buy our first computer and a scanner. The scanner has a sheet feeder which will feed Norm's photographs.

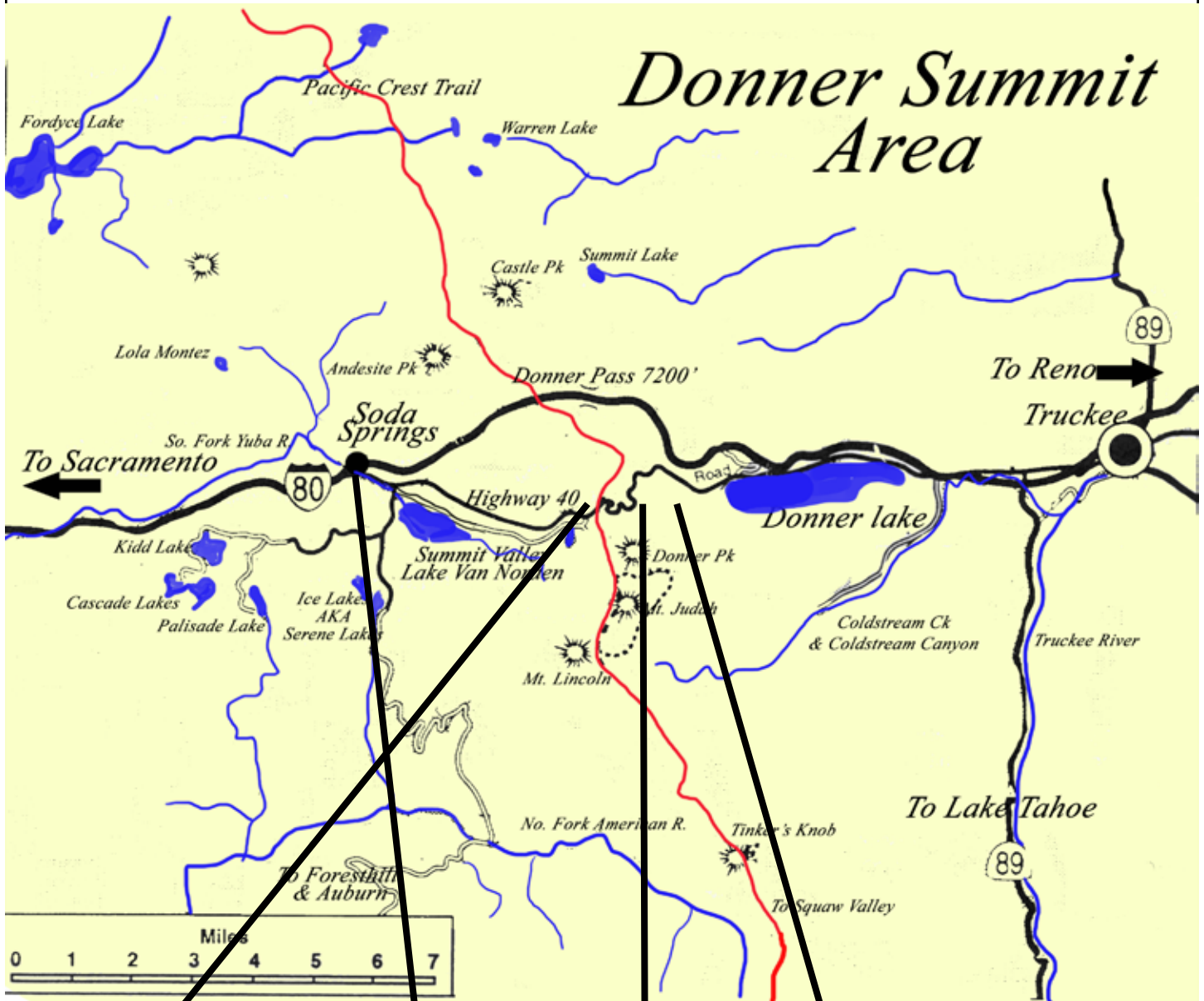
Now we need volunteers to come in and run the scanner. Once the pictures are in the database we can go back and annotate the collection: key words, subjects, dates, etc.

Long term it will enable research by us and others. It will serve as record of Norm's collection, and it will preserve the collection. Eventually we'd like to offer a reproduction service so people can request copies of photographs. The greater access will mean we'll have to have some computer stations and printers. We'd like too, to be able to duplicate the photographs and put the originals away for safekeeping. The database will enable us to finally curate the rest of the collection as well - providing labels so visitors know what they are looking at.

If you would like to help with bringing the DSHS into the modern museum age, please let us know. Experience in scanning is not required. All you have to do is load some pictures and push the button.

volunteer Scanners Wanted

Story Locations in this Issue



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One More Sheep Story

Archives

Snowsheds at Lakeview