

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

February, 2015 issue #78



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

The first part of the title is really ironic. It's kind of what Theodore Judah said after studying the situation carefully before the railroad was built – but we'll save that particular story for a future [Heirloom](#).

There's a lot that's famous about Donner Summit: the first wagon train to reach California with wagons, the first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, the first transcontinental telephone line, the first transcontinental air route, surviving members of the Donner Party, the first motorized crossing of the continent (not including a RR), the first auto over the Sierra, the first women motorcyclists to cross the continent, the first transcontinental bicycle ride, etc. They all went over Donner Summit.

"One of the most marked and important works on the line is the great snow gallery on the Sierra Nevada Mountains extending for about 28-miles without a break."

Annual Report made to the Secretary of the Interior on June 30, 1879, by the Auditor of Railroad Accounts. The 28 miles would later stretch to 40.

There is nothing more iconic though, than the snowsheds of Donner Summit. Once they stretched forty miles covering all of the track that was not inside the fifteen Sierra tunnels. There were hundreds of workers dedicated to the snowsheds: snow shovelers, carpenters, track walkers, fire train personnel, etc.

With those snowsheds go a lot of stories that we'll get to: the need, the building, the problems, tourists and snowsheds (on foot and in trains), vehicles in snowsheds, and there's more. Our research staff has accumulated a bunch (technical historical research term for mounds) of material that's been curated (another impressive technical historian's term) exclusively for the [Heirloom](#) in coming months. Aren't you glad you subscribe?

more on page 3

"The whole railroad up here operates under wooden tunnels, snow sheds, and it was a rather weird experience to see turn-tables and a station and switches all in tunnels like the boat ride at Revere Beach. Great massive engines, 16 drivers, cab in front."

**Johnny Ellis*
Aug. 17, 1935,
Norden, CA,**

*see the April, '09 [Heirloom](#)

What's in Your Closet?

View from Donner Summit, 1920's found in Bill Kirkham's (Serene Lakes) father's things. If you have historical items you'd like to share please let us know. We'll copy your photographs so you won't lose them.

info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org



Big News Milestone Reached Heirloom Makes Good

You can imagine the jubilation and joy when the compilation of this month's Heirloom recipient addresses was totaled and the total hit 700. People must like Donner Summit history. That is fortunate because there is so much left to share and more keeps turning up each day.

So stay tuned.

*Trail Blazer...
in Tailored Navy*

There's quiet elegance in the sculptured lines of this ski Blazer, flawlessly fashioned from precious virgin wool... Navy spiced with ice blue stitching
\$22.50

Fine Wool Gabardine Downhill Ski Pants
\$11.95 to \$18.95

AT SMART STORES

White Stag
SKI TOGS
HIRSH-WEIS MFG. CO. PORTLAND, OREGON

"Out of the Top Drawer"

Ad from 1947 Western Skiing Magazine

editor:
Bill Oudegeest
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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



SUMMIT STATION WITH WEST END OF TUNNEL
C.P.R. WATKINS' NEW SERIES.
1877. Mounting No. 4, 5, 6, 7.

Snowshed Description, 1880

It was day an instant ago, and now it is dark night. The train has burrowed in a tunnel to escape the speechless magnificence. It is roaring through the snow-sheds. It is rumbling over the bridges: Who shall say to these breakers of sod and billows of rock, "Peace, be still!" and the tempest shall be stayed and the globe shall be at rest ?

Do you remember the old covered bridges that used to stand with their feet in the streams like cows in midsummer, and had little windows all along for the fitful checkers of light? Imagine those bridges grown to giants, from five hundred to two thousand feet long, and strong as a fort. Imagine some of them bent into immense curves that, as you enter, dwindle away in the distance like the inside of a mighty powder-horn, and then lay forty-five miles of them zigzag up and down the Sierras and the Rockies, and wherever the snow drifts wildest and deepest, and you have the snow-sheds of the mountains, without which the cloudy pantings of the engines would be as powerless as the breath of a singing sparrow. They are just bridges the other side up. They are made to lift the white winter and shoulder the avalanche. But you can hardly tell how provoking they are sometimes, when they clip off the prospect as a pair of shears snips a thread, just as a love of a valley or a dread of a cañon, or something deeper or grander or higher or ruder catches your eye, "Out, brief candle!" and your sight is extinguished in a snowshed. But why complain amid these wonders because you have to wink!

Between the Gates Benjamin Franklin Taylor

Next Month: The beginning (of snowsheds)

Getting to Donner Summit Could be Tough Work

Today we hop in our cars, set the temperature and cruise controls, and don't even give a thought to driving long distances. We can reach Donner Summit in just an hour and a half from Sacramento and double that from San Francisco. Our vehicles are reliable and fast. The multi-lane Interstate allows us to zip past slower drivers.

It was not always so. It took six weeks in 1867 for a donkey engine to arrive at Donner Summit from Gold Run. It had been a locomotive and was so scary that oncoming mules had to be blindfolded so they would not bolt. That's an aside though, for another [Heirloom](#).



painting by Harold Von Schmidt at the Donner Memorial State Park at Donner Lake

“You can form no idea, nor can I give you any description of the evils which best us. From the time we left the [Donner] lakeuntil we reached the top [Lake Mary] it was one continued jumping from one rocky cliff to another. We would have to roll over this big rock, then over that; then there was bridging a branch; then we had to lift our wagons by main force up to the top of a ledge of rocks...Three days...found ourselves six miles from the lake... you never saw a set of fellows more happy than when we reached the summit.

William Todd, 1845

Emigrant wagons

coming up Donner Pass had to be disassembled to get them over the rock ledges. The trials those original emigrants went through must have made them wish they'd never heard of California. Then they discovered Roller Pass*. Emigrants didn't have to take their wagons apart but they did have to attach a dozen oxen to bring each wagon, one by one, up the very steep slope.

The crossing of Donner Summit was the hardest part of the emigrants' trip across the country. As they approached the Sierra they looked with “terror at the awful site [sic].” (Wm. Tustin, 1846). The Sierra looked like an “apparently impassable barrier” (Edwin Bryant, 1846 whose mule went somersaulting down the mountain**), “as steep as the roof of a house” (Joseph Hackney 1849). The Sierra “looked terrible” (David Hudson 1845). The mountains were “some immense wall built directly across our path” (Elisha Perkins 1849).

The railroad made it easier but traveling by train over Donner Summit meant going through 40 miles of snowsheds which kept heavy snowfall and avalanches from wiping the track and trains off the mountainsides. Going through sheds, though, meant that some of the most beautiful scenery in the world was hidden from view. In

addition to the dark, train cars filled with smoke making the trip over the Summit less than pleasant.

Once there were roads one would think things got easier but that was not always the case. At least drivers did not have to take apart their cars.

*See the Heirlooms for 11/11, 4/12, 5/13, 7/13

**the mule's condition will be reported in a future [Heirloom](#). (Anticipation is good)

Snow Makes Crossing Donner Summit Difficult Too

Before the highway was plowed in 1932 merchants in Truckee and Lake Tahoe had one wish each Spring - let the snow melt QUICKLY!

Sometimes the snow did and sometimes it did not and when it did not the merchants did their best to hurry things along. Placer County used to send up snow shovelers annually to help out. They could clear 1500 feet of snowdrifts in two days (1921) and the road could be open by early June. The newspapers faithfully reported on snow clearing presumably to encourage travelers.

For awhile there was a carnival of cars coming annually from Reno clearing the remaining snow as they went and there was a celebration when the first car got over the Summit.

Salt and ashes were spread on the road at times to hurry things along. Sometimes residents dug trenches in the snow to speed melting by letting the warm air get to more snow than just the surface.



Snow shoveliing bee from an undetermined date. Photo from the Auburn Ski Club's Western Ski Sport Museum at Boreal.

The lower men would shovel snow to the men just above who would shovel snow to the men at the top. Eventually, the drifts would be cleared and people could travel.

The Summit Hotel (burned in 1925) helped by spreading ash on the snow and putting up the County snow shovelers.

There were newspaper articles each Spring about hoped for opening dates, opening plans, and the yearly prominent citizens' committees set up to oversee clearing operations and openings.

Snow Shoveling Bee

"The Auburn Chamber of Commerce, working with the Placer County Auto Trades Association, is planning to conduct a snow shoveling bee, which will take place on Sunday and Monday, May 22 and 23, and they hope to secure a large delegation of snow shovelers.

"Leaving Auburn on train 22 at 6:30 Saturday night, the party would arrive at the summit about four hours later. Accommodation would be provided at Summit Hotel, which has recently changed hands...The owners plan to make an all season resort of Summit Hotel... the region of the Summit is particularly well suited for sport the year around. An eminent Swedish traveler recently remarked that no place in Sweden equalled the Summit as a winter pleasure spot..."

Truckee Republican
May 19, 1921

From the DSHS Archives



Above: Cisco Grove Service Station on Old 40 1940's

Below: parking outside the Soda Springs Hotel 1930's



From the DSHS Archives



Right: Winter at Donner Summit 1930's

Below: Ski ticket for Johnny Ellis' rope tows at Lake Mary and what is now Donner Ski Ranch. ca: 1936

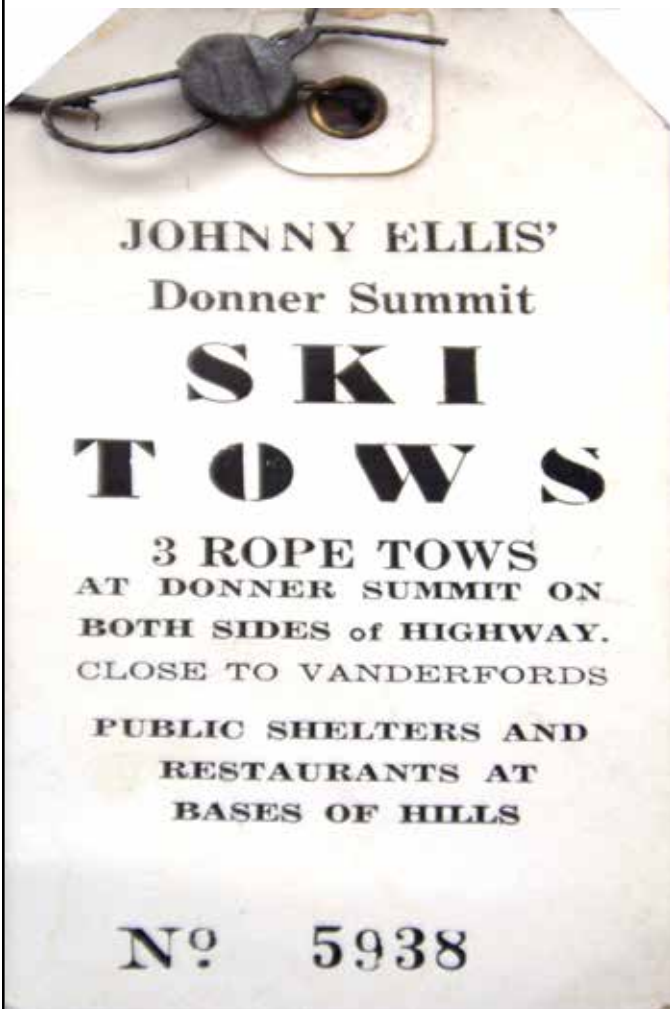
Salt Sprinkled on Summit Road

"...The Truckee Chamber sent twelve men to Summit on April 1, together with 3,000 pounds of black cinder and 1,500 pounds of rock salt. The men spread the cinders and salt over the road from Summit hotel [sic] to the head of Donner lake [sic], and also shoveled out a deep drift on the sharp bend just this side of the subway.

"...there is 12 to 15 feet of snow on the road from the Summit hotel to the subway and from the latter point to the head of Donner lake the snow will average from 2 to 4 feet in depth.

"A stretch of new road on the Truckee side of the subway under the sheds, sand over 1,000 feet in length is covered with from 30 to 50 feet of snow. It is probable that little work will be done on the new stretch at this time but instead all efforts will be concentrated on the old road."

Truckee Republican, April 7, 1921



Book Review

[A Reliable Car and a Woman Who Knows It](#)
2000 Curt McConnell 177 pages

Two large social changes occurred to make this book possible. First the automobile became a social phenomenon. It changed lives and society radically. Second, the women's suffragist movement changed the roll of women and so changed society radically.

It was a given that men could pilot automobiles and pilot them they did. As they piloted their automobiles they carried their women with them and of course protected them. Women were for protecting. There were, however, women who did not want or need protecting. They wanted to pilot automobiles on their own. They wanted adventure and the feeling of accomplishment.

This book covers five women who traveled across the country when automobiles were new and when hardly anyone was a "transcontinentalist." They must have been very special because even today traveling across the country in an automobile is an endeavor. In the early 20th Century it was an ordeal. The machines were not reliable. The weather was not reliable. The roads were not reliable; they were scarcely roads in some places. They had to know how to fix cars and put up with dirt, heat, thirst, and the continual rattling of their teeth as they negotiated the routes across the country.

So, the book is interesting.

The five stories are:

- Louise Hitchcock Davis – the first woman to attempt to travel the country in a car; her husband drove during the 1899 trip.
- Alice Ramsey – the first woman to drive across the country; she was accompanied by three other women. 1909 and 53 days
- Blanche Stuart Scott – the first woman to drive across the country (if you discount Ramsey – you'll have to read the book to understand) 1910
- Anita King – the movie star and first woman to drive across the country alone - 1915 in 48 days
- Amanda Preuss – who set the record for driving across the country alone – 1916 (11 days)

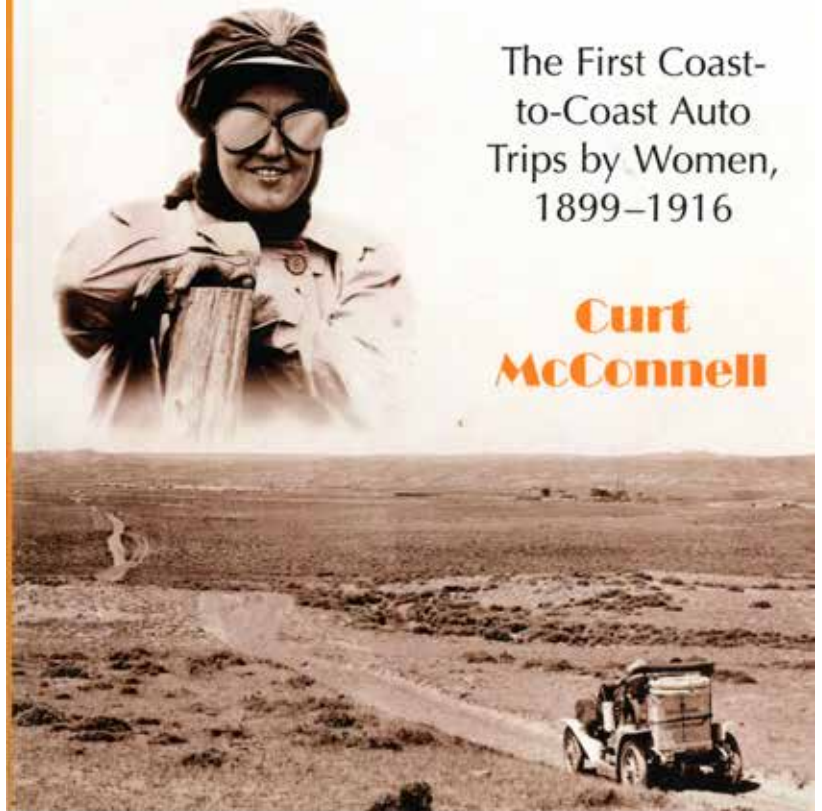
Our research team is always looking for interesting stories that have to do with Donner Summit and we have quite a backlog in our DSHS files just awaiting exposure in the Heirloom. Some stories awaiting exposure are "blindfolded mules," "locomotives over the snow," "the first train rides over the Sierra," "tunneling under Donner Summit (that's not RR tunnels)," etc.

It was that hunt that led the team to A Reliable Car and a Woman Who Knows It. The Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway, went

"A Reliable Car and a Woman Who Knows It"

The First Coast-to-Coast Auto Trips by Women, 1899-1916

Curt McConnell



"The automobile is a treacherous animal for a long trip."

pg 9 Louise Davis

right over Donner Summit (one of the two routes did – the other went over Echo Summit, today’s Highway 50). Since it was the main route across the country there must have been “autoists” or “transcontinentalists” who used the route. There must be records of their passages. A book about five women, attempting to cross the Sierra and cross the continent must include a few who crossed Donner Summit.

The first story ended in Chicago. There was no Donner Summit there. The second and third stories’ drivers both took the Lincoln Highway route over Echo Summit. That was disappointing. There were only two stories left.

Then we hit “paydirt.” Both Anita King and Amanda Preuss went over Donner Summit. Not only did they break the mold for women and take on the challenge of crossing the country by automobile, but they went over Donner Summit doing it. That’s a little flippant, but humor is good.

The five women, all in their twenties, were not just automobile pioneers, they were societal pioneers. They showed women could be independent. Their examples led other women to break the molds and become lawyers, doctors, and professors. They made the world better.

McConnell uses lots and lots of primary sources to put together his stories and includes pages of notes at the end so one can follow him through the old newspapers and magazines. He also includes lots of old pictures that are fun to look at. A little detail is good but a lot

can be tedious. Mr. McConnell did a heroic job ferreting out all the sources he did. He did not have to report on all of them. He found so many he was able to spend time noting the discrepancies between newspaper articles. After awhile that gets to be a bit much. For example, was Blanche Scott born in 1890, 1891, 1892, or 1889? Was her maid with her not? Was her companion Gertude or Amy? Then, he’s such a stickler that when he lists some numbers we’d expect him to be just as strict but he does not even stop to consider their logic. He said Amanda Preuss, during her record run, covered an average of 313 miles per day at an average speed of 13.05 MPH. Averaging 13 MPH shows the condition of traveling in those days and how heroic these women were but it also shows that Amanda had to travel for 23.98 hours per day. She could not eat, sleep, or do anything but drive for the 11 day trip.

That said, the book is interesting. The women dealt with sand, mud, bad weather, rough roads and no roads, bad directions, lack of information, lack of water, flat tires, breakdowns, and danger. That was not enough though. The publicists for Anita King, a movie star, embellished stories and she added more: shooting a timber wolf, being accosted by a tramp, being rescued by prospectors in the desert at the point of death, and more. You’ll have to read the book.

McConnell also gives details about the automobiles which any car nut would like.

There are interesting stories along with the main stories. For example, an automobile manufacturer tried to pay Blanche Scott \$5000 to end her trip so the Overland automobile would not get such good publicity. There are good details like most early transcontinentalists had pilot cars as did most of the women in this book. The pilot cars were there to help out and guide as well as

Donner Summit

...the roads became steep and tortuous, twining ever upward and upward, from precipice to precipice. Around one curve after another I flew, giving the car more gas every time I glimpsed a little straight stretch ahead. I took some awful chances. However, I had absolute confidence in my car, and so did not hesitate to run any risk.

Passing over the Sierras, I negotiated three snow-sheds, the last one at the summit, over 7,000 feet above the sea. Coming out of this shed, the road drops 1,800 feet in less than a mile, curving wickedly toward Donner Lake, in the heart of the mountains, Thanks to the car, I negotiated it safely.”

Amanda Preuss
page 140 ...



What This Paramount Girl Did with a Stock KesselKar

All motordom is wondering at the performance of a stock KesselKar 42-Six driven from San Francisco to New York—alone by Anita King, the Paramount Girl. Miss King made this grilling trip without motor trouble of any kind whatever—carburetor and ignition perfect. Although encountering the worst imaginable roads and weather for 27 days, no mechanical trouble of any consequence was experienced.

KESSELKAR

EVERY INCH A CAR.

What Miss King accomplished is a great tribute to the power, sturdiness and simplicity of the KesselKar.

Write for literature describing the new KesselKars—Touring Cars, \$1650 to \$1750—Roadsters, \$1750 to \$1850—ALL-YEAR Cars, \$1450 to \$2100 P. O. B. Factory. Unparalleled values.

The ALL-YEAR Car

The KesselKar was the first and, up to now, is the only successful ALL-YEAR car. Offered either with a Coupe or a Sedan top —the changes easily made by anyone.

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OAKLAND

Rules for a cross country record

Anita King, to set the record for traveling alone

- could not even take her dog,
- must make her own repairs,
- sleep out on the desert when the occasion demands it,

pg 103

react in emergencies. Some had many pilot cars which carried reporters. Blanche Scott had a toilet installed in her car so she could get relief without exposing herself to reporters. That occasioned one reporter, not knowing of the toilet, to marvel at the apparent size of her bladder. Some of the travelers sent laundry ahead so they would not have to wear the same clothes over and over.

Two of the five went over Donner Summit. They did not say much about their crossings though. The clues of their routes come from the snowsheds which they mentioned – iconic symbols on Donner Summit and which were nowhere else in the Sierra at the time. Anita King was stopped by a tramp in the snowsheds at the Summit, apparently as she was crossing through them. He wanted a ride to Reno but the rules forbid that. Later, in Reno, the tramp showed there were no hard feelings by presenting her with a bouquet.

Mr. McConnell also wrote Coast to Coast By Automobile reviewed in our October, '12 Heirloom



A movie poster for *The Race*. (AMP)

Blanche Stuart Scott must have been a “card.” She told a story:

She was a teenager and like today’s lobbied for an automobile. Eventually, like parents today, they were worn down. Blanche got her car, a one cylinder Cadillac. One night she was driving by the “feeble glow of the auto’s kerosene lamps” and she saw a bicycle coming. “I rang my bell... but the light came straight towards us without deviating from its course in the middle of the road. “Say there you are, fellows, I’ll go between you!” a voice rang out from behind the light. There was a crash as he hit, fair and square between the two lamps on my car. We dug him out of the radiator, not much the worse for wear, but his bicycle was beyond redemption. The poor man never again mistook automobile lamps for bicycles.”

pg 69

What to take - Blanche Scott pg 73

suitcases
 thermos bottles
 field glasses rubber cushions
 rubber ponchos
 camera
 revolver
 spare tires
 tent
 water bottles
 gas cans
 oil
 acetylene gas
 compressed air
 tools
 block and tackle

What to Take - Anita King pg 103

extra tires
 waterbags
 gasoline and oil
 food for four days
 sawed off shotgun
 revolver
 huge searchlight
 siren
 tent
 blankets
 cooking utensils

Then & Now with Art Clark



In this spot the Lincoln Highway has descended from Donner Summit, passed under the railroad, and is headed for Donner Lake. At the top of the view is the China Wall with the snowsheds on top.

Photo location is almost adjacent to the climbing wall at the curve of Old 40 below the bridge and the petroglyphs at - N39° 19.004' W120° 19.143'.

From the road it's a short walk up to the petroglyphs, China Wall, the old railroad bed, and Tunnel 6.

This picture is part of the University of Michigan archives of the original Lincoln Highway Association (1910-1927). The Association was made up of representatives from the automobile, tire, and cement industries, with the goal of planning, funding, constructing, and promoting the first transcontinental highway in North America. The route, consisting of both existing and newly-built roads following the most direct route possible, ran from New York to San Francisco, covering approximately 3,400 miles.



Then & Now with Art Clark

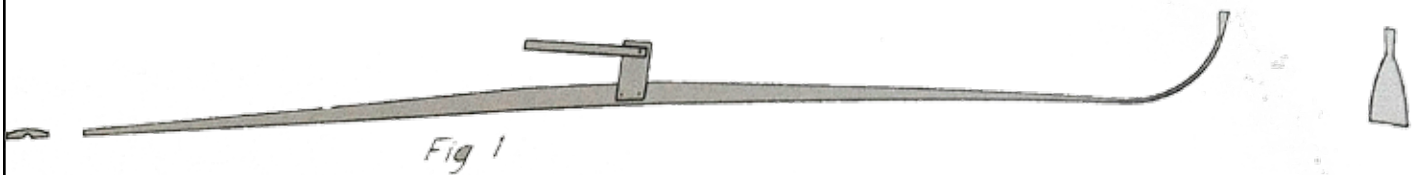


Tunnel 6 is the longest of the Sierra transcontinental railroad tunnels. It took two years to build. The railroad was so impatient to get on with building beyond the tunnel they dug from two ends at once. That was still not fast enough so they sank a shaft down the middle and dug from the inside out. A donkey engine was placed at the top in a shaft house to hoist out rock and let down workers and supplies.

This location just west of the Sugar Bowl Academy building parking lot at the top of Old 40 (the large building just at the top of 40 just before you go downhill).

You can find the top of the shaft 50 yards west of the historical marker which sits at the edge of the parking lot.





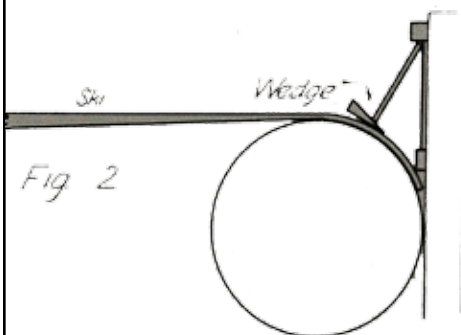
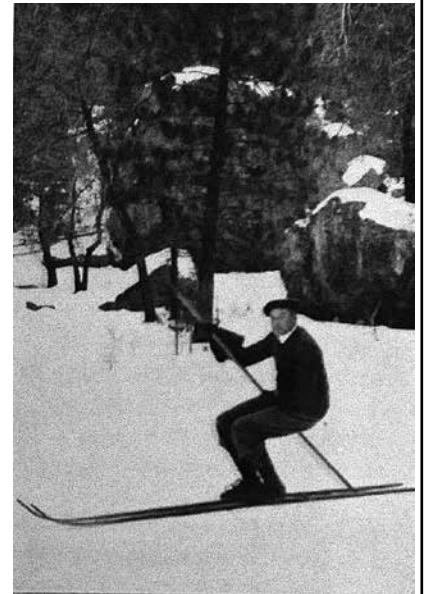
It's Ski Season and Time for Skis

One of the perquisites of accomplishing research assignments assigned by the task masters at the DSHS is the benefit of serendipity. Researchers can't be so focused they ignore everything but the goal because if one is open and paying attention there is so much more that just falls into one's lap.

Here is a case in point. While searching through old PGE magazines for information about the Wise Power Plant (for our Wise Power Plant sign in Auburn - see our 20 Mile Museum web page or go to Auburn) all kinds of other things turned up - like how to make skis from the Pacific Gas and Electric magazine for April, 1912. It was titled "How to Make a Pair of 'Skis'". "Skis were in quotes I suppose because they were pretty new to the regular public.

Given that ski equipment has become so expensive our editorial staff thought this "how to" would be a good benefit to [Heirloom](#) subscribers.

Spruce is the best wood because of its "long straight grain." From the heart of the Spruce log nine foot pieces are hewn four inches wide and two inches thick. Be sure the grain runs edgewise from top to bottom and lengthwise end to end.



Pair up pieces and plane until the edges are straight and surfaces are square with each other.

The best looking end will be the toe. Begin a groove 18" back from the toe 3/4" wide to the end of the skis tapering from 0" at the front to 1/2" at the back.

Plane the skis from 1 or 1 1/2" at the middle to 1" at the rear and 3/8" at the front. See figure 1 above.

Place the front 20" into boiling water and then bend slowly over a heated pipe. See figure two, above.

Point the toe and put a little ball on the front for "style." Round the edges. Then tie the pair together and place a 1 1/2" thick block of wood between the two at the center. Let them sit for a month to develop the arch.

Once the skis are shaped it's time to "dope" them using a 3-2-1 mix of beeswax, paraffin, and rosin.

Once the skis are done you must try them out. To go up hill use a moccasin, a long canvas stocking, over the rear half of the ski. Without the moccasin, one must throw the heel off the ski and dig into the snow. Use an 8' long pole as a push rod and brake.

"It takes practice to become a ski-rider."



Then & Now Bonus from Art Clark



If you look at the Maxwell Military Vehicle on page 10 you see a telephone pole in the background of both pictures. In producing the Then/Now's for this Heirloom Art discovered, by matching knot holes, that it's the same pole in both pictures.

The venerable pole is still standing 100 years later. On this page is the proof, close up. The pole has just lost a few pieces over the years. We all get old.

No historical detail is too small for the Heirloom.



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org

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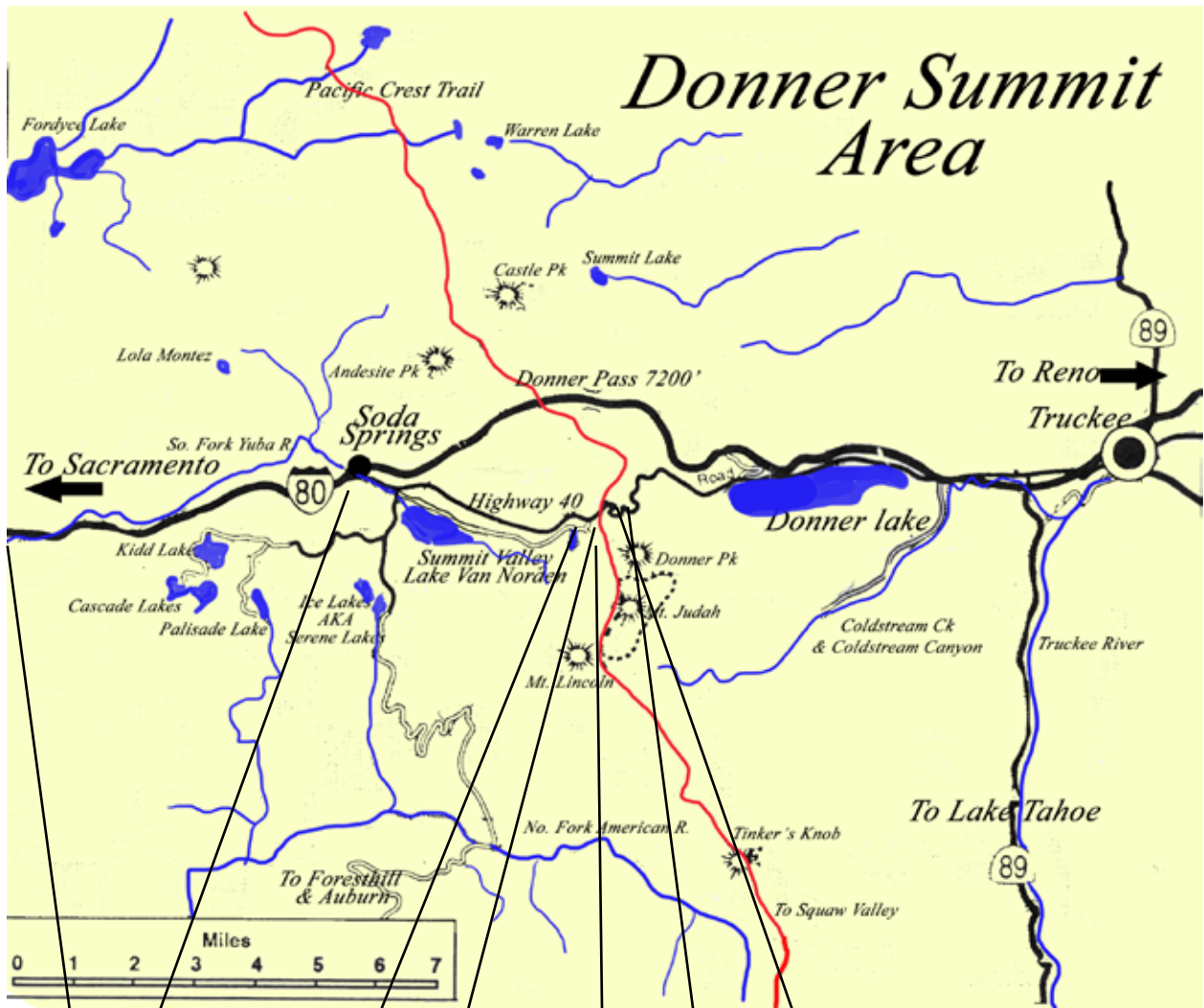
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