

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

June, 2015 issue #82



"AUTO FIGHTS SNOW AND WINS TROPHY A Buick First Car to Reach Tahoe Tavern Over Emigrant Gap Road This Year."

Oregon News, JUNE 21, 1914.

"Difficulties Encountered on Trip Over Summit of Sierra Nevada Mountains."

Travel over Donner Summit was not always as easy as it is today. Today we speed over in comfort with music from multiple speakers, air conditioning or heating, and the kids engrossed in video games or videos. It was not always that way. We don't need to discuss wagon train travel; it's scarcely imaginable – no shower for six months, following oxen day after day, walking the whole way, and facing unknown danger. Stage travel was a lot better. Instead of 10 miles a day they made 10 miles an hour and it was only 22 hours from Alta to Virginia City. Passengers though, were packed like sardines sometimes with some legs hanging out on the sides and others intertwined with those of fellow passengers. It wasn't like the movies. Autos eventually would be a great improvement as we all know, but for the early adventurous auto travelers huge efforts were required, too.

The first automobiles to cross the summit were piloted by adventurers but within a few years ordinary families began making the trip. To encourage people to cross as soon as the snow was gone local merchants sent workers to clear the road, spread soot and ashes to speed melting, or hosted snow shoveling bees. The Tahoe Tavern even, at least some years, awarded a silver trophy to the driver of the first automobile to cross the summit of the Sierra under its own power. That generated a lot of publicity which presumably attracted others to make the trip. You can get an idea of the publicity generated by noting that the story here comes from an article in an Oregon newspaper.

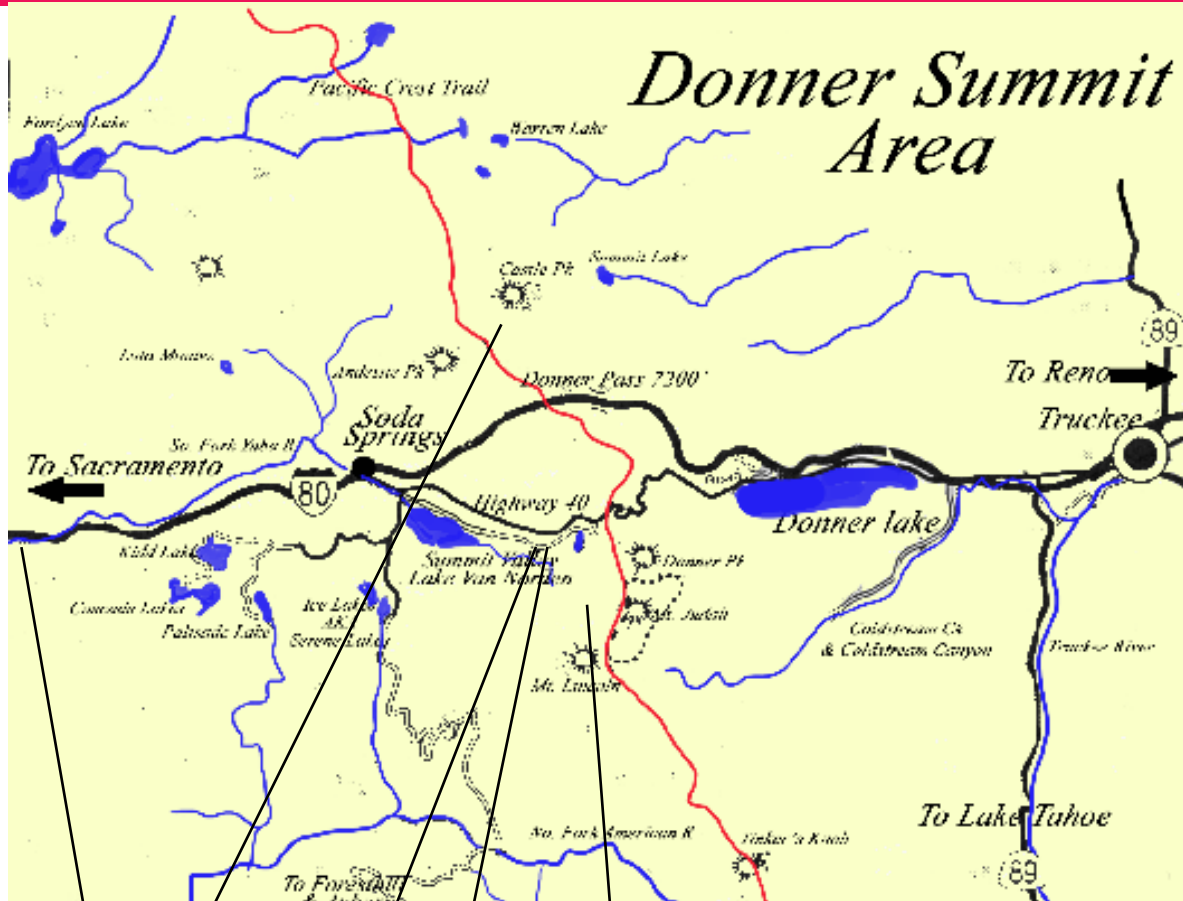
In 1914 the race to be the first over the summit was won by a Buick B25 which was good advertising for Buick. It was particularly good because the Buick had won for three consecutive years. Apparently Buick was not for old folks in 1914.

The Buick "proved that it is just as much at home in a contest over the snow as it is in a mud plug or on a race course."

Travel was a bit different in those days. To make the June trip the two contestants, Mr. McGee and Mr. Gross, carried a complete camping outfit and two weeks worth of supplies to get them from San Francisco to Lake Tahoe. Everything was carried in the auto's folded down top.

In the Sierra it was raining and Mr. Gross received a telegram calling him back to San Francisco. He was replaced by Mr. Schmidt. The next day it "was raining harder than ever." It didn't look like it was going to stop so the pair aimed for shelter

Story Locations in this Issue



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Announcements:

- Margie Powell Hikes August 15 and 16
stay tuned for details
- Heritage Trail August 15 16
www.theheritagetrail.blogspot.org
- Donner Party Hikes October 3, 4
www.donnerpartyhike.com
- New museum at the State Park at Donner Lake
opens June 6
- Lake Mary Dinner at Lake Mary on Donner
Summit - part of evening proceeds go to
the DSHS July 26 Call 530-426-7002 for
reservations

more details next month

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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

at "Soda Station." The rain had so softened the snow "that there was practically no bottom to it and to make matters worse, the water running underneath it had made it full of holes...even now it is a mystery to us how the car ever pulled through."

They camped near Soda Station and were awakened by thunder followed by drenching rain. They put the top up, covered their food supply and then got back in their waterproof sleeping bags. It must have been uncomfortable but then it got worse. The rain had softened the snow even more so "progress was almost an impossibility." They went a mile and a half by noon that day and were worn out by the "hardest kind of work." No sooner had they set up camp that day than it began to hail.

To get through the snow to the summit, "Sometimes we would back up and take a run at a drift and maybe make six inches headway. Other times, in making a run at a bad place, the front wheels would drop out of sight in a hole undermined by water. It was then a case of throw the car in reverse and pull the front end out of the hole, but the worst of all was when the back wheels would drop into one of these water holes.

"The car would settle down to the running boards, and the only thing to do was to shovel out the snow until the back wheels could get traction on the ground. This usually meant that the car was sitting on an angle of from 30 to 45 degrees when it was ready to pull itself out of the hole."

"Snow Is 10 Feet Deep."

"In spite of the unfavorable weather and road conditions, the Buick arrived at Soda Station. As the next three miles was an easier grade, we expected no trouble in making the Summit Hotel the next morning.

"Once more we did not figure on the weather. The first sight to meet our eyes in the morning when we crawled out of our sleeping bags was six inches of fresh snow, and more falling all the time.

"About noon there was a change in the weather, and at last it was a – change for the better. At 3 o'clock the Buick left Soda Station, and at 6 o'clock it was at the Summit Hotel. Three miles in two hours may not seem very fast, and for once we were not in any fear of being arrested for speeding. But when it is taken into consideration that the snow was from three to 10 feet deep, and that the front and rear axles were buried all the time it is to be wondered at that the car could make any headway at all.

"That evening it was clear, and Mr. Growling, manager of the Summit Hotel assured us that we would have cold weather the next morning. We went to sleep with the thought that at last our luck and the weather had changed, and sure enough it had. The morning was clear and cold with a light crust on the snow. This gave the chains something to grip, and the Buick climbed the big drifts between the hotel and the Summit without difficulty.

"The crossing through the snowsheds at the summit was blocked with 20 feet of snow, and in order to get onto the road on the north side of the sheds it was necessary to cross directly over the top of them. This crossing was made at a point, known to railroad men as the eastern end of tunnel 7. At this place the snowsheds join a round -granite knob. By driving the car up a steep, narrow ledge it is possible to get within 12 feet of the top of the wooden shed, but this last 12 feet is the hard part.

"Descent Is Perpendicular."

"The descent from the top of the shed to the road a quarter of a mile below was almost perpendicular, but by exercising a due amount of precaution it was negotiated without trouble.

It will never again be necessary to cross the top of the sheds, as the Southern Pacific Company and the State Engineer are now building a crossing under the railroad tracks. This crossing is located in such a proposition that it will be free from snow long before the summit is open.

Rules for Being First

"The Tahoe Tavern cup is one of the most-sought-after trophies in this part of the state. The conditions under which it must be won make it one of the hardest imaginable tests. on every part of the car, as well as on the driver."

"The rules to be followed in competing for this prize are: The car must be fully equipped; it must make the entire trip over the Emigrant Gap state road on its own wheels and under its own power; no paraphernalia to help the engine to be used, except that which is carried in the car. The only time the motor is allowed assistance is when the road is blocked impassably and detour is necessary. The car must proceed on its own power, however, as soon as it is again on the road."

Oregon News June 21, 1914

"When we finally got back on the [road] we thought our troubles were over, but one more disappointment was in [store] for us. This last trial, was in the shape of a snowdrift about 100 feet long. When we arrived at the lower end of it the Buick faced an almost sheer drop of 25 feet.

"A consultation was held and Schmidt decided that he could drive down the face of the drift. This he did without accident, but it is safe to say that an automobile was never intentionally driven down a steeper place. This was our last experience with the snow.

Those two fellows deserved their win.

An interesting commentary after the race was that these two racers had no mechanical troubles. The Goodyear tires demonstrated they could run "at least 20 miles" absolutely flat with chains on. At Donner Lake the tires were pumped up for the rest of the trip without the "least sign of hard service they had just been through."

If you are interested in these first crossings, one day we'll report on more. There is a folder in the DSHS computer with stories from various newspapers about the contests in the early 1900's. Meanwhile, perhaps the most famous contest winners, because there are photographs and a number of articles, were part of Arthur Foote's 1911 trip. We've not done an article about it yet just because there are so many articles wanting to be written up and vying for space in the Heirloom. You can get a feeling about that trip by going to the exhibits page on our website, donnersummithistoricalociety.org. In the center column are 2015's exhibits. One is about Mr. Foote's trip. Those displays have not been exhibited yet (at this writing). A small version of the exhibit is on page 16 in this issue. It's the largest one there. You can see some of the trials Mr. Foote and friends had to go through. Be glad we have I-80, be encouraged to go to the exhibits page for a readable version, and wait patiently until the Heirloom covers the story completely. Don't let your subscription lapse.



The slab of granite with mortars and petroglyphs below Castle Pk. looking outwards toward the view: Anderson Pk. and Tinker's Knob. Castle Pk. is behind the photographer taking this picture. Also in the picture, lower left, is an official DSHS Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) traveling kit.

Petroglyphs & Mortars Below Castle Peak

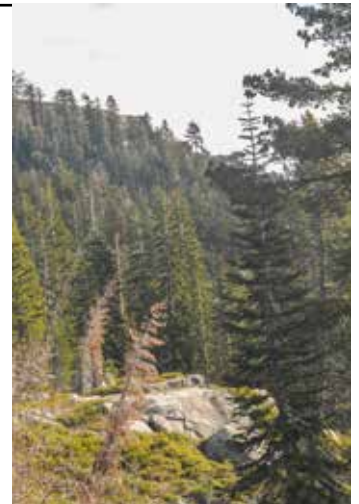
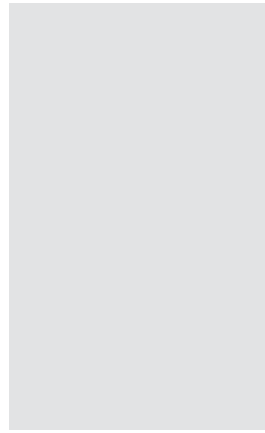


There are lots of mountain peaks on Donner Summit, or in the immediate vicinity, and so there are lots of wonderful views. Edwin Bryant, in *What I Saw in California* (1846 and reviewed in our April '13 [Heirloom](#)) said, "The view from the crest of the Sierra to the east, is inexpressibly comprehensive, grand and picturesque." Even though he arrived in 1846, which was pretty early, he was not the first to think something like that. The Native Americans appreciated those views too and used them. We don't know if their appreciation was purely aesthetic or whether they connected some supernatural or religious properties to the views and the mountain peaks. At many spots with great views the Native Americans of the Martis Culture took the time to carve petroglyphs into the granite.

We don't know the meaning of the petroglyphs or their function but they must have been important. Granite is one of the hardest rocks on the planet and carving into it is very difficult and must have taken a lot of time – time away from daily survival. That time was spent carving petroglyphs shows the Martis had mastered their environment, leaving them with extra time, and that the petroglyphs were very important.



photographs top and bottom by Art Clark.



Unfortunately almost all of the petroglyph sites are on private property with access mostly strongly restricted. Other sites are on USFS lands with the exact locations kept secret so that petroglyphs won't be damaged by souvenir seekers or modern graffiti-ists. That of course means we protect them until they disappear from view, but I digress with an editorial comment which Heirloom editors don't make - usually. Still other sites are difficult to get to.

The petroglyphs easiest to approach are just below the Donner Summit or Rainbow Bridge on Old 40. At the first turn below the bridge parking lot is a monument and a 20 Mile Museum sign for the petroglyphs. Just beyond the monument there is a large rock slab with many petroglyphs. They are a bit hard to see, but then they are between two and four thousand years old. Tractors also unfortunately drove across them while building the pipeline that is nearby.

The other major artifact of Native American presence on Donner Summit are the mortars or grinding rocks. They are seldom found near the petroglyphs. The petroglyph sites seem to have been used for carving and whatever activities went with them but not for living around.

The Martis summered in Summit Valley and over thousands of summers ground depressions (mortars and metates) into the granite boulders. See our February '13 [Heirloom](#) for the Summit Valley Native Americans. There are no petroglyphs in Summit Valley, except one.

The pictures here are petroglyphs below Castle Pk. They have been enhanced since after a few thousand years they are hard to see and harder to photograph. The DSHS Laboratory for artifact enhancement (LAE) fortunately has the skills needed for the [Heirloom's](#) exacting standards. The bear paw, left, is the only recognizable figure unless some of the above represent the sun.





Since mortar sites and petroglyph sites are generally separate on Donner Summit, if we were to come across a site with petroglyphs and mortars, that would be special. Not only would it have both but it would have a great view. If that location was easy to get to, or not too difficult, that would be a bonus. Acting on a tip from Kathy Hess, who runs the Donner Party Hikes (see the announcement on page 2) the DSHS Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) went out late last Fall to Castle Pk. Kathy gave some general directions which sent the MHRT scrambling all over the slope below Castle Pk. (no risk is too great to satisfy Heirloom readers'

thirst for local history) until the site was found. Kathy had said there were just petroglyphs there, so imagine the team's surprise to find some mortars as well.

Here Native Americans spent time not just carving the petroglyphs during summers but living (or summering) too. Grinding soft foods (tubers, grass, berries, larvae, insects, etc.) into granite to produce depressions a few inches deep would have taken much longer than incising the petroglyphs (according to our unscientific analysis). Native Americans must have occupied the spot in summers, summer after summer, decade after decade, and century after century. Uncountable meals must have been prepared there and uncountable stories told. Only a few yards away from the mortars and food preparation petroglyphs were being carved, perhaps making tangible representations of some of the stories being told.

There is a good view to the south down the canyon (page 4) to peaks in the distance and the spot sits directly below Castle Peak. That view up is dramatic. It must have been a special spot to the Martis, so special that whoever occupied it chose that spot as opposed to joining the relatively large population in Summit Valley just a few miles south. Was this spot below Castle Pk. an outpost? Did people from Summit Valley travel to the spot below Castle for ceremonies? Was Castle Pk., the tallest peak in the neighborhood and certainly the most dramatic, something like an altar? Of course we don't know. The Martis disappeared from the area about 500 AD. They had arrived about 2,000 B.C. as the climate changed. Their departure was also a time of climate change. Coincidentally it was also when the bow and arrow came into local use. The Martis were not immediately replaced on the Summit however, so they were not chased out by others.

There is one interesting follow-up thought regarding the site below Castle Pk. You can see from the pictures that it's an exposed granite slab. Surrounding the site is dense forest with lots of forest detritus. The forest in the Martis' day would have been much more open and natural fires would have reduced the detritus. The site could be much larger than what the MHRT saw and there could be more sites nearby.



The grinding rocks or mortars below Castle Pk. They are not as large as some in Summit Valley but are almost two inches deep and a few inches in diameter.

To Learn More

If you want to read more about the Martis, see our February '13 [Heirloom](#) and the Native American petroglyphs, and mortars exhibits on the exhibits page of our website. If you are a little more curious you can check out two books from the library or buy them on the Internet: Willis Gortner's [Ancient Rock Carving of the Central Sierra](#) (1984) and [The Martis Indians: Ancient Tribe of the Sierra Nevada](#) (1986). Gortner was a part-time Summit resident and amateur archeologist. They were reviewed in the [Heirloom](#) in June and September of 2013. The reviews are also on our website. You can also pick up [Walking Through Donner Summit History](#) which has much about the Martis including where they might have gone. See page 17 here or our website to acquire a copy.

What Do They Mean?

The petroglyphs must have been very important to the Martis. They took a lot of effort to produce and were placed only in very special places. The petroglyphs in the Donner Summit area are all on horizontal slabs of granite with magnificent views. The petroglyphs are also all abstracts. With one exception, down at the Yuba River near the Eagle Lakes exit, there are no representations of humans or animals. There are many bear paws, however.

Their meanings were lost when the Martis decamped for other areas about 500 A.D. That leaves modern explorers the task or puzzle of interpretation. They could have some religious or shamanistic value. They could be totemic. They could be prayers. We can imagine someone carving a bear paw in hopes that he'd kill a bear. They could be records of what has happened – we caught a bear this big. Willis Gortner (see above) had one creative suggestion. Some of the petroglyphs look like branches of a tree, or on the Donner Summit area, river drainages. He copied and cataloged hundreds of summit petroglyphs and focused on the copies of the ones that looked like branches. Some matched modern maps of local river drainages. Are some of the petroglyphs maps? Were they used to tell stories or plan hunts? We don't know.

Map by Art Clark.

Donner Trail School

A.K.A. Summit School

Mrs. Olia M. Tiffée reminisced about the old Summit School in [Sounds and Images of the Fabulous Fifties](#). It's in the Truckee Library in the oversize book collection.

Donner Trail School, or Summit School, was a one room schoolhouse that was originally a bunkhouse for Southern Pacific workers. It was attached to the snowsheds, like most other buildings along the railroad line on Donner Summit, west of the Norden Station (see our 20 Mile Museum sign and "Fong, Snowshed Chef" in our February, '11 [Heirloom](#)). Access to the schoolhouse was by the dirt road along Lake Van Norden (the old Lincoln Highway) and then parking at the snowshed entrance and walking up a ramp and then through the shed.



The school building was decrepit with little outside play area. The hand-me-down furniture was ugly as was the students' furniture for the ten-twelve railroad kids. There was a pot belly stove and a drinking fountain. There were flush toilets, accessed in bad weather, through a trap door in the floor. In good weather, students could go outside and then down to the bathroom. The trap door access was dangerous since there was no railing. There was always a shortage of teaching material.

There was also a small room with a bed, kitchen and stove for the teacher so the teacher could stay overnight in bad weather. Mrs. Tiffée began working at the school in 1944 for \$90 a month. She was also the janitor.

There was no bus so parents took their kids to school and picked them up afterwards. That way they could be sure the students did not have to negotiate the ramp and cross the railroad tracks alone.

The noise of passing trains, sometimes two at a time, with pusher engines (used to get up over the Summit) made teaching hard. "Many times we had to just stop and wait for the trains to go by before proceeding with our lessons." Train traffic was great because of all the troop trains and trains filled with war materiel.

Because of snow, school closed in October and re-opened in April. The year went until mid-June and started the first Monday in July after the 4th.

One November 11, 1948 the school closed for good and students moved to the new building "at the foot of Kingvale Grade." There were new desks and a "large roomy teacher's desk and such a comfortable swivel chair for the teacher." There were shades and a new Bell-Howell (sic) projector and a large screen and stage. "There was just no comparison between the old building and the new one. The building had two classrooms, a large selection of books, kitchen, office, lounge, and restrooms. In 1949 the school became part of the Tahoe Truckee Unified School District and had a normal school year. There were two teachers, one for the primary level and another, Mrs. Tiffée, for the 4th-8th graders.

Mrs. Tiffée left for Truckee in 1950 and then retired in 1964.



Hiking Advice 1915

The Placer County Water Agency wanted a 20 Mile Museum sign for its Wise Power Plant in Auburn. They "stuffed us" for the cost but that's a different story. In preparation for making the sign there was research to do and that occasioned a trip to Nevada City to the Foley Library where there are copies of old PGE magazines which might have information.

That turned out to be a good source. The turbine in the Wise Power House, which is still there inside the power plant, is the same turbine that was on display at the Panama Pacific Exposition that took place in San Francisco in 1915. That was really interesting and of course we wanted to get into the plant and get a picture. Unfortunately Homeland Security imperatives make that impossible. The personnel there did supply us with some pictures. The sign was made and installed. You can see it in Auburn halfway down Ophir Rd. between the Ohir and Taylor Rd. exits from I-80 or you can go to our web pages and see the sign.

While researching, other things came up that were interesting, pointing out the danger of historical research if one has a life beyond historical research. One tidbit culled from the magazines was hiking advice from 1915. You may want to take some of this advice with you on your next hike. Summer is here.

The Panama Pacific Exposition, 100th anniversary this year, is what's what on the cover of the magazine. That's what's reproduced here.



Hiking Advice from Pacific Service Magazine July, 1915

It is high time to bring forth the knapsack again. The Fair is again the center of attraction now, but it is to be here for several months, and it will not do to tire oneself out by trying to see everything at once; just try it and see how weary it makes you. As a good alternative it is well to rest the mind and also to give the body a change by taking a good country hike. Go away into some other county where the climate is a little different, take a free and easy walk and you will find as a result that you are more refreshed than if you had stayed at home to rest, and for the next week in the home or the office there will be a more cheerful aspect prevailing.

It is foolish to start out dressed as you would to make a social visit. Be comfortable, wear a free-and-easy suit or dress, and remember that shoes that are heavy soled, preferably with hobnails, and a rather heavy pair of woolen hosiery will make the feet less tired than a thin attire of light-weight shoes or thin hosiery.

Then too, do not pack a lot of boxes of lunch and try to hang on to the strings; it will not only make you weary but will detract from the appetizing look of the lunch. Get a canvas knapsack with shoulder straps and pack it, with a four-legged broiler - which makes an ideal stove as well as broiler for meats - a small agate pot, for boiling canned food, a small frying-pan and a coffee-pot. Small cans, such as baking-powder cans, etc. serve as suitable carriers for sugar, coffee, tea, pepper and salt. Soldiers' mess kits of aluminum can serve as plates, and enclosed in them are the necessary knife, fork and spoon. Paper napkins and tablecloths help to make the outdoor luncheon inviting. Another member of the party can carry the foodstuffs in another knapsack, so that neither will be overburdened. You will find that the knapsack does not retard the speed but helps to keep the shoulders back and the chest forward while walking.

It is always well, too, to be supplied with matches, a carbide lamp or an electric flash-light, a map of the country to be traveled, and a canteen of fresh water.

These are just a few suggestions to add to the pleasure of the "hike." If there are any veteran hikers than can help out on items, or points of interest, now's the time for such suggestions. The season is just starting and the roads will be dry and ready.

From the DSHS Archives

Looking for a Place to Vacation?

"The Summit House, located at the station, is one of the best hotels on the road and can furnish tourists with every accommodation required, while spending a few days or weeks exploring this very interesting region.

"Passengers from the west, desiring to visit Lake Tahoe, can take a stage at the Summit House, which will afford them a fine view of Donner Lake, while rolling down the mountain and around to the north and east side of it, en route to Tahoe."

Crofut's New Overland and Pacific Guide 1879

This "Summit House" was the Summit Hotel, the first version of which sat near where the concrete block buildings across from Donner Ski Ranch sit.

Front and back of a postcard of Cisco Grove. The back has a note to "Ma & Pa.")

The first Cisco was the "end of track" while the tunnels of the Pacific Railroad were being completed. It sat above the current gas station. Nothing is left of that Cisco.

The next Cisco was a small community that served tourists along Highway 40 just across the current freeway from the current gas station. There are a 20 Mile Museum sign, two stone buildings, some foundations, stone stairs, and a chimney. The rest was torn down by the Gould Family who donated the land for the park there to save on taxes.

The current Cisco is a group of second homes along Old 40.



Above is a postcard showing the gates at Baxter where Old Highway 40 was closed when there was too much snow.



From the DSHS Archives

[1869 Donner Summit Hero]

"CITY INTELLIGENCE

"Narrow Escape – Yesterday morning, while the Sacramento-bound train on the Central Pacific Railroad was crossing the mountains, M. O'Connor, Wells, Fargo & Co.'s messenger, having nothing to do and being very tired, naturally fell asleep in his compartment of the express car, which, as usual, was well filled with freight. A sensation of heat and suffocation finally aroused him..."



The story in the [Sacramento Daily Union](#) on April 10, 1869 goes on but at some length. So our editorial dept. has shortened the story for modern readers' sensibilities.

"Mr. O'Connor, discovering the fire in the front of the compartment tried to smother it with sacks. That didn't work. He went to pull the bell rope to notify the engineer but it had burned up. The train was traveling through a snowshed [so we know the train was at or near Donner Summit] so there was no one to communicate with outside. He went out the back door and climbed to the roof of the car. The train was increasing in speed and it and the sheds were in danger of burning. It was a "difficult gymnastic undertaking" as the train swayed heavily from side to side. The roof of the snowshed added to the danger. O'Connor moved forward and hailed the engineer. The train was stopped and the fire put out."

Imagine O'Connor's bravery. The train was gaining speed going downhill in a snowshed. He climbed out and up on top then went along the top of the express car to where he could signal the engineer in the locomotive. As he crawled along the express car's roof the rafters of the snowshed were speeding by not too many inches above his head. Maybe he got a promotion.



Above top: "Pausing on the east side of Donner Summit prior to attempting the ascent." This comes from the Lincoln Highway Association, California Chapter in their January, '15 newsletter, page one with permission.

Above: a 1937 photograph of the transcontinental air route weather station atop Donner Pass.

Book Review

Sierra Stories

Tales of Dreamers, Schemers, Bigots, and Rogues

Gary Noy, 2014 217 pages

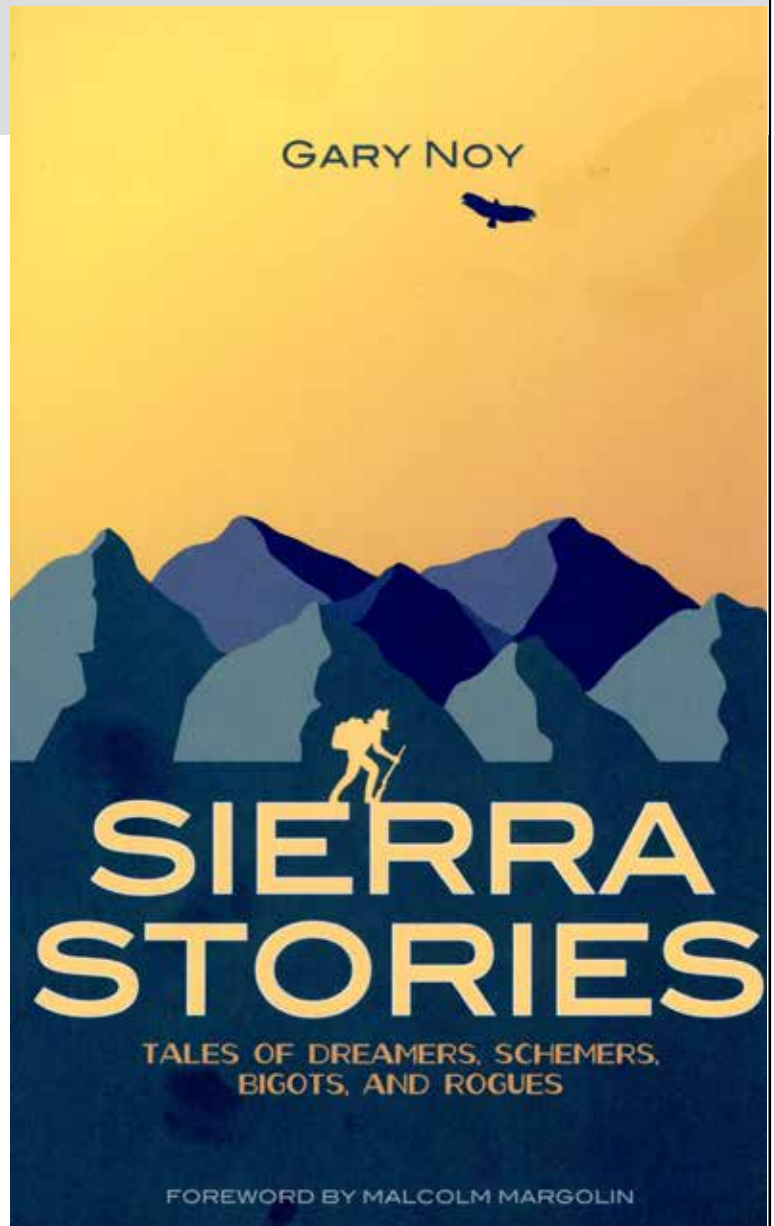
This book is only partly related to Donner Summit but it's history and it's about the Sierra so the editorial staff thought it would be appropriate. The preface says it well, this collection of stories is about the people of the Sierra – the “tales of magnificent and tragic human endeavors in the Sierra – stories of measured optimism and overwhelming disappointment; renewal and re-invention; the chronicles of folks seeking a better life, and those who were just stuck.” These are not the well-known stories but rather “obscure accounts that bypassed the history books and became tangled in the shadows.” Sierra Stories “releases them from the dark, the forgotten recesses of history.”

As such it's a fun read. Each of the 32 stories is a couple of pages long so the book could keep you happy for an entire month at one story a night before bed. Along with each story there is a shorter “Sierra Spotlight” highlighting another person from Sierra history related to the subject of the preceding story.

In the wider view the stories cover a lot of material such as: Lotta Crabtree, treatment of Indians, camels, African Americans, Chinese, movies made in the Sierra, treatment of the Chinese, Suffragists, Redwood trees, flume riding, Sacagawea's son, rich people, and some famous artists.

For Donner Summit purists, there are stories related to Donner Summit: Moses Schallenberger, Lola Montez, Theodore Judah and the railroad, the 1911 Arthur Foote trip over the Sierra by auto, and Charlie Chaplin's “Gold Rush.”

It's an eclectic collection which will fill out your knowledge of Sierra history.



Do you Read Books?

Wouldn't you like to share your readings with our readership? Our fine editorial staff will happily edit your contributions if you don't feel comfortable writing.

You'll be sharing what you've found with others of like minds.

We'll take reviews or summaries of books having to do with Donner Summit history or history nearby.

Bonus Book Review

Twenty Miles From a Match: Homesteading in Western Nevada

Sarah E. Olds, University of Nevada Press, 1978

Twenty Miles From a Match tells the story of a pioneer family in northern Nevada from 1908 to 1923. They started homesteading in the horse and wagon era and carried through into the automobile age. It is a charming story that emphasizes just how much life has changed in the past 100 years.

Sarah Elizabeth Thompson came west to join her older brothers and sisters at the age of 21 in 1897. As the youngest daughter, Sarah had cared for her aging parents until they died in Iowa. An accomplished cook and seamstress, she sought work in the mining camps, ending up near Sonora. There she met A.J. Olds, an older miner from a distinguished California family. His grandfather had owned 8000 acres in Marin County near Olema, and his father was a member of the Constitutional Convention for California.

After they married, A.J. and Sarah Olds followed the gold strikes until silicosis made it impossible for A.J. to continue to work in the mines. As a result, their six children were born in Sonora, Arizona, Virginia City, and the last three in Reno. In 1908, they staked a claim on property north of Reno on the way to Pyramid Lake.

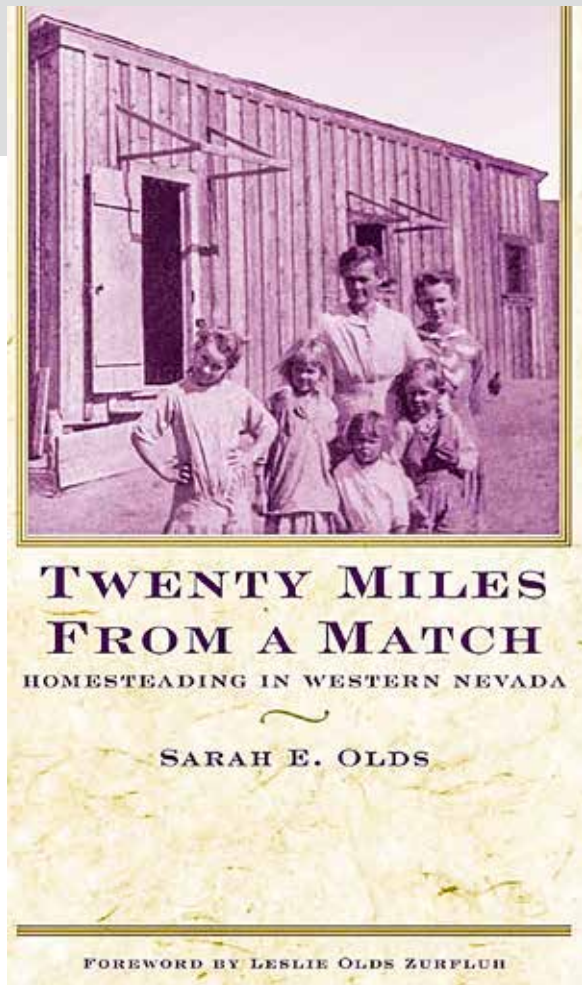
The house they built started as a simple one, with two rooms and an attached pantry. A.J. thought of it as a hunting lodge for him and his friends, but Sarah always planned to live there, too. She solved A.J.'s final objection to the move when she organized her four school-age children and three neighboring children into a school district. The State provided funds for a teacher as long as a schoolroom was available. This was quickly added to the house to serve as a classroom during the day and the teacher's bedroom at night. Over the years, Sarah was successful in hiring a series of teachers who fit right in with the rustic lifestyle.

There were a few other neighbor families, but the area was mostly populated by cowboys who made a living herding cattle and breaking wild horses (whose progeny still roam the area) for sale in Reno. The neighbors looked out for each other, helping whenever necessary. They also created their own fun, organizing gatherings and dances as the children grew older. The title of the book comes from an incident that occurred when Sarah was on her way to Reno with a sick child. Halfway there, she stopped at the abandoned Twenty Mile House to rest and water her horse. Hoping to make a quick cup of coffee, she got prepared to light the stove, only to realize that she was "twenty miles from a match!" This incident is representative of the almost complete isolation of the family in the early years on the homestead.

"Mom" Olds, as she was known, was the driving force behind the success of the family. She had a vision and limitless drive. A.J. was intermittently "bedfast" but also came through with significant contributions at critical times.

As time went on, the family extended its land holdings, enlarged the house, and increased the size of their herd. They did everything possible to be successful in the Nevada desert. The children kept poultry, trapped and shot game, grew hay and other crops, trapped and sold coyote pelts, and made their own clothes. This is a remarkable story of frontier ingenuity and perseverance in the face of great odds.

Reviewed by Tom Burns



Then & Now with Art Clark



Charlie Chaplin's Gold Rush Town at Sugar Bowl, 1925

Charlie Chaplin's movie, the "Gold Rush," was filmed in 1925. The Palisades at Sugar Bowl were used by extras from Sacramento to represent the Chilcoot Pass during the Klondike's gold rush in 1898. The whole set was built at Sugar Bowl. Due to Chaplin's flu and colds among the cast and crew the filming moved to Hollywood and another set. Almost all the footage from Sugar Bowl was replaced by Hollywood footage. The footage of the miners going over the pass made it into the movie though. To read more go to our August '11 [Heirloom](#).

Photo location:
N39° 17.683' W120° 20.067'



Then & Now with Art Clark



Alfred A Hart 258 - Castle Peak from Railroad above Donner Lake

This view from near Tunnel Eleven looks much the same as it did in the 1860's, with a few exceptions - Highway 40 and Interstate 80 didn't exist then. The scars from their construction are very evident today. As always, Castle Peak seems to stand guard over the pass.

Photo location

t39° 18.792'N 120° 18.066'W



New Exhibits

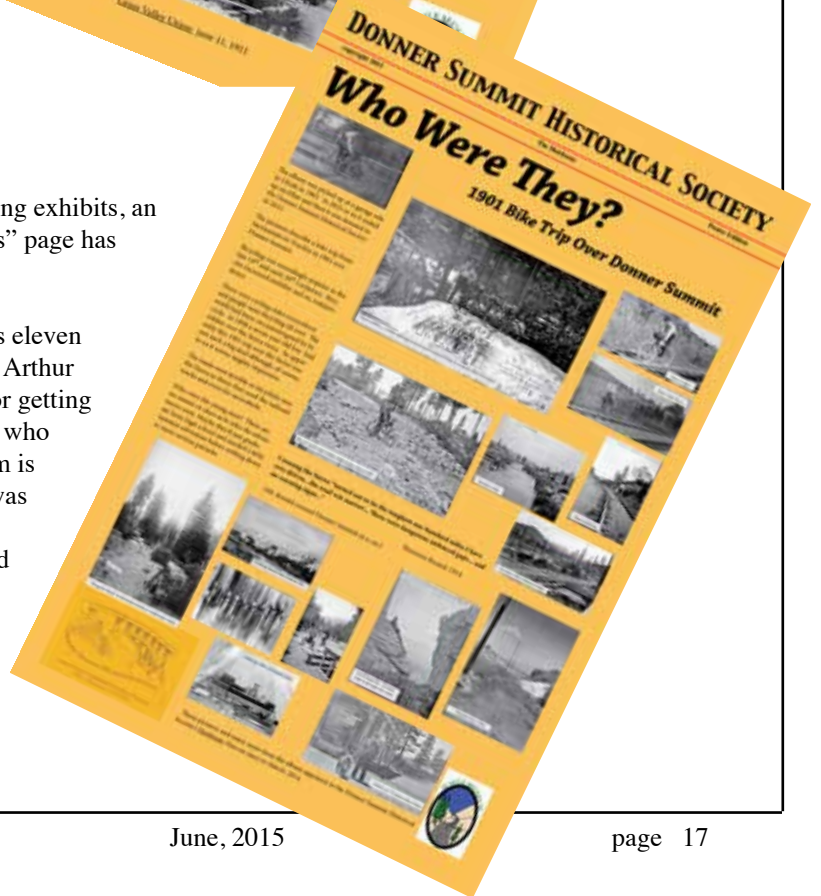
Our mission at the DSHS is to spread the rich history of Donner Summit. That's pretty easy since the history is so rich. Did you know that Donner Summit is the richest historical square mile in California?



Part of that history spreading is accomplished with traveling exhibits, an endeavor started some years ago. Our website's "Exhibits" page has reduced size versions of our, now, many exhibits.

With many of the big stories having been done, this year's eleven exhibits focus on smaller stories. Three of them are here: Arthur Foote's winning of the Tahoe Tavern silver cup in 1911 for getting the first auto of the season over Donner Pass, two fellows who bicycled over Donner Pass in 1901 and whose photo album is at the DSHS in Soda Springs, and Thomas Stevens who was the first to cross Donner Summit with a bicycle (he didn't do much riding on that part of the route) and then for good measure continued across the country and around the world.

To see the other eight exhibits you'll have to go to the web site, stop by the DSHS, or wait for another issue of the [Heirloom](#).



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.

_____ New Membership

_____ Renewing Membership

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_____ Family Membership - \$50

_____ Patron - \$500

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Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

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

Walking Through Donner Summit History

Dozens of stories of Donner Summit history, dozens of historical quotes, hundreds of photographs and drawings, and lots of maps.

218 pages ©2015

Purchase a Copy:

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

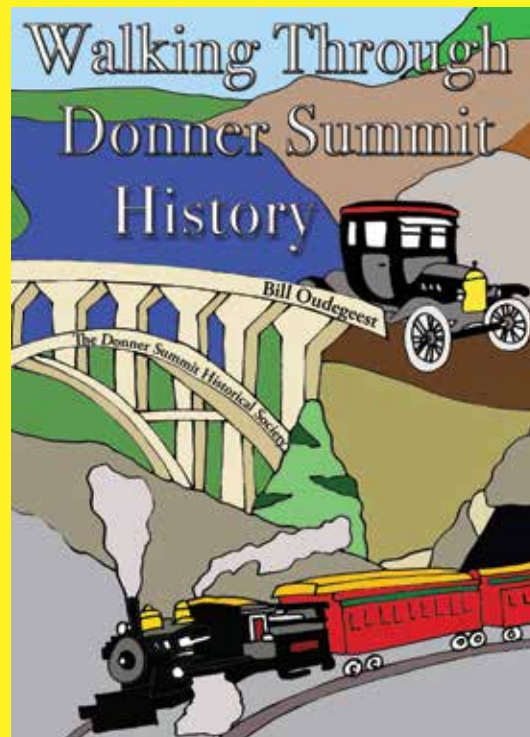
Regular Mail:

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95724

In person:

- Soda Springs Gen. Store
- Donner Summit Historical Society
- Donner Memorial State Park Visitors' Center
- The Bookshelf in Truckee

\$25 includes S/H and sales tax.



From the Back Cover

Donner Summit is the most important historical square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States. Native Americans crossed for thousands of years. The first emigrants to arrive in California with wagons came over Donner Summit. The first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, the first transcontinental air route, and the first transcontinental telephone line all crossed Donner Summit. The first person to bicycle around the world went over Donner Summit, as did the first person to make a motorized crossing of the U.S. and the first people to attempt to cross the country in an automobile. That's just a bit of the richness that is Donner Summit history.

Then there are the fun small stories: frozen turkeys roosting in the trees, the two-story out house at the Summit Hotel, blindfolded mules, and the Spider Dance.

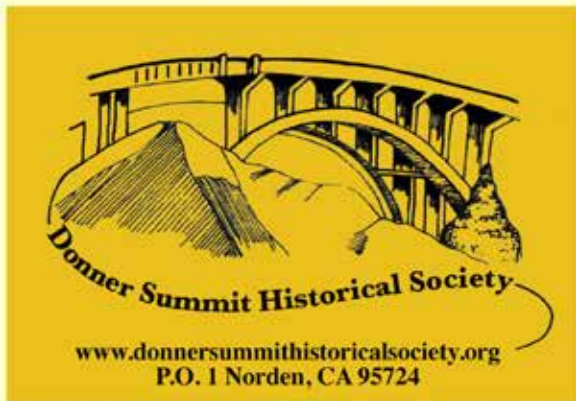
You can walk through Donner Summit history, where it all took place. In the walks described here you will read the stories, "hear" history through people's words, and see the historical photographs that bring the history to life.

New Brochure - A Scenic Byway

A MOST SCENIC BYWAY



Get off the freeway and enjoy the California Sierra.



A publication of the Donner Summit Historical Society, ©2015

The Donner Summit Historical Society has produced a series of brochures about Donner Summit touting its wonders. The list is below.

For some time Norm Saylor, president, has been pushing for a brochure to correct a grave error. Ads, circulars and newspapers articles that tout the Yuba-Donner Scenic Byway either completely ignore Donner Summit or they give it very short shrift. You can hardly see Donner Pass or Donner Summit (the most historically important square mile in California) if it's even mentioned.

Our brochure department has been busy, as you can see from the list below making and keeping up with the demand by reprinting. Nevertheless this spring the challenge was taken up and the brochure to the left was developed, printed and disseminated. On one s (8.5" X 18")ide is the Scenic Byway and on the other (below), listing just a few of the Donner Summit area's highlights, is the route on Old 40 from Truckee to Cisco Grove.

Like all our brochures it's available on our website, at the DSHS, the Summit Restaurant, and the Welcome Centers in Truckee and Auburn.

DSHS Brochures:

Tunnel 6 The Most Interesting Unknown Historical Spot in California

Old 40 from Rocklin to Truckee

Native Americans of Donner Summit and Summit Valley

Historic Hikes of Donner Summit

The Incredible Summit Valley

Donner Pass - The Most Important Historic Square Mile

The 20 Mile Museum

The Lincoln Highway Through Donner Pass

Take the Scenic Route over Donner Summit

The Donner Summit Historical Society

The Emigrant Trail Over Donner Pass

The Snowsheds of Donner Pass

Summit Canyon at Donner Pass



HERITAGE TRAIL
Placer County
Museums Tour

20 Museums 2 Days

August
15 & 16

FREE! FAMILY! FUN!

The poster features a large black and white photograph of two men in suits and hats sitting in a vintage car. Below this is a row of seven smaller color photographs showing various activities: a horse-drawn carriage, people sitting on the ground, a person with a horse, a man and a boy, a person with a horse, a man with a dog, and a young girl.

www.theheritagetrail.blogspot.org