

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

April, 2015 issue #80



Snow is Not a Problem on Donner Summit The Snowsheds of Donner Summit - Pt III

It was decided...that the only means of protecting the road was by means of snow sheds and galleries, although the expense of building a shed nearly 40 miles in length was appalling and an unprecedented extra in railroad construction. In the summer of 1867 we built some experimental sheds. The snow shed building was commenced in earnest in 1868.

Arthur Brown, Supt. of Bridges and Buildings in an affidavit to the Pacific Railway Commission, 1887

“The only feasible plan that presented itself to obviate this difficulty was to protect the track by a structure that would withstand the accumulated weight of the falling and drifting snow.”

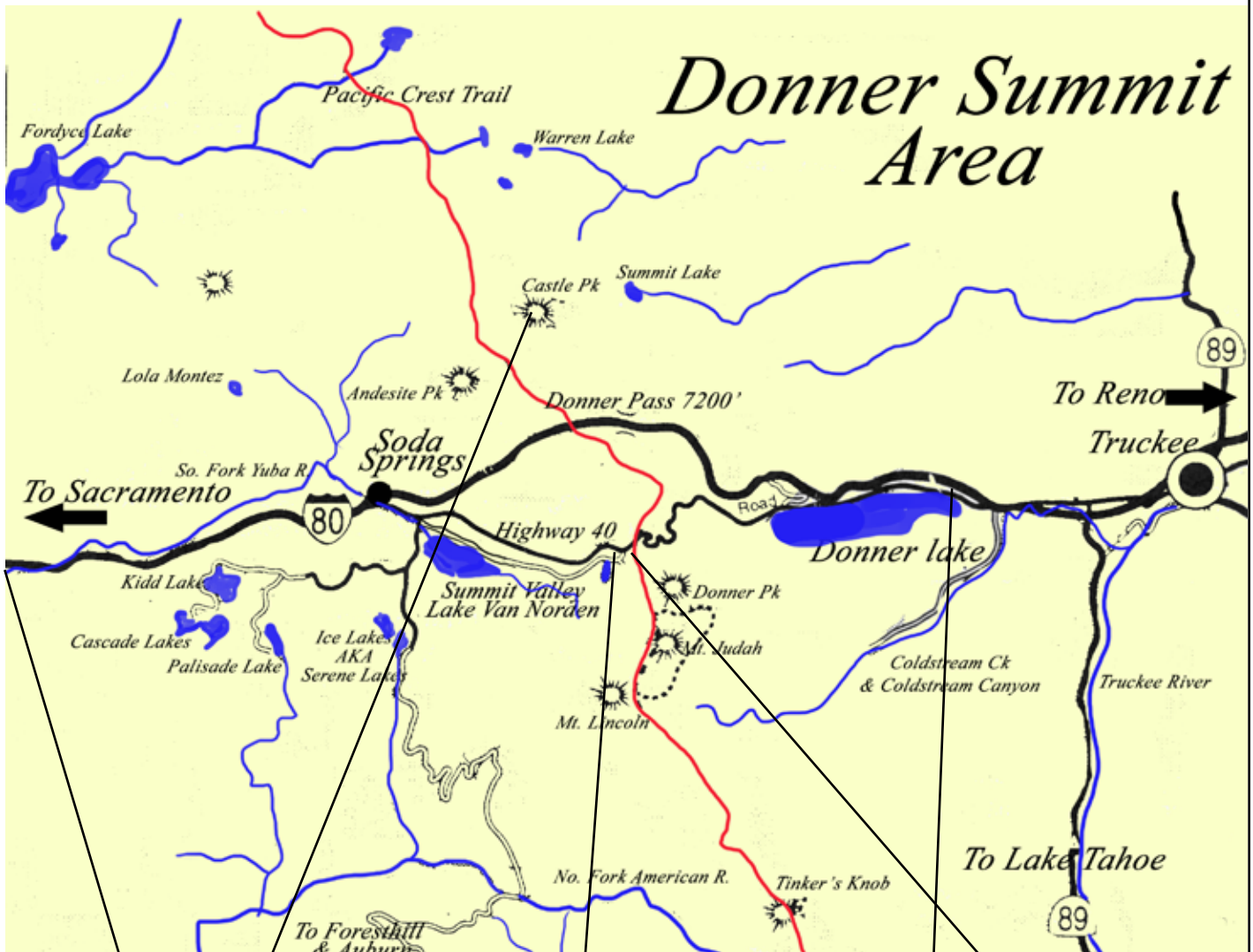
Samuel S. Montague,
CPRR chief engineer, 1889,
writing retrospectively

The CPRR experimented with snowsheds in 1867 and by 1868 they were seen as the best method to keep the railroad open. The large bucker plows and an army of snow shovelers had not been able to keep the railroad open in 1867. Arthur Brown, Superintendent of Bridges and Buildings, said in an affidavit to the Pacific Railway Commission in 1887 that they'd found it impossible to keep it open over one-half of the time. Ultimately most of the track over Donner Summit was covered in showsheds protecting the trains from snowfall and avalanche but also preventing travelers from seeing the grand sights.

It was a big decision to embark on building the snowsheds and it came at a huge cost: \$10,000 per mile. 65 million board feet of lumber and 900 tons of bolts and spikes were used in the initial construction. The continual rebuilding of the wooden sheds due to fire (see next month's [Heirloom](#)) and collapse raised those figures considerably. We can imagine that the sawmills on Donner Summit operated non-stop.

There must have been much consternation among the CPRR's Big Four (Huntington, Stanford, Crocker, and Hopkins). They were racing to build as much track as possible so they could get as much money as possible from the Federal Government. They were also in a race against the Union Pacific (UPRR) which was coming from the east and building like crazy over the easier part of the route. The Big Four must have hated reading the UPRR's progress reports, afraid it would get to Utah and Nevada first. Then imagine the Big Four's reaction when the UPRR boasted that their line would reach the Eastern side of California before the CPRR even surmounted the Sierra and printed a map showing it would be UPRR rails up to the border

Story Locations in this Issue



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Hart 256 Crested Pk. snowsheds

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Donner Monument on the cover, pg. 11

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between California and Nevada.

First the CPRR was hampered by having to blast 15 tunnels out of Sierra granite. It took two years to complete Tunnel 6, the longest of the tunnels (see [Heirlooms](#) May-September, '12). During much of that time the railroad made no further progress. Eventually the CPRR hauled three locomotives, eighty miles of track and parts for railroad cars over the Summit so they could build into Nevada while the tunnels were being completed. Parenthetically, two of those locomotives went over the Summit in the snow, but that's a story for another [Heirloom](#).

Then, just as the tunnels were done and trains could travel over the Summit, the railroad realized the snow had to be dealt with. Sheds had to be built.

The idea of having to build what would eventually be forty miles of snowsheds was appalling and appallingly expensive. It was unprecedented. Arthur Brown delineated the difficulties in his affidavit to the Pacific Railway Commission. They had to gather men from "all quarters and pay high wages." 2,500 men were dedicated to the effort as well as six locomotives and trains. This activity increased traffic on the incomplete railroad by 30 per cent. Before they could even start building the sheds Chinese workers had to shovel six to eight feet of snow to clear the ground for foundations. The terrible working conditions - shoveling snow, the weather, etc. - made keeping workers, even at high wages, difficult. There were not enough saw mills to supply wood so the company resorted to round timber which had to be cut in the adjacent forests and hauled to the work sites. That increased the costs over bringing in dressed lumber on the railroad.

To go along with the sheds, masonry walls had to be built in places to keep the snow from hitting the sheds at right angles and scouring them off the tracks.

Eventually the initial forty miles of snowsheds cost \$1,500,000.

To put the Sierra crossing in perspective, according to testimony before the Pacific Railway Commission in 1887, the distance from Newcastle to Wadsworth was 157 miles and took three years with 11,000 to 13,000 men. From Wadsworth to Ogden it's 555 miles. It took only ten months and 5,000 men. The CPRR directors must have been pulling their hair out given the delays in getting over the Sierra.

Snowsheds brought unexpected new "industries" to Donner Summit. Carpenters were needed to build the sheds and hundreds of workers were needed to clear snow off the snowshed roofs to prevent collapse. Thousands were needed in emergencies. Track walkers were needed to continually inspect the snowsheds for fire and collapse. Fire watchers kept an eye on the tinder dry timbers. There were also special fire trains with steam always kept up, ready at a moment's notice to head for the latest fire. There were so many workers that some lived in box cars, all focused on keeping the tracks open over the Sierra. That continued until the concrete sheds were built

"The snow-sheds," we are told, "are solid structures, built of sawed and round timber, completely roofing in the road for many miles. When the road was completed, there were 23 miles of shed built, at an annual cost of \$10,000 per mile. With the additions since made the line reaches about 45 miles, which includes the whole length of the deep snow-line on the dividing ridge. When we remember that along the summit the snow falls from 16 to 20 feet deep during a wet winter, we can understand the necessity and importance of these structures. By this means the track is as clear from snow in the winter as in the valleys. The mighty avalanches which sweep down the mountain sides in the spring, bearing everything before them, pass over the sloping roofs of the sheds, and plunge into the chasms below, while beneath the rushing mass the cars glide smoothly along, the passengers hardly knowing but that they are in the midst of an enormous tunnel."

[Nelson's Pictorial Guidebooks Central Pacific Railroad A Trip Across the North American Continent from Ogden to San Francisco, 1871](#)

No sheds were built in the season of 1866, and the road was, with the exception of a few days, kept open to Cisco with plows, aided by a large force of men to shovel through the deeper drifts. The plows were driven with six and at times with as many as twelve of the heaviest locomotives, coupled together, and then they could in many places penetrate the compact drifts to the distance of only a few feet. The sudden stoppage of such a train when moving rapidly under full steam necessarily caused heavy strains upon the machinery and an unusual wear of the iron in track by the slipping of the wheels. The only feasible plan that presented itself to obviate this difficulty was to protect the track by a structure that would withstand the accumulated weight of the falling and drifting snow.

testimony to the Pacific Railway Commission, 1887, by Samuel S. Montague, Chief Engineer

in the last half of the twentieth century. Those sheds dramatically reduced the number of workers needed and better kept the traffic flowing despite “Pineapple Expresses” and “Sierra Cement,” as Californians call heavily moisture-laden storms coming directly from the west off the Pacific and the resulting heavy snow.

The original sheds were built of four-inch thick planks and had peaked roofs. It was a logical idea but a bad design. The peaks caught the snow and sheds were pushed out of alignment by the uphill snow. A 1905 article in the Bulletin of The American Geographical Society reported on the variations that came next. "The sheds were next anchored back to the side of the hill with heavy rods attached to the framework of the shed (see below), and secured to the rock or earth of the cut. It was then found that the snow melted from beneath the rods, and on the adjacent ground and roof of the shed, so that the entire mass for many feet in depth would hang upon the rods, bending them down, and pulling the sheds toward the bank, throwing them out of line in a direction opposite to that which occurred when there were no rods. A further development was the extension of the roof, where practicable, into the adjacent banks, forming a shed which prevented the wedge of snow from piling in between the building and the bank." That design was successful with one further modification. The top of the sheds were "somewhat wider than the bottom, so that the melting wedge of snow falls away from the side of the shed instead of pressing against it, so that the weight upon the base is increased, to prevent overturning." That brought the roofs closer to the locomotives' smokestacks which increased the hazard of fire in summers. So deflectors were attached to the stacks so the sparks were thrown to the sides. That wasn't the end of designing though. See the sidebar here.

The flat roofs which resulted from the redesign, then required snow shoveling crews to keep the weight of the snow from collapsing the sheds.

Snowsheds did not just cover the tracks. All along the route over the Summit stations faced the track and were built attached to the snowsheds as were workers' houses, businesses, and other buildings. Even the school on Donner Summit was attached to the sheds and children walked through the sheds to school every day.

Railroad Man Remembers

“The original snowsheds were of logs, with sloping log roof.” They had been built sized for the locomotives of 1868 and no one considered that equipment might get larger. A boxcar could carry ten tons “and two ten-wheeled engines could pull eighteen freight cars and a caboose up to the Summit.” Mr. Wooster did not give comparable figures for the modern trains of 1939 but did say that comparing the old to the new was like comparing the new main line equipment to the "watch charm' engine of the narrow-gauge road at Colfax."

“...the snowsheds, which held back the enlargement of equipment in each decade, were rebuilt frequently in an attempt to keep pace with the times. The rebuilt sheds had flat roofs, of which the covering was 2 x 10 inch planks, the entire structure being of sawed timber, and were about three times the size of the original structure.”
pg 367

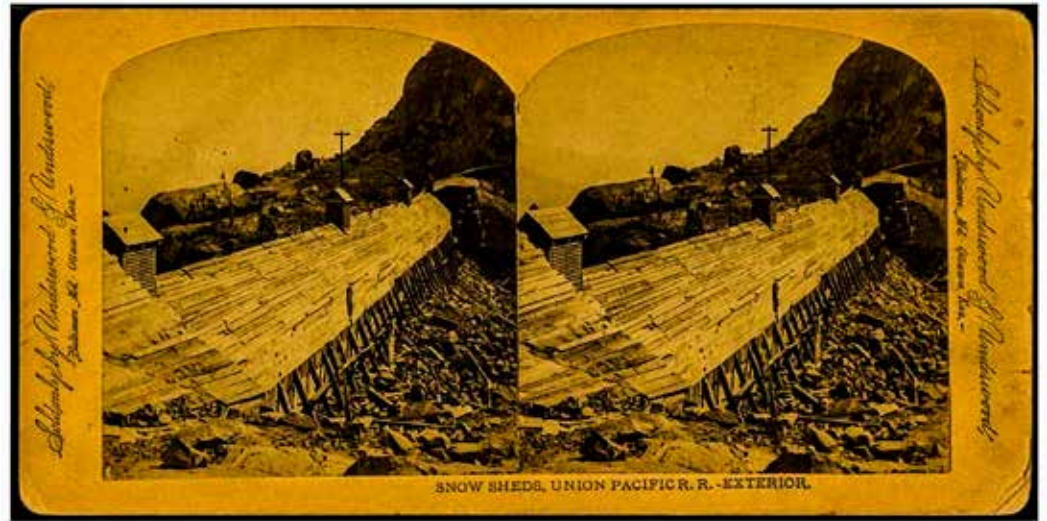
from "Railroading in California in the Seventies" in [California History](#) December, 1939 which came from: [Railroading in California in the Seventies: From the Reminiscences of Clarence M. Wooster](#)



Snowshed anchors, steel rods driven into the granite, to hold the snowsheds against the lateral movement of snow outside Tunnel 6's east end below Donner Pk.

from Bret Harte's "California," April, 1866, in [California History Spring, 1992](#)

You have an idea of snow that is ten and fifteen feet in depth represents a pretty severe winter blockade. Why, our Pacific Railroad goes through snow thirty and forty feet deep. The smoke of the locomotive as you approach the summit of the Sierras, rises between snow banks sometimes one hundred feet above the track. Looking back on the foot-hills the road seems to pass through a canal of white marble whose walls vary from fifteen to twenty feet in height...Think of cabins entirely hidden, with their chimneys melting a small crater around their tops as they smoke on the roadside...You will say you have read something like this in Munchausen, but these are facts. Imagine what ought to be the fiction of such a people.



Some of the earliest snowsheds on Donner Summit - note the chimneys.

**FARE FREE FOR ALL - FARE MORE
THE GREAT SNOWSHEDS
LAKEVIEW - CRYSTAL LAKE - SUMMIT.**

300 men of all nationalities for work in the snowsheds; free fare and ship every afternoon; good wages

**NEVADA - NEVADA
RENO - TRUCKEE- DIVISION**

Summit, Tamarack, Cisco. Placer, etc.
250 carpenters and carpenters' helpers for work on the great snow sheds, \$60 to \$90 month
FREE FARE - SHIP DAILY

San Francisco Call October 1, 1907



interior of snow sheds from [Crovutt's New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide, 1884](#)

WESTERN SUMMIT.



256. Crested Peak and Tunnel No. 10
Eastern slope of Western Summit.

Left, Alfred A. Hart #256. Crested Pk. is today Donner Pk.



246. Constructing Snow Cover.
Scene near the Summit.

Left, Alfred A. Hart #246.

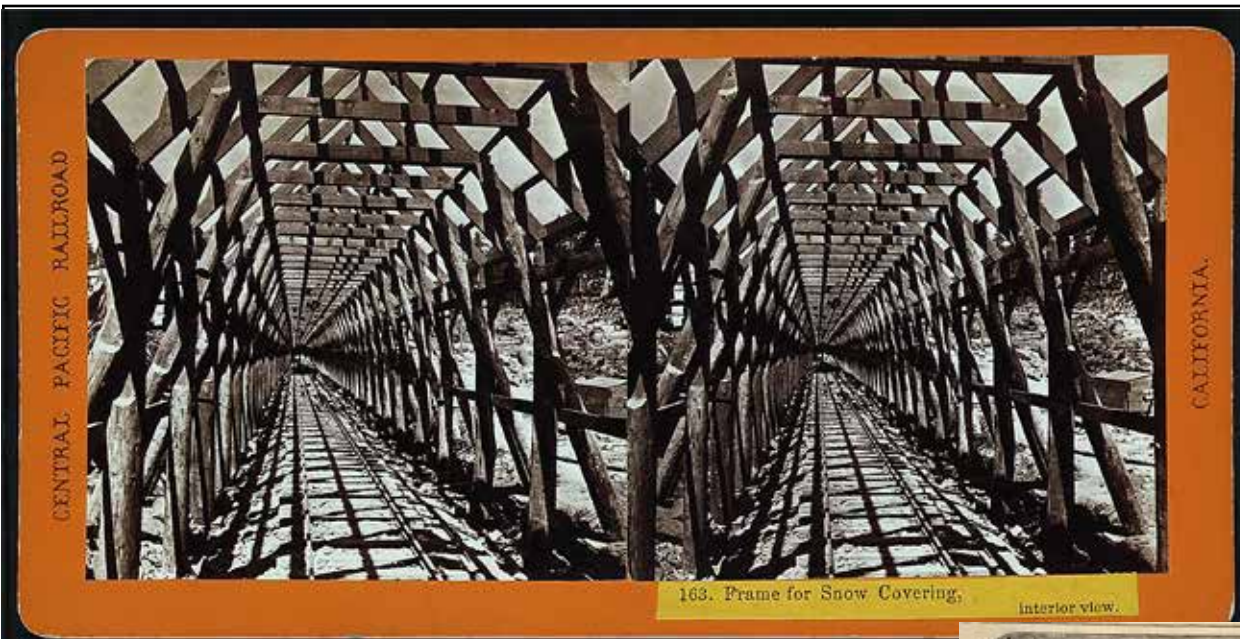
FROM CHICAGO TO SAN FRANCISCO BY RAIL.

ACROSS THE SIERRA.

Next morning (Sunday) we began to ascend the sierra by a number of sharp curves. The steepest gradient is 116 feet in the mile, and some curves have a radius of only 600 feet. There are 40 miles of curves with a radius of less than 1000. In some places the train seemed to make a half circle. It was freezing sharply on the summit. They say that political interests have taken a line over a needlessly difficult ridge, and that a much better route could have been found to San Francisco if Sacramento had not insisted on being made the terminus of the line. The scenery to the right, where several lakes show themselves far below the track, is very beautiful; but it is spoiled by the snow-sheds which cover the line for some 30 miles, and afford only glimpses of the country far beneath the traveler [sic]. These sheds are made of sawed pine timber, covered with plank, and a more convenient arrangement for a long bonfire I never saw. This part of the line must burn some day, as the chimney of every engine goes fizzing through it like a squib, and the woodwork is as dry as a bone.

For some time from the summit we passed through mountains wholly covered with pine and cedar, and ran carefully round the heads of valleys and spurs of the range. As I have said, steam was shut off, and men were put at all the breaks. It struck me that there was greater care shown by the officials in this part of our route. . . The breaksman [sic] and conductors had hitherto smoked and chewed whenever they could, which was almost always; but when I offered a cigar to a fresh Californian breaksman [sic] here, he said, "Thank you, Sir, but it is against the rules to smoke while on duty."

Hawke's Bay Herald (New Zealand)
January 28, 1870



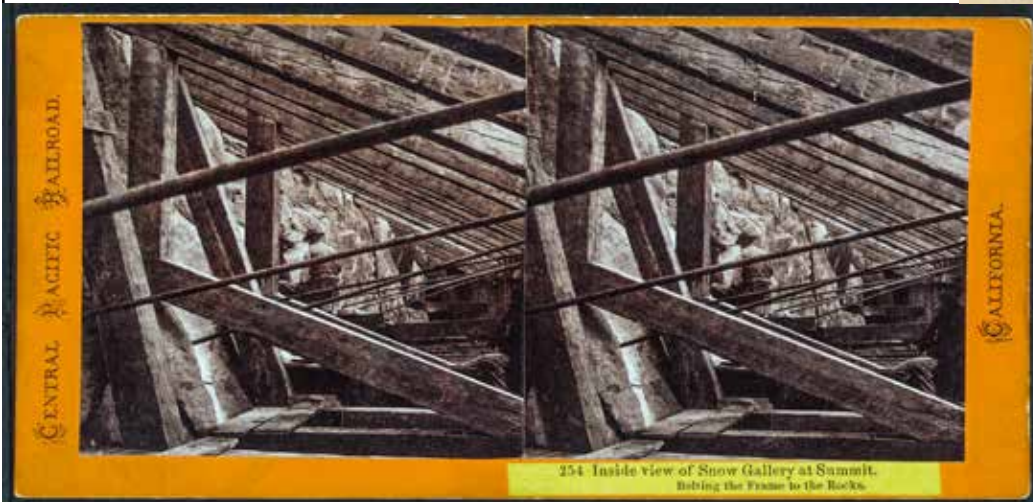
163. Frame for Snow Covering, interior view.

Need for Snowsheds

John Gillis, engineer who oversaw the construction of the Summit tunnels in Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad, 1870 said:

In November and the early part of December [1866] there were several snowstorms, just enough to stimulate without denying work. The rough rocky sides of Donner Peak soon became smooth slopes of snow and ice covering the trail from tunnel 8 to 9: it remained impassable until spring... Snow storms, 44 in number, varied in length from a snow squall to a two week gale, and in depth from 14 inch to ten feet... the heaviest storm of the winter, began February 18 [1867]... and snowed steadily until... the 22nd., during which time 6 feet fell.

Of course these storms made the road impassable even for sleighs. they were opened by gangs of men, kept for that purpose, with heavy ox sleds. The snow when new fallen is very light, so that a man without snowshoes would sink to his waist or shoulders. Into this the oxen would flounder and when they lay down, worn out, be roused by the summary process of twisting their tails. I saw three in one team so "fortunate" as to have their twisted clear off, none left to be bothered with.



254 Inside view of Snow Gallery at Summit. Bolting the Frame to the Rocks.

Croft's New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide, 1884

Snowsheds bolted to adjacent rock. Note the worker inside.

From the DSHS Archives

Life at Cisco in the 1870's

Bob Campbell's store and hotel was a remodeling of the long, hewn-log freight shed which was built when Cisco was the terminus, in 1867, to accommodate the heavy freight teaming which changed from cars to wagon at that point and time. The store was a part of the lobby of the hotel. In one corner was a small bar, and in the center was a large round stove, with a footrest which encircled it and on which a dozen men could and did rest their feet simultaneously. With no matter what force the winds howled, and to what depth the blustering snow piled, the sages of Cisco were most serenely comfortable in Bob's lobby, with their feet upon the stove. Ponderous questions of the Nation were discussed and settled in heated and in sober eloquence; and Jacobs would read aloud "Custer's Massacre." "Let 'er blow, 'n let 'er snow." The store had plenty of victuals and no one could better prepare them than Mrs. Campbell. When the snow was good and deep, Harry Hartley, the hermit of Meadow Lake, would snowshoe to Cisco and spend a few days with us. He would saw on an old fiddle and create a noise which did have some effect in soothing the savages. Other than this there wasn't even a jewsharp in town. Except for the protection which the snowsheds afforded, we were completely snowed in. A tunnel dug through the snow connected the station with the store. After freezing this was like walking several hundred feet through an ice tunnel. Between storms and after the crust had formed on the snow, a tramp in the open was most delightful. The world was completely white, except where a pine or a juniper tree held its head above the snow. Before the freeze was over all were expert in riding the skis. Inside the sheds the picture was a contrast: snow discolored by smoke, and black sooty icicles the size of a man, which now and then knocked a brakeman off the top of a boxcar. The recollection of my carefree life at Cisco is a lasting joy.

From Railroading in California in the Seventies
Clarence M. Wooster

California Historical Society Quarterly vol 18
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"The recollection
of my carefree life
at Cisco is a lasting
joy."

Clarence Wooster



From the DSHS Archives



Left, Careleton Watkins #185, Upper Cisco, 1866

Cisco Grove here and in Art Clark's Then & Now later in this issue was in a different spot than today's Cisco Grove. Today Cisco is a few summer houses along Old 40 and a gas station on the south side of I-80.

For two years, while the Great Summit Tunnel was being finished in 1867-68, Cisco was a vibrant community of a few thousand people. It was "end of track" for the railroad. There trains were unloaded so goods could be transported on the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. and stages left for Meadow Lake, Coburn's Station (Truckee today), and Virginia City.

The Old Cisco sat up the hill from the gas station.

BY STATE TELEGRAPH

The Weather on the Mountains-A Snow Slide and its Effects

Colfax, January 21st – On Thursday evening January 18th, a snow slide occurred near the summit, destroying a house occupied by two employees of the railroad. J.P. Belknap, who was sleeping on a table, was instantly killed; the other man escaped serious injury, how, it is impossible to tell. The house was rent asunder and covered ten feet deep with snow. Several hours elapsed before Belknap's body was recovered.....It has rained hard and incessantly here for forty-eight hours, with a prospect of continuing. It is the heaviest storm we have had since the winter of 1861-62....

Daily Alta California January 22, 1866

What's in Your Closet?

All the way in La Quinta, CA Joan Lizza saw the newspaper article here, about the annual Donner Party Hikes (last October 4 & 5) in her local paper. She said, "it reminded me of one of my father's, George Clark, books he treasured." So she pulled out the 1931 edition of The History of the Donner Party by C.F. McGlashan and sent it to the DSHS.

Her father had loved the Donner area and its history and spent many of his college days working at the lake. Ms Lizza also enclosed a handwritten history of the Murphy Family (Stephens Murphy Townsend Party of 1844, the first wagon train to reach California with wagons) that was sent to him by one of the descendants. The first page of the history is below.

If you find things in your closet related to Donner Summit history let us know. If you don't want them we will be happy to help you out. Otherwise we'd love to make copies.

History of the Murphy Family -

In 1832 - Martin Murphy, Senior -
accompanied by the O'Toole and Fitzgerald
families - left - Eniscorthy, County Wexford
Ireland - and settled at Frampton
near Quebec - Canada - where there
were several other Irish families,
- Mrs Murphy and five sons, and
two daughters accompanied him,
as follows: -

Martin Jr. and family -
James - and family -
Bernard - single -
Daniel - single -
John - single -
and two sisters -

In 1844 - Martin Murphy Sr. -
left Canada - and joined a party
to come to California - with
his wife and family - (over)



BENJAMIN SPILLMAN/THE RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
A graffiti mural shown an underpass where the Lincoln Highway passes beneath what was once the Transcontinental Railroad line near Truckee.

History underfoot in the Donner Pass

By Benjamin Spillman
Reno Gazette Journal

It's ironic so many American success stories happened at a spot named for one of history's iconic failures.

But that's how it is with the Donner Pass near Truckee, Calif.

The first wagon train to successfully cross the Sierra Nevada squeezed through the tiny granite gap in 1844. In the 1860s, laborers built massive walls and 15 tunnels through the pass to bridge the most difficult section of the Transcontinental Railroad route. And in the early 1900s, the Lincoln Highway, America's first transcontinental automobile highway, was developed and included a route through the pass on the former

in the area. The first day features hike on five routes that highlight the diverse history and sights. The second day has walking tour that's focused mainly on the disastrous Donner trip.

"That's the beauty of this event," says organizer Kathy Hess. "We take you places you would never see on your own."

Hess and Palmer previewed a portion of the Summit Canyon/Dutch Flat Wagon Road hike. They started from Donner Pass Road west of Donner Lake and hiked out onto some granite flats overlooking the lake.

The flats are covered with an estimated 200 pieces of rock art. The Donner Summit Historical Society says archaeologists estimate the art is 1,000 to 2,000 years old.

Book Review

The History of the Donner Party

History of the Donner Party

C.F. McGlashan

Originally published, 1879

There have been many books, stories, and videos about the Donner Party (Desperate Passage was reviewed in our May, '14 Heirloom). The reporting started as soon as people in California found out about the trapped emigrants in the Winter of 1846-47 and has gone on into current times. The story is very well-known, so at first thought it did not make much sense to read again about the tragedy in this book. On further thought though, the editorial department thought it might be interesting to read one of the first books and see how the travails of the Donner Party were reported in the 19th Century. The 19th Century was a time of "Yellow Journalism" and excess. The newspapers were trying to win customers and truth was not always the priority. That could not happen today of course. Our modern sensibilities would not allow it. McGlashan approached his subject as an historian. What would it show?

C.F. McGlashan was a local luminary in Truckee. He was a newspaper publisher, businessman, historian, lawyer, and public servant. His book, The History of the Donner Party, was one of the first to detail the infamous episode. McGlashan spent a lot of time researching a thorough fact-based story using newspaper articles, diaries, interviews, and survivors' manuscripts. It appeared in print 33 years after the events.

The book recounts experiences on the trail: cooking with buffalo chips "these chips burn well", Indians attempting to steal things or trying to buy Mary Graves, meeting other wagon trains, injuries, etc. It also recounts all of the troubles that led up to and caused the big trouble: disagreements and arguments that kept them from working together, the week spent looking for the Reeds' lost cattle, Indian thefts, death by exhaustion, death by disappearance (murder?), death by accident (gun discharge), the Reed-Snyder dispute at Gravelly Ford and Reed's banishment, the general slow going and delays, and the fateful decision to follow Lansford Hastings' advice to take the Hastings Cut-Off. That last decision took 28 days to go 21 miles. Just doing the math of that we see how hard progress must have been, and that was nowhere near the worst.

Once the Party got to Donner Lake (although the Donners were actually 7 miles away) they made multiple attempts to cross the



Interesting contrast for the reader, knowing what was to happen:

"We had this morning buffalo steaks broiled...no fear of Indians, our cattle graze quietly around our encampment unmolested... I could never have believed we could have traveled so far with so little difficulty. The prairie...is beautiful beyond description... everything was new and pleasing... we laid in 150 pounds of flour and 75 pounds of meat for each individual, and I fear bread will be scarce." pg 32 Yes, bread would be scarce.

Tamsen Donner in a letter from the So. Platte June 16, 1846

Summit with and without wagons. Then they tried without the oxen but the snow was too deep. The Forlorn Hope Party was another try to get to California and send back help. It left in Mid-December with the members wearing snowshoes.

McGlashan describes the impetus for the group in his 19th Century prose: "The emigrants were no longer on short allowance, they were actually starving! Oh! the horror! The dread alarm which prevailed among the company! C.T. Stanton, ever brave, courageous, lion-hearted, said "I will bring help to these famishing people or lay down my life."

The Forlorn Hope was misery compounded. They crawled, staggered, and floundered through the snow making little progress once they'd gotten to the Summit. They were out of food. They were starving and could hardly move. They drew lots to see who should die to feed the others. Dolan lost but they did not execute him.

Things got worse. The fire melted through the snowpack and fell into a stream. No more fire. There was no shelter from the storm as they slept. People began to die and eventually there was cannibalism, "...they remained at the 'Camp of Death.,' said McGlashan but then he deflected, "Would you know more of the shuddering details? Does the truth require the narration of the sickening minutiae of the terrible transaction of these days? Human beings were never called upon to undergo more trying ordeals." Then a worse storm arrived. To McGlashan the Forlorn Hope were heroes facing unimaginable terrors. Their decisions were completely understandable. They had to survive, to keep going, to get to California, and get help for those still at the Lake.

One can't imagine one's own reaction until confronted with like circumstances but maybe McGlashan goes a bit too far when the Forlorn Hope kills the two Indians who had come from Sutter's Fort to help the emigrants. The members of the Forlorn Hope were starving. Soon none would survive. There were people at the Lake counting on them including their children. "Contemplate his position!... His comrades, his wife, were in the last stages of starvation... Was it murder? No! Every law book, every precept of that higher law, self-preservation, every dictate or right, reason or humanity, demanded the deed... It was not simply justifiable – it was duty; it was a necessity.... The five women and Eddy heard two reports of a gun." Pg 104

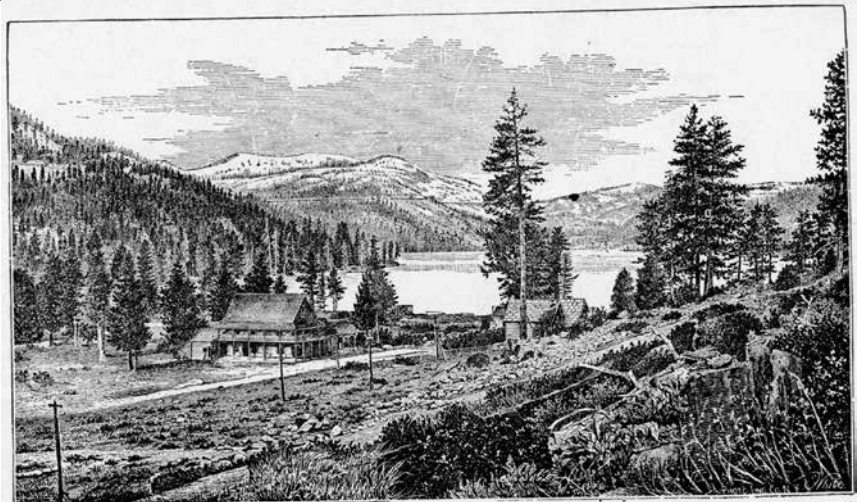
"Is there a mind so narrow, so uncharitable, that it can censure these poor dying people from the acts of this terrible day?... can the most unfeeling heart condemn them?"

Some of the Forlorn Hope reached the Sacramento Valley. Their arrival engendered the rescue parties.

McGlashan shifts his focus from the Hope to the rescue parties starting out and to the condition of the people at the Lake, interspersing quotes from diaries.

One cannot help but get drawn into the pathos. Back at the lake Bayliss Williams "starved to death... What words can portray the emotions of the starving emigrants, when they saw one of their number actually perish of hunger before their eyes!" pg 89

The rescue parties were heroic. People put themselves at risk to go into the mountains to save others. Then there was the extraordinary heroism



DONNER LAKE
(From a Photograph by H. K. Gage, June 12, 1879)

19th Century prose

pg 52

"This brave little woman was only twelve years old, yet in this and all other acts of which there is a record she displayed nerve and skillfulness which would have done credit to a mature woman."

Patty Reed ministering to her father's wounds after the altercation with Snyder:

"Conscious that he had only obeyed the sacred law of self-defense, he refused to accede to the unjust punishment. Then came the wife's pleadings! Long and earnestly Mrs. Reed reasoned and begged and prayed with her husband. All was of no avail until she urged him to remember the want and destitution in which they and the entire company were already participants...he might ... see his children starve before his eyes, But if he would go forward...."

James Reed was banished by the group. He got to California ahead of the Party and returned to help rescue his family and those who'd banished him.

of John Stark who refused to leave any of the Starved Camp and got them all to California.

Throughout the book, to help readers appreciate the personalities, McGlashan writes short biographies. Then at the end he dissects the whole tale: who lived, who died, who was rescued when, and what happened to all of the survivors afterwards.

Particularly interesting was McGlashan's giving Louis Keseberg a podium from which to tell his side of the story. Keseberg, in the popular telling, is the villain. Lurid contemporary accounts tell of him sitting on a log with blood running down his beard and a body part in his hands as the rescuers arrive. In less lurid accounts he was accused of murder and theft (which McGlashan reports) and idleness. Even today he is the butt of jokes, for example, Keseberg opened a restaurant afterwards and served finger foods (he did in fact run a hotel and a rooming house as well as other businesses). McGlashan interviewed Keseberg and, although we cannot know the truth, we get a very different telling. One particularly sad moment was when, upon being rescued and having made it to the Summit, he rested in one of the previously used campsites. He saw a piece of calico sticking out of the snow and he pulled on it. It was his daughter's clothing. He had not known she was dead. Keseberg must have led a life of misery given all of his setbacks following the Donner Party episodes.

After reading his account, one can agree with Keseberg, "I have been born under an evil star!" That was something new for me and it came from the first Donner Party book.

McGlashan also includes a report of General Kearney's visit to the Donner Lake site in 1847, written by Edwin Bryant who'd come to California just ahead of the Donner Party. With that description, it is clear that if any blame applied to

Keseberg, it should have been shared by many more. Edwin Bryant wrote [What I Saw in California \(1846\)](#), reviewed in our April, '13 [Heirloom](#).

Then there is the report of McGlashan's archeological work at the Donner Lake sites and his description of some of the 500 objects that were found (left).

The book is interesting. More modern books have had the advantage of much more available material including the science of starvation, but McGlashan's book is a good introduction and his flowery descriptions are an interesting counterpoint to today's prose.



Some of the Donner Relics at Wohlbruck's Pioneer Donner Museum. All Free, Visitors Welcome, Everything Explained, Questions Cheerfully Answered.

The Hastings Cut-Off

"Alas! There were trials in the way compared with which their recent struggles were insignificant. But for the fatal delay caused by the Hastings Cut-off, all would have been well, but now the summer was passed, their teams and themselves were well-nigh exhausted, and their slender stock of provisions nearly consumed." Pg 40

Trapped

"to the Donner Party [the ascent of the Sierra] brought terror and dismay The company had hardly obtained a glimpse of the mountains, ere the winter storm clouds began to assembly their hosts around the loftier crests. Every day the weather appeared more ominous..." Every day's delay had cost a dozen lives. "It was too late!... they found themselves encompassed in six inches of snow" at Prosser Creek. On the Summit the snow was feet deep.

Donner route over summit

"All day long the men and animals floundered through the snow, and attempted to break and trample a road. Just before nightfall they reached the abrupt precipice where the present wagon-road intercepts the snow-sheds of the Central Pacific. Here the poor mules and oxen had been utterly unable to find a foothold on the slippery, snow-covered rocks." pg 61

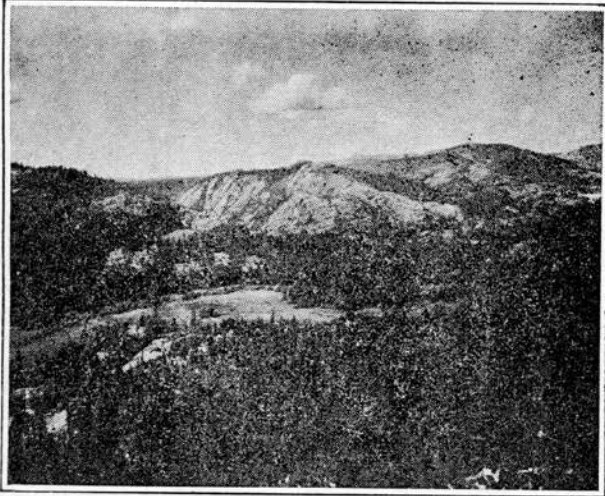
What the resuers saw pg 124

"The inmates lived subterranean lives. Steps cut in the icy snow led up from the doorways to the surface. Deep despair had settled upon all hearts. The dead were lying all around, some even unburied, and nearly all with only a covering of snow. So weak and powerless had the emigrants become, that it was hardly possible for them to lift the dead bodies up the steps out to the cabins. All were reduced to mere skeletons."

LOOKOUT POINT

EMIGRANT GAP

Don't Fail to Stop! A Wonder View of
Bear Valley, Bear and Yuba Rivers,
the Scenic Wonder View of
Entire Lincoln Highway.



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

WOHLBRUCK'S LOOKOUT POINT

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

The Best for a Little Less

Ad in The History of the Donner Party. T.C. Wohlbruck,
who founded the first version of the museum at Donner
Lake was the publisher of McGlashan's book. See our
Heirlooms for October and November '12 for more on
T.C. Wohlbruck.

TRUCKEE SODA WORKS

M. S. FRANZINI, Prop.

PHONE 74-J

RES. 74-W

Truckee, Calif., 8/6 - 1926

Name T. C. Wohlbruck

Address Emigrant Gap

Sold by Amt. Recd.

5	out. Bud	17 50
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TRUCKEE SODA WORKS

M. S. FRANZINI, Prop.

PHONE 74-J

RES. 74-W

Truckee, Calif., 8/12 - 1926

Name T. C. Wohlbruck

Address Donner Monument

Sold by Amt. Recd.

2	4 Root Beer	7 60
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1	4 Dream	3 80
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3	4 Bud	10 50
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22

As long as we're running the ad in the previous column it
seemed like a good time to include these receipts from T.C.
Wohlbruck, dated 1926. They reflect T.C.'s purchasing drinks
for tourists at his Emigrant Gap Canteen and Service Station and
the Donner Monument Canteen and Service Station.

19th Century Popular Knowledge

This comes from 10,000 Miles by Land and Sea by Rev. W.W. Ross in 1876. Mr. Ross wrote this travelogue about travels he took in 1874. In this excerpt he has come to Donner Lake. See how he describes Louis Keseburg of the Donner Party; this only three years before McGlashan's true account in The History of the Donner Party.

But this lovely lake will be longest remembered, it maybe, not from its pleasure parties and summer songs, but from the dreadful fate of the Donners, after whom it is named. A party of emigrants from Illinois undertook to cross the mountains late in the fall of 1846. Their guide, an old trapper familiar with the terrible snow storms, hurried them forward. The majority pressed on and passed safely over ; but Donner himself, driving a lot of cattle, and kept in company by a party of sixteen, made no haste. Anticipating no danger, he disregarded all warnings, and quietly encamped on the shores of the lake. In the night the storm burst upon them with the fury of loosened demons. The hurricane howled and raged among the pines, whilst the snow fell fast and thick. At last the morning broke, but brought no abatement of the storm. [M]ost of the cattle and horses had broken from their fastenings and fled... Donner is unable or unwilling to move till the storm stops, and his devoted wife refuses to go and leave him behind. A German resolves to remain with them. The rest, placing the four children of the Donners on horses, start for the other side of the mountains; after many days of toil and peril, they succeed in reaching the valley in safety.

The storm continues for weeks with scarcely any cessation. For the imprisoned to get out or deliverers to get in is impossible. No power but a spring sun can ever open a way of escape. In the early spring, as soon as there is any hope of succeeding, a party starts to their assistance. After weeks of labor and suffering, they succeed in reaching the camp ; but what a sight meets their horrified gaze ! Before the fire sits a solitary man tearing the flesh from a roasted arm: It is the German, and he is raving mad. At the sound of steps he springs to his feet, confronting them with a terrified look, and clutching, like a beast of prey, the remains of his repast. They spring upon him, wrench away the food, and pinion down his arms. The remains of the Donners are found and buried. The German recovered his reason, and declared his innocency ; but whether the Donners died a natural death, or were murdered by the madman, may remain a mystery until the "Judge of all the earth shall make known."



10,000 MILES

BY

LAND AND SEA.

BY REV. W. W. ROSS.

TORONTO:
JAMES CAMPBELL & SON,
1876.

From the Great Trans-continental Railroad Guide 1870, page 161

To show just how hard our research department works, it followed up on the story above, wondering where the good reverend, above, got his facts. He was traveling across the country by train. in 1874. Perhaps he had a guidebook? Here is an excerpt from a transcontinental railroad guide, dated 1870. People had a lot of fun entertaining the public apparently. To set the stage for this excerpt, it comes from the section the traveler would be reading as the train went up the Sierra past Donner Lake. Here the story of Donner Party is being related. The rescue party has crossed the Sierra and is approaching Donner Lake,

“After a desperate effort, which required weeks of toil and exposure, the party, succeeded in scaling the mountains and reaching Donner Lake. They came to the camp of the Donners, and, pushing open the rude door, entered. What a sight met the first glance which pierced the semi-darkness of the cabin! There – before the fire – sat the Dutchman, holding, in a vice-like grasp, a roasted arm and hand, which he was greedily eating. With a wild and frightened look he sprang to his feet and confronted the new-comers, holding on to the arm as though he feared they would deprive him of his repast. The disgusting, horrid sight

almost overpowered these brave, rude men, used to scenes of blood and strife. The remains of the arm were taken from him by main force, and the cannibal secured for the time, while an examination disclosed a portion of the remains of the unfortunate lady from whence the arm had been severed, frozen in the snow, but was as in possession of perfect health when she met her fate.“

The writer then went on to say the Donners were given a burial and the rescue party returned to the Central Valley. Keseburg related his story saying that Mr. Donner had died of sickness and the cattle had escaped. With little food and being exhausted, Mrs. Donner died. The evidence the author asserted, said something different. Mrs. Donner’s body was “stout and healthy” and was in as good shape as Keseburg. Her remains showed she had not died of illness. That left only one answer: “Suspicion, too horrible for utterance....”

Bicycling Over Donner Summit Others Did it Too

Last Month's Book Review section reviewed [Across America by Bicycle](#), the story of Thomas Stevens' trip across Donner Summit, the Continent, and around the world in 1884. He was not the only 19th Century cyclist to cross the Sierra. Bicycling was a popular sport in the 19th Century. A future [Heirloom](#) will even include the story of a father and seven year old son who crossed the Sierra twice - but that's off in the future. Here are a couple of short pieces about other cyclists who crossed Donner Summit.

George Nellis Crosses Donner Summit By Bike, 1887 Or Sometimes Research Anticipation is Crushed

While looking for the first trip across the Summit, across the No. American Continent and around the world by Thomas Stevens in 1884 for our last month's [Heirloom](#), our research department came across a number of transcontinental bicyclists in the 19th Century. Bicycling was a popular sport. It was inexpensive and it provided independence and freedom.

You can imagine the excitement generated when we came across George Nellis' trip of 1887, which included going over Donner Summit, and to discover that he kept a journal. That set off the search for the journal.

Upon finding the log, we scanned through it, day by day, following Nellis across the continent anticipating with enthusiasm getting to the Sierra and Donner Summit. What had he thought of the views? How was the trip up the Dutch Flat Rd. or did he take the railroad route? Did he go through the snowsheds as Stevens had? What did he think of Donner Lake from the top? Did he stay in Truckee for the night or the Summit Hotel?

Excitement grew as we got closer but we evaded the temptation to skip ahead.

Anticipation is delightful. We traded off reading passages, going around the research department's work circle. We got closer and closer. We crossed Utah, the Nevada Desert, got to Reno and then.... there it was, the section titled, "Reno to the Sierra Summit."

The log was empty. The next title was "Summit to Colfax." That text was missing too. Those days were never printed by anyone and were lost. All of the rest of the days, from the whole trip, were there but there was nothing from Donner Summit.

If you are interested you can read about Nellis' adventures by going to http://www.thewheelmen.org/sections/americanjourneys/goldengate/nellis_1.asp.



George Nellis

OUR OFFER.

OUR OFFER.
"Pedal and Path,"

Across the Continent "A wheel and A foot."

BY GEO. B. THAYER.

Being an account of most thrilling interest of how Mr. Thayer travelled 11,000 miles, visiting Yosemite, Yellowstone and other places of interest, 439 miles of which was on the wheel, at a

Total Cost of \$284 !!!

The book has 244 pages of letter press, and is beautifully illustrated.

WE OFFER

To new subscribers this book free on receipt of the yearly subscription price of the *WORLD*, \$1.

WE OFFER

This book to others for 25 cents.

This is a bargain, as it is one of the most interesting books of travel "a wheel" ever written.

BICYCLING WORLD CO.,

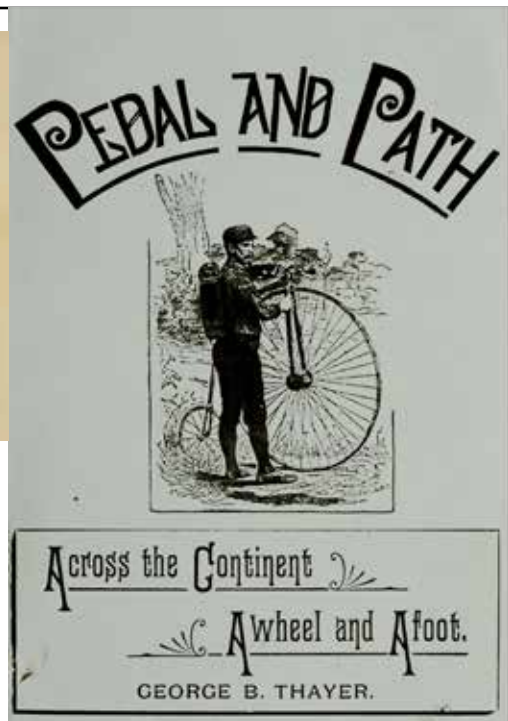
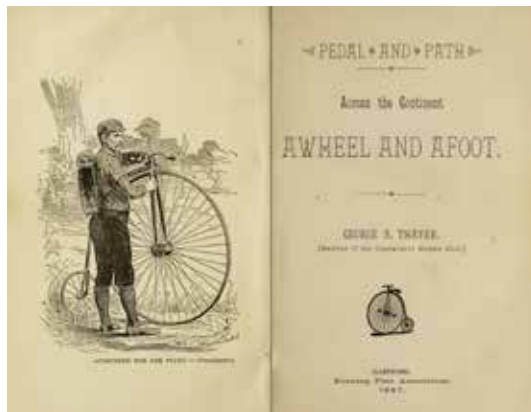
No. 12 Pearl Street,

BOSTON, - - MASS.

Theron Gray traveled across the continent and Donner Summit in 1887. He was following Horace Greeley's advice to go west. "It was too far to go on foot, the interstate commerce bill had soured him on railroads, and he concluded to come through in regular wheelman style"

"..when he crossed the summit and began to descend the mountains through the magnificent pine forests into California he began to realize that he had entered that far away land so often spoken of in the past as 'God's country.' His description of the beautiful places to be passed in coming through Placer county, while they are familiar to all Californians, were interesting from the fact that they were described by an Eastern individual. The balmy mountain air, the streams of sparkling water, the magnificent forests, radiating from the pine on the summit, through spruce, fir, cedar and hemlock to the oaks of the foothills and valley, were to him a panorama of magnificence in nature which no description in books could ever have conveyed the remotest idea of their grandeur. The fruit farms of the mountains, notably those in the vicinity of Colfax, Newcastle and Auburn, were to him a revelation of why it is that California is called the king fruit country of the world."

Sacramento Daily Union October 1, 1887



George Thayer took the Donner Summit route across the continent in 1887 but took train over the Sierra. He had nothing to say about going over the summit because he was asleep, having gotten on the train after midnight. He did not have much to say about Tahoe either after biking to it. He was amazed by Cape Horn (on the railroad route east of Colfax) when he ran out on the platform.

**Nelson A. Bradt Arrives From
New York on a Bicycle.**

Incidents of the Trip—The Wheelman's Itinerary—A Splendid Average—Fishing on the Way.

The July 4th celebrations were just wrapping up when Nelson A. Bradt arrived "fresh and hearty" from a three month travel across the country. His "faithful roadster" had long ago lost "its jaunty freshness...was still in serviceable condition."

On June 24th he crossed the Sierra and "dropped down by Sacramento into the land of gold and climate and pursued his course without stop to the Golden Gate."

"The venturesome wheelman's outfit consisted of a full riding suit, one extra suit, shirts, collars and toilet necessities, pair of revolvers, fishing-tackle and blankets - weighing in all about twenty pounds.

Headline and story from the San Francisco Call July 1, 1891

Our June Heirloom will have an article about N.E. Wilson, who bicycled with his wife and 3 year-old over Donner Summit in 1894.

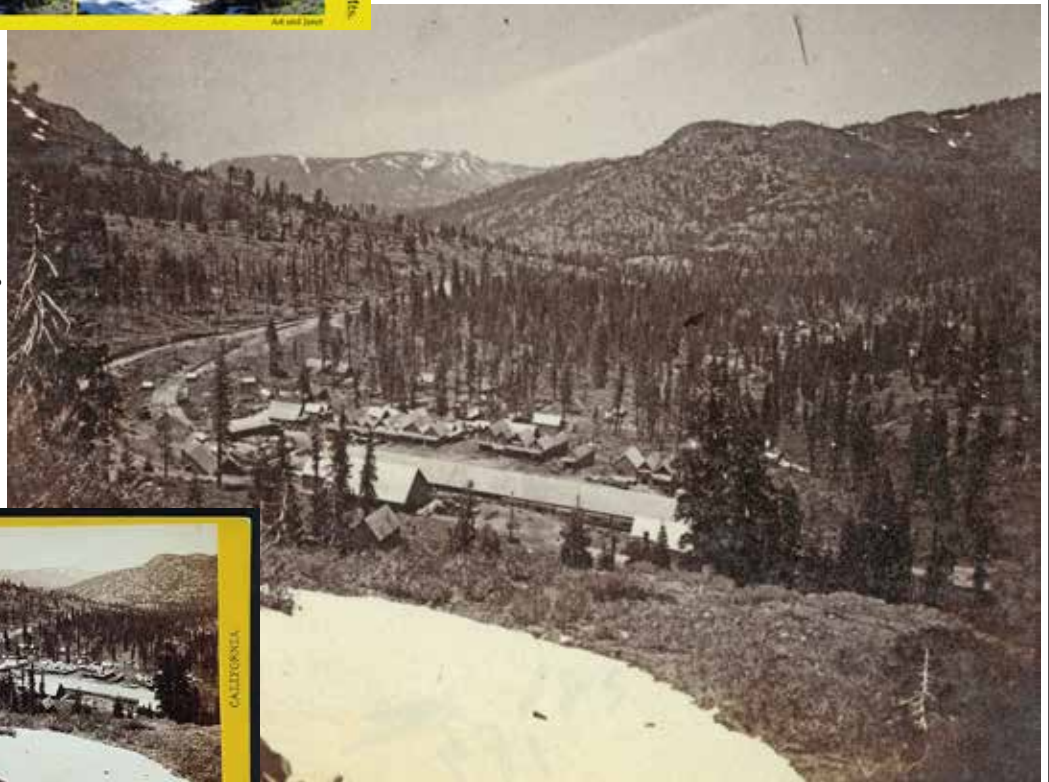
Then & Now with Art Clark

Alfred A Hart 184 - Upper Cisco,

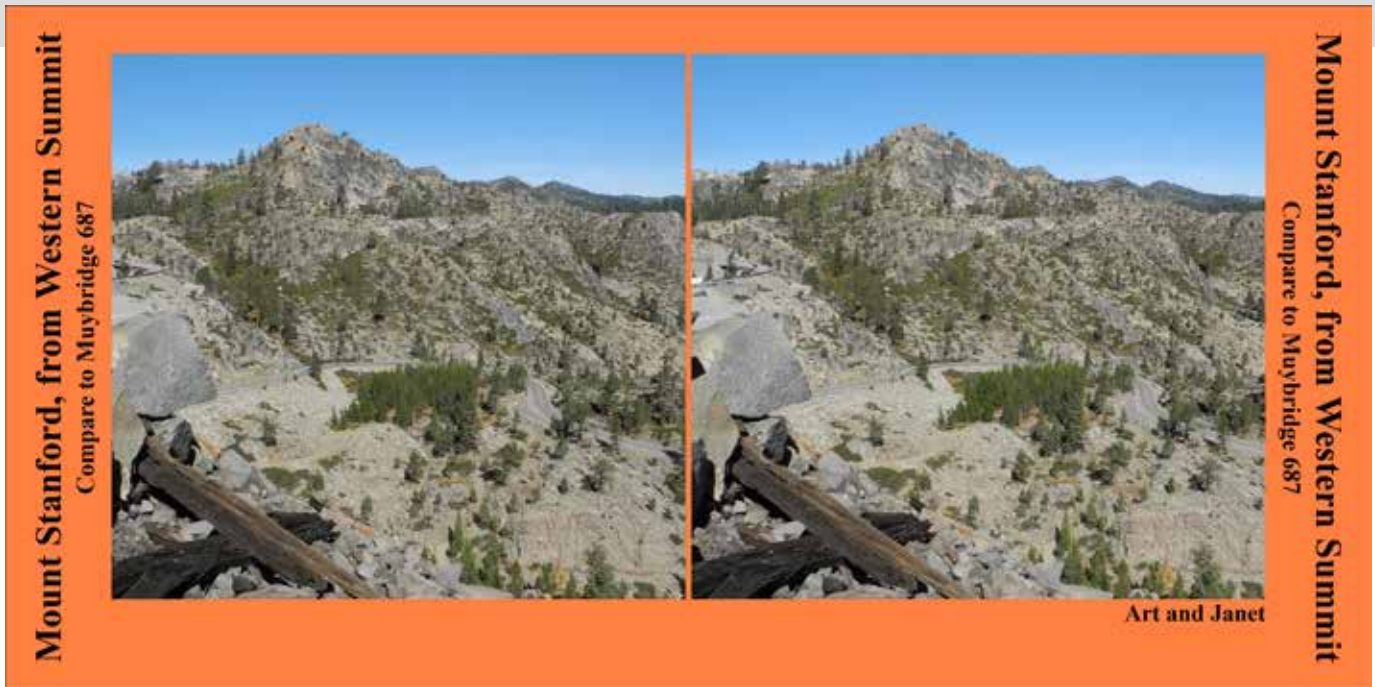
Rattlesnake and Yuba Mountains. For several years, Cisco was the "end of the line" for the railroad. Freight headed up the mountains had to be unloaded and reloaded on wagons, which then climbed the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon road. In summer 1867, 58 carloads of freight were transferred every day. Wood was in great demand for railroad ties, fuel and buildings, and many of the trees were removed. They have returned, and now obscure much of the view.

The mountain on the right is Signal Peak. Rattlesnake Mountain is out of view to the right.

Photo location 39° 18.005'N 120° 32.745'W



Then & Now with Art Clark



Mount Stanford, from Western Summit (Muybridge 687)

This photo by Eadweard Muybridge is taken from along the railroad east of Tunnel 8. The very distinctive rock in the original seems to have been buried when they removed the wooden snowsheds. The rubble there now includes timbers & boulders. Mount Stanford is now Stewart Peak, and Highway 40 dominates the scene. Barely visible is the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road.

Photo location 39° 18.928'N 120° 18.980'W



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
www.donnersummithistricalsociety.org

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I/we would like to join The
Donner Summit Historical Society
and share in the Summit's rich
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(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit
Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

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