

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

July, 2016 issue #95



Chinese Railroad Workers on Donner Summit - Pt II

Life, Work & Danger

“I wish to call your minds that the early completion of this railroad we have built has been in large measure due to that poor despised class of laborers called the Chinese – to the fidelity and industry they have shown.”

Sacramento Daily Union May 8, 1869

“Without the Chinese, it would have been impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national highway.”

Leland Stanford

The job of building the railroad across the Sierra went to the Chinese workers who made up 80% or more of the Central Pacific's workforce.

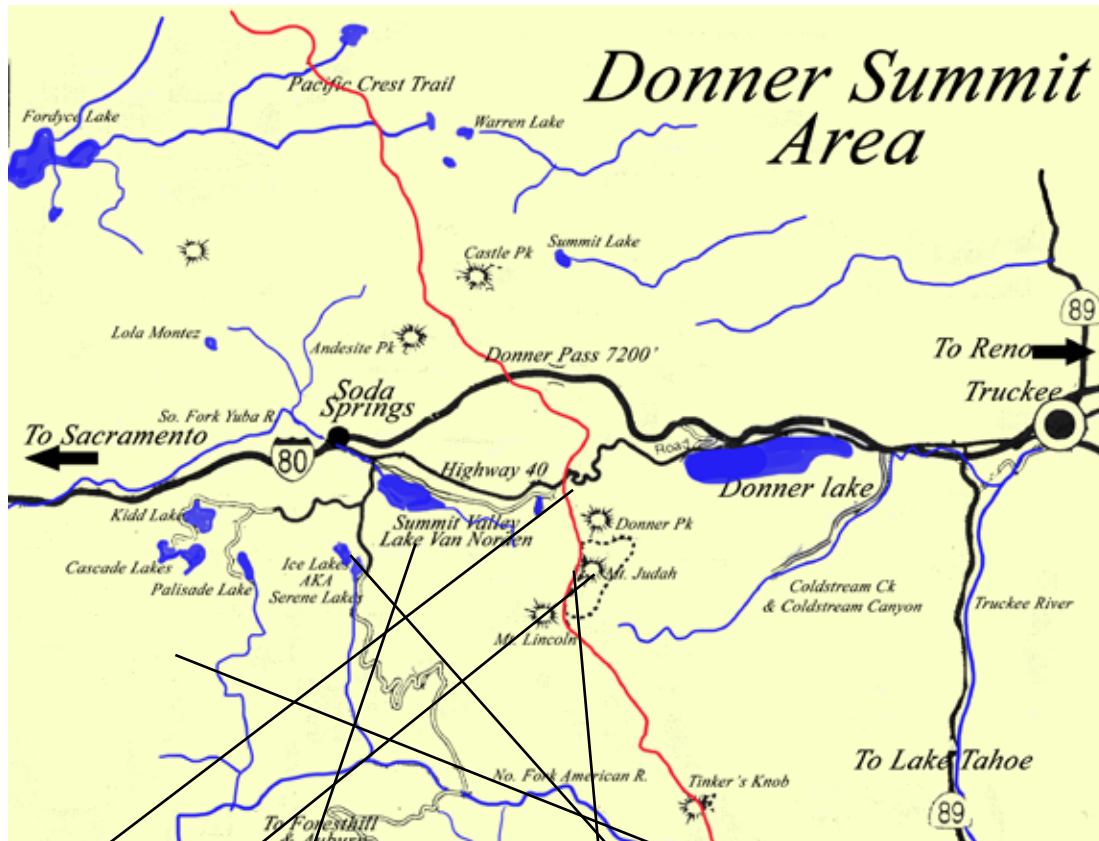
The Chinese workers were courageous. They'd left China with big hopes but uncertain futures going to a completely alien land, America. Building the railroad they faced discomfort, danger, and death but they built the railroad which tied California to the rest of the country enabling commerce, immigration, and the development of the West. The railroad even brought the world to California since products could be imported to California and then sent to the rest of the country and vice versa.

The Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) first attempted to hire white workers but there were not enough willing to fit into the regimentation necessary for railroad building. Those who could have been workers were also immigrants to California and their mindset was starting new lives and getting rich. Being immigrants to California they were individuals and independently minded. They were willing to take chances and the risks that go with tenuous independent employment. They were of a different mindset than those who'd stayed in the East. Many, paid to come to the end of track presuming they would work for the railroad, simply disappeared.

The Central Pacific was desperate to build. The Union Pacific was making good progress two years after starting, but the Central Pacific had hardly gone fifty miles. Something had to be done or the Union Pacific would lay all the track and gain all the profit. Charles Crocker, one of the Big Four, suggested the CPRR use Chinese workers. That was met with laughter. Chinese were small in stature. Each rail weighed 532 pounds and was 24 feet long. How could the Chinese ever lay those rails? James Strobridge, construction superintendent, refused.

Story Locations in this Issue

In This Issue



Summit Camp pg 14 Emigrant Mtn. (Now Mt. Judah) Anderson Valley Devil's Pk.
 Summit Valley pg 17 Margie Powell Hike pg 19

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

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit

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

Crocker pressed on though saying, “Did they not build the Chinese wall, the biggest piece of masonry in the world?”

The experiment using Chinese started with fifty workers. Then another fifty were added, and then more. By 1865 there were 3,000 Chinese workers and by 1869, there were more than ten thousand making up 80% or more of the Central Pacific’s labor force. Leland Stanford, in a letter to President Andrew Johnson, said about the Chinese “As a class they are quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious and economical. Ready and apt to learn all the different kinds of work required in railroad building, they soon became as efficient as white laborers. More prudent and economical, they are contented with less wages. We find them organized into societies for mutual aid and assistance.” John Gillis, Chief Engineer (in Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad, 1970) said, “The Chinamen were as steady, hardworking set of men as could be found.”

The Chinese were paid less than whites and initially it was thought they moved less dirt than whites but were more tractable. Charles Crocker, though, talking about the central shaft of Tunnel 6 said, while testifying to the Senate Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration in 1877, they were “cutting both ways” and “got some Cornish miners... and paid them extra wages. We put them on one side of the shaft...and we had Chinamen on the other side. We measured the work every Sunday morning; and the Chinamen without fail, always outmeasured the Cornish miners....”

The Chinese worked out very well. They were, in Albert Richardson’s Beyond the Mississippi (1869) “a great army laying siege to Nature in her strongest citadel. The rugged mountains looked like stupendous ant-hills. They swarmed with Celestials, shoveling, wheeling, carting, drilling and blasting rocks and earth, ... from under immense basket-hats, like umbrellas.... After a little experience the [Chinese] were quite as efficient and far less troublesome [than the Irish].” For one the Chinese were more collectively oriented as opposed to immigrants to California who were more individually oriented.

Chinese Workers’ Lives

We know the Chinese worked out and we know what kinds of labor were done, but what were their lives like? What was the human dimension of the railroad construction?

The wagon trains to California had many diarists whose writings have survived to tell us about the experience crossing

the country. Likewise there were diarists on the ships rounding Cape Horn. Visitors to California wrote of their experiences. Newspapers carried articles about California and artists and professional writers visited and recorded life and California’s wonders. There’s a lot of of good documentation about life in California for everyone, except the Chinese.

There is a dearth of firsthand Chinese accounts of life while building the railroad. Many of the workers, perhaps most, were illiterate. If others wrote letters and sent them along



From Beyond the Mississippi, 1869 drawn from Alfred A. Hart photo #119

with their remittances home, none survived in China. Most of the workers were from Guangdong Province in southern China and that area was in upheaval in the mid-19th Century. In order to get a sense of what life was like for the Chinese workers, then, we have to rely on visitors to the work sites who wrote accounts and the reports of railroad personnel. They, reporters and railroad personnel, were prolific in their reports and wrote about everything with only a little about the Chinese. Even the names of the individual Chinese have been lost to history for the most part, because they were paid in groups rather than individually. So there are only partial names on the pay rosters. To round out what observers said, we are left to rely on the archeological evidence found in the



Alfred A. Hart photo #204 at the east end of Tunnel 8

didn't just run away.

Although we can't know, we can guess that sometimes the drillers missed the bit and hit the bit holder's hands. Were fingers broken? Did fights erupt? Inside the tunnels the drillers worked eight-hour shifts. Outside the tunnels, hauling rock and dirt, etc., Chinese worked twelve-hour shifts.

Beyond the obvious, the work must have been uncomfortable. Work at the tunnel rock faces was lit only by candle light. The air held rock dust and the acrid remains of black powder charges. In winter the tunnels are ice cold. I took a film crew into Tunnel 6 one spring and spent some of the coldest hours I've ever spent. Water drips from fissures in the rock sometimes forming amazing ice sculptures. That's not to remark on the beauty, since by their candlelight the Chinese probably couldn't appreciate the colors and shapes, but to remark on the continual ice cold.

sites where the Chinese lived. One site, on Donner Summit, is Summit Camp.

Life constructing the railroad was hard on Donner Summit despite the gorgeous views and surroundings. The Chinese were far from home and far from what was familiar. Winters were harsh with an average snowfall of 34 feet. It can snow any month of the year and snowdrifts can remain into July. It was continually cold in winter, even in the tunnels.

The work was very difficult no matter what the job, with no mechanical help. Even though they were available, the Chinese did not use pneumatic drills. They refused and the railroad did not push the issue. Drilling was done by hand, explosives were set and the resulting debris was all hauled out by hand. Filling and leveling was done by hand and small carts. To cross the Sierra, leveling, filling, building trestles and tunnels, all by hand, must have been monotonous work.

The Sacramento Union (4/22/1867) said, "The drillers are all Chinamen, and most excellent hands they make, as will be seen when I state that a gang of three can drill three holes of one and a quarter inches in diameter and two and a half feet deep in twelve hours." One of the gang of three held the drill bit and rotated it a quarter turn each time the two others of the gang hit it with sledge hammers. Some drill holes, as can be seen today in Tunnel 6, are much more than two and a half feet deep. One and a quarter inch diameter holes were for nitroglycerine which was not used much. Black powder, used most, required holes of two and a half inches in diameter. Imagine drilling those holes, bam bam quarter turn, bam bam quarter turn, hour after hour, day after day, six days a week. At the end of the day there was always the next day to look forward to: another day of pounding away at the rock, hour after hour. It was back breaking monotony. It's a wonder they

The cold also brought with it pneumonia and frostbite. Imagine the discomfort: living in un-insulated buildings and then enduring the grueling labor, day after day after day.

Snow had to be dealt with and was not pleasant. There was so much snow on the Summit that workers dug snow tunnels to move around. As snow shifted and melted the tunnels had to be continually enlarged. A traveler to the summit reported on progress of the railroad saying that labor was not impeded until the snowfall got to be four feet (Daily Alta California November 10, 1867). Before it got to be four feet then, the Chinese who worked outside were working in the snow: moving snow so they could then move rock and dirt. During winter the workers sometimes went weeks without seeing the sun as they traveled from their dwelling to the work through snow tunnels.

Brett Hart reported in the September, 1869 Overland Monthly, "To deal with the snow the workers dug snow tunnels

"...the Directors of the road say it would be impossible to build it at present without them [Chinese]. They are found to be equally as good as white men, and less inclined to quarrels and strikes. They are paid \$30 per month and boarded, and a cook is allowed for every twelve men. They do not accomplish so much in a given time as Irish laborers, but they are willing to work more hours per day, and are content with their lot so long as they are promptly paid.

Sacramento Daily Union June 18, 1866

“The Enquirer is informed by a man from the summit that on Saturday a gang of Chinamen employed by the railroad were covered up by a snow slide and four of five died before they could be exhumed. Snow storms accompanied with high winds made the stay at the Summit anything but agreeable, the snow being from ten to fifteen feet deep notwithstanding which the road is kept open and the sleighs of the Pioneer [Stage] Company make their regular trips to Cisco. The snow fell to such a depth on Friday that one whole camp of Chinamen was covered up during the night and parties were digging them out when our informant left.”

Dec 25, 1866 [Dutch Flat Enquirer](#)
Dec 18, 1866 [Sacramento Union](#)

through which they traveled to and from work. The tunnels ranged from fifty to 200 feet long and included excavated rooms. There were windows dug in the sides of some so that the tunnel excavation debris could be thrown out...”

The Chinese were paid less than white workers and had to supply their own board. The CPRR estimated that it cost them .75 a day to feed and board* their white workers so they were getting the Chinese at 2/3 the price ([Chinese of the American Frontier](#), Ch. 2 “The Army of Canton in the High Sierra”).

Chinese labor was supplied to the railroad by labor

contractors. The Chinese worked in gangs ranging up to fifty individuals. Each gang had a Chinese foreman who organized the gang and received and distributed the pay. Money was withheld to pay the gang’s cook and buy food. Although they were paid less, there was an advantage. The Chinese had much better diets. The white workers had boiled food, beef and potatoes.

The Chinese ate "Dried oysters, dried cuttle-fish, dried-fish, sweet rice crackers, dried bamboos sprouts, salted cabbage, Chinese sugar (like sorghum sugar) four kinds of dried fruits, five kind of desiccated vegetables, vermicelli, dried seaweed, Chinese bacon cut up into salt cutlets, dried meat of the abalone shell, pea-nut oil, dried mushrooms, tea, and rice. They

*Sharp eyed readers will note an apparent contradiction between this statement and the one on the previous page saying the Chinese were "boarded." It just shows you can't necessarily rely on contemporaneous accounts. Virtually all sources say the Chinese paid for their food.

also buy pork of the butcher, and on the holidays they eat poultry." This list comes from Charles Nordhoff’s 1873 book, [California for Travelers and Settlers](#). He was specifically talking about the Merced railroad but other reports by visitors to transcontinental railroad work sites agree as does some archeological evidence. Foodstuffs were purchased by the railroad for resale to work gangs and supplied from mobile stores in rail cars at track end. Chinese merchants also catered to workers selling imported good, rice, dried fish, tea, opium, silk, and herbal medicines as well as table ware and storage vessels.

On Donner Summit and elsewhere along the line, at least some Chinese helped themselves to fresh food by stocking local ponds with catfish. There is no direct evidence of that, but the catfish are there and have been for a long time. On Donner Summit Catfish Pond, or Maiden’s Retreat, is a nice little spot. When you approach the catfish swim up to the surface and could be easily scooped up. Stocking by the Chinese makes sense since the Chinese occupied nearby Summit Camp for four years. There are catfish in other ponds along the transcontinental route as well.

The Chinese were better off than the white workers in another way. Their cooks heated water for tea which the Chinese drank instead of the local water. We can only imagine the sanitary habits of thousands of men at work on the line and the effect on local water. The cooks also heated water so the Chinese workers could bathe regularly.

After work the Chinese could bathe, change clothes, gamble, enjoy opium or liquor.

Donner Lake Kills Thirty Chinese

Virginia City, March 1st – 8:15 P.M. – A Snow slide occurred on the Summit, on the Donner Lake Route, crushing a house occupied by Chinamen, Who were working in the Central Pacific Railroad Tunnel, killing some thirty of them. [sic]

[Daily Alta California](#) March 2, 1867

How exciting it must have been for the Chinese to be able to go to a town with a Chinese community when they were off work. Money could be sent home, familiar products could be bought, a familiar language heard. What a treat it must have been to see merchants displaying Chinese goods and Chinese characters on signs, and experience the sights and sounds and smells of foods and spices.

Building a railroad can be dangerous work.

On Donner Summit besides the grueling work, the Chinese endured frostbite, avalanche, accident, pneumonia, explosion, rock slide, and disease. Some died. The winter of 1866-67 had one of the highest snowfalls on record: 40 feet. Workers



Life size diorama of Chinese workers on Donner Summit at the State Railroad Museum in Sacramento.

Then, if the work was not bad enough, the Chinese were subject to being waylaid after leaving the railroad during time off. The Sacramento Union reported in December 15, 1866, that the practice of robbing Chinamen is said to be very frequent occurrence in that locality [Folsom], as scarcely a week passes without some of them being attacked beaten and plundered.”

Other articles report, “Two Chinamen were shot...” (12/3/66 Sacramento Union), Chinese robbed, doors kicked in, women abused, men beaten, houses burned, etc.

The Daily Alta California carried an editorial on February 25, 1869 commenting on what must have been regular “outrages.”

“Every now and then the press have occasion to chronicle some act of wanton cruelty on the part of those who profess to belong to a civilized nation... What possible motive can animate that class of person who wantonly assault Chinamen, unless it be the simple desire to vindicate their muscular superiority to a race which they know cannot retaliate... There is something extremely despicable in the idea of assaulting one because he is the weaker...” those who do so are “cowards in the strongest sense of the term” especially knowing Chinese cannot testify in California courts.

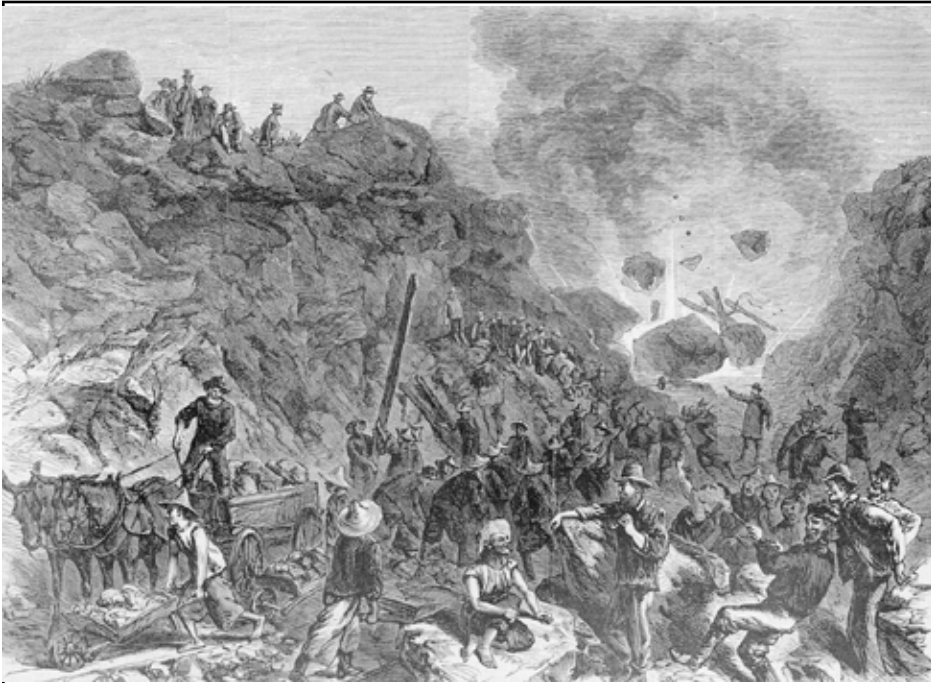
It makes the researcher’s heart glad to keep reading. The same newspaper reported a few days later on December 18, that six “Chinamen had been attacked” on the Placer side of Bear River, below Emigrant Gap. The “Celestials [euphemistic term for Chinese] had succeeded in killing two and driving off the balance of the robbers... The Celestials have evidently made up their minds not to be any longer made fools of by thieving white men.”

There were a couple of Chinese railroad workers’ camps on or near Donner Summit. The longest lasting of the camps was Summit Camp, nestled between Tunnel 6 and Donner Peak. That is where we are going next. Stay tuned and keep up your subscription.

didn’t see daylight for days at a time as they moved from their living sheds to the work faces through tunnels dug into the snow. There were a total of 44 storms that winter with one multi-day storm dropping 10 feet of snow. James Strobridge, construction superintendent, lost an eye to a black powder misfire. That was reported, but then he was a boss. How many Chinese were injured or killed is an open question but we come across reports from visitors to the work sites. In Beyond the Mississippi, there is story about a visit to “Lake Angela, a lovely little mountain gem.”

“It was like picnicking at the North Pole; for snow lined the higher ravines and icicles hung from the water-tanks on the stage-road. Here during the previous winter [1868] they [workers] were engulfed by a snow-slide. Seeing it approach they stepped behind a tall rock; but it buried them fifty feet deep. In spring their bodies were found standing upright, with shovels in their hands.”

Another story tells of a workman coming along into camp and noting that a house was missing. It had been covered by an avalanche burying fifteen or sixteen men. The men remained buried all day until they were dug out. Only three had died. The rest had been protected by their bunk beds. (Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad, John Gillis, 1870). Then there is the story of an avalanche that took away a cabin filled with Chinese workers who were not found until spring (The Heirloom, June, 2012). Summarizing, James Strobridge, the construction superintendent said before the Pacific Railroad Commission, “snow slides carried away our camps and we lost a good many men in the slides; many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted...”



It was a grand sight from the valley of Lake Donner, at eventide, to look up a thousand feet upon the overhanging cliffs, where the workmen were discharging their glycerine blasts. Through the gathering shades of night, immense volumes of the fire and dense clouds of smoke broke from the mountain side, as if a mighty volcano was rending it to atoms. Huge masses of rocks and debris were rent and heaved up in the commotion; then anon came the thunders of the explosion like a lightning stroke, reverberating along the hills and canons [sic], as if the whole artillery of heaven was in play. Huge masses of rock rolled far down the steep declivity, and pieces weighing two hundred pounds were thrown a distance of a mile. Sometimes the people at the hotel, a mile from the scene of destruction, were obliged to retire to avoid the danger from the falling fragments.

"The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69" by Old Block, 1868

Dangerous Work

The picture above from a 19th Century book is an example of how dangerous the work building the railroad could be. The text to the right gives an almost poetic view to it.

Just how many Chinese died during the building of the railroad is an open question argued over by railroad aficionados and historians. The problem in ascertaining the numbers is lack of record keeping and reports that cannot be relied upon. The article to the right was contradicted by another article the same day that said the bones of only fifty Chinese were on the train. Below is another article along with some other reporting just for fun.

STRANGE CONSIGNMENT.—Yesterday the schooner *Emily Howard* landed thirty-nine boxes containing the bones of deceased Chinamen, which are to be transported hence to the Celestial Empire. The Chinese are very superstitious in matters of this kind, and will not bury their dead elsewhere than at home, unless it is a case of emergency. The Chinese Companies in this city always forward the remains of their employes when possible.

BIGAMY.—Thomas German was arrested last night by officer Fennell upon the charge of bigamy. The warrant was issued upon the complaint of Eliza McClatchy. The case will doubtless be brought up in the Police Court within a few days.

FOUND.—A box containing human bones was found yesterday by workmen engaged in excoavating the lot opposite the Presentation Convent, on Powell street. The box was conveyed to the Coroner's office, and the affair will be investigated.

CORONER'S INQUEST.—Last night the jury in the case of the boy Murphy, who was run over by a truck a few days since on First street, rendered a verdict of accidental death, and found that Mr. McEvoy, the driver of the truck, was in no way to blame.

BONES IN TRANSIT.—The accumulated bones of perhaps 1,200 Chinamen came in by the eastern train yesterday from along the line of the Central Pacific Railroad. The lot comprises about 20,000 pounds. Nearly all of them are the remains of employes of the company who were engaged in building the road. The religious customs of the Celestial Empire require that, wherever possible, the bones of its subjects shall be interred upon its own soil and the strictness with which this custom is observed is something remarkable.

Above:
Sacramento Daily Union June, 30, 1870

Left:
Daily Alta California Dec. 15, 1868

A Rascal Killed by Chinamen

The wild life of these mountains does not fail to bring out many of the hard characters whose doings remind us of old times. Day before yesterday, November 5th, four men, two of them unknown, and two other worthies, severally know as Johnny Kelley and Johnny-behind-the-Rock robbed several Chinese on the Truckee of about \$40, and then crossed over the summit, and half a mile below Summitville they overtook a Chinaman on horseback and took him off his horse and robbed him of the animal and \$47. Next they entered a Chinese ranch near by, the inmates of which were ready for them, and proceeded to go through the Chinamen, who offered the wretches \$50 to be let alone; this offer was refused, and the ruffians threatened the lives of the Chinamen, whereupon they [the Chinese] attacked the robbers with shovels and drove them from the house, killing John Kelly, and battering "Johnny-behind-the-Rock" so badly that he could not escape, and was captured by the Sheriff; the other two were subsequently arrested at this place and have been sent below. The body of Kelly was still lying on the snow where the Chinamen left him, the Coroner not having arrived, and nobody apparently being willing to take any trouble about the poor dead wretch.

Daily Alta California November 10, 1867

From the DSHS Archives the Crampton Album

In the May Heirloom we introduced the Crampton Family Album with pictures of the Cramptons and Crampton Lodge. Last month we included a couple of general Donner Summit pictures but there is lots more to the album. So this month we thought we'd include various ads from 1950 for Summit or nearby Summit tourist businesses. Old 40 on (or near) Donner Summit was a vibrant place in the old days as you can see from the business list on the next page (1949). Then the freeway came and people could go further faster.

DONNER SKI RANCH



ON DONNER SUMMIT

Complete Skiing Facilities:

- Constam "T" Bar ●
- Rope Tow ●

BEGINNER - INTERMEDIATE
and ADVANCED SLOPES

- BAR -- CAFETERIA ●
- SKI SHOP -- SKI SCHOOL ●

For Information
PHONE: SODA SPRINGS 2275
P. O. Box 747, Soda Springs, Calif.

Free Picnic Park

Hampshire Rocks Public Camp is directly across the highway from Crampton's Food Market. There you will find the beautiful South Fork of the Yuba to fish and swim in, picnic tables, rest rooms, spring water piped to the grounds and a wonderful grove of evergreen trees. Plan your next picnic here. Picnic supplies at Crampton's Food Market.

something.. **NEW**



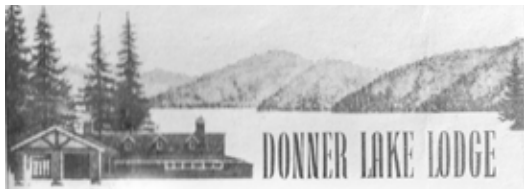
DONNER SKI RANCH

Bar, Cafeteria
and complete
facilities for
skiers

Chalet

ON TOP OF DONNER SUMMIT


LEADS TO DONNER SUMMIT SKILAND



DONNER LAKE LODGE

Year 'Round Rates
(EUROPEAN PLAN)

Double bed \$6.00
Twin bed 7.00
Shower and bath
in each room.

Weekly Rates

Double bed \$36.00
Twin bed 42.00

For reservations write to:

**Donner Lake
Lodge**

P. O. Box 57
Truckee, California
Telephone: Truckee 349



DONNER LAKE LODGE
P. O. BOX 57 — TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA
TELEPHONE TRUCKEE 349

Businesses Along or near Old 40 in 1949 in the neighborhood of Donner Summit. Times have changed.

Donner Rancho, Donner Lake
Don-Lac Lodge Donner Lake
Donner Lake Lodge, Donner Lake
Donner Ski Ranch, Norden
Vanderford's Lodge, Norden
Sugar Bowl, Norden
Hannes Schroll, Norden
Kline's Ski Shop, Norden
Norden Store, Norden
Norden Lodge, Norden

Kiski Inn, Norden
Ski-Inn, Norden
Soda Springs Service Station, Soda Springs
Soda Springs Ski Corporation, Soda Springs
Buek Ski School, Soda Springs
Soda Springs Rope Tows, Soda Springs
Zorich Ski Shop, Soda Springs
Sitzski Lodge, Soda Springs
Soda Springs Hotel, Soda Springs
Ice Lakes Chalet, Serene Lakes
Beacon Hill Lodge, Soda Springs
Aro Ski School, Soda Springs
Shi-Hive Norden
Soda Springs Grocery, Soda Springs
The Crest Soda Springs
Donner Summit Lodge, Soda Springs
Pratt's Garage, Soda Springs
Marrott Enterprises, Soda Springs
Steen's Motel, Kingvale
Griff-Lou Lodge, Kingvale
Kingvale Park Garage, Kingvale
Crampton's Lodge, Rainbow
Rainbow Lodge, Rainbow
Trailside lodge, Big Bend
Big Bend Inn, Big Bend
Cisco Grove Lodge, Cisco Grove
Cisco Grove Store, Cisco Grove
Sierra Gift Shop, Cisco Grove
Yuba Gap Lodge and Ski Tow, Yuba Gap
Yuba Gap Lodge Emigrant Gap
Laing's Ski Tow, Emigrant Gap
Laing's Pioneer Camp, Emigrant Gap
Nyack Lodge, Emigrant Gap
Nyack General Store, Emigrant Gap
Nyack Service Station, Emigrant Gap
Lakeview Lodge, Emigrant Gap
Skyline Lodge, Emigrant Gap
Rancho Sierra Inn, Emigrant Gap
Rancho Sierra Service Station, Emigrant Gap

Soda Springs Hotel

PAUL NORBOE, Mgr.

Restaurant * Cocktail Lounge
Ski Shop * Lodging

On
HIGHWAY
U. S. 40



Call
SODA SPRINGS
2641

Ski Tows * Rope * J Bar
Double Chair Lift in walking distance
take advantage of our mid-week rates:
3 Days.....\$25.00 5 Days.....\$42.50

THIS INCLUDES:

DOUBLE CHAIR LIFT (Unlimited Use)
1 OR 2 SKI LESSONS
BREAKFAST AND DINNER
PARKING AT BASE OF LIFTS



1949 + 1950

From the DSHS Archives

the Crampton
Album

One of the West's Finest Mountain Resorts

Donner Summit Lodge and Hotel

Invites you to enjoy your Spring Skiing
at SPECIAL MID-WEEK RATES:

- Private Room with Radio, Telephone and Bath ●
- Unlimited use of Ski Tows and New Double Chair Lift ●
- Breakfast and Dinner -- Free Parking Facilities ●

3 Days.....\$25.50 5 Days.....\$42.50



HIWAY 40
POSTOFFICE - SODA SPRINGS, CALIF.
TELEPHONE - SODA SPRINGS 2307

1949 + 1950

1949 + 1950

SITZSKI of CISCO

- SKI TOWS
- DORMITORIES
- COFFEE SHOP



call: CISCO GROVE No. 3
write: SITZSKI OF CISCO
SODA SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA
Betty & Tommy Vicencio (Owners)

SKI INN LODGE

American Plan:

(Including Three Meals)

DORMITORIES:

with Sleeping Bag.....\$5.00
with Bedding.....\$5.75

HOTEL ROOMS:

for Two — Per Person.....\$7.00

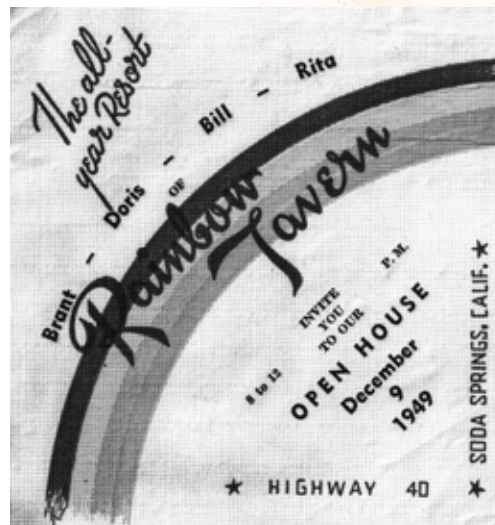
★ ★

FOR RESERVATIONS

Write: P. O. Box 7

NORDEN, CALIFORNIA

Phone: SODA SPRINGS 2272



Steen's SNO-TEL



In the heart of the ski area
on Highway 40

Seven Electrically-Heated Modern
Hotel Units

DOUBLE ROOM:
with Private aBth.....\$6.00

DORMITORIES:
completely furnished for
men and women.....\$2.00

FOR RESERVATIONS:

phone: KINGSDALE PARK No. 2

write: THE STEEN'S Box 720

Soda Springs, California

Ideal for All-Year-Round Vacationing
Elevation 6886 Feet

Soda Springs Hotel

PAUL NORBOE, *Manager*

ON HIGHWAY U. S. 40 — THE OLD DONNER TRAIL

Special Summer Rates

American Plan



\$6.50 per day

(BREAKFAST AND DINNER INCL.)

* * *

For Reservations

Write to . . . or Call

SODA SPRINGS HOTEL — SODA SPRINGS 2641
or contact your local Travel Bureau



Crampton's Lodge

(OPPOSITE HAMPSHIRE ROCKS PUBLIC CAMP)

Postoffice Address, Soda Springs, Calif.

Phone Crampton's Lodge Toll Station

On U. S. Highway 40 (the Old Donner Trail) 86 Miles East of
Sacramento and 54 Miles West of Reno.

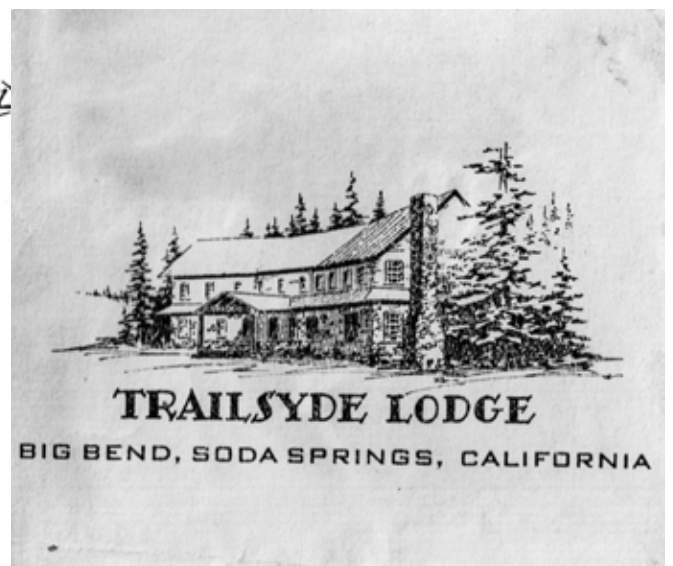
Altitude 5,800 Feet—A Mile Nearer Heaven!

Here is a treat

The article in the album said, "Sunday was usual big day at the Ski Ranch with the Donner Sunday slalom race predominating. The Northern California Ski Council downhill and team slalom were won by Kandahar Ski Club of Sacramento. Little Starr Walton won the junior girls tournament trophy donated by the Sudsy Club of the Sacramento Utility District....."

"Little Starr Walton" today has a house opposite the DSHS at the blinking light in "downtown Soda Springs." She is a founder of the DSHS.

Since the album was put together in 1950 and Starr had not been born for several more decades some kind of time travel must be responsible.



Book Review

Storm

George R. Stewart
1941 349 pages

“From Siberia the wide torrent of air was seeping southwards.” The cold Arctic air ran into warm moist air from the south, “wind drizzle, and showers were now arranged.... From the contact of north and south air had sprung something which had not been... that complex of forces began to develop and grow strong. A storm had been born.” So starts George R. Stewart’s novel in which the storm is the main character.

Storm was a best seller and a Book of the Month Club selection. Why, is obvious. It is a masterpiece and there is some trepidation for the reviewer on starting a review of Storm. How does one do justice to such a work, such a piece of literature?

Storm is a work of fiction. It is a novel but told as if the story was non-fiction. The main character is the storm, Maria, and the story follows Maria’s life, her effects and aftermath. It’s a wonderful telling of the storm and its effects. That’s one reason to read this book.

Another reason is the prose which is beautiful, evocative and sometimes even poetic.

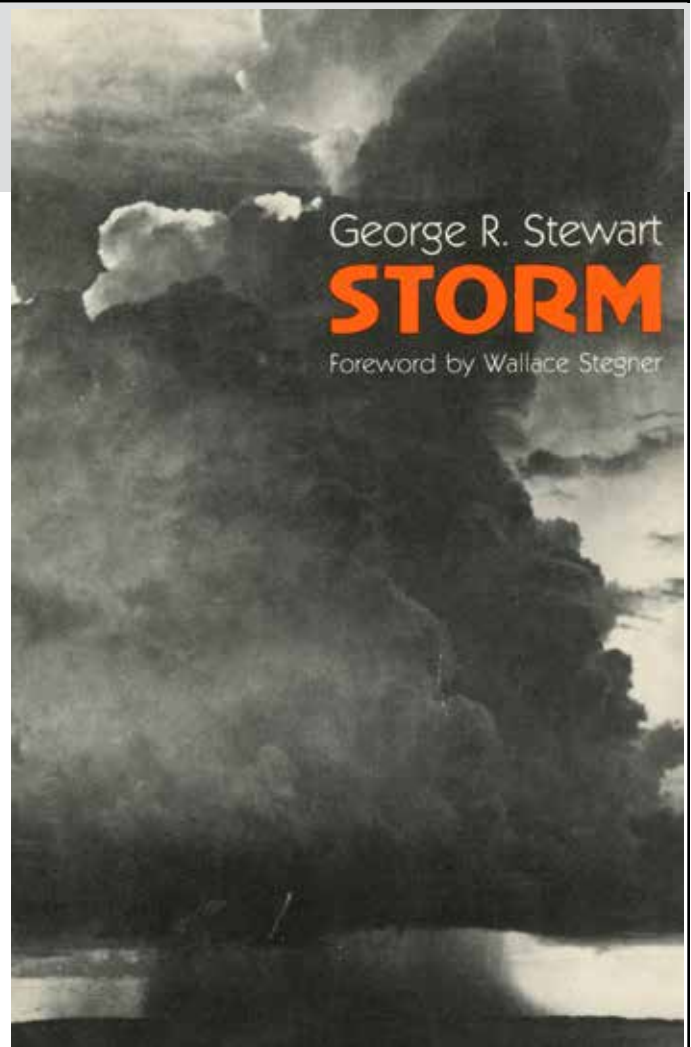
There is a third aspect of this book that makes it good for readers here. Although the storm started across the Pacific and the story tells of the approach and arrival, a large portion of the story revolves around Donner Summit.

The biography of the short life of Maria is told in vignettes. Vignette follows vignette with each little story building suspense and connecting to something larger as the book goes on. The boys’ target shooting and using their last bullet will have an effect later on as will the chipmunk in the burrow and the rooting hog.

Those vignettes, featuring people, humanize the story. The vignettes come in bunches with one in a bunch building on the ones in the previous bunches. Each little story shows a different aspect of the storm’s effects on life and land. Each story builds through the book and some build suspense. Will the couple be found? Will the Streamliner make it? Will the Transcontinental survive the Sierra crossing? Will the dam collapse? Will the road stay open?

All of those alternating vignettes have minor characters in conflict with the storm. There are many because there are a lot of stories to tell: the Load Dispatcher for the Power and Light Company; the Junior Meteorologist, his supervisor, and the Old Master; the road superintendent; the railroad general manager; the Chief Service Officer at the airport; travelers; and the water manager. There are also some more minor characters: the ships at sea, the Clipper navigator overhead, telephone linemen, and a coyote.

The prose is wonderful. “...that great river of wind, the winter monsoon, at work pouring out the cold air from Siberia.” “With work to be done they [plow operators on Donner Summit] were as good-natured as fat puppies.” “With a sudden whir which rose



“Why man, on Donner Pass you figure snow by feet, not inches.”

at once to the all-enveloping roar, the big machine was off. It vibrated and shook and pounded. The heavy windshield wipers seemed to labor frantically. Driver and swamper leaned anxiously forward.”

The description of a city scene as the storm arrives is vivid: “the flower-stand no longer glowed with sun-bright colors; the vendors did little business; they covered the blooms with water-proofs, and hoped for a better day. Newsboys no longer pre-empted the better corners; now they withdrew toward sheltered spots and guarded their papers against the wet.... On the sidewalks fewer people moved along. They no longer strode boldly, heads up and confident faces, as they had a few days before, when the Pacific High ruled the air... Now... they scurried along, uncomfortable, in costumes only partly adapted to rain. Men’s hats, dripping water, lost symmetry and spruceness; below overcoats, trouser legs collapsed damply; shoes lost all trace of shine, or disappeared beneath clumsy rubbers. Pink, green, and blue, women’s raincoats put up a brave front, but the color was infirm and chalky with no touch of gaiety. And below the raincoats, shoes and clammy silk stockings were spattered and muddy. The very faces of men and women were hidden beneath umbrellas; as people passed at the corners, the umbrellas clicked and tangled.”

Besides the main story of the storm some of the little stories tell about Donner Summit: life for the rotary plow operators and telephone operators; the beacon on the crag guiding planes; life at the highway maintenance building at the summit; and clearing Old 40 and keeping it open. Keeping Old 40 open was a challenge, a fight waged with each storm and sometimes the battle was lost, “...he pulled on the cigarette; that feeling of deep depression came over him again. He had lost the road! The storm had been too much. It had worn down the men and beaten the machines.” To add to the challenge there were the stupid chainless drivers, broken shear pins, avalanches, and snowfall.

There are descriptions of Donner Summit in the 40’s too, “Along by Fox Farm [site of today’s Donner Summit Lodge] was a stretch of highway that was in pretty bad shape that night. A rotary was working on it. The men in the rotary could see next to nothing; the flying snow reflected the lights right back in their faces. They were feeling their way along from snowstake to snowstake. Then came a bang, and a jolt, and the shear-pin went.”

“U.S. 40 carried more traffic than any other road in the world.”

After 11 days the storm was done. “On the Pass, where old trapper Greenwood and hawk nosed Elisha Stevens first led the way, a gold sun in a blue sky shone dazzlingly on the fresh white snow. The cedars were dark green columns, powdered with shining crystals. Cars lined the highway. Costumed in red and blue, dark-goggles against the glare, the skiers moved swiftly across the snow... In the ski-tracks the light of sun, refracted among the snow-crystals, gleamed in ethereal blue... the skiers came up to play; but along the highway the men in the plows still worked on.... The road was safe and two lanes wide... On the railroad the trains moved freely, but there too the plows were busy... “ Crews had laid new track to replace the washout that stopped the Streamliner. Telephone crews had repaired the Transcontinental Lead. The chipmunk, “was warm, and had again sunk into a death-like slumber. At French-Bar Dam the water was no longer spilling over the top. Mrs. Martley mended the torn knees of her husband’s pants, wondering what in the world he could have scraped them against [he’d almost been trapped by falling water]. High above the Pass a plane moved from the east. Its metal glittered in the sunlight. It followed the steady hum of the Reno beam. The pilot looked down upon the far-stretching, snow-covered mountains –quiet, beautiful... he saw the highway and the railroad.... made out the faint trace of poles and sires. He passed the air-beacon on the crag...”

**Donner Summit sign:
STOP
MOTORISTS PUT ON YOUR CHAINS.
WITHOUT CHAINS YOU ENDANGER
YOUR OWN LIFE AS WELL AS OTHERS.**

Donner Summit, 1941

“So we come, in less than a century, from the death dogged snow-shoers of the Donner Party to the carefree weekend skiers dotting the mountainsides with bright costumes. Above the place where little Stanton sat to smoke his last pipe, Cisco beacon flashes out to Donner beacon. Where John Denton, plucky Yorkshireman, waited in the snow for death, the streamlined trains slide by. And over that camp where the poor emigrants ate the forbidden meat, the pilots of the wide-winged planes followed the whining Reno beam to Blue Canyon where - turning - they set their last course for the airports of the Bay”

Then & Now with Art Clark



The view of Summit Valley from Emigrant Mountain

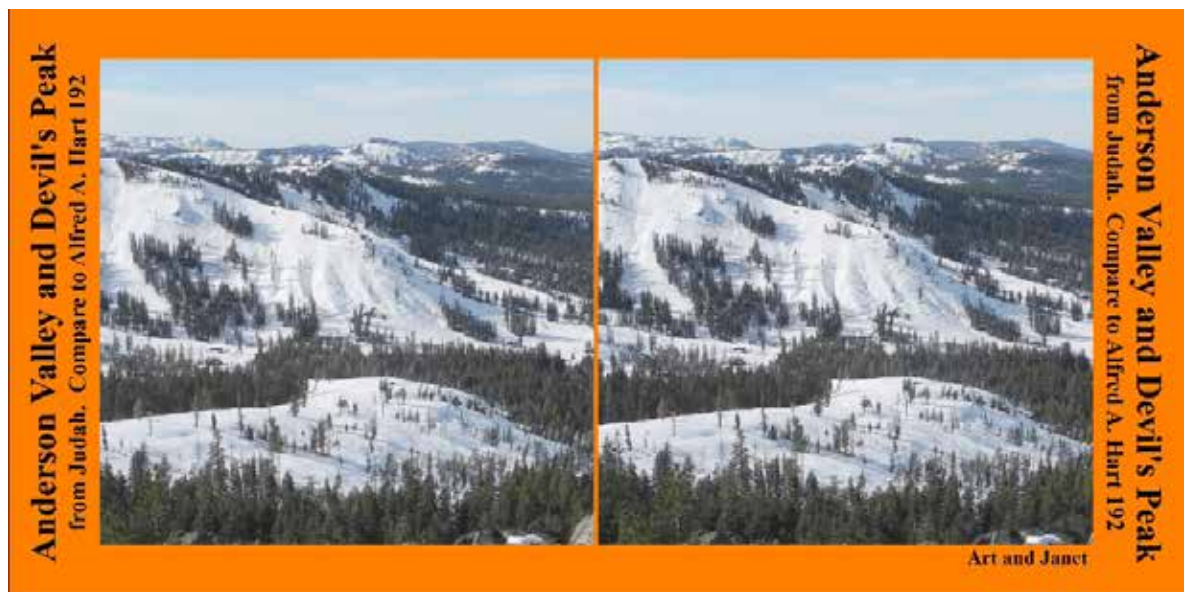
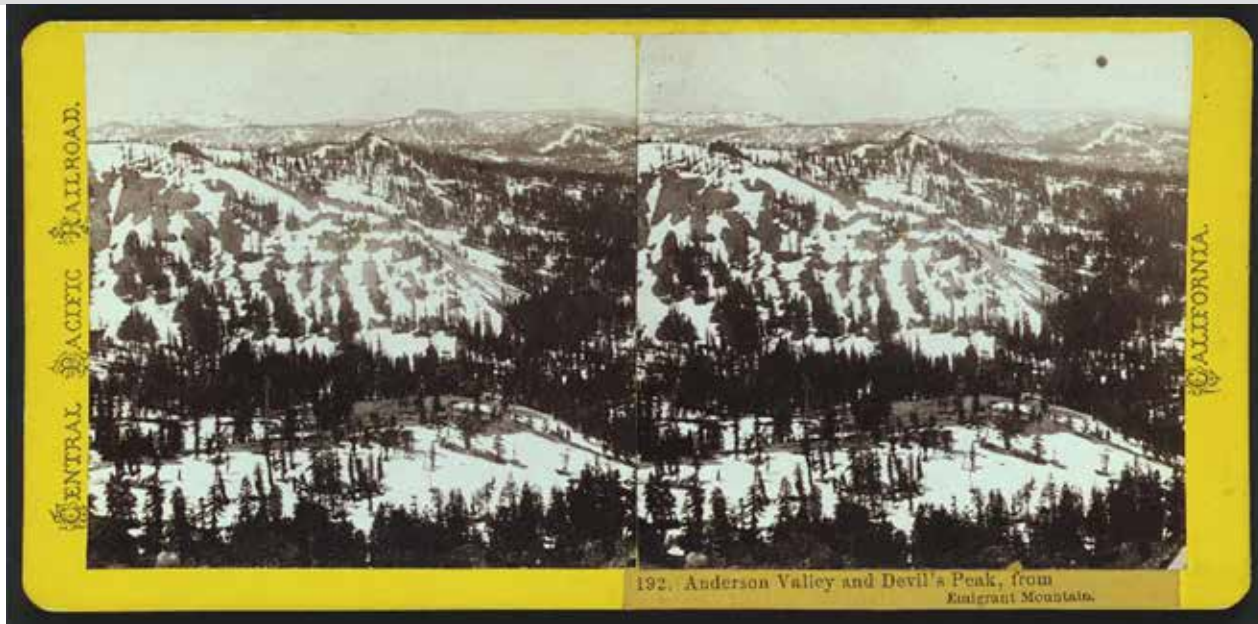
[today Mt. Judah] by Alfred A. Hart, RR photographer for the Central Pacific Railroad about 1867.

Photo location 39° 18.228'N 120° 19.070'W

Look closely at the right side of the valley. There is a faint light line. That is the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.



Then & Now with Art Clark



Anderson Valley and Devil's Peak - 192

This view from the north end of Mount Judah was taken by Alfred A Hart. Visible (L-R) are Mount Disney, Snow Mountain (distant), Crow's Nest, Devil's Peak and Palisade Peak.

Despite the name of the image, Anderson Valley isn't visible without a lot of imagination. It's just this side of Palisade Peak. Next time you ride up the Mount Judah lift at Sugar Bowl, stop just past the lift and look to your right.

Photo location 39° 18.225'N 120° 19.075'W

And the Question Was

Dear Heirloom editor,

Thank you for reading my email. I know how you get hundreds of letters each day and the commitment of your staff to wade through all of those envelopes and read my question is very much appreciated.

In the March edition on page 10 [in a book review of Saving the Donner Party] Linda Cashion shared a page from Patrick Breen's diary. The last sentence says, "...the snow nearly gone from the valleys."

My question: why didn't the Donner Party turn around and go to lower elevations to wait out the storms? The passes were impassible. It was quite clear they were not going to get through until some of the snow melted. They had climbed the mountains and found the snow blocked any ability to make it over the summit. Why didn't they just turn around and get to warmer, dryer areas?

Thank you again for all of your staff's commitment. The Heirloom is great reading on a rainy day like today.

Best Regards, Ken Hall [Serene Lakes]

The Preliminaries

Here at the DSHS our many departments are always scrambling to acquire, digest, and disseminate local history. There are a lot of stories to tell. Our Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) has placed the original Soda Springs Station buildings (stay tuned), explored the largest Chinese railroad workers' camp (June-September '16 Heirlooms as well as some future explorations to other camps), found petroglyphs and grinding rocks, mapped Summit Valley history, walked the Lincoln Highway finding long lost signs, explored the emigrant trail and emigrant rust marks, found Sierra Ski Way signs and Emigrant Trail markers, etc. The museum is open for visitors. The Heirloom publishes the most fascinating history. The 20 Mile Museum crew places signs each spring, retrieves them in the fall, maintains them, and adds to the collection (two new ones just installed). The publications committee develops and reprints a host of brochures and other publications about local history. Hike leaders lead hikes.

Then there is the web crew, sitting patiently by the DSHS computer, keeping up and just recently completely redoing the website and trolling historical resources. They also answer queries from time to time. Some are just about Donner Summit such as is it snowing? Others are more historic in nature. One high school student wrote from Florida asking about the Transcontinental Railroad. Our reply listing our and other sources elicited an "Awesome" as he passed on our email to his group partners.

So it was that not long ago a local eminence in Serene Lakes, Ken Hall, emailed with his query about the Donner Party. The actual email, preserved for posterity, is above. You can note what a polite and clearly upstanding personage of eminence he is in his community.

First, that's a very good question as we'd expect from our readers. It seems to defy common sense that the Donner Party locked themselves into starvation at Donner Lake (or half of them – the other half being at Alder Creek some miles away) rather than just return to the Truckee Meadows (Reno today) for the winter. It being a good question we should answer it. It's a responsibility and we should shoulder it.

Second, though, the question has nothing to do with Donner Summit. So there's a conflict. How to get around our mandate to deal with our local history and leave others' history to others. This occasioned passionate debate. Our mission is clear and the Donner Party was not on Donner Summit. The Donners were not even at Donner Lake (except for a few who passed through and one who died there).

We often get questions about the Donner Party given that we're on Donner Summit and we gently direct people to the museum

at Donner Lake (where, incidentally, Linda Cashion, referenced in the email, works sometimes).

Wanting to satisfy our reader's query caused us to look more broadly at the question. There must be an historical loophole. Donner Summit did not have any Donners and had there been no Donners the pass would probably have been called Stephens Pass (the Stephens Party* was the first wagon train to cross with wagons). The Donner experience sat more clearly in people's minds though. There is the vision of Old Man Keseberg sitting "before the fire... holding in a vice-like grasp a roasted arm and hand, which he was greedily eating..." (Heirloom March, '16 from an 1878 publication). That's a lot more evocative, even if it was untrue, than a successful journey over the summit by the Stephens Party. We won't address the many jokes that go along with Donner Summit such as serving "finger food" at meetings which is really beneath the dignity of a quality publication like the Heirloom. But Keseberg as well as the fact that people in the old days were just like us (enjoying the sensational) are other stories for other times.

There is a relation between Donner Summit and the Donner Party which should bring the Hall Question (now so named for the archives) into our "sphere of influence" and not leave it to other groups like the Truckee Donner Historical Society in Truckee. They've got enough history being so lucky to have the Donner Party in their sphere as well as all of the skullduggery that went with early Truckee.

When the Donner Party first arrived at Truckee's Lake, as the lake was known then, they tried to get up the pass but were turned back by snow. After hunkering down at the lake one group decided to make a bid for freedom. The Forlorn Hope climbed the pass in the snow and experienced incredible hardships on their way to the Central Valley. Only seven survived of the 15 who went over the pass. It was partly the reporting in California of that group's survival that started rescue parties heading for Donner Lake. All of those rescue parties went over Donner Summit. The Starved Camp and John Stark's heroism took place on Donner Summit (see "Heroism on Donner Summit in the May, '14 Heirloom) and the tall stumps (right) recorded by Carleton Watkins as having been cut in Summit Valley by Donner Party members were definitely photographed on Donner Summit. All of the rescue parties came over the summit. On the wider Donner Summit there is the grave of Charles Stanton. He'd gone ahead to Sacramento for supplies and returned to the wagon train even though he had no family ties. He died on the way out as part of the Forlorn Hope. A number of other members of the Donner Party died on or around Donner Summit. Most pathetically, Old Man Keseburg, while being rescued, saw a scrap of cloth in the snow on the summit and discovered the body of his daughter who had gone with one of the rescue parties.

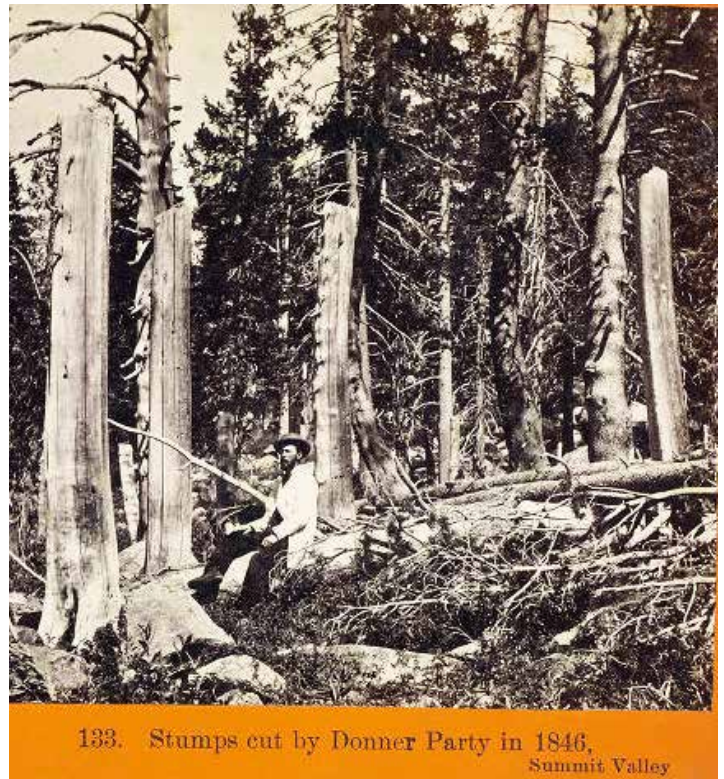
So, there are some connections to the Donner Party on Donner Summit even though they were trapped a thousand feet lower in elevation and miles away. We could answer The Hall Question.

Answer to the Hall Question

There had been some problems with the Indians but I don't think any of the books give that as the reason for the Donner Party not returning to Truckee Meadows (Reno).

We know more than the emigrants did by virtue of our experiences. The emigrants had the experience of back east where the snow did not stay on the ground all winter. It would melt away. The emigrants expected the same thing in California. Moses Schallenberger, who crossed in 1844 and stayed at Donner Lake alone for most of the winter (see Heirloom references above and the January, '16 edition), said that in Opening of the California Trail (Heirloom December, '15).

We've also got to put ourselves in the Donner Party members' mindset. They were exhausted. It had been a hard journey from Reno. They could see storms coming (and in progress) and they could "see" their goal, California, in the distance. Some of the first of the party to get to Donner Lake tried immediately to get up the pass but did not get very far and had to return. They



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

www.donnersummithistoricalociety.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

Individual Membership - \$30

Family Membership - \$50

Patron - \$500

Benefactor - \$1000

Business - \$250

Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

Friend Membership - \$100 Sponsor - \$250

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

tried again and failed. Then the snow started in earnest and did not stop. They were also a bit ahead in the calendar of when the Stephens Party had gone up two years before so they thought they'd just wait a bit, the snow would melt and they'd be able to get over. They were focused on California and by the time they realized there was a long term problem they were snowed in. Even before that realization the idea of giving up hard-earned miles to return to Reno would have been anathema.

Two years before when the Stephens Party left Moses at Donner Lake, he and the two men who were initially with him had no fears about food. They thought they'd keep the larders filled with their hunting successes. They had no idea the snow would drive away the game and make starvation probable.

Finally, the Donner Party was made up of city-folk and farmers. They were not experienced in the ways of the wilderness.

The Donner families exhibited all of the above at the camp at Alder Creek, some miles away from the lake that would be named for them. They just put up tents apparently assuming the stop would be temporary and the journey resumed. They wintered in the tents.

We get an average of 34 feet of snow on the summit in winter. When you tell that to people today they are amazed. The emigrants didn't know that. Another example, to illustrate the inexperience is Theodore Judah. He laid out the route of the Transcontinental Railroad over Donner Summit. He analyzed things carefully and concluded that snow would not be a problem (See the Heirloom for February, '15). They'd just push the snow out of the way and trains would keep going. Snow is a problem and to deal with it 40 miles of snowsheds had to be built to keep the trains running. Not only trains but automobiles and bicyclists used the snowsheds to get around the problem of snow on Donner Summit (see the July, '15 Heirloom).

By the time the Donner Party figured things out it was too late to go back. The snow had already piled up.

The best book about the Donner Party I've found is Ethan Rarick's Desperate Passage (Heirloom for May, '14). On our web page for book reviews there are reviews for a number of other books on the subject from the very first, by C.F. McGlashan, the History of the Donner Party (April, '15 Heirloom). George R. Stewart's book, Ordeal by Hunger (October, '15 Heirloom) is good as an earlier one too.

*See the Heirlooms for 11/13, 7/12, 7/11 (Forgotten Journey video review), 2/09 (Truckee's Trail book review), and references to Moses Schallenberger (5/11, 11/11, 8/13, 12/15,

Margie Powell Illustrated* Hikes, 2016

Margie Powell was the inspiration for the Donner Summit Historical Society. She was also the energy behind the founding. In her memory we've held annual Margie Powell hikes in August.

This will be the fifth annual Margie Powell Hike. This year will be very ambitious for the number of stories to tell. We are going to amble up to Roller Pass. It's two miles uphill and will take a couple of hours because of all the stories. We'll lunch at Roller Pass and admire the great views. Then people can follow the trail back two miles all downhill at their own speeds (unless they want to make side trips to Mt. Judah and Donner Pk.)

This is what's on the agenda this for year's illustrated* hikes:
Chinese RR workers and the camp site you can see from the PCT
(brand new research)

the first rope tow on Donner Summit, Johnny Ellis and
the first subdivision
Theodore Judah and the Transc. RR.
Sierra Ski Trails
Peter Wedell and marking the Emigrant Trail
Van Norden since there's a great view: Dutch Flat Rd. Emigrant Trail, etc.
Forlorn Hope and Starved Camp
The coming of Sugar Bowl
Charlie Chaplin's Gold Rush movie - the Palisades as Chilcoot Pass
The source of the mighty Yuba
Coldstream Pass - the emigrant experience
Roller Pass and the emigrants in 1846
(some people may want to experience it by going down)
The first locomotive over the summit
The transcontinental RR
The Lincoln Highway
Airway beacon and the transcontinental air route
Various stories like the Blue Goose.

And more as we think about it.

*meaning lots of pictures

The dates: August 13,14. 9:30 AM



Margie Powell Hike, 2014 at the petroglyphs.

**August
13-14
9:30 AM**

Meet at the Pacific Crest Trailhead off of Old 40.

Take Old 40 to Donner Summit. Across from Donner Ski Ranch is Sugar Bowl Rd. Take the first left, Old Donner Summit Rd. Drive up to the parking area. If that area is full keep going, take the sharp left and park along the road or further up. The trailhead is at the sharp bend in the road where the porta potty is.

Bring Hat, good shoes, sunscreen, water, camera, curiosity.



Heritage Trail all Summer Long

For more information about this year's Placer County Museums Heritage Trail, start at <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/temporary/heritageTrail.html>

Fan Mail

I want to make sure that my subscription is up to date. How much and when do I need to renew. You guys make Donner Pass alive.

Thanks

Jim Dodds,
Sacramento

Hey, [re: the new website] just terrific and a big improvement.

I really look forward to my Heirloom each month. It's the highlight of my day.

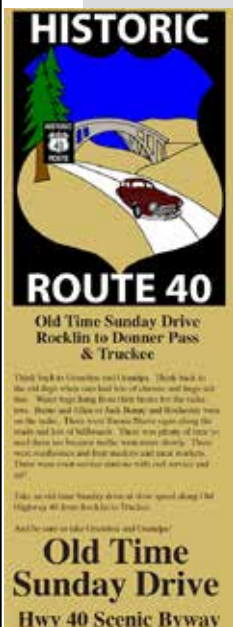
Jane O'Donnell,
Piedmont, Ca.

Recently, I was in a business in Auburn and picked up a brochure on the HWY 40 bypass. This past Saturday, to borrow a phrase from Huell Howser, my wife and I decided to take "Road Trip". We started out in Rocklin and followed the route to downtown Truckee! WHAT a day! Having lived in the area for over 30 years, I thought that I-80 completely wiped out Hwy 40 and the Lincoln Hiway, but NOT so! I NEVER knew about the Rainbow Bridge or many of the other highlights! What a great adventure and the directions were easy for my wife to follow and the signs were great!

We stopped briefly at the museum about 3:30 and the fellow there was involved with another couple, so we moved on. But, no harm on foul!

Thank you for a great adventure and we'll be passing the word!

Sincerely,
Mike and Sue Lauro,
Lodi, CA



[To the left is the brochure Mr. Lauro is talking about: available at the California Welcome Center in Auburn, the State Park at Donner Lake, the DSHS in Soda Springs, and the Summit Restaurant in Soda Springs. The text is also online on our brochures page but the actual brochure is too large to print out.]