The Donner Summit Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

March, 2015 issue #79

Snow is Not a Problem on Donner Summit

The Snowsheds of Donner Summit - Pt II

Snow is Not a Problem on Donner Summit – Theodore Judah, Chief Engineer of the CPRR,1862. Judah laid out the route of the first transcontinental railroad and Mt. Judah, on Donner Summit, is named for him.

Theodore Judah did not say that exactly, because in the 19th century people were a little more wordy. What he did say in a report to the CPRR about his proposed route over the Sierra was, "The argument of obstruction from snow having been frequently urged against the Central route for Pacific Railroad, I have taken much pains to arrive at correct conclusions upon this subject, and feel warranted in the statement, that a Railroad Line, upon this route, can be kept open during the entire year for the transaction of its business."

He was wrong, or at least he was wrong without substantial accommodation for snow. Facing granite was not the only obstacle to the first transcontinental railroad (see Heirlooms from May-September, '12).

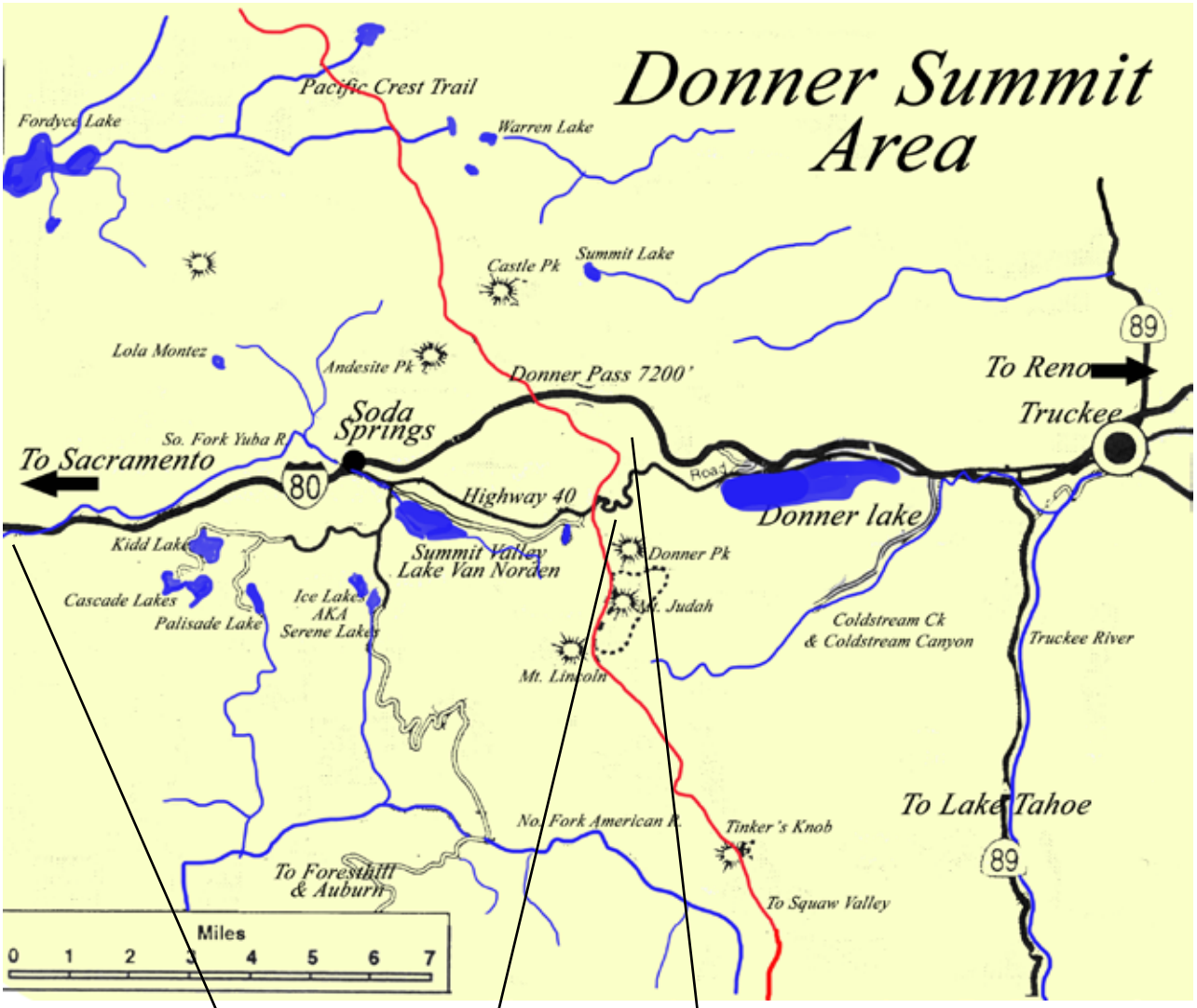
The San Francisco Call was no doubt right in 1905 when it opined that people did not pay much attention to snowsheds. With even fewer of the original more than 40 miles of showsheds still in existence, that is no doubt more the case today, but for the fledgling transcontinental railroad they were an imperative, greatly impacting travelers and railroad operations. Without them the transcontinental railroad could not have operated – at least not in winter.

To the builders of the Central Pacific Railroad the Sierra mountains were an obstacle but snow didn't figure into the equation. Theodore Judah thought that maybe 13 feet would fall during the season after he surveyed the heights of moss on the trees, tree limb heights, and the axe marks left by snowshoers who had chopped trees at "the level of snow." That 13 feet would not fall all at once, he reasoned. He thought a storm might drop, "perhaps…three or four feet." After a snow a locomotive would be sent out to clear the tracks and that would be the end of it. Snow would not be a hindrance to railroad traffic.

In reality, 34 feet is the average Donner Summit snowfall, and in a heavy winter much more can fall. Fifty feet or more have fallen in 11 of the last hundred years. That's a lot of snow. The first crews sent to the Summit in 1865 to begin Tunnel 6 were chased away by snow. The following year, when work began on the tunnel, the problem of snow was obvious. There were 44 snowstorms and 60 feet of snowfall. Workers moved from their living sheds to the work faces through tunnels in the snow. An avalanche carried fifteen Chinese workers away and their bodies were not found until spring.

Judah's study may have been based on low snowfall years. He also didn't take into account the consistency of Sierra snows. They are affectionately called "Sierra Cement" for a reason. The snow can be very wet when dropped by the "Pineapple Express"

Story Locations in this Issue



In This Issue

Yuba River below Big Bend pg. 9 Tunnel 6 Shaft pg. 7 to the east of Lake Angela pg. 15

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

storms heading directly east from the Pacific. Many modern homeowners have felt they were moving cement when clearing their decks and driveways.

Judah was not alone in his thinking. Back east temperatures dropped to 30 degrees below zero and they had drifts of snow of 3 feet. Since the Sierra temperatures dropped to not much less than 0 degrees how high could the drifts be? The railroad's planners had no experience with Sierra snowfalls – despite stories like the Donner Party. Samuel S. Montague, the railroad's chief engineer following Judah's exit said in 1865, "….heavy snowfall in the vicinity of the Summit, will render it necessary to provide substantial protection….during the winter months… That portion… requiring this unusual protection does not exceed one hundred yards."

E.B. Crocker, CPRR attorney and older brother of one of the Big Four, Charles Crocker, said in December, 1866, The snow was no trouble at all. "It is the least of our troubles & we no longer fear it."

Hah!

Even the Sacramento Daily Union said, as the railroad was reaching the Summit in 1866, "Although snow was supposed first to be a great obstacle in the way of the successful running of the road in Winter, no fears whatever are entertained now but that any obstacles it may place in the way will be easily overcome without interference with every day travel." (Sacramento Daily Union October 18, 1866) Apparently "spin meisters" are not new.

For people familiar with Donner Summit, Judah's investigations and the optimistic pronouncements by others are amusing. You really cannot understand the Summit and snow on the Summit until you have spent a winter here. Judah had just made brief trips and fit his findings into his experiences. 1865-6 and then 1866-7 gave the railroad builders a taste of what they could never have imagined.

Snow was a problem. Eventually 40 miles of snowsheds were built to cover the tracks.

The Problem

Snow had to be dealt with annually but some years showed the problem more dramatically than normal. The very winter after the completion of the railroad, in January 1870, the road was blocked near Emigrant Gap by a large avalanche. Track and snowsheds were swept into the canyon below. Snow shovelers and snowplows were hurried to the site but they could not keep up with the falling snow. After six days workers had cleared miles of track working from both ends of the blockage but were still seven miles apart. A snowbound train at Truckee was finally dug out and the passengers were told to get out and walk. Walk they did, through tunnels and past stations (stations used to be all along the line) – all the way to Emigrant Gap where they boarded a train to a warmer and sunnier part of California. More snowsheds were built the next summer.

In 1890 a blizzard shut the railroad for 15 days and even the snowplow train got stuck in the drifts. It couldn't go forwards and it couldn't go backwards. Snowflakes fell "the size of soda crackers," reported one passenger. Eventually 1800 men were brought in to shovel snow. General Superintendent J. A. Fillmore reported that the snow was "from fifty to two hundred and fifty feet deep…" on Donner Summit. The records do not indicate whether Mr. Fillmore was prone to exaggeration on a regular basis.

In January, 1952, 225 passengers aboard the City of San Francisco Streamliner were engulfed by an avalanche and trapped just east and above what is now the turnoff to Highway 20 from I-80. The next day the train ran out of fuel. 30 people were overcome by fumes. Passengers wrapped their feet in towels and curtains to keep warm. Plumbing froze. A thousand workers arrived to shovel the train clear. The Coast Guard dropped a doctor to the train. Dog sleds from Soda Springs brought in food. The passengers were stuck for three days until they could walk out to the highway and be taken away by volunteers in automobiles. The train was stuck for six days.

In February, 1887 the Daily Alta California headlines screamed, "SNOWED IN AT CISCO. Two! Overland Trains Get

No Fears Now

Heavy snows fall in the upper regions of the Sierras in Winter, three feet in a night being not an uncommon fall. But it lies loose, frosts and the cold nipping winds of the Atlantic States being rare. Snow plows, with two or three locomotives, will be used in deep snow. The plows will throw snow sixty feet. Clearing parties will be stretched all along the line in Winter ; and where there is danger from snow slides at low points, horizontal solid timbering will be placed over the road. Although snow was supposed first to be a great obstacle in the way of the successful running of the road in Winter, no fears whatever are entertained now but that any obstacles it may place in the way will be easily overcome without interference with every day travel.

Sacramento Daily Union
October 18, 1866

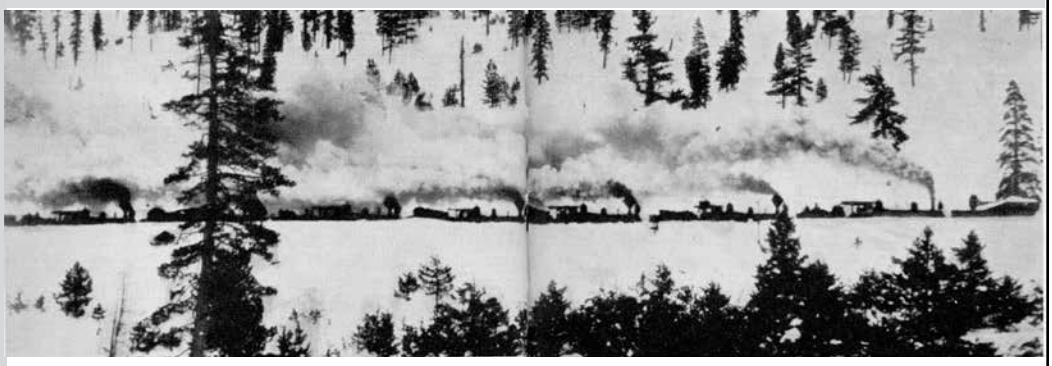
Snowsheds

A year ago to-day, there were eighteen feet of snow upon this track; hundreds of Chinamen with shovels were helping a snow-plow (three times as high as a tall man, and driven by ten heavy locomotives) to fight its slow way through it.

NY Tribune 1869

Reaching the deep snow-belt, however, the vision of mountain scenery is cut off by the many miles of snow-sheds, or, at best, is only caught in snatches provokingly brief, as the train dashes by an occasional opening. If the time is winter, the shed is enveloped in snow ten to twenty feet thick; the light gleams feebly as through diaphanous shell, and the smoke-blackened interior is in sharp contract to the white drifts seen through chinks and slits. A ride through these winding galleries at this season is weird enough, and the rare glimpses without reveal a scene thoroughly Arctic. … Here and there in the sheds are cavernous side-openings, which indicate snow-buried stations or towns, where stand waiting groups of men, who receive daily supplies – even to the daily newspaper – in this strange region. The railroad is the raven that feeds them. Without it, these winter wildernesses would be uninhabitable. When the train has passed they walk through snow tunnels or smaller sheds to their cabins, which give no hint of their presence but for the shaft of begrimed snow where the chimney-smoke curls up. And in these subnevian abodes dwell the station and section people and the lumbermen during several months, until the snow melts and its glaring monotony of white is suddenly succeeded by grass and flowers …

Benjamin Avery, "Summering in the Sierra," Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine 12:2 February 1874: 175-83.



Snow was such not a problem that the CPRR had to develop bucker plows (see the Heirloom for January, '15) that weighed 20 tons and pushed by up to eleven locomotives as this 1870 photo from the December, 1958 American Heritage Magazine shows above.

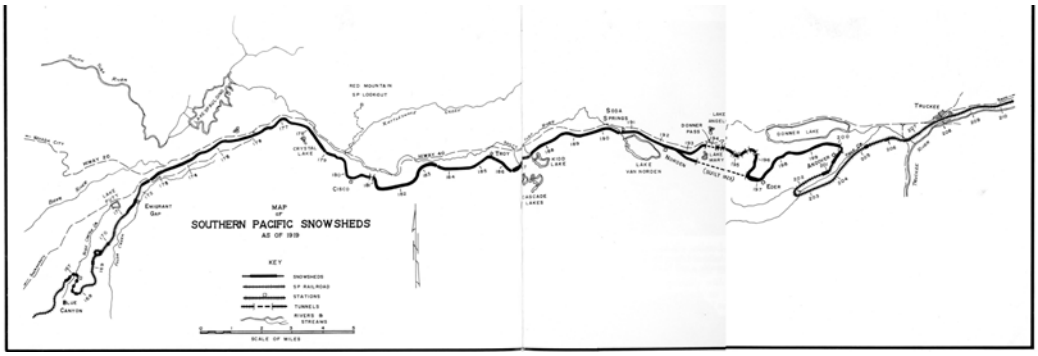
Cont'd from previous page

Imprisoned in the Dark Snowsheds. Without Light, Scant of Food and Chilled With Cold, Some 450 Passengers Spend Eighty-two Hours in the Railroad Cars."

Those are all stories for future Heirlooms.

For a good firsthand account of how hard it was dealing with the Sierra snows: A reporter for the Virginia Enterprise wrote an article about "snow life" summarized in the Sacramento Daily Union for February 20, 1869 . It is a good first hand account of how hard it was to deal with Sierra snow. The reporter's train ran into snow before Colfax and lost of traction. It was stuck all night. The next day the passengers waited hour after hour and finally the train went back to Sacramento. The reporter remained behind and got to ride along with the snowplow train for his story.

> The snow plow snow train arrived with five engines pushing the larger bucker plow arrived and the reporter got to ride along to clear the snow. The snow plow train got a run at the snow and cleared a furrow. The "locomotives wheezed and labored" and came to a dead stop "in the middle of a huge bank of snow." The train reversed for half a mile then got the steam up and then, "with the speed of the wind" hit the snow again and moved some dozens rods. It backed up, got steam up and hit again and again. This when on hour after hour: "so went on the hours, and not until dark did the engines force the plow to….Blue Canyon…." All the next day was spent trying to force through the snow that was "five to twenty feet in depth." Then two more engines were added and two miles cleared then more runs to Emigrant Gap.



SP snowsheds, 1919, from Snowplow Clearing Mountain Rails

Only 100 Yards!

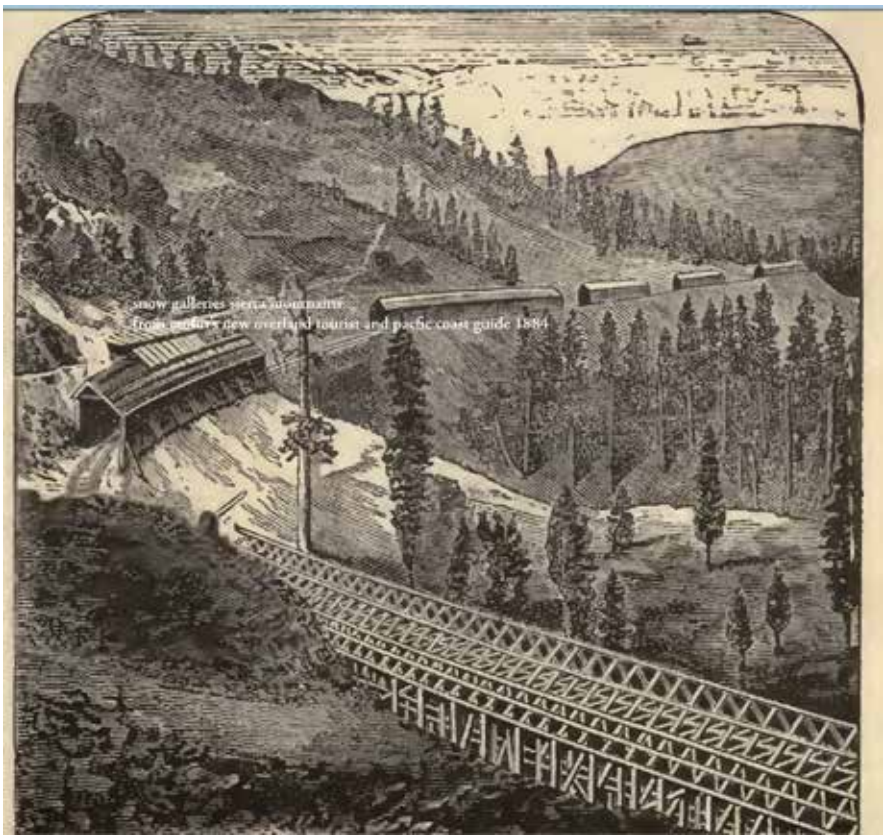
In an 1865 report S.S. Montague, who succeeded Theodore Judah as the CPRR's chief engineer said,

The heavy snowfall in the vicinity of Summit, will render it necessary to provide a substantial protection, either of timber or masonry, to insure the successful and uninterrupted operation of the road during the winter months….That portion of the line requiring this unusual protection does not exceed one hundred yards.

"The recent storm has demonstrated just this: from Truckee to Alta, the Central Pacific Railroad must be shedded- nearly every rod – to be rendered practicable in the winter. Wherever the sheds are, two engines with a plow can clear the way; in other places, ten are inadequate to the work. We predict the road will be entirely shedded before another winter…"

The next day only a half mile of track could be cleared even with the help of "a large force of men" who "were set shoveling." The reporter and a Wells Fargo agent decided to walk through the snow to Cisco, feeling that would be faster. After hours of walking they reached the bridge a mile from Cisco and discovered an avalanche had taken out part of it. That was being repaired by a hundred men. The train they'd left behind did not get to the bridge for two more days.

Next Month: Building the Sheds



Snow Galleries in the Sierra from Crofutt's New Overland Tourist Guide, 1884 (as well as various other sources - this was a popular picture)

Sierra Train Travel, 1875

Soon we were in the snowshed, then in a tunnel, then a shed, next a tunnel and so on under a continual roof like a covered bridge for 22 miles and after an Egyptian darkness, for the tunnels are not lighted, through the cracks and windows in the sheds I could see deep canyons and mountain peaks all covered with snow. About the middle of the snow sheds we came to a railroad station and hotel. We stopped a few minutes and found everything frozen hard and cold as mid winter. This is the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the [Summit] hotel is 7,017 feet above the sea level. From there we struck a down grade and ran very fast and soon came to the American River and the scenery was far above anything we had before seen ... so on we went and was soon below the snow and in a few miles everything was in full bloom ... before noon we passed gardens filled with cherry trees, red with ripe fruit and at the stations the boys were selling strawberries and cherries just picked.. How is that for a change of climate? I tell you Sis, it seemed to me as though I had just dropped from the clouds to a tropical climate. About noon we arrived in Sacramento City From Pacific Railroad

Traveler's Letter, San Francisco, California, William Smith,1875.

Today, ironically, about the only snowsheds left are those that sit over the former route where the tracks were taken up and not where the tracks are. Above: Donner Pk. at center right. The black line from left to right across the center of the picture is the concrete snowsheds. The track inside was removed in 1993. The current route of the railroad is a half mile south.

Keeping the "Cars" Running

The railroad company are engaged in building a large boarding and lodging house on Coldstream, this side of the summit. They intend to quarter four hundred men at the point mentioned who shall have no other duty than to shovel snow and keep the road in that vicinity open. They are determined to keep the cars running over the summit this season no matter how great a depth of snow may fall.

Sacramento Daily Union
November 7, 1868

Snowshed Description from a Snowshed Traveler in 1884

The "roofs [are] built so slanting that the mighty avalanche of rock and snow that comes thundering down from above glides harmlessly over… The section-houses, the water tanks, stations, and everything along here are all under the gloomy but friendly shelter of the great protecting sheds."

Thomas Stevens
Around the World on a Bicycle, published 1887; the trip was in 1884

The "smoke-emitting monsters" "fill every nook and corner of the tunnel with dense smoke, which creates a darkness by the side of which the natural darkness of the tunnel is daylight in comparison. Here is a darkness that can be felt ; I have to grope my way forward, inch by inch ; afraid to set my foot down until I have felt the place, for fear of blundering into a culvert…" "I pause every few steps to listen" for an approaching train.

Thomas Stevens about bicycling through Donner Summit Snowsheds in 1884

Tunnel 6 Shaft Top

The Donner Summit Historical Society's Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) went up to the top of the Tunnel 6 shaft to work on a Then & Now. Art Clark is very exacting and could not get the perspective right. How that got set right and how it was done is the subject of a future story because we don't have, yet, the "perfect" Then & Now.

The MHRT thought that as long as we were doing the Then & Now we could include some pictures of the shaft top.

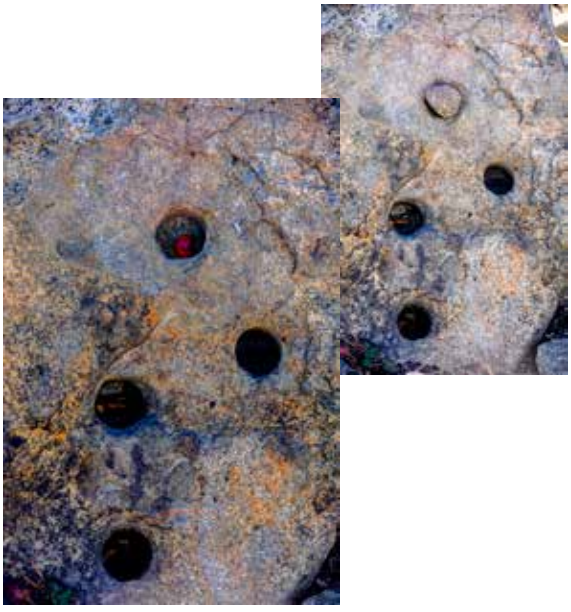
The Shaft is, of course, the central Shaft of Tunnel 6. 90 feet or so below the top is the bottom of the tunnel. It was dug to speed work on completing the tunnel so workers could work at four faces at once instead of just the east and west faces. Even working four faces at once they only made 14" of progress per day (check our indices for the Heirlooms that talk about building Tunnel 6).

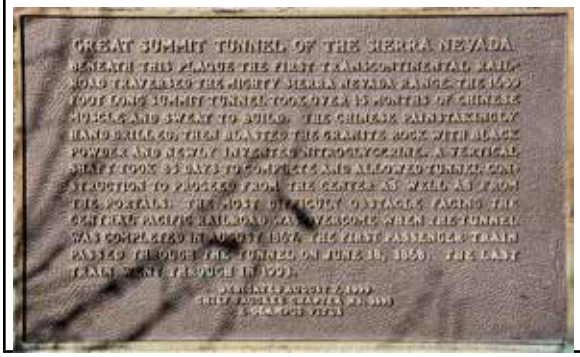
As pictures were being taken, the team was surprised to see that rails supported the covering. Rails can be dated from their profiles and sometimes from dates stamped on them. Maybe these rails were original rails. Maybe Chinese workers had laid them there 150 years ago.

We explored and rubbed the rails so we could read markings and discovered the rails indeed had a date stamped as you can see to the right.

Not every historical exploration bears fruit. This one was not over though.

Nearby was a rock with drill holes (right). One hole was covered by a rock (the top one). Inside there was a prize. Some historical explorations provide surprises which is why the MHRT is out exploring Donner Summit history.





The plaque, left, is for the "Great Summit Tunnel" and sits in the Sugar Bowl Academy's parking lot.

From the DSHS Archives

Spend a Few Days on Donner Summit, 1884

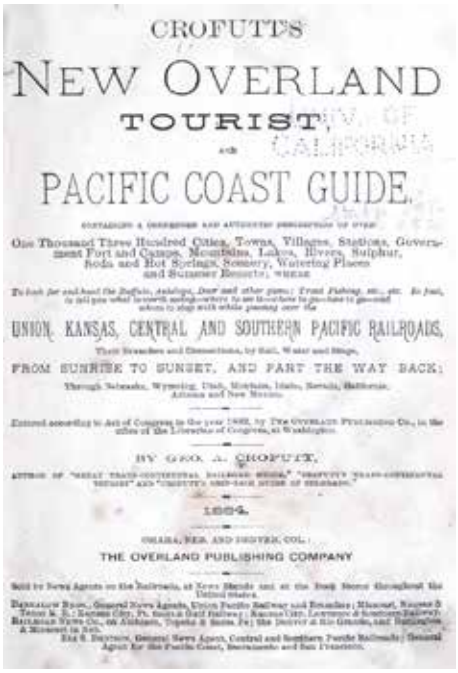
There is no grander scenery in the Sierras – of towering mountains, deep gorge, lofty precipices, sparkling waterfall and crystal lakes – than abound with an easy distance of this place [Summit Valley]. The tourist can find scenes of deepest interest and grandest beauty; the scholar and philosopher, objects of rare value for scientific investigations. The hunter and angler can find an almost unlimited field for their amusement - the former in the gorges of the mountains where the timid deer and fierce grizzly bear make their home ; the latter among the mountain lakes and the streams, where the speckled trout leaps in its joyous freedom, which around all is the music of snow-fed mountains torrent and mountain breeze, and over all is the clear, blue sky of our sunny clime, tempered and softened by the shadows of the everlasting hills. There is life, health and vigor on every hand if one will but embrace it. There are roses on the zephyr's breath, which are transferred with a morning kiss to the "pale-faced city's daughter," to renew the bloom wasted amid balls and the aimless life of city dissipation. There is health and vigor for the invalid, for the toil-worn business man, if he but cast aside his business cares and for awhile become a natural person among nature's grandest scenery.

The snowsheds 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 actual cost of $10,000 per mile. With the additions since made, the line reaches about 45 miles… By this means the track is as clear from snow in the winter as are the valleys. The mighty avalanches which sweep down the mountain sides in 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.

Where the road lies clear on the divide or level land, the sheds have sharp roofs, like those of any building calculated to withstand a great weight of snow. But where the road is built against the side of these bare peaks, the roof of the shed can have but one slope, and that must reach the mountain side, to enable the "snow-slides" to cross the road without doing harm to that or the passing trains.

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.

Crofutt's New Overland Tourist Guide, 1884



CROFUTT'S

NEW OVERLAND

TOURIST,

AND

PACIFIC COAST GUIDE.

One Thousand Three Hundred Cities, Towns, Villages, Stations, Government Fort and Camps, Mountains, Lakes, Rivers, Sulphur, Soda and Hot Springs, Scenery, Watering Places and Summer Resorts, with a

UNION, KANSAS, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROADS,

FROM SUNRISE TO SUNSET, AND PART THE WAY BACK;

BY GEO. A. CROFUTT,

1884.

THE OVERLAND PUBLISHING COMPANY

THIS NEW ROAD, VIA DONNER

Lake**,** will probably be open for travel by **JUNE 15,** 1864, and will be the shortest and best route from Sacramento over the mountains to Nevada Territory. Two lines of stages, if not more, connecting with the Central Pacific Railroad at Newcastle, will run over the same as soon as opened.

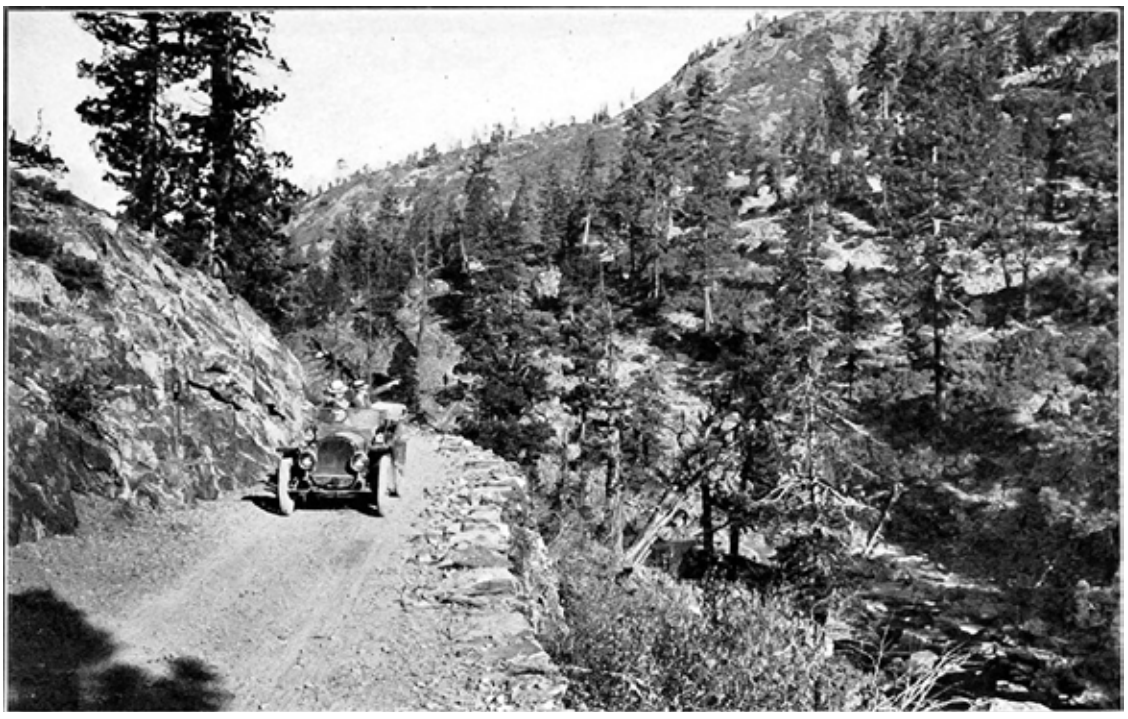
CHAS. Crocker,
President of Company
Sacramento, May 25, 1864

Announcement for the opening of the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.

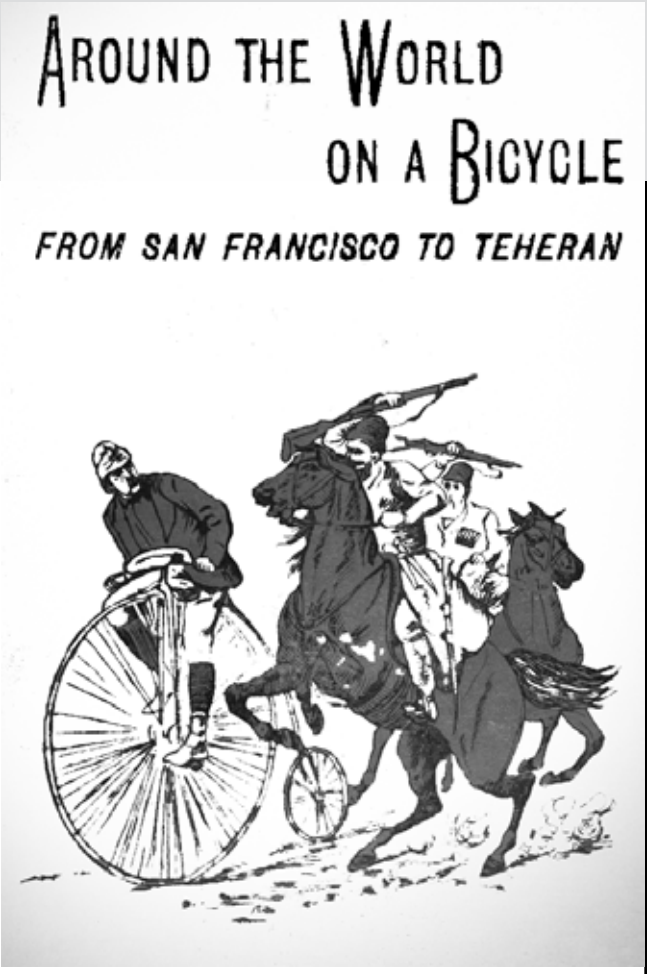
From the DSHS Archives

Above: the Lincoln Highway along the Yuba River near Big Bend. Picture taken by T.C. Wohlbruck. See our Heirloom indices for articles about him. Below, the Lincoln Highway along the Yuba River below Big Bend. The current freeway runs across the picture to the rear. This one is from Across the Continent, 1915. The drivers did not go over Donner Summit but used a few pictures of Donner Summit to illustrate their trip.

Spend a Few Days on Donner Summit in 1884



Book Review



Around the World on a Bicycle, 1887

Thomas Stevens

The first trip across Donner Summit by bike, the first transcontinental bike ride, and the first trip around the world by bike.

This story is appropriate since summer is coming and you may be pulling your bicycles out of winter storage.

In April of '14 a fellow stopped in to see Norm at the DSHS on his way across Donner Summit by bicycle. Crossing the summit by bike is not unusual. Many hundreds do it in good weather, relishing the effort going up and then the exhilaration of the speed going down. It's the agony and ecstasy of bicycling on Donner Summit I suppose. They'll start at Cisco and go over to Donner Lake on Old 40 or vice versa. But that's another story and not for the Heirloom.

The fellow who stopped in to see Norm was on his way to reprise a 19th Century trip around the world by bike. Norm and the fellow spent some hours together. The fellow was taken with the Heirloom article of the bicyclists who came up from Sacramento by bike in 1901 to go camping, which was in our May '14 issue. Then the fellow hopped on his bike and left, promising to mention Norm and the DSHS in the book he will write about his adventures circumnavigating the globe in 2014.

That story set off a search by our research department.

We thought we'd hit pay dirt, and there were "high fives" all round, when we came to Annie Londenderry (or Annie Cohen-Kopchovsky) who was the first woman to bike the world and did so in 1894. Alas, after tracking down articles and books, there was a summary of her route. She did not cross Donner Summit. Annie's story is interesting though, even if it's not about Donner Summit history. She left New York in June, 1894 on a 42 lb. bicycle. In Chicago she traded it in on a bike half the weight that had no brakes or gears. She also changed her dress for bloomers and then changed her direction, turning around and going the other way around the world. Annie was Jewish, but hid that with the Londenderry name. She also hid the fact that she was a mother of three who'd left the kids at home with her husband. She foresaw the age of sponsors by pasting advertisements on her and her bike. She also did a lot of travel by ship and train rather than on the bike, but that's all a different story too. You can read about her in Around the world on Two wheels by her great nephew, Peter Zheutlin.


Stevens leaving S.F.

Back to the research and with a bit of tenacity, there was success. Thomas Stevens did cross Donner Summit by bike in 1884 and was the first to circumnavigate the world by bicycle. On the way he was also the first to cross the North American Continent by bike, and probably the first to cross Donner Summit by bike. Here it might be more accurate to say that he crossed Donner Summit with his bike. Long distance bicyclists in those days had no compunction against hopping on a train, a steamship, or walking. Some played very loose with the facts which is not to say our new hero did any loose fact playing. Read on.

Progress of the Overland Bicyclist

ALBANY, July 29th. Thomas Stevens, who left San Francisco on a bicycle April 22d, arrived here in good health and suffering no fatigue. He weighs fifteen pounds less than when he started. He averaged sixty miles daily, took notes and will publish a book. He says the roads west of the Mississippi were very heavy and he often walked long distances, but did not ride in car or wagons. He had not been molested. He saw great numbers of Indians, but they simply gazed at him in wonder. "I saw any number of bears and wolves. The greatest inconvenience west of the Mississippi river was the scarcity of houses, where I could sleep. The roads now run in long stretches parallel with the railroads. "I will go to New York or Boston; thence to Liverpool."

Daily Alta California July 30, 1884

Crossing the Sierra

Stevens must have been an interesting guy. He was born in England. His father came to America and was going to send for the family but ended up having to go back to England when his wife became sick. At that point Thomas asked his father if he could go to America alone. You can imagine the father's response but then Thomas showed his father that he'd saved up his passage money. Thomas, age 17, came to America and worked in a railroad mill in Wyoming and then in mining in Colorado. He got into a little trouble and ended up in San Francisco. He'd gotten the idea to ride around the world on a bicycle before he'd ever ridden a bicycle. He rectified that lack of experience with a two hours' trial in Golden Gate Park. That little tidbit comes from an 1887 book, 10,000 Miles on a Bicycle which is really a reference book of long distance riding, just one of the sources that was used for this article. The author, Karl Krone, dedicated his book to his bulldog, "the very best dog whose presence ever blessed this planet." That was just fun to include here but completely irrelevant. Stevens was still on his around the world journey when "10,000 Miles…" was written but Krone remarked that Stevens would continue to set records on his journey as long as he was not killed. Bicycling was more dangerous in those days.

Stevens' Columbia Ordinary

After the round the world travel Stevens was a bit at "loose ends" and when the offer from the New York World came for Stevens to go to Africa to look for the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, he jumped at it. He didn't find Stanley but did have African adventures and collected African souvenirs. He later traveled the world, sending reports back to American newspapers, and wrote a couple of books. Then he tired of travel, went back to England, married, and settled in to a conventional life.

Stevens began his journey around the world on April 22, 1884 in San Francisco, CA. He said, "The beauties of nature are scattered with a more lavish hand across the country lying between the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the shores where the surf romps and rolls over the auriferous sands of the Pacific, in Golden Gate Park, than in a journey of the same length in any other part of the world." He should know. That is the opening sentence of his book, Around the World on a Bicycle. Some editions come in Part I and Part II.

Stevens crossed the Bay on a ferry and then started cycling from Oakland. From there he traveled to San Pablo, Suisun, Davis, Sacramento, and Rocklin. By the time he got to Rocklin people were asking, "What'll you do when you hit the snow?" In April there is typically still a lot of snow on Donner Summit. Unlike others who tried traversing the Sierra before snowmelt, Stevens had made plans. "…the long snow-sheds of the Central Pacific Railway make it possible for one to cross over, no matter how

deep the snow…"

Today we travel Placer County to the Sierra on an Interstate at high speed. Stevens was traveling considerably slower and so saw a lot more: abandoned mine shafts, decaying sluice boxes, washed out gravel, water ditches, heaps of gravel, etc. It all told "in language more eloquent than word or pen, of the palmy days of '49…" He traveled through Auburn and Clipper Gap sticking mostly to the path that followed alongside the rail line. The path was "occasionally rideable" whereas the roads were not. It snowed a bit at Clipper Gap and that was when a railroad employee told Stevens that there was so much snow up high that the trains could barely squeeze through the snowheds (snow blew into the sheds through the cracks in the boards), leaving no room for Stevens and his bicycle. Stevens decided to keep going anyway. Next it was through Dutch Flat where the streets were shallow streams as water poured "in torrents from above [in elevation]."

In the Snowsheds

The next day Stevens began to travel through the snowsheds, "built at great expense to protect the track from the vast quantities of snow…" The "roofs [are] built so slanting that the mighty avalanche of rock and snow that comes thundering down from above glides harmlessly over… The section-houses, the water tanks, stations, and everything along here are all under the gloomy but friendly shelter of the great protecting sheds."

It turned out the "difficulties of getting through" were much less than rumors had said. He could not ride in the sheds but could "trudge merrily along…" Occasionally there were short breaks in the sheds and then he could trace the "sinuous structure" of the sheds as they wound their "tortuous way around the rugged mountain sides, and through the gloomy pine forest, all but buried under the snow." He imagined the snowsheds were "some wonderful relic of a past civilization, when a venturesome race of men thus dared to invade these vast wintry solitudes and burrow their way through the deep snow, like moles burrowing through the loose earth." There were no living things around. He heard only the "occasional roar of a distant snow-slide, and the mournful sighing of the breeze as it plays a weird, melancholy dirge through the gently swaying branches…" Trudging "merrily along" he had a lot of time to compose evocative prose.

Hanging from the Trestle

At the summit Stevens stayed at the Summit Hotel (see Art Clark Finds the Summit Hotel in the July '13 Heirloom), "seven thousand and seventeen feet above the level of the sea." So much snow falls on the summit, he learned, that "thirty feet on the level is no unusual thing…" and "snow-balling" on July 4th is "no great luxury at the Summit House…" Even with snow all around it was not cold and he traveled with just a shirt and a gossamer rubber coat to shed the water falling from the snowshed roofs. Some water froze after dripping and froze into "all manner of fantastic shapes." There were "whole menageries of ice animals, birds, and all imaginable objects… reproduced in clear crystal ice…" Traveling forty miles through the dark snowsheds pushing a 48 pound bike must have made his mind wander.

Traveling through the snowsheds was anything but "pleasant going" as he traveled the "gloomy interior" that was both "dark and smoky." Groping his way over the rough surface was not pleasant. When he heard a train he'd "proceed to occupy as small an amount of space as possible against the side, and wait for the "smoke-emitting monsters" to pass. The engines "fill every nook and corner of the tunnel with dense smoke, which creates a darkness by the side of which the natural darkness of the tunnel is daylight in comparison. Here is a darkness that can be felt; I have to grope my way forward, inch by inch ; afraid to set my foot down until I have felt the place, for fear of blundering into a culvert…" "I pause every few steps to listen" for an approaching train.

When he emerged from the sheds he climbed a pine tree to "obtain a view of Donner Lake, called the 'Gem of the Sierras.'" That of course brought up the Donner Party that became snowed in there. Stevens' version of events was that when the relief party arrived in the spring, "the last survivor of the party, crazed with the fearful suffering he had undergone, was sitting on a log, savagely gnawing away at a human arm, the last remnant of his companions in misery, off whose emaciated carcasses he had for some time been living!" That seems a bit lurid and at odds with the composer of the evocative prose above, but it was a common understanding of the travails of the Donner Party in the 19th Century. Some news reports of the time are even more lurid or at least dwelled on bones blanketing the ground and the tales of cannibalism. The 19th Century public would have enjoyed our supermarket tabloids, no doubt. Next month we'll have a review of the original Donner Party book, The History of the Donner Party by C.F. McGlashan, published in 1879.

Then it was down the Truckee, a "rapid, rollicking stream" along which were dams and mill sites without limit. There was little ridable road down to Truckee but Stevens eventually found good road at Verdi.

The Bicycle Tourist

NEW YORK, July 9th. - *The Mail and Express* says: An athlete on a bicycle, flying the American colors at the bar handles of the machine, last night rode up to the American House, Trenton, and registered as Thomas Stevens, bicycle tourist. He said he left San Francisco in February, and was on his way to New York. When he left San Francisco he weighed 158 pounds. On his travels he lost 25 pounds. He will reach New York this evening.

After the Sierra it was on to the 40 Mile Desert in Nevada. In Reno "the characteristic whiskey-straight hospitality of the Far-West at once asserts itself" and he stopped for a few days to "paint Reno red."

On August 4, 1884 Stevens completed his cross country jaunt. He had gone 3,700 miles in 103 days. Then it was off to conquer the world. He sailed into San Francisco in January, 1887 completing 13,500 miles of bicycling and walking (he walked about a third of the journey*). On the way he'd had to confront a mountain lion, deserts, lack of roads, 130 degree Indian heat, inability to communicate in foreign lands, loneliness, and almost being stoned to death. He had to dissuade highwaymen and he had to cross Afghanistan (where he was arrested as a spy and ended up having to take a steamer to India). He lost 25 pounds from his 5' 5" frame on the journey.


AROUND THE WORLD
ON A BICYCLE

BY
THOMAS STEVENS

FROM SAN FRANCISCO TO TEHERAN

WITH OVER ONE HUNDRED ILLUSTRATIONS

London
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE, AND RIVINGTON
CROWN BUILDINGS, 188, FLEET STREET
1887
[All rights reserved]

If you want to read his adventures, his book is available from various sources on the internet for just a few dollars. It can also be found for free as some variety of "ebook." It's called Around the World on a Bicycle by Thomas Stevens, published in 1887. It's a fun read.

*although in Ten Thousand Miles by Bicycle by Karl Krone (1887) had interviewed Thomas Stevens about his trip and reported that for the initial part of the journey from S.F. to Utah, Stevens had to walk a half to two-thirds of the way.

See page 18 for Stevens' bike and for a description that goes with the trestle picture on the previous paget.

Around the World on a Bicycle

DES MOINES (Ia.) June 23d - Thomas Stevens, who started from San Francisco two months ago for a bicycle tour around the world, arrived here this afternoon in good health and spirits. He will continue his trip to-morrow morning.

16 BICYCLING WORLD AND L. A. W. BULLETIN 2 Nov., 1883.

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22 July, 1887. THE BICYCLING WORLD 141

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FACTORY AT HARTFORD, CONN. ALBERT A. POPE PRES'T. E. W. POPE SEC'Y.

106 THE BICYCLING WORLD 3 June, 1887.

"Let Others Try the Experiment."

The Columbias have been subjected to the practical tests of ten years upon road and path; there are machines upon the market of limited age and claimed to be as good or superior to the old reliable Columbias; perhaps they are; it isn't for us to say. If the wheelman can afford to try the experiment, it's good for his education, and of eventual benefit to the Columbias.

For instance, for six years hemispherical steering-centres have been used on the Expert Columbia, and on the Light Roadster for three years, a pretty fair test that such an arrangement is the most practical. The ball bearing head hasn't been proved to be better, yet it may be. "Let others try the experiment."

It has been asserted that the various forms of safety bicycles will wear out both continents. For several years safeties have been on the market, yet their increase in use has not been noticeable. Ninety-five per cent. of riders seem to prefer the crank machine. We manufacture safeties; if you desire one we should be pleased to have you try the experiment.

It costs considerable to make first-class machines; Columbias are first-class machines, and are sold at respectable prices; perhaps as good machines can be sold for much less than our prices. "Let others try the experiment."

It may be a paying investment for wheelmen to purchase a so-called first-class machine for a seemingly low price, and then again it may not be. The wheelman can try the experiment.

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The New Star Safety Bicycle

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Its advantages are many. The Best of all Hill Climbers. Speedy on the road. Easy learning and comfortable riding. Intending purchasers will do well to try this wonderful little machine.

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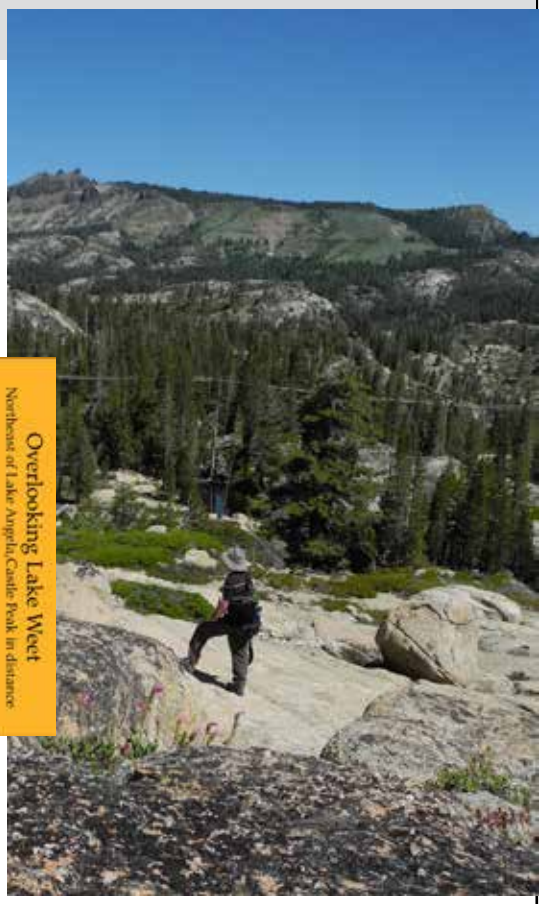
MANUFACTURERS OF STAR BICYCLES.

SMITHVILLE, N. J.

Then & Now with Art Clark

The Charles E. Davis Overland Trail Project Collection documents the efforts in 1927 to re-trace the Donner route from Independence, Missouri to Sacramento, California by Charles Davis, an amateur historian and explorer. He recorded his expedition in a journal and through regular correspondence with Harry C. Peterson, the curator at the Fort.

We'll report on our visit to this archive in a future Heirloom.



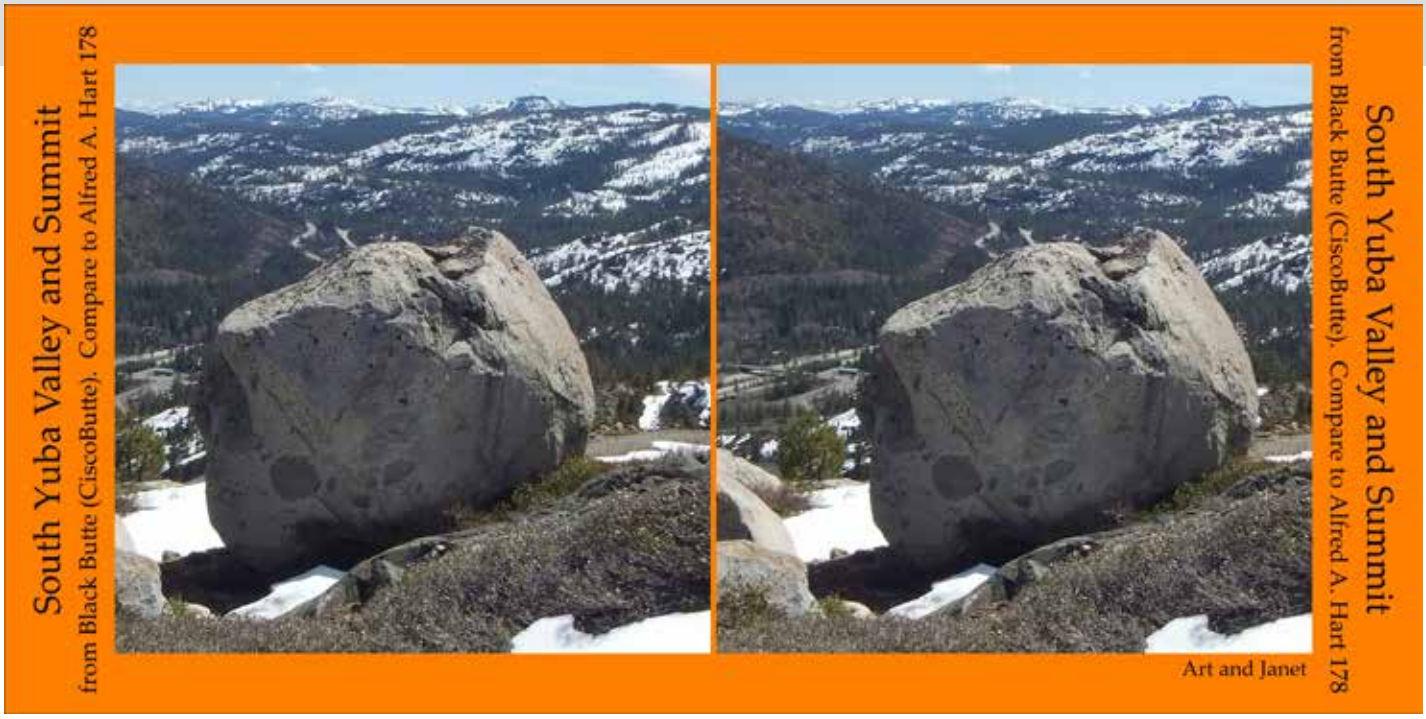
Charles E. Davis #104

In 1927 Davis traced the Donner Party route from Missouri to Sacramento. His notes on this photo said:
"This view is what bewildered those, starving, dieing, Emer.
On there arrival to top of Summit Ridge.
Below here some died, near this pretty little Lake they camped."

"Taken just over Ridge from Donner Lake."

Photo location 39° 19.535'N 120° 19.351'W Northeast of Lake Angela.

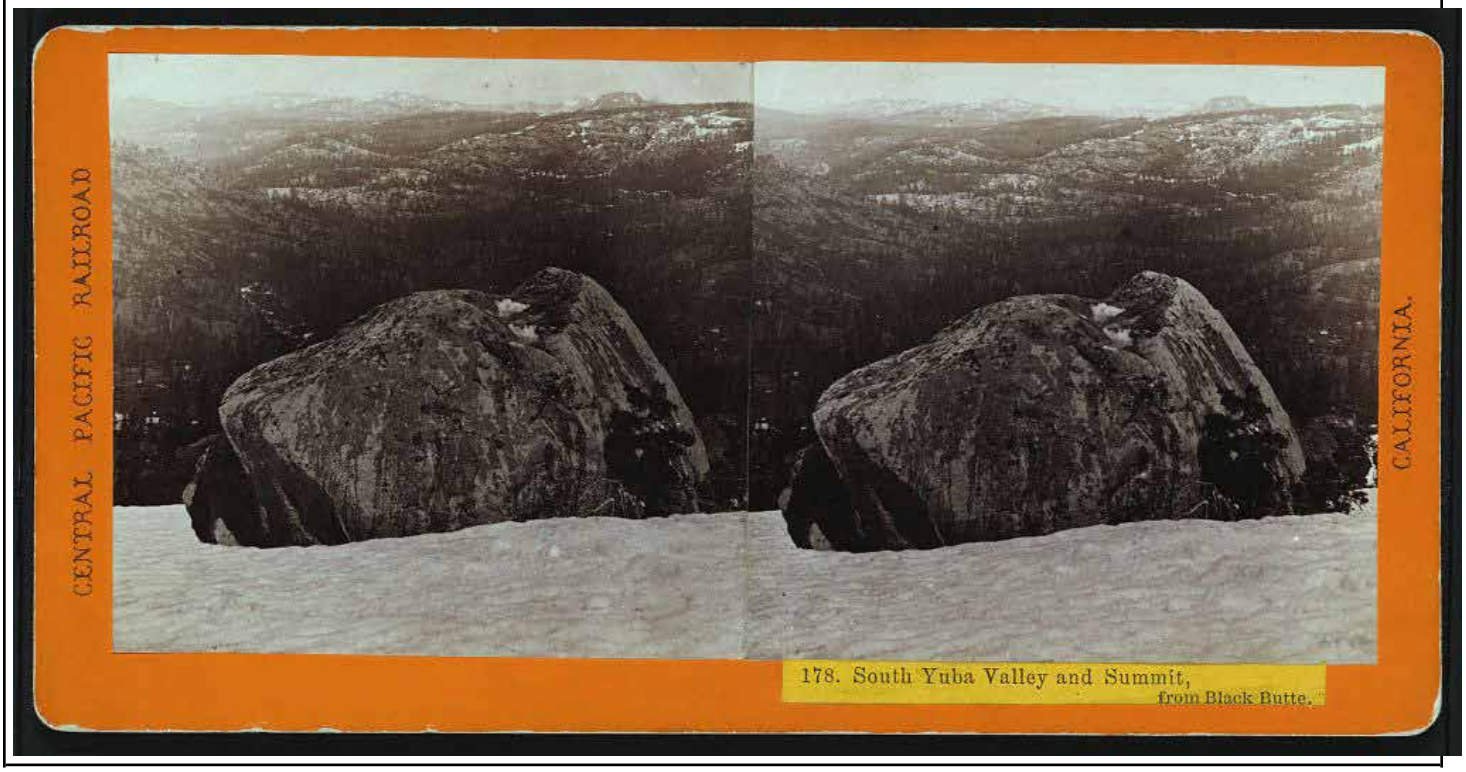
Then & Now with Art Clark



South Yuba Valley and Summit, from Black Butte.

This Alfred A. Hart view is looking east from Cisco Butte, formerly called Black Butte. The twenty-foot granite block was left there when the glaciers receded. The top of Cisco Butte shows grooves from the glacier passing over it. Imagine the entire valley filled with ice, making its way west, and carrying rocks like this with it. Devil's Peak is visible in the upper right. This scene was later reprinted by Carleton Watkins in his "New Series."

Photo location 39° 18.530'N 120° 33.733'W



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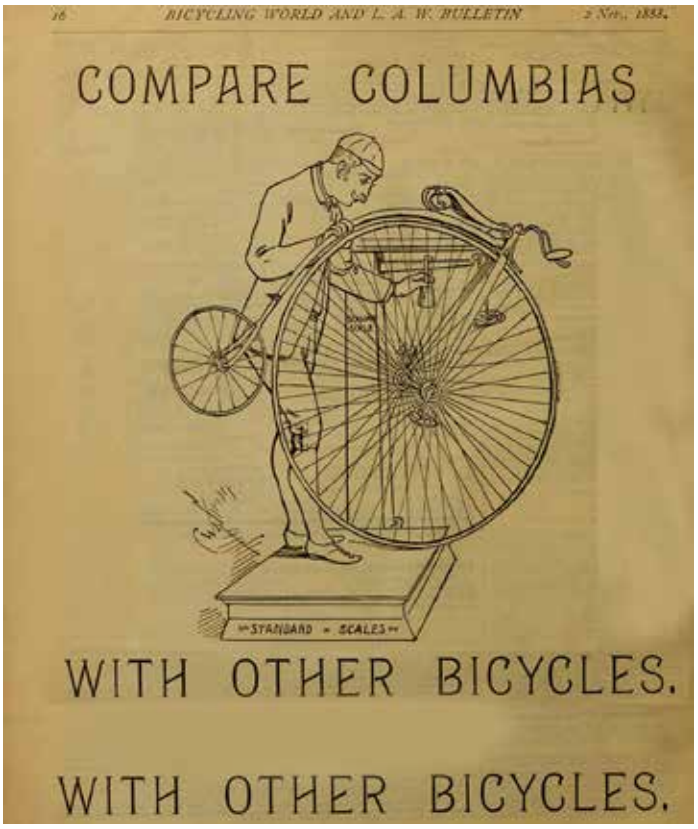
Thomas Stevens, His Bike



In case you are in the market and want an expert's opinion.

In 1884 Stevens was in San Francisco and purchased a 50 inch, 49 pound steel Columbia Ordinary manufactured by the Pope Manufacturing Co. of Chicago. It cost $110.00

It was to Albert Pope whom Stevens dedicated his book, Around the World on a Bicycle. The bike was black enameled with nickel plated wheels.

Stevens traveled lightly, taking only socks, a spare shirt, a raincoat that could be a tent, bedroll and pistol (which he would use to dissuade a mountain lion and thieves). He did not even take a coat since "coats are not in style among the Wyoming cow-boys" (from an interview in Ten Thousand Miles by Bicycle – 1887) The bike had wooden wheels and solid rubber tires. These early bicycles were known as "bone crushers."

About the Trestle Picture on page 12

Because Stevens didn't have a train schedule, he'd just make do when a train passed. Once he was crossing a trestle when a train approached. "He had to get out on a rail and hang his bicycle over the precipice as the train passed."