

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society



April 1, 2014 issue #68

The Dragons of Donner Summit

Once, long ago, when Donner Summit was very different, before the Indians, before the white man, but after the glaciers and after the dinosaurs, it was ruled by dragons. They were a wild and mischievous bunch. Crater Lake at the top of Boreal Ridge was carved out of the rock by them but that's another story for another [Heirloom](#).

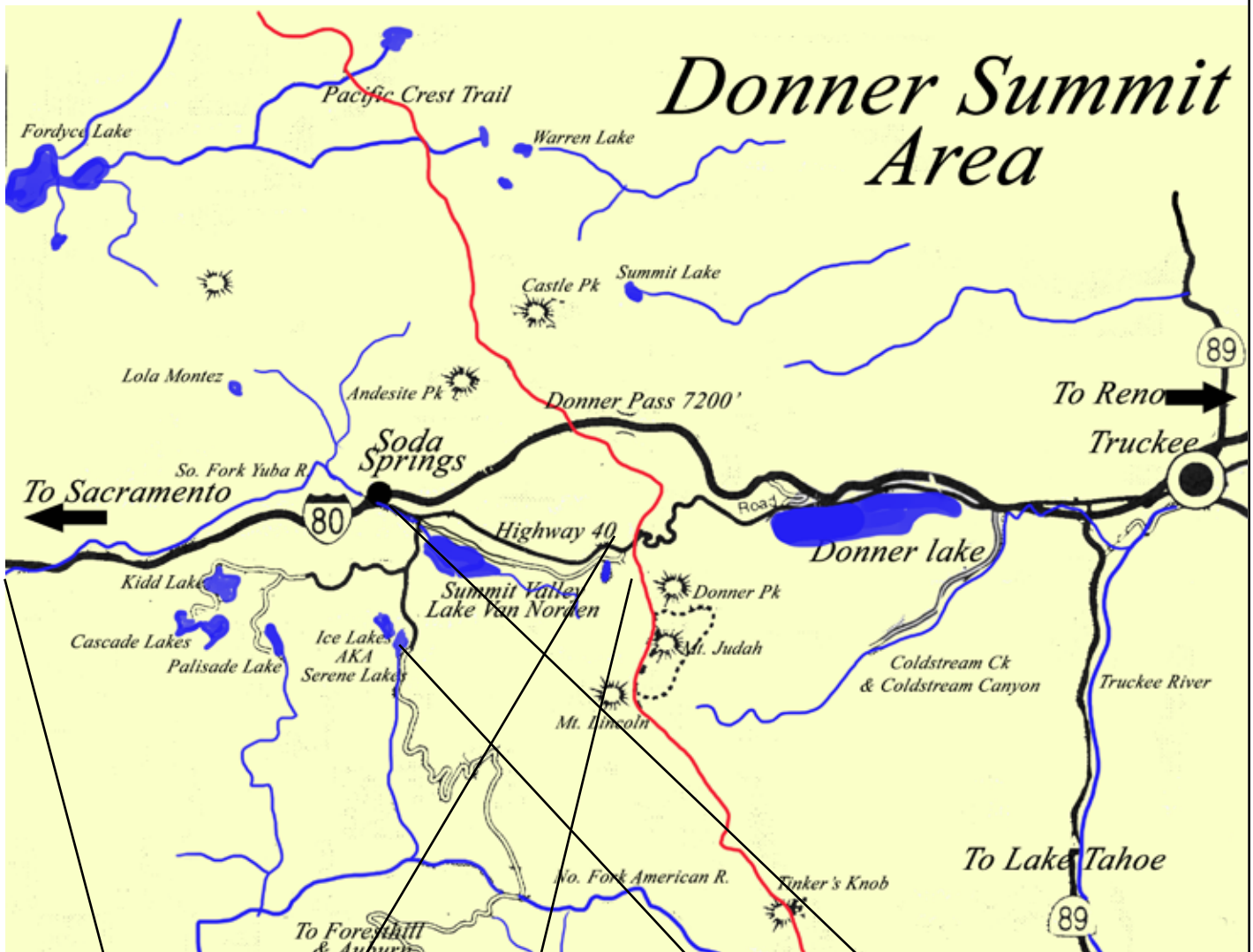
The dragons left no written records that we can decipher but they did leave a rich oral tradition. Some evidence of their physical presence also survived.

Dragons were peaceful. They lived life on the Summit enjoying the beauty. They gamboled and frolicked. They chased butterflies. They played games, one which was like our hide and seek. It must have been difficult to hide though, with the smoke rising from their nostrils. One would think it would have been a dead giveaway. Another game was played with large rocks placed on large flat open granite terraces (see page 3 for a gameboard that has not been changed since dragon times). The pieces were moved strategically, that is clear, but exactly how is still being debated by dragonologists.



In summer, as part of a rite of passage, adult dragons took young dragons up what is now Donner Pk. (the names of old have been lost) and they made snowcones from the banks of snow and flavored syrup they'd brought with them. On their returns home they'd slide down the banks on their backsides making the return trips much faster than the uphill treks. They guided themselves down the steep declines by dragging their wingtips.

Story Locations in this Issue



In This Issue

Rainbow Tavern

Dragons

Wedell Signs

Ice Lakes Chalets
(Serene Lakes)
(Anderson Valley)

Soda Springs Hotel

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

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

It is a myth that “Dragons live forever...”* and that provides us some of the evidence of their presence on Donner Summit. Dragons were buried where they fell and over them were planted Juniper trees because Juniper trees are the hardiest of the Sierra Summit trees and live the longest. Wherever you see a Juniper tree there is a chance a dragon is buried underneath with all his or her worldly goods.

In some cases, possibly because very good dragons were buried beneath, the Junipers grew to resemble the dragon beneath (page 1 and center page 3). In the case of the picture here, the dragon turned up when the Juniper lost its bearings and toppled. Tangled among the roots were the dragon’s riches as you can see (top).



One ignorant passerby wondered if the dragons were buried with their riches then where was the gold but that is clearly ignorant and only focuses on what we value. Dragons valued the hardest of the Sierra rocks, the granite, and the more colored the granite the more valuable it was. Dragons worked long and hard crafting their granite into blocks. These were not used as currency however. The granite was valued for itself not for what it could buy.

Eventually climate change did the dragons in and subsequent ice ages destroyed most of their traces. At times the sheets of ice on Donner Summit were 500 to 1,000 feet thick. Not much can survive that. But underneath, there still were seeds of life and when the ice retreated the Juniper seeds sprouted and the dragons underneath were protected again.

As you travel the forests of Donner Summit, look for their traces. As more is learned we will of course pass it on to our faithful readers. This is just a preliminary report, just received at our April 1 press time.

*Peter Paul and Mary



Pictured here:

Top, dragon treasure just above the Catfish Pond. That's Donner Pk. in the background.

Center, dragon in Summit Valley.

Bottom, "game board. Donner Pk. and Mt. Judah in the back right



Rainbow Tavern Re-opens

Rainbow Tavern

Our editorial staff generally limits editorial content to history. It's an Heirloom publication after all. We're making an exception this month because the story relates to Summit history and it's about something you can enjoy both for the history and the ambience.

Rainbow Tavern Reopens

In the old days when life moved a lot slower and "social media" was actually talking in person to someone, there were lodges all along Old Highway 40. Just on Donner Summit there were accommodations at Cisco, Big Bend, Rainbow, Kingvale, Soda Springs, and Norden. There were many more down at Donner Lake.

Rainbow Tavern was one of those lodges catering to travelers and it has done so for more than a hundred years ever since the 1890's when a previous incarnation was a stage stop on the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.

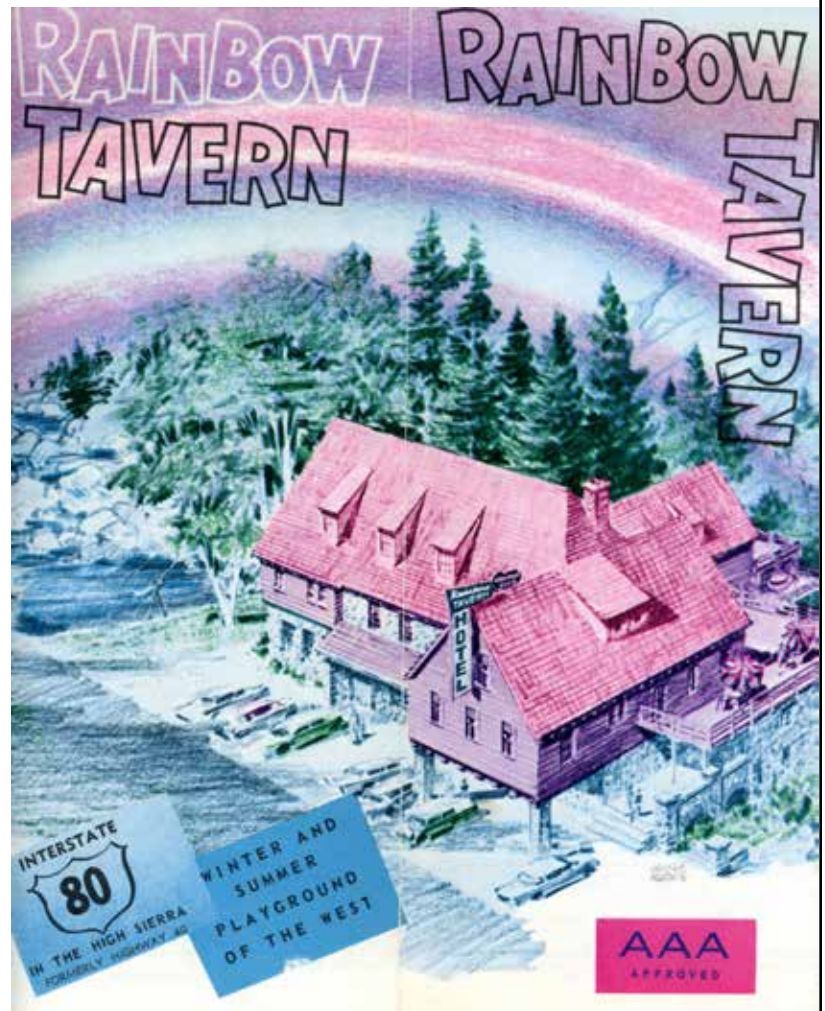
In 1932 Herstle Jones bought the lodge, no doubt thinking that with the highway being plowed in winter there would be more opportunities for serving tourists. Prior to that winter the road had not been plowed and so there were no travelers in winter except for those who arrived on the train. Herstle's brother, Oscar, had built the Soda Springs Hotel in 1927. There was a train station in Soda Springs so winter travelers could arrive and gambol in the snow.

You can see on page 5 that the original Rainbow Tavern was considerably smaller than it is today.

Apparently business was good because Herstle enlarged the lodge in 1935.

The lodge is beautiful building. The first floor has all the original paneling, logs, and stonework. The historical photographs and the old bar add to the atmosphere. It is a classic mountain lodge and it's easy to imagine a traveler on Old Highway 40 stopping for a night or nights. The lodge sits on the Yuba River. On one side of the lodge there was a trout farm (pond in the bottom pictures on page 7) where people could catch their dinners, and up the hill and down the road were lots of opportunities for enjoying nature.

With the popularity of skiing small ski areas popped up all along Old 40 and Rainbow was one of those ski areas. At first skiers got themselves up the hill to ski down but then a "J" bar was built and that was eventually replaced with a poma lift. For a time Rainbow was a popular ski area.



Above, a brochure from the mid-60's. On the next page, Herstle Jones in front of the Rainbow Tavern before the additions - about 1933

Over the decades there were many owners, there were bankruptcies and even a leaking gas tank from the gas station that used to be out front.

Most recently the lodge was owned by two developers who wanted to build a large development on Donner Summit. That did not work and eventually the bank took over and sold the lodge.

Rainbow Tavern and Lodge Today

Today Rainbow Lodge has been renamed Rainbow Tavern and Lodge in a nod to its historic name, Rainbow Tavern. Craig Mitchell and his wife, Wendy, first saw the lodge in October of last year and fell in love with it and its possibilities. Craig gave up his corporate persona to bring Rainbow Tavern back to what it can be with good service and a broader menu that will attract families with reasonably priced and comfort food.

Craig felt a connection to the lodge. His grandfather, who influenced Craig a lot, ran an historic inn back East. The



grandfather was also a fisherman and crafted custom fishing poles. That Rainbow was once a trout farm added to the connection. Some of those old fishing poles will be on display.

In the short term the Mitchells intend to get the lodge and restaurant operating. By the time you read this it should

Rainbow Stories

Gold and Murder

One night a man from up the road at Hampshire Rocks, or Cramptons, lost \$25,000 in gold coins gambling at Rainbow Tavern. He was upset. He went “home” for awhile and then came back. The man to whom he’d lost had also left and then returned and returned with wet legs and apparently without the gold. The loser demanded that the game be continued. The winner refused. The loser took out a gun and shot the winner dead. The gold coins are still presumably in the neighborhood and with a river running for miles in either direction, there are a lot of places to look for where the winner could have gotten his legs wet and deposited the gold.

Norm Saylor, local tractor operator, among other things, and president of the historical society, was once called to do some excavation near the river in a pond. The owner kept an eagle eye out on Norm just in case the gold turned up. It didn’t, says Norm.

The Flood

Rainbow Lodge sits right on the South Fork of the Yuba River and in a normal year a lot of water coming from Donner Summit comes down the channel. Occasionally there is excessive water. In 1963 there was a flood that brought four feet of water into the dining room. The ski shop downstairs was completely inundated and ski equipment and clothing was washed down the river.

Summit residents came to the rescue gathering things up from the river and cleaning them so they could go back into the shop. That was the end though. There was generally a lack of snow and it was harder to compete with the larger areas up the hill and around Tahoe so the Rainbow Tavern ski area was no more.

be open for brunch and by summer there will be a full restaurant operating. The owners want to attract visitors who will come wanting to stay in an historic lodge and enjoy what the Summit has to offer. They also want to attract travelers off of I-80. They think the lodge is perfectly located for that, being close to the Interstate, and far enough along the travelers' routes that they will want to stop to stretch, enjoy the fire in the fireplace, have a snack, a coffee, or a milk shake.

Longer term there will be renovations, the Tavern will serve as a venue for events, and there are plans for the natural spring water that flows from the hill above.

If you have never been in Rainbow Tavern it is a treat. The first floor's original architecture is wonderful and there are historical pictures on the walls. Couple the new owners' energy and commitment with the lodge's history and ambience, and the venture is as close to guaranteed success as can be.

The Gambling

During Prohibition at least many of the lodges along Highway 40 served liquor and hosted gambling. The sheriff was charged with enforcing the law and would at least occasionally patrol. Once he started his patrols the first place inspected would then call up the road to warn other businesses that the sheriff was on the way. There was gambling in the basement of the Rainbow Tavern.



Pictured here, the front and back of a Rainbow Tavern publicity postcard. The cars would indicate its vintage is the early 40's.

Bottom, two skiers at the "J" bar just behind the Tavern.



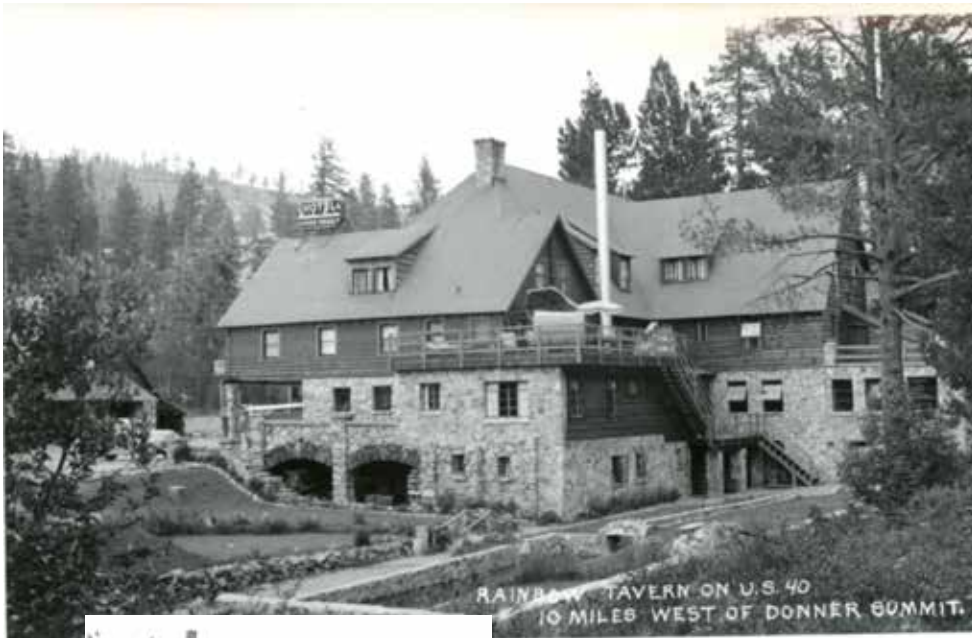
Pictured here:

Drawing of Rainbow Tavern by George Mathis.

Below, side view of the Rainbow Tavern.

Bottom, Close up of the Trout Farm at Rainbow Tavern.

Right, Price list from the mid-60's



Rainbow Tavern Lodge

Rate Sheet



DELUXE ROOMS (Private Bath)

SINGLE	\$11.00
DOUBLE	16.00
3 PERSONS	18.00
4 PERSONS	20.00
5 PERSONS	22.00

ROOMS (Shower and Wash Basin Only)

SINGLE	\$10.00
DOUBLE	13.00
3 PERSONS	15.00
4 PERSONS	17.00

ROOMS (Wash Basin Only)

SINGLE	\$ 8.00
DOUBLE	10.00
3 PERSONS	12.00
4 PERSONS	14.00

CRIB - \$1.00 EXTRA

* RATES AS SHOWN IN EFFECT ALL SEASONS

FOR RESERVATIONS CALL (916) 426-3580 OR
WRITE P. O. BOX 8, SODA SPRINGS, CALIF.
95728

Group Rates Available on Request

From the DSHS Archives

Below are emigrant quotes about arriving in Summit Valley (Van Norden) from Tail of the Elephant reviewed in the August '13 Heirloom and on our website. For the signs to the right see page 9.

pg 193 Wistar 1849

It was bitterly cold, but from the almost pointed summit, the gradeur [sic] and wild, confused desolation of the prospect was sublime indeed. North, east, and south peak rose beyond peak in endless succession while in the west the eye looked far down into the chasm where every ravine and gorge shone and glistened with the spotless white of vast snowfields, and beyond, instead of the expected Sacramento Valley, nothing broke the magnificent expanse of mountain chains. Thousands of feet down the chasm – but by no means at the bottom – shone an emerald valley of brightest green, surrounded with snow-fields and intersected by a lovely stream, sparkling from afar on its way through these fastnesses to the golden Sacramento... the wind roared and howled, the day was drawing to a close and nearly frozen, I hastened down.

page 203 Todd 1845

On the top of the mountain we found a beautiful lake [Mary's Lake], but quite small, and a few miles farther we came to a fine prairie, about three miles long by three fourths of a mile broad, full of springs and excellent water, and at the lower end a find branch, which forms the head of Juba river, and the way we danced "Juba" there, was a caution to all future emigrants. The difficulty of getting down the mountain was not as great as ascending it, though it was a work of labor, and looked at first glance as impossible to be performed by horsemen, much more by teams and waggons. [sic]

page 203 Bryant 1846

"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.

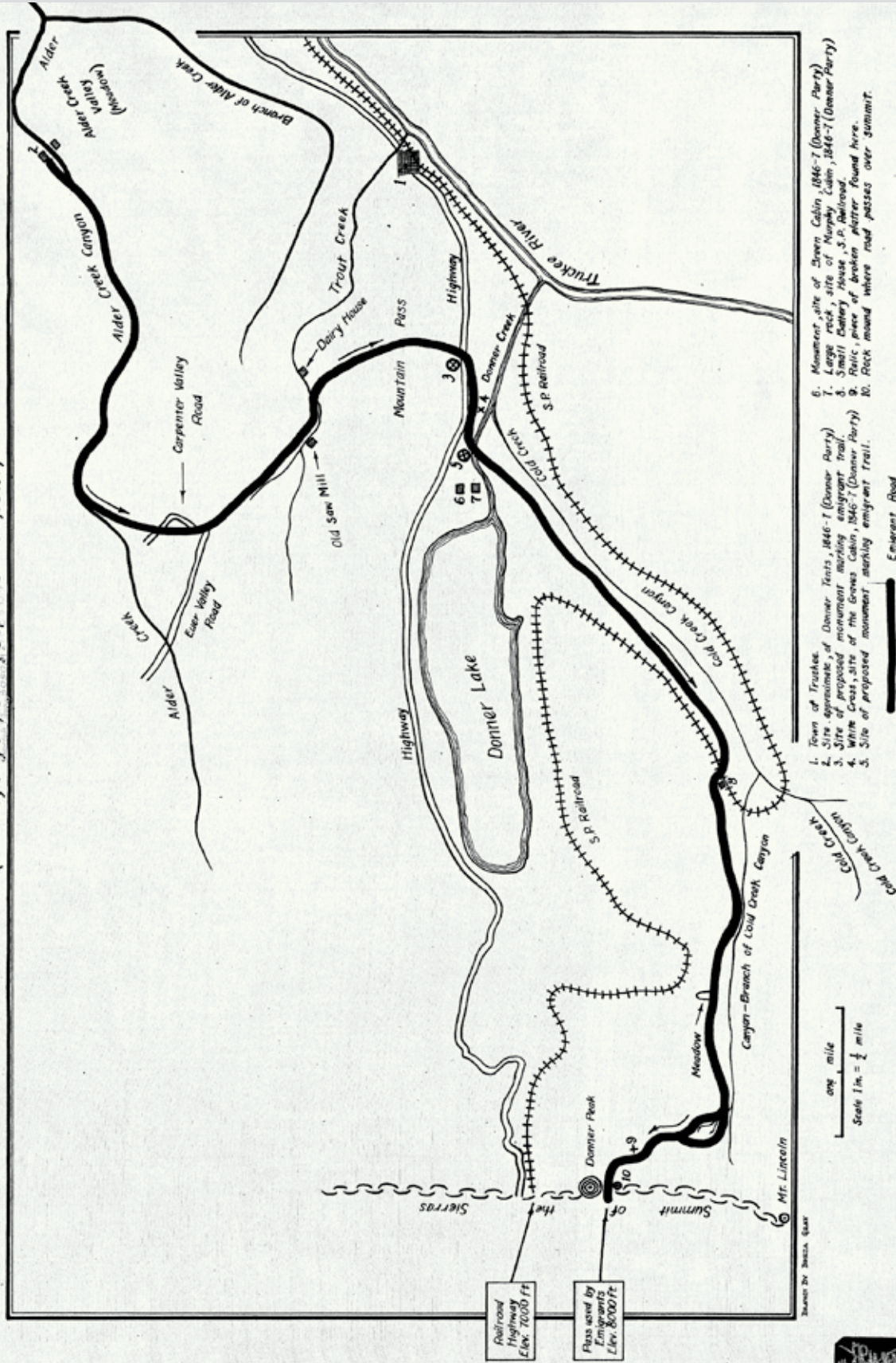
A narrow, sluggish stream runs through this valley, the water of which are of considerable depth, and the banks steep and miry. A luxuriant growth of grasses, of an excellent quality, covered the entire valley with the richest verdure. Flowers were in bloom; and although late in August, the vegetation [sic] presented all the tenderness and freshness of May. This valley has been named by the emigrants "Uber Valley;" and the stream which runs through it, and is a tributary of the Rio de los Plumas, or Feather River, has the same name. It is sometimes pronounced Juba; but I think Uber is the correct etymology. How the name was derived, I Never could learn. [Bryant was able to get to the valley in August rather than in October because he and his companions had left their wagon train after trading wagons for mules and so were able to proceed at a much faster pace.]

"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

MAP OF HISTORIC EMIGRANT ROAD
P.M. Weddell, San Jose, California, September 1, 1924.
(Revised, July 31, 1926; September 30, 1927)



This is not from the Archives of the DSHS. This map comes from the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley where we did some research hoping to find maps relating to a story coming in June maybe.

There were no helpful maps but we could not help looking at other things.

This is a map of the Emigrant Trail drawn by Peter Wedell. Mr. Wedell spent years exploring the Emigrant Trail over Donner Summit and put up signs delineating the route. Over the years the signs have disappeared although a few are left. On the previous page are a couple of signs from Coldstream Valley and Mt. Judah (by Art Clark) along with some decipherment.

From the DSHS Archives



Soda Springs Hotel about 1930. Note that Highway 40, in front, is not plowed. It would not be plowed in winter until the winter of '31--'32. Soda Springs Rd. on the left side which leads to Serene Lakes (Below) is also not plowed. Soda Springs ski hill is behind the hotel. Also missing is the annex now occupied by the DSHS which would be on the left side of the hotel building.

Left, unidentified skiers on Donner Summit, year undetermined.



Ice Lakes Chalet at Serene Lakes, 1959. In the back right is the original Serene Lakes Lodge which was torn down in 1997. The chalets were little cabins across the street, now replaced with houses which also replaced the campground on the other side of the lodge.



Book Review

Rails, Tales, and Trails

A step-by-step guide to secret locations, fascinating people, and historic towns of the old Central Pacific Railroad from Sacramento to Reno

Bill George Nimbus Films w_ george1@msn.com
96 pages

You should get this book. You will enjoy the reading and then you will enjoy exploring what you've read about.

This book follows on the heels of Bill George's video, "Hidden Wonder of the World, The Transcontinental Railroad from Sacramento to Donner Summit." That video was featured on PBS and is available for purchase from Nimbus Films (see below).

The first transcontinental railroad's western terminus was Sacramento. Bill George has been exploring "construction sites of the great Central Pacific

Railroad...from Sacramento to Donner Summit" and his new book acts as a guide to sites in the video including directions for visiting. Mr. George is clearly in love with the railroad and brings his passion to the book in the places, stories, characters, and brief information about which he writes.

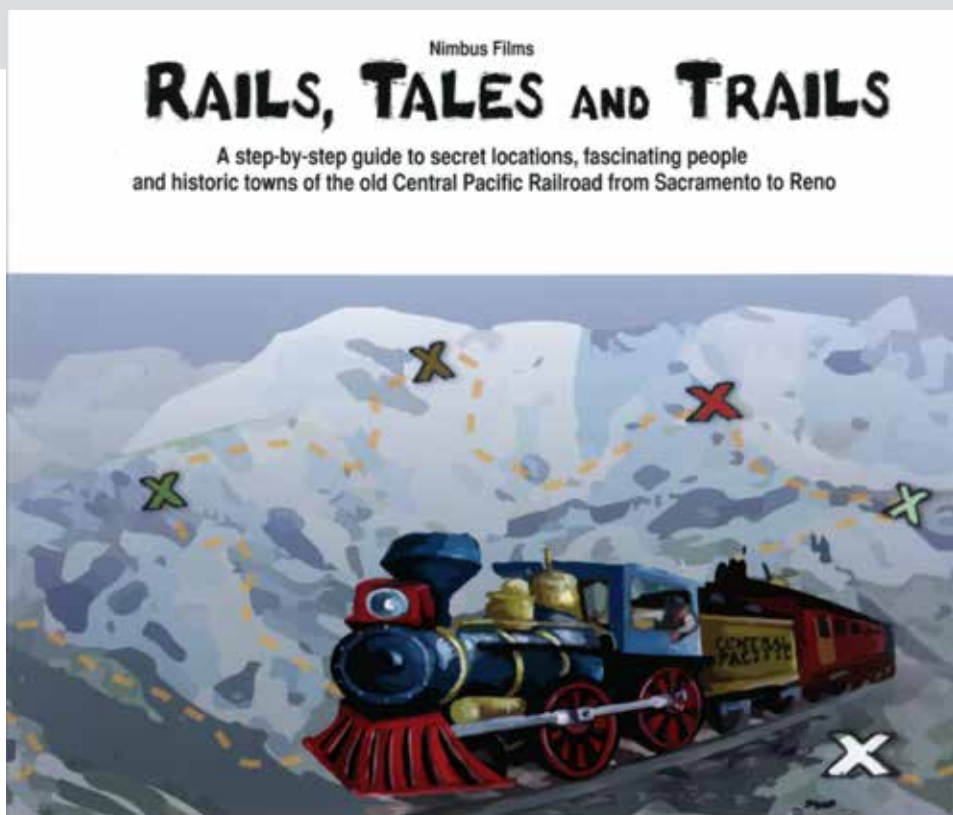
Sacramento is the book's first stop where Mr. George describes everything railroad related listing, among other things, the Railroad Museum, the Capitol, the historic train depot, Old Sacramento, the Judah Monument, Crocker Art Museum, and Sutter's Fort. Using this guide a tourist could be kept busy for a week in Sacramento, but there is the rest of the route to explore, all the way to Reno.

On the way Mr. George explores every site having to do with the railroad: Roseville railroad yard, the railroad's first roundhouse in Rocklin, Auburn, Bloomer Cut, Bayley House, Colfax, Clipper Gap, Secret Town, Gold Run, Dutch Flat, and Giant Gap. Mr. George explains what there is to find at each spot, its significance, how to get there, any monuments nearby, and the history.

Along the way sidebars called "Rail Tales" make what's interesting even more so, telling little stories having to do with the railroad. The reader learns about fruit packing, interesting characters like Schuyler Colfax and Alfred A. Hart, and places like Red Mountain. There are stories about how the Sierra ended up starting at Sacramento, how the Sierra came to be named, missing gold, Chinese workers, and a hotel built in the wrong place. George even mentions Mark Twain traveling over the Sierra in 1868.

One story, which is widespread, has to do with the Chinese workers who are supposed have worked hung from baskets at Cape Horn. Mr. George gives his opinion and analysis. All together it's a great listing of field trips for history and rail aficionados.

Since this review is by the Donner Summit Historical Society, the reader would like to know what's listed about Donner Summit. There is plenty listed: Cisco, the tunnels of Donner Summit, Soda Springs, Rainbow Lodge, Summit Valley, and Royal Gorge. The Donner Summit Historical Society is even pictured on page 78 with directions. Good for Donner Summit,



by Bill George

Mr. George suggests that travelers use Old Highway 40 instead of the Interstate in their travels. That is really good advice.

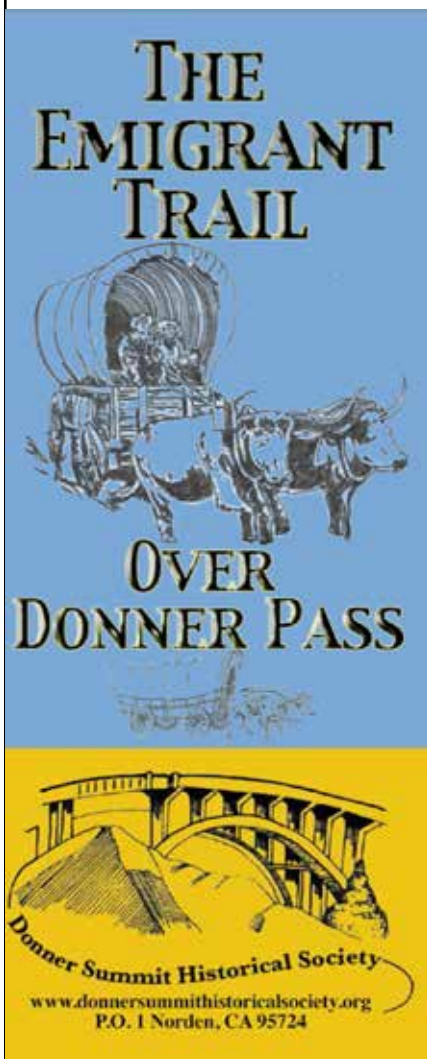
After the Summit the trip continues to Reno and Sparks: Donner Lake, Truckee, Boca, and Floriston.

Parenthetically Mr. George argues against revisionists who say the government involvement in the railroad's building by giving subsidies was excessive. Mr. George disagrees. The building of the railroad was hugely expensive. For the Central Pacific going east from Sacramento, all materials had to be hauled by ship around the Horn to California. Only with the help of the government could it get built. Once built the nation had a tremendous return on the investment. The proof is that in the end, the railroad worked. It opened up the empty center of the country, made government land more valuable, provided jobs and opportunity, and connected the country.

Nimbus Films w_george1@msn.com
4520 Shari Way Granite Bay, CA

New Brochures at the DSHS

To begin with, the heart of the DSHS was of course the museum in downtown Soda Springs. Along with the museum came the Heirloom telling the stories of Donner Summit history each month. Then there came the 20 Mile Museum, all along Old Highway 40.

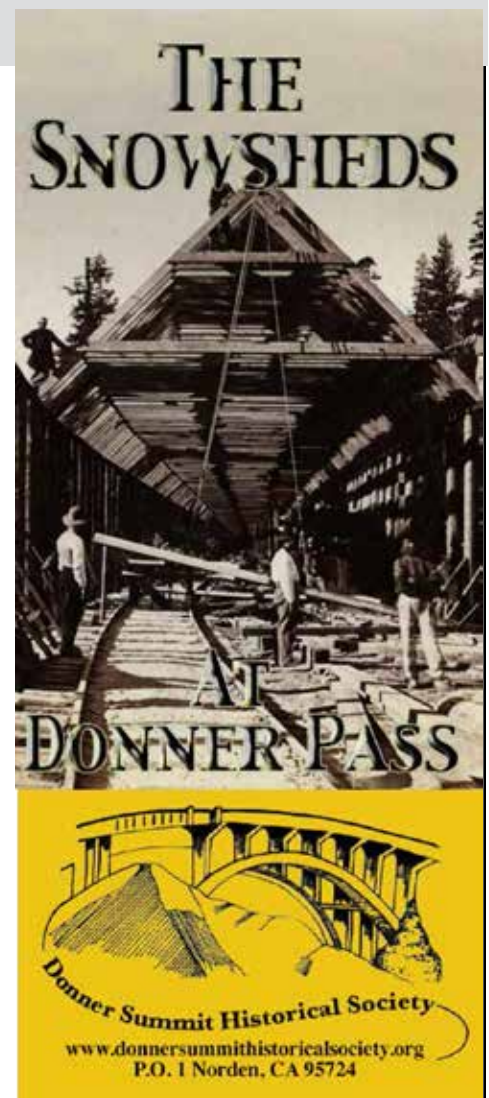


Coming some time later was a growing collection of brochures about different historical topics. You can go to our brochure page to see and even download each one. They are also available on Donner Summit and at the tourist center in Truckee at the railroad station. We have brochures about Tunnel 6, Historic Hikes, Summit Valley, Native Americans of Donner Summit, The Lincoln Highway, etc.

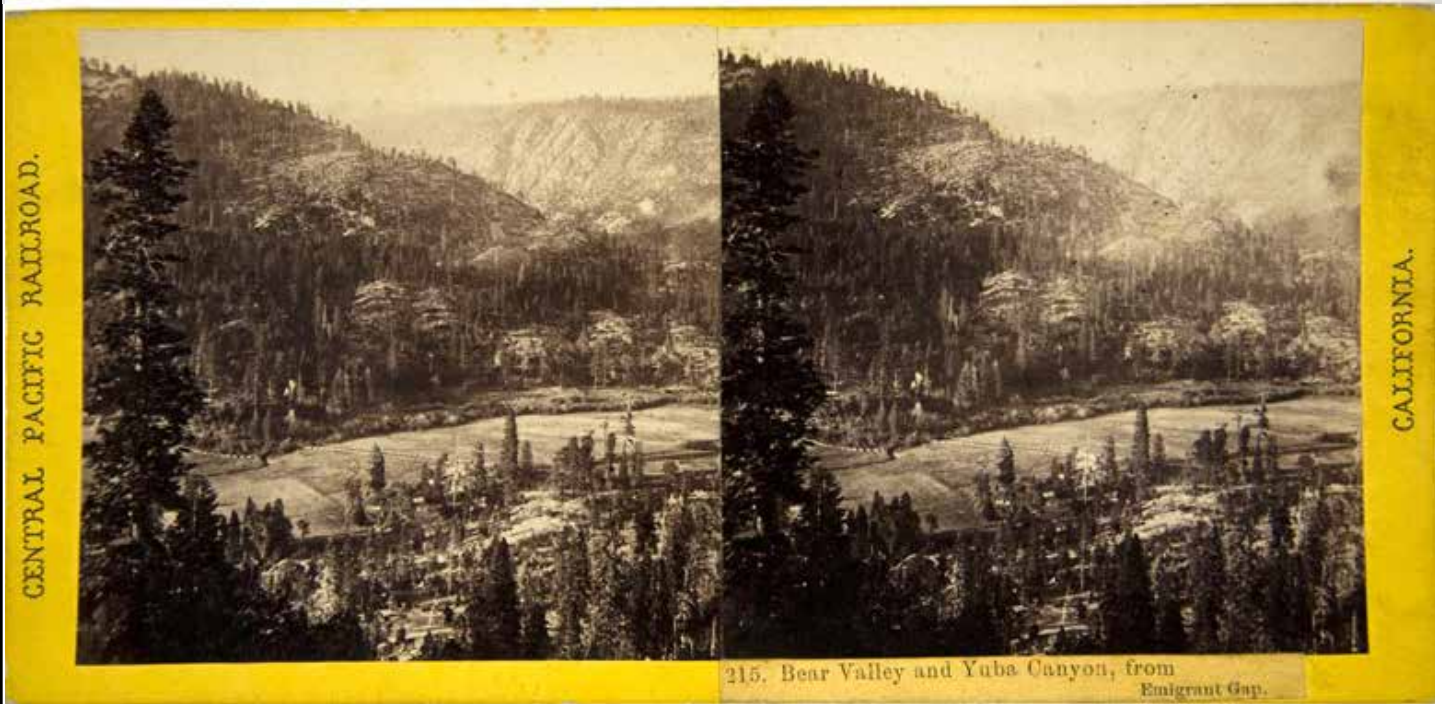
We have recently added two to the collection. The Snowsheds on Donner Summit are really iconic and the subject probably should have been one of the first. Eventually the topic will find its way into the Heirloom in a series of articles but you can read about the who, what, where, when, and why in the brochure and read some interesting stories.

The other new one, The Emigrant Trail, probably should also have been done earlier. There were definitely three routes the emigrants used to cross Donner Pass and this brochure introduces the subject and will help you explore them if that's what you'd like to do.

These brochures are just one of the places that our money goes. If you like our mission and are not a contributing member, consider contributing so we can continue to pass on the many stories of Donner Summit history. There is so much left to tell.



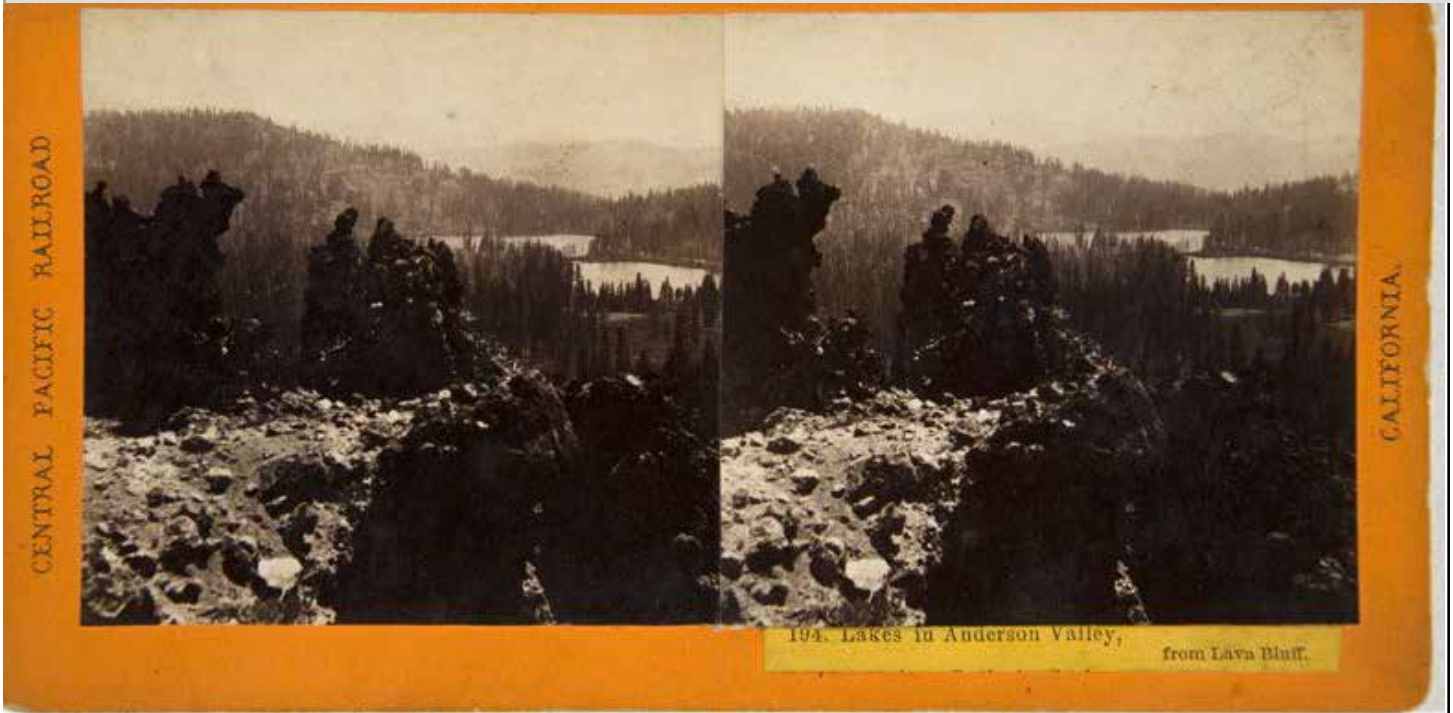
Then & Now with Art Clark



Alfred A Hart 215 - Bear Valley and Yuba Canyon, from Emigrant Gap - The biggest change in this view is the trees. Gradually they are moving in along the borders of the valley. Very little evidence of man can be seen. Even Highway 20 is hidden from view. By contrast, if one turned around he would see busy Interstate 80 and the railroad.
Photo location 39° 17.885'N 120° 40.496'W



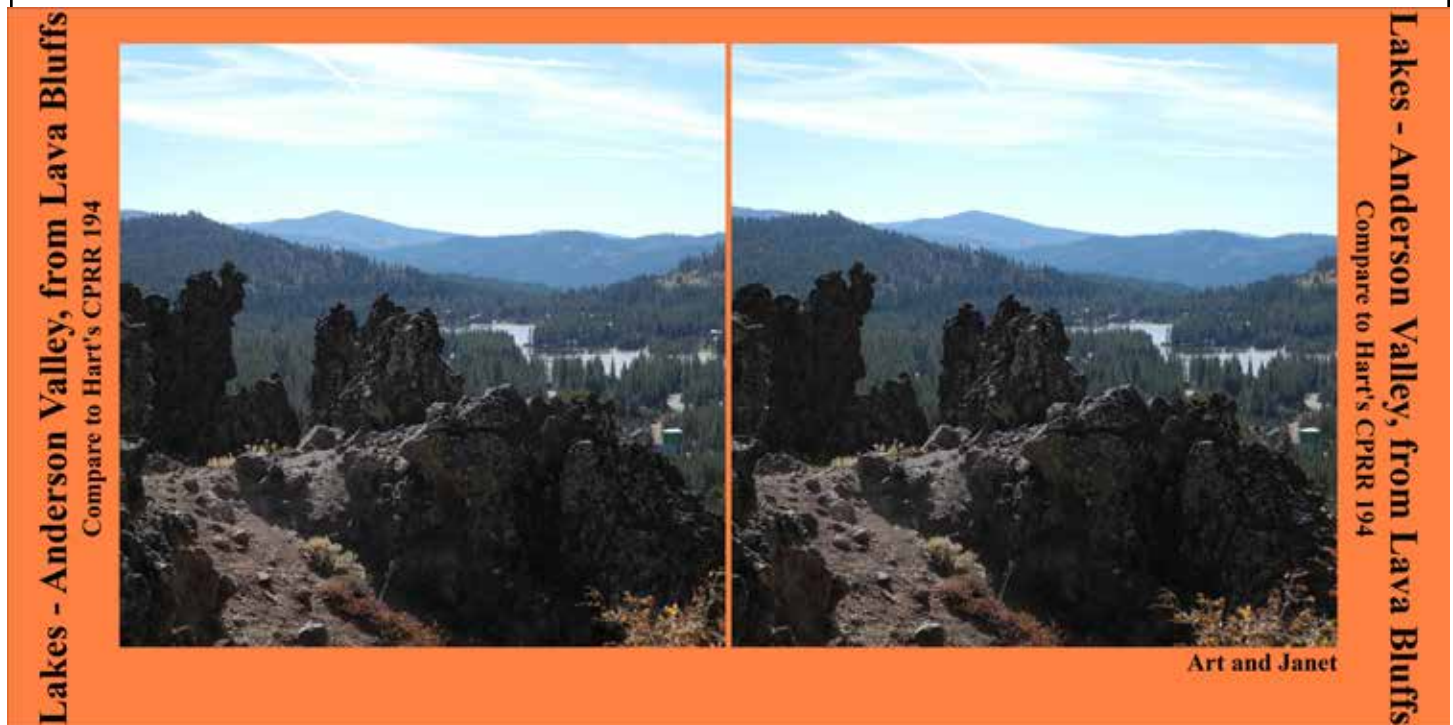
Then & Now with Art Clark



Hart 194. Lakes in Anderson Valley, from Lava Bluff.

Names have a way of changing. Lava Bluff became Beacon Hill, and a ski lift was built in the 1930's. Soda Springs Ski Area is located here, and affords a nice view of what is now called Serene Lakes.

Photo location 39° 18.963'N 120° 23.245'W



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.

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

____ Patron - \$500

____ 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.

2014 Margie Powell History Hike

Margie Powell was one of the founders of the Donner Summit Historical Society. She loved the local history.

She passed away three years ago. In her memory the community began the Margie Powell History Hikes which have proved really popular.

The 2014 hike will go downhill from the PCT on Donner Summit to the Land Trust kiosks on Old 40 (trailhead in the map to the right). Along the way we'll tell the stories of the local history: the Emigrant Trail, the Stephens and Donner Parties, The Lincoln Highway, China Wall, 1913 underpass, Old 40, Rainbow Bridge, petroglyphs, and turkeys. We'll see old signs painted on rocks, wonderful scenery, and historic sites. We'll eat lunch at a beautiful view site.

Best of all, we'll organize so car shuttle back to the top so the most interesting and historic hike on the summit will also be the easiest and most fun.

There will be two hikes: **August 2 and August 3**. Meet at the PCT trailhead* at 10 A.M. Download the brochure with the map to the right it on our brochure page at the DSHS website.

The 2015 Margie Powell Hike will be at Big Bend: Stephens Party, first white baby born in California, Emigrant Trail (rust marks on the rocks), Lincoln Highway (we'll walk pristine sections, and then end up at Rainbow Lodge, an historic old time lodge. Dates still to be decided.

*The PCT is just off Old 40 on Donner Summit. Take the Sugar Bowl Rd. turnoff to the Old Donner Summit Rd. Drive up to the PCT trailhead. Parking is just below it or uphill towards Sugar Bowl Academy. The Academy has also given permission for people to park there for the Margie Powell Hike (white buildings at the top).

