

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

August, 2016 issue #96



## Chinese Railroad Workers on Donner Summit - Pt III

### Summit Camp

The Transcontinental Railroad was a mammoth undertaking. Nothing like it had been done anywhere before. The western portion, built by the Central Pacific, was built primarily by Chinese workers. There were Chinese worker camps all along the Central Pacific's route. In an 1867 report from the Federal Railroad Inspectors, "These camps are generally built about one mile apart and consist of store houses, power houses, blacksmith shops, kitchen, eating and sleeping rooms, and stables for mules, horses and oxen. These, with the small buildings erected by the Chinese laborers for their own use, make quite a village." As work moved east the camps were abandoned and new ones were built further along the line. Since the camps were temporary there was not much in the way of permanent infrastructure.

Bret Harte, a famous 19th Century writer, said in Overland Monthly in September, 1869, "Here is a "camp;" but, alas! none of the old style of snow-white canvas, with its memories of refreshing sleep upon fragrant pine boughs; no, it is a Chinese camp, resembling a collection of dog-kennels, which, in fact, it is—each hut hastily made of "shakes," about four feet high by six feet broad, and eight feet long."

The camp at the top of Donner Pass, Summit Camp, was different though. It was in use for four years, from 1865 to 1869 because it took two years to construct the tunnel that took the railroad over the summit, Tunnel 6. Sometime after the completion of the railroad in 1869 Summit Camp was abandoned in favor of Summit Station (see page 7). Besides being in use for longer than most work camps and so requiring more substantial construction, there was also the climate to consider in the building of Summit Camp. An average of 34 feet of snow falls each winter on Donner Summit. Then the wind piles the snow in



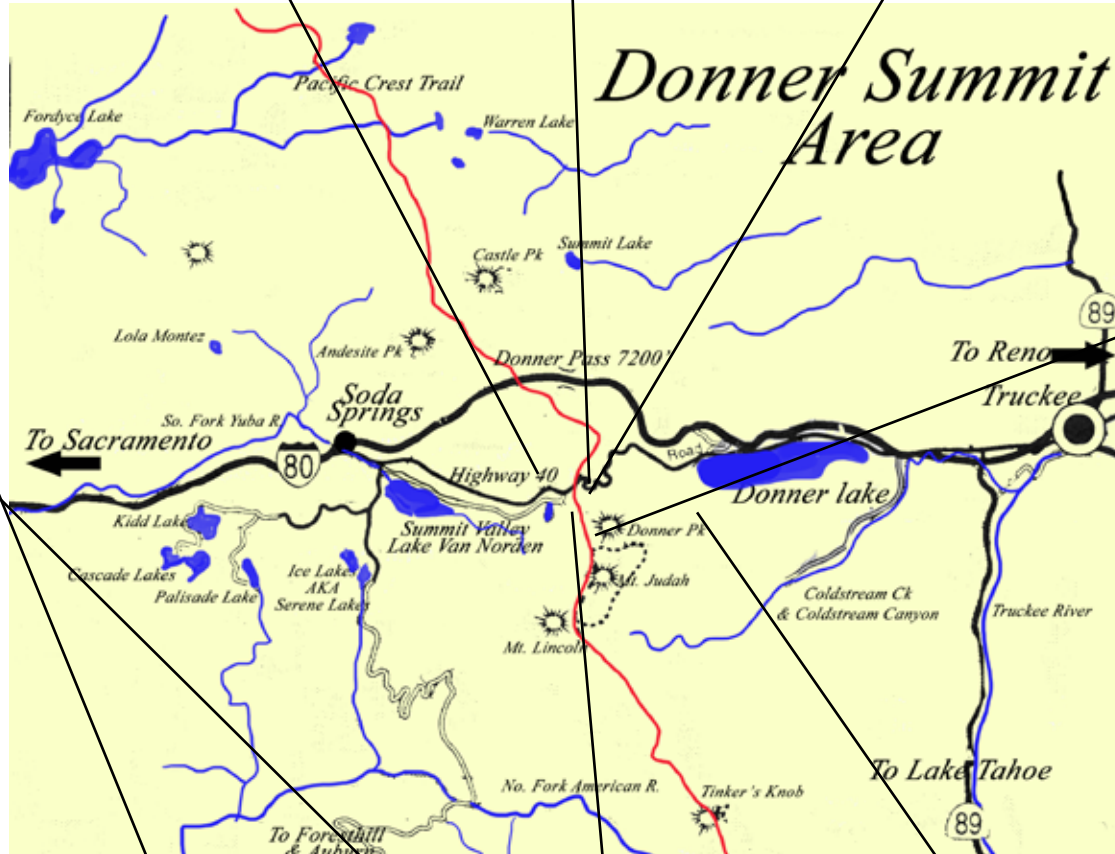
Alfred A. Hart #116 "Camp Near Summit Tunnel" showing buildings in the Chinese work camp called "Summit Camp." The road in the foreground is the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. which would mostly become the Lincoln Highway in 1913

# Story Locations in this Issue

Donner Summit pg 7

Donner Summit Bridge pg 11 and 18

Summit Camp pg 1 pg 8



Margie Powell Hike pg 18

Cisco Grove pg 10

Yuba River pg 17

Shaft House pg 5

Donner Summit Snowsheds pg 16

**Note,** you can see "now" versions of the Alfred A. Hart pictures 196, 202, and 116 in this month's lead article by checking out the Then and Now Sections of our May, '15, August, '14 and July, '12 [Heirlooms](#).

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

high drifts, sometimes forty feet deep. Avalanches can sweep down the slopes bringing danger but also more snow. The quarters for Chinese workers had to be more substantial than what Bret Harte reported. There are a number of old photographs that attest to the more substantial nature of Summit Camp such as the photographs here.

In winter most of the workers besides those working the tunnels were sent up the line (see bottom of page 6) but winter must have been miserable for those who remained. Some of Summit Camp's inhabitants did not see sun for months at a time as they traveled from their quarters through snow tunnels to the work faces in the tunnels. "Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad," a paper given before the American Society of Engineers by the CPRR engineer John Gillis in 1870 described conditions. "The Chinese lived under the snow. Chimneys went up through the snow along with air shafts. Tunnels went from location to location. Store rooms and blacksmith shops were dug into the snow." It was cold and water must have been continually dripping from the snow caves and tunnel ceilings. The winter of 1866 was particularly bad; there were forty-four snowstorms, "We are now in the midst of one of the most severe winters we have experienced. Tunnel portals were buried, Chinese encampments snowed under," said the [Dutch Flat Enquirer](#) on January 26, 1867.

To deal with the snow the workers dug snow tunnels 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 debris could be thrown out. The tunnels had to be continually maintained because the snow roofs would sag. So the workers were not just excavating the rock they were also continually digging the snow and sometimes the snow fell faster than it could be removed.

Work materials had to be lowered down snow shafts, some forty feet tall, and rock debris had to be hoisted up the same shafts for disposal. The Chinese lived all the long summit winters in the snow and it must have been miserable.

Robert Harris visited Summit Camp in 1869 and reported in September issue of [Overland Monthly](#), at Summit Camp there was a little town of wooden buildings. "As sunset approaches, I arrive where the road is less advanced, where more divisions of the army of labor are concentrated; and, tumbling down the granite banks, climbing over the cuts, elbowing my way between

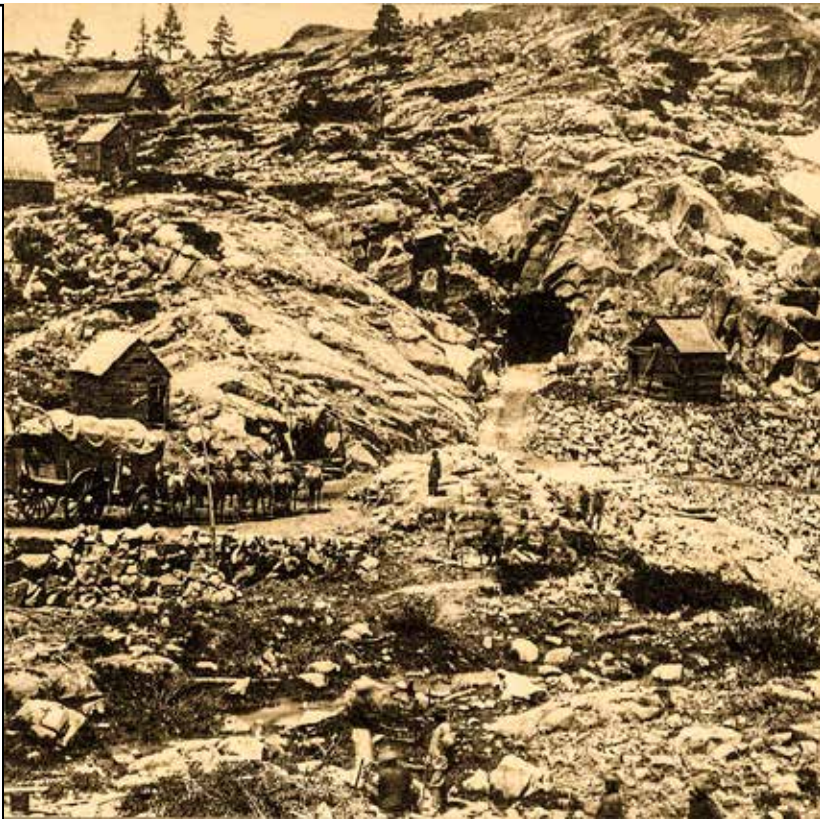


Alfred A. Hart #202 "East Portals of Tunnels No. 6 and 7 from Tunnel no. 8" showing buildings in the Chinese work camp called "Summit Camp." Wendell Huffman of the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City, says that after analyzing the Alfred A. Hart photographs of Summit Camp that he sees 16 buildings (see sidebar below).

"The Alfred Hart photo #202 shows the East portal of Tunnel 6 and the East portal of Tunnel 7. Insofar as the steam from the Old Black Goose is streaming from the stack over the central shaft of Tunnel 6, and no rails are in sight, I would guess that construction is still progressing. That is of interest, as in the photo I see 16 wooden buildings, and not one single tent.

I recall that further testimony in the RR hearings noted that 20 Chinese were supervised by one Anglo, the Anglos worked 12 hour shifts, the Chinese 8 hour shifts, around the clock, in Tunnel 6. Computing four shifts working (80 men) and 160 men resting, those 16 wooden buildings would have held 10 men in each."

Wendell Huffman, Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City



Alfred A. Hart #199 "East Portals of Summit Tunnel and Wagon Road from Tunnel No. 7" showing buildings in the Chinese work camp called "Summit Camp."

crowded workmen, dodging my head from their striking hammers, and my feet from their picks, hurry on" and then he begins to travel the wagon road.

"At about an hour after dark the 'Summit Camp' was reached. This is in reality a small town of one and two story houses, built quite strongly, to resist the weight of winter snows..."

The next day "a day of astonishment, wonder, and great satisfaction was before me. Every moment was full of condensed enjoyment. After feasting my eyes upon the beautiful picture framed in the east, with its foreground of Donner Lake, eleven hundred feet below... the day's visit was begun by a visit to the Summit tunnel of 1,659 feet... through solid granite..."

They had been blasting and working on the road over the summit for some time, "the battle between intelligent force and mountain cohesion!" Harris observed "one rock, measuring seventy tons, [that had been blasted] a third of a mile away from its accustomed place; while another, weighing 240 pounds was thrown over the hotel at Donner Lake – a distance... of two-thirds of a mile. In fact, the whole valley is covered with drops from these granite showers."

Today there is only the site of Summit Camp. Over time there has been a lot of activity nearby which is not good for the preservation of an historical site. The old photographs show wooden buildings but there are no timbers left. Presumably when Summit Camp was abandoned and the railroad needed building materials for other facilities on the summit (see page 7), the buildings of Summit Camp were taken apart and the materials used elsewhere. Later on, a number of summit buildings were built with discarded snowshed timbers so it's reasonable to assume that Summit Camp was recycled too.

A petroleum pipeline (1956) crosses the summit right through or just next to the Summit Camp site. There were leaks in that pipeline (1997 and 2005). Both the construction of the pipeline and the fixing of the leaks brought in machinery and activity that no doubt affected the Summit Camp site. A fiber optic cable (1987) crosses the summit at the Summit Camp site as does the first transcontinental telephone line.\* The Summit Camp site sits near the Pacific Crest Trail which brings a lot of people nearby. There is a trail following the old Lincoln Highway from the summit to Donner Lake (see our brochure with map, "Donner Pass Summit Canyon" on our "Brochures" web page or at the DSHS) which is right next to the site too. The Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway also goes right next to the site. So there have been a lot of people in the neighborhood, at least a few of whom affected the site.

Still, it was the archeological investigations that have affected the site the most. Of course artifacts were removed and the site was studied in order to give us a better picture of the Chinese on the summit. There was archeological activity in 1966, 1967, 1999, 2006, and 2008. In addition at least one amateur archeologist did some sleuthing around and sent an actual archeologist a collection of rice bowls found at Summit Camp. That collection now resides at the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California which we've tried contacting a number of times but with no luck.

The archeologists did, what is called in archeological circles, horizontal surveys so they could cover a wide area in a short

---

\*finished in 1914, first used in 1915 for the Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco – that first phone call included Alexander Bell, Thomas A. Watson of "Watson come here" fame, William Howard Taft and the president of ATT (see the July, '15 [Heirloom](#)) – aren't little digressions like this wonderful?



time. That means no digging was done. One might think then that there's lots more buried, but on Donner Summit there is a lot of granite. There is really no depth to the soil at the Summit Camp site. On the one hand a listing of what was found seems extensive but archeologists, used to finding more apparently, say the reason little was found is due to the shallow soil, lack of vegetation (few places for things to hide), and the activity of visitors in the area.

Archeologists found, though, during their visits: foundation remains for 12 x 25' and 12 x 30' buildings (archeologists were able to correlate the foundation remains of several buildings to ones seen in Alfred A. Hart photographs); bottle glass, primarily whiskey and wine and one bottle of "bitters;" metal buckles such as for overalls; metal buttons showing at least some American clothing styles; Chinese

Alfred A. Hart #196 "Shaft House over Summit Tunnel, American Peak (today Mt. Lincoln) in the distance." Note more buildings that were part of Summit Camp.

coins (not used for money – see sidebar page 7); brass opium boxes; crude heavy porcelain rice bowls (several score found); gaming pieces; Chinese and American tableware; some fine porcelain pieces; window glass; bowls with porcelain glaze from Canton; opium pipe bowls; wok fragments; larger stoneware vessels, jars, and smaller containers; fragments of large flat pans; and the remains of cooking hearths. These last “providing evidence for use of traditional cooking methods and suggesting that communal cooking occurred on the site” which validates historical records.

What was found in Summit Camp and other work camps around the Western U.S. showed that “Food, liquor, medicine, and various novelties were constantly flowing from Guangdong toward America for Chinese workers who could afford minor luxuries from home. Gaming equipment was included in the regular exports to America.” That included coins.

Soil samples near hearths indicate usage of local foodstuffs as well as imported: rice barley, legumes. We know from historical records the Chinese ate a varied diet: oysters, abalone, dried bamboo, seaweed, mushrooms, dried fruits, rice, crackers, vermicelli, salted cabbage, etc. - see the last issue of the [Heirloom](#).

Today there are square nails, pointing to the wooden buildings, some possible hearth configurations of rocks, small pieces of glass, pieces of metal, bits of stoneware, and the outlines of building foundations (see pages 8 and 9). One can stand in the midst of Summit Camp, or on some granite overlooking Summit Camp (as the intrepid members of the MHRT are doing on page 8), and imagine the hive of activity that was Summit Camp as hundreds of workers, scattered along the railroad route, worked to build the first transcontinental railroad and join California to the nation and the world (see the meaning of the railroad in the last issue of the [Heirloom](#)). Next month: Part IV.

## Railroad Work Camps

" ... The company were compelled to build a number of expensive wagon roads along precipitous ridges and deep ravines. ... In opening a new section of line (between Cisco and Truckee) this was the first thing to be done. ... Then the building for the camps had to be erected, and in the mountain regions they are required to be made strong and capable of resisting the pressure of snow so as to protect the inmates from the inclement storms of this elevated mountain region. These camps are generally built about one mile apart and consist of Store houses, power houses, blacksmith shops, kitchen, eating and sleeping rooms, and stables for mules, horses and oxen. These, with the small buildings erected by the Chinese laborers for their own use, make quite a village."

Report to the Secretary of Interior October 7, 1867

# AN OCTOBER 1867 TRIP ON THE CENTRAL PACIFIC RAIL ROAD

[to Donner Summit and Summit Camp]

"Leaving the almost perpetual summer of the plains of California on a pleasant afternoon in October, 1867 I was carried by steam to Cisco, the then terminus of the Central Pacific Railroad,

"...Snow! The idea was quickly brought home by the sight of the hard-working Chinese, in thick coats, with mittens and tippets; buckets fringed with ice, cuts gemmed with icicles, and by a strong inclination to get warm in any way I could.

"... Now I walked through a granite cut where Chinamen were as thick as bees, the various sets of "strikers" keeping in unison with their hammers on the drills and thus unwittingly showing the foreman if there was a laggard...

"The wagon-road below is lined with slowly moving teams, the drivers cracking their whips. The loud sharp reports of blasts as of large rifled guns seem to crack the very mountains. A rush of three score Chinese for a culvert betokens a danger. I am 800 feet from the blast. I watch the effect, bang! bang! bang!.. Grand is the sight. 'Hurry down to the culvert cries a foreman, hurry, the big blast is yet to go.' Down the bank and into the culvert I too tumbled and the next instant, with a sound of thunder, a young volcano showering its stones in the air, rending trees, tearing the ground, and falling all about and over our hiding place. A lucky escape for me...

"At about an hour after dark the 'Summit Camp' was reached. This is in reality a small town of one and two story houses, built quite strongly to resist the weight of the winter snows. Here last year [1866] the snow naturally accumulated on a level, though the greatest depth was thirteen feet. Passing from drifts to slides, the way of these currents of snow is plainly shown by the devastation of the forests. At two places slides occur nearly every ...

"[after a] substantial supper I gladly coiled myself under as many bedclothes as the human body could stand, awakened only in the night by the dull boom of blasts in the tunnel, three hundred feet distant. ...

"From five to ten thousand men were employed all the season. The times of firing along the whole cliff were limited to three a day. At those times, an immense broadside cleaved a little of the shell from the grand mountain-side transforming a goat's path to a way for the iron steed. Let me relate one instance of skillful execution. With one drilled hole, eight feet in depth, 1,440 [cu] yards of granite were thrown clear from the road-bed. ...and three thousand tons of granite were torn from their long resting place, making sad havoc with the sturdy pines beneath. I observed one rock, measuring seventy tons, a third of a mile from its accustomed place; while another, weighing 240 pounds, was thrown over the hotel at Donner Lake-a distance, certainly, of two-thirds of a mile. In fact the whole valley is covered with drops from these granite showers. As the season is short, much of the work has been carried on night and day. Here we saw a retaining wall seventy feet in height, [known 135 years later as the "China Wall"]; there a tunnel of granite."

The Overland Monthly, III, A. Roman & Co.,  
September 1869, 244- 249

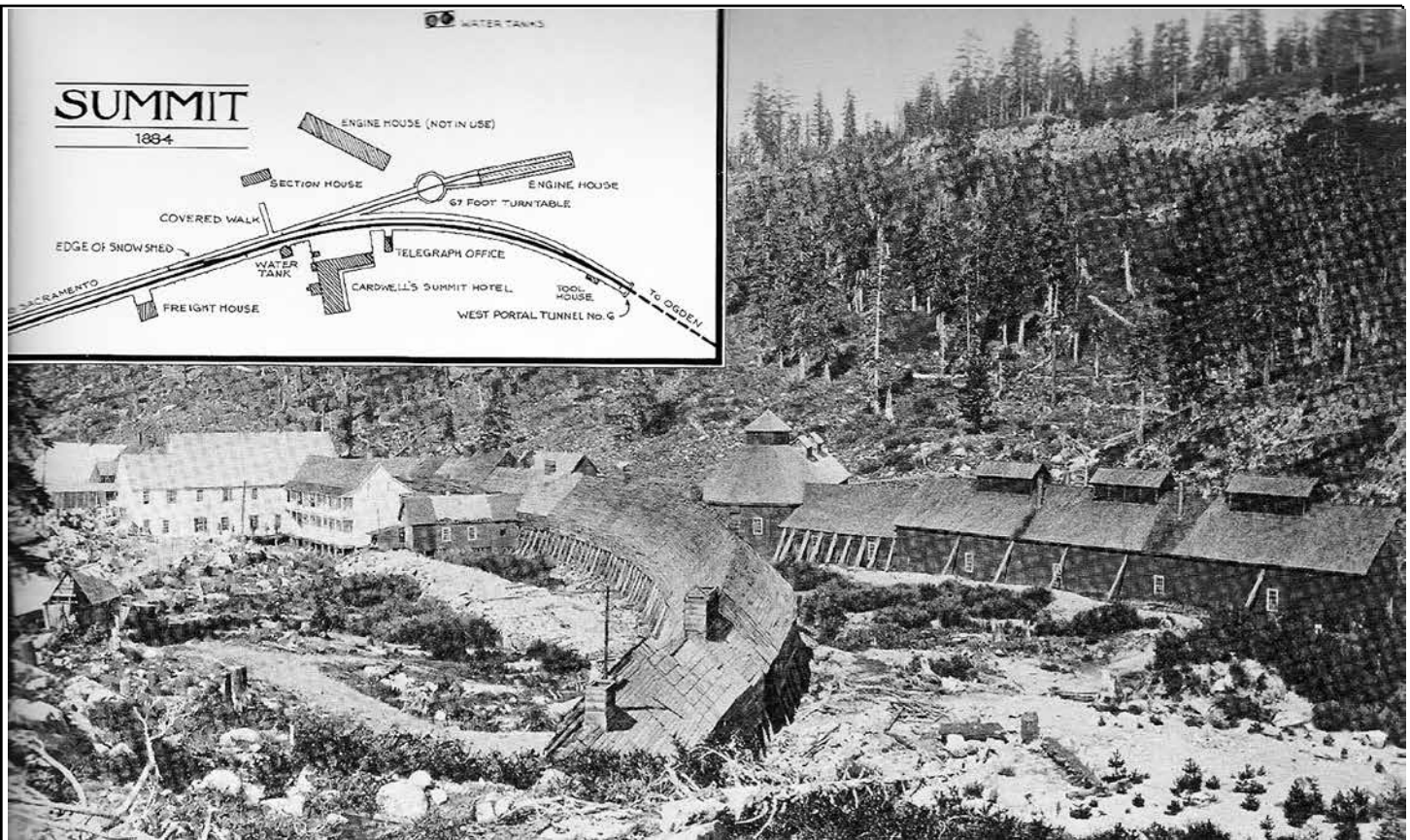
## About RR work Camps:

"In the earlier construction and operation of the Road wooden buildings of a temporary character were put up, but they are now being replaced by others of a more permanent nature. ... "

Department of the Interior,  
Report of condition, equipment &c. of Central  
Pacific Railroad of California  
Received Feb. 11, 1869, Dated Jan. 25, 1869  
From Special Commissioners, CPRR of  
California Lloyd Tevis, Sherman Day, and  
Brvt. Lt. Col. USA RS Williamson  
Page 19:

"There was a good deal of the winter that the road was blocked, and then in those bad winters we did not keep it open. We took our men to Truckee Canyon during those last two winters, excepting the men who could be worked in the tunnels"

The Report of the US Pacific Railway Commission of 1887-88, page  
3150,  
testimony by James H. Strobridge  
The above found by Chris Graves of Newcastle



Summit Camp went out of use in 1869. Railroad maintenance and operations went a bit west of Tunnel 6 to the spot above. The snowshed in the center above leads to Tunnel 6. The building with the cupola houses a turn table for turning the helper locomotives that helped trains get up the mountains to the summit. The white building to the left is the first version of the Summit Hotel which was attached to the snowsheds. What is now Donner Ski Ranch is to the right and Old Highway 40 will cross the face of the hill above the snowsheds and the turn table building.

## Uses of Chinese Coins

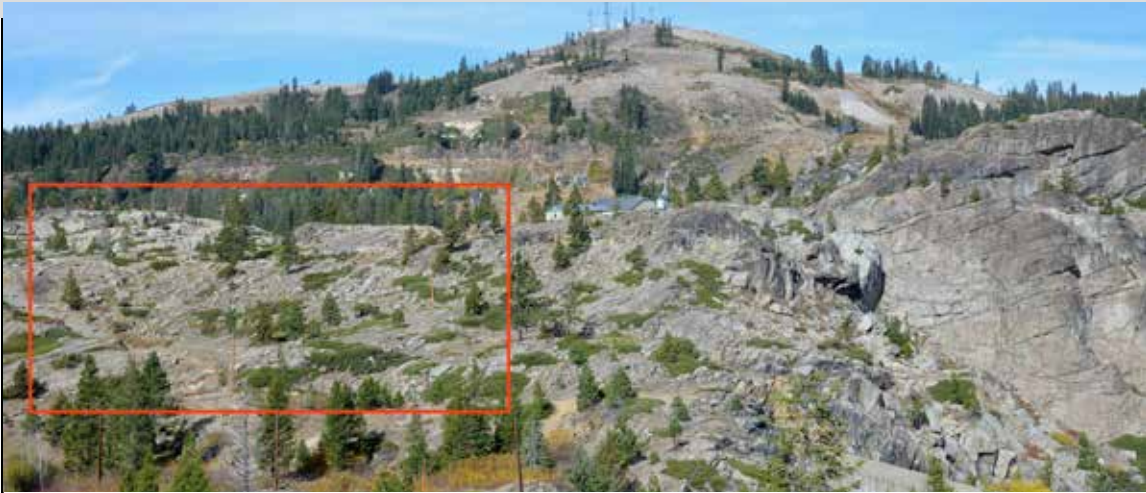
Some of the artifacts found at Summit Camp were Chinese coins. One wonders what their presence signifies. Fortunately, in our investigations, we have some answers which come from an article in [Historical Archeology](#) called appropriately, "Asian Coins Recovered from Chinese Railroad Labor Camps."

We can learn about daily life in the camps from the coins' presence. Coins "were never used as money in North America but were imported for many other uses, such as gaming and counting pieces and talismatic items, and were employed in folk medicine." They were also used for decoration and good luck.

In folk medicine the coins were boiled in water with the resulting tea either drunk or made into a paste. Coins were rubbed on the body to cure "hot" diseases like colds and flu. "Systemic massage" was done with the smooth edge of a coin rubbed in the direction of the spine and then out, parallel to the ribs.

Coins found at railroad worker camps were from the Qing Dynasty, were 18-28 mm in diameter, and had no dates. Coins did show the reign of current emperor by showing not his actual name, but his slogan-like name. That name was chosen in consultation with historians, astrologers, and advisors. The coins are brass or copper.

# Summit Camp Today



Left: Looking north towards Donner Ski Ranch. Summit Camp is in the red square.

Left below: the intrepid Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) above

Summit Camp after a death-defying rock scramble. Donner Ski Ranch is in the upper right.

Below: according to the archeologists a possible hearth used by the Chinese.

Below left and bottom: artifacts left in place.







Pictured here: rocks that formed foundations for Summit Camp buildings. You can still see excavations and in the case of the top picture, the actual outlines of the building.



# From the DSHS Archives



Truckee 23  
Reno 57 1/2  
Sacramento 87 1/2  
Calif. State  
Auto Assn.

These pictures of the Lincoln Highway between Cisco and Truckee were in the Lincoln Highway California Chapter's Traveler newsletter in Spring, '16. Used with permission of the editor, Gary Kinist.

The sign in lower picture that the fellow is consulting (titled "Cisco Grove Camp") reads 87 miles to Sacramento and 23 miles to Truckee (enlarged at right). That places the scene within 2 miles of Cisco Grove. The photo was taken in the early 1900's and predates the photo shown above (labeled "Auburn Road at Cisco Campground") as having been taken near Cisco Camp in the 1920's. Both scenes look quite similar.



# From the DSHS Archives



DONNER SUMMIT

These pictures come from Don Scott author of the book Life and Times of George R. Stewart (<https://georgerstewart.wordpress.com/>) and the article, "Creating Something Where Nothing Was - George Stewart on Donner Pass" in our October, '15 Heirloom. He was also the impetus behind our new 20 Mile Museum sign for Stewart Pk. He wondered why there was not one, given Mr. Stewart's fame and connections to Donner Summit.

The pictures are of Robert Gordon, taken in 1938 on the Donner Summit or Rainbow Bridge. John Lucia found the original photos while cleaning out an old barn. Robert Gordon joined the Army Air Corps in WWII and stayed in until 1976. On retiring he

became a contractor in Hawaii and then retired to Pilot Hill in the Gold Country which is where the barn is.

One day in 1938 Mr. Gordon must have visited the Donner Summit Bridge.



VIEW OF DONNER LAKE



TAKEN AT TOP OF  
DONNER SUMMIT  
ON ROAD TO TRUCKEE  
JUNE - 1938

## What's in Your Closet?

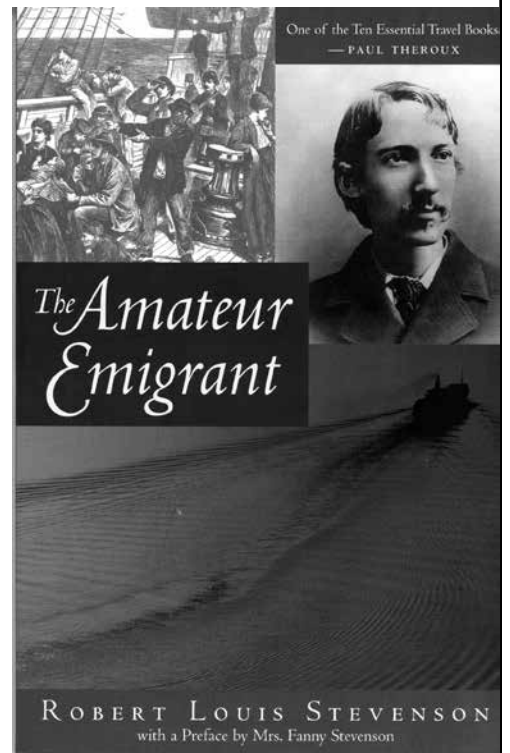
If you have pictures or other ephemera related to Donner Summit history let us know. We'll happily take a donation or we'll make copies.

# Robert Louis Stevenson Crossing Donner Summit, 1879

When I awoke next morning, I was puzzled for a while to know if it were day or night, for the illumination was unusual. I sat up at last, and found we were grading slowly downward through a long snowshed; and suddenly we shot into an open; and before we were swallowed into the next length of wooden tunnel, I had one glimpse of a huge pine-forested ravine upon my left, a foaming river, and a sky already coloured with the fires of dawn. I am usually very calm over the displays of nature; but you will scarce believe how my heart leaped at this. It was like meeting one's wife. I had come home again - home from unsightly deserts to the green and habitable corners of the earth. Every spire of pine along the hill-top, every trouty pool along that mountain river, was more dear to me than a blood relation. Few people have praised God more happily than I did. And thenceforward, down by Blue Canon, Alta, Dutch Flat, and all the old mining camps, through a sea of mountain forests, dropping thousands of feet toward the far sea-level as we went, not I only, but all the passengers on board, threw off their sense of dirt and heat and weariness, and bawled like schoolboys, and thronged with shining eyes upon the platform and became new creatures within and without. The sun no longer oppressed us with heat, it only shone laughingly along the mountain-side, until we were fain to laugh ourselves for glee. At every turn we could see farther into the land and our own happy futures. At every town the cocks were tossing their clear notes into the golden air, and crowing for the new day and the new country. For this was indeed our destination; this was "the good country" we had been going to so long.

Above from July, August September, 1883 of  
[Little's Living Age](#) fifth series volume 43

but it was written in 1879 as "Across the Plains" and was found in many publications. The quote is also in [The Amateur Emigrant](#) which we may review in the [Heirloom](#) one day.



## Twisted Tails

from [High Road to Promontory](#) page 146

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

# Book Review

## Indifferent Stars Above The Harrowing Story of the Donner Party

Daniel James Brown 2009 337 pages including sources

I started with great expectations. Pat Malberg (Lake Mary on Donner Summit and our esteemed proofreader) had recommended *Indifferent Stars Above* with enthusiasm and I wondered why I'd never come across it.

At the same time our web development department was completely redoing our website to make it "responsive," i.e. optimally usable on smart phones, tablets and computers, and more interesting. One of the pages being redone was a book review of *Indifferent Stars*.... It was a very short review by Margie Powell, DSHS founder. Clearly I'd seen it before.

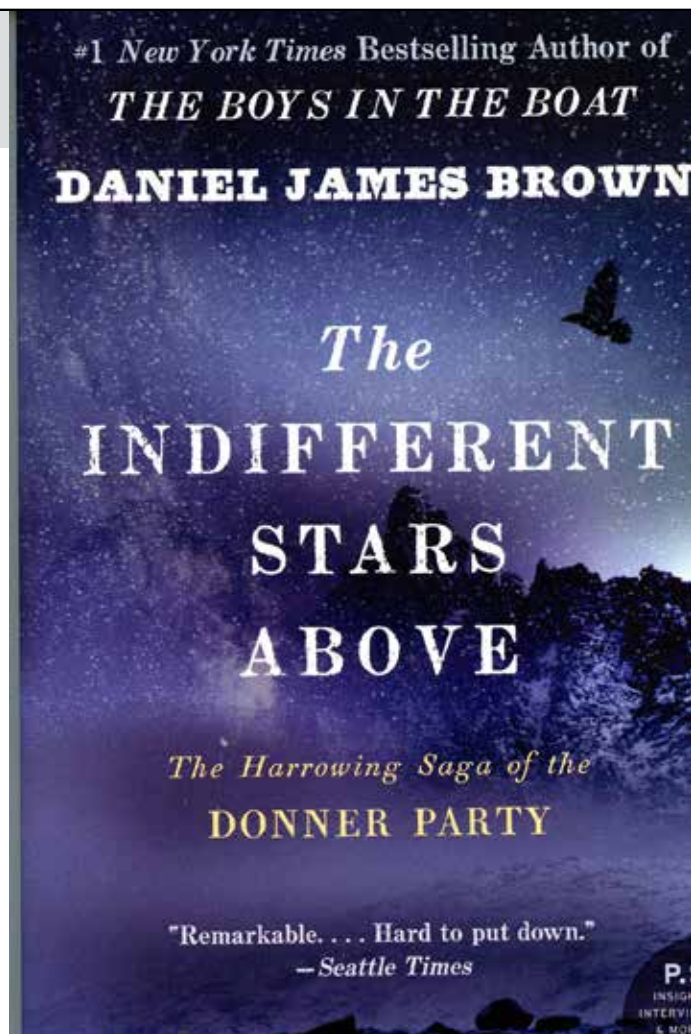
Margie's review recommended the book highly saying she couldn't put it down.

Oh, boy, I thought as I began reading. This would be a good one.

Mr. Brown advertises that the story focuses on one participant in the Donner Party saga, Sarah Graves, so as one begins to read one expects to focus on her. Perhaps, I thought, this will be a fictionalized account of the Donner Party highlighting the experiences of Sarah, a newly married 21 year old. That would be like *Truckee's Trail* (*Heirloom* February, '09 - good book) is to the Stephens Party.

Mr. Brown has done a lot of research on this book reading a large number of books, given as sources at the end. He also retraced the steps of Sarah Graves from Illinois to Donner Lake to California immediately after the tragedy, later in life, and then to where her grave ought to be. The story starts

"At the far end of the lake stood a great jumble of granite cliffs, an imposing rock wall squatting squarely in their path west, rising more than eleven hundred feet above the level of the water. They had never seen anything like this in the Rockies or in the Wasatch nor anywhere in their lives. There was a slight notch in the southern end of the wall, the pass through with they were supposed to travel, but notch or no, the thing looked utterly impassable for wagons, even under the best of circumstances. To make matters worse, every ledge and crevice and possible foothold on the face of the cliffs was already laden with deep drifts of snow." Pg 113-4



with Sarah having to make a decision. Should she stay in Illinois with her beau and never see her family, including eight siblings, again or go with her family and give up the beau, Jay Fosdick? This and the many places in the book where the focus is on Sarah humanize the story beyond that of a simple recitation of facts as most of this kind of book do.

The family left Illinois after Franklin Graves, Sarah's father, sold his land for \$1500 and hid the money in holes augered into one of their farm wagons. Little facts like that are interesting. Sarah and Jay accompanied the family west as newlyweds.

Also interesting are Mr. Brown's descriptions of what life must have been like on the journey across the continent. In researching his book Brown covered the territory in person as well as in sources. Life was hard, "Mud was their constant companion- it squelched under the heavy feet of the oxen, it plastered the withers of their saddle horses, it flew out from under turning wagon wheels, it splattered their clothes and their hair and their faces. They scraped mud from their boots, they daubed it from their eyes, they combed it out of their hair, they dug it out from

under their fingernails, they tasted it in their food, and they cursed it all the while.” That was maybe the smallest of their problems and is an example of Brown’s imagining.

There’s lots more information pertaining to the journey to set the stage after the family left Illinois: Sutter’s background, President Polk and the Mexican War to put things in context, Lansford Hastings and his contemporary and later activities, supplies needed for a trip to California, advice, etc.

One piece of advice came ironically from Lansford Hastings’ book, The Emigrants’ Guide To California and Oregon which we’ll review in a coming Heirloom in case you need advice on your way to California. He told emigrants to begin their journey no later than the beginning of May “after which time they must never start, if it can be possibly avoided.” An “Impassable mountain of snow” could detain one until spring or “perhaps forever.” That’s foreshadowing. The Graves left in late May.

Brown imagines activities on the trail. Evenings a fellow would get up on a tail gate and dance. “Two by two, boys and girls would get up and pull off their boots and begin to dance, circling and wheeling around the fire... their warm hands holding other warm hands,... Tune after tune would fly off the fiddles – fast, hot tunes that swirled though the night

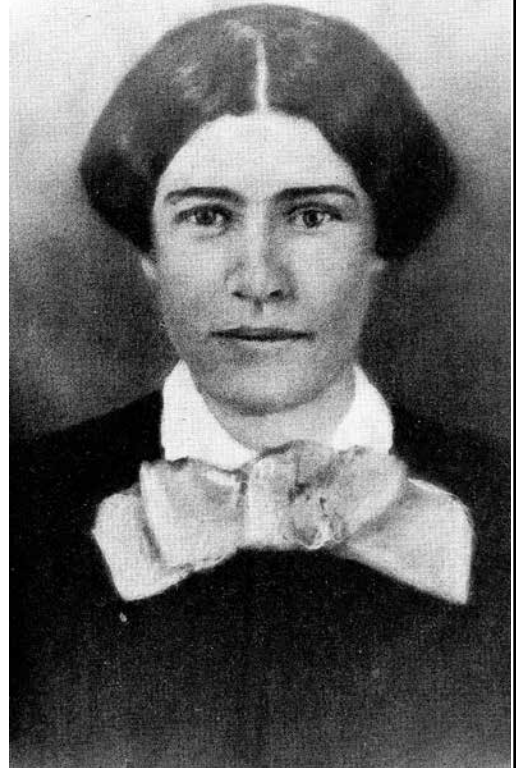
“Sarah and Jay, exhausted by what they had just endured, lay down, too. They drifted toward fitful sleep in the eerie, waving light of the burning pine snag. A few hours later, the leading edge of a new storm slid in over the jumble of granite peaks just to the west of them. Snow began to spiral silently down out of an utterly black, featureless sky. One by one, feathery flakes land on cold blankets and buffalo robes, on sweat slicked hair, on shoulders turned to the sky, on soft cheeks – each flake delicate and slight, but each lending its almost imperceptible weight to the horror of what was about to happen.”

Pg 116 one of the escape attempts prior to Forlorn Hope

air... Older folks... would drift toward the fire to watch... and join in, flinging out their arms and legs like drunken chickens... Somebody would start singing, and a chorus would join in,... boisterous sea chanteys, sweet love songs, uplifting spirituals,....”

Then Brown sometimes imagined the personal level. There was guard duty each night and Jay drew his duties. Since his wife, Sarah, had no children, she could join him, “The moon had waned to a thin crescent... When they were sure that it was safe, Sarah and Jay could sink in to the prairie grass, lie on their backs, listen to the crickets, stare into the immensity of the heavens, count falling stars as they streaked across the skies,

ponder what such things meant. The could pull each other close, brush warm lips, and... lost in each other and in the vastness of the dark prairie night.” Given the troubles with Indians stealing cattle and horses, detailed later, one hopes Jay and Sarah did not do guard duty like that but it makes for a good story



giving the human element to the coming drama. If the reader identifies with the character then the character’s later travails or literary conflicts will be felt more strongly.

That said, most of the book is the description of Donner Party troubles much like others have done. Although Sarah is advertised as the focus at the introduction, the emphasis of the early part of the book, and highlighted the “In the Years Beyond” chapter at the end, most of the book is about the general experience of the Donner Party – the rendition of what happened. To keep up the Sarah Graves focus Brown occasionally throws in what Sarah must have been doing at some point. Even the journey of the Forlorn Hope, the group that escaped Donner Lake to go for help, does not focus on what must have been Sarah’s experiences. Brown could have accomplished his focus better had he retold the story as imagined from Sarah’s point of view. He felt, though, that he had to tell the Donner Party story too. That took away from Sarah’s experiences.

That’s not to say the book is not good; it’s just not what was expected. Brown does an admirable job of describing the plight and experiences of the Donner Party. He delineates the problems: arguments, possible murder, murder, abandonment, Indian depredations of livestock, Stanton’s and McCutchen’s going ahead for help, death in a fight, death by accident, and snow. This is all familiar to those who know the story and well told for those who don’t. He tells of the heroism of some like John Stark and Charles Stanton, the mendacity of some like the fourth relief party, Starved Camp, the Forlorn Hope, etc.

He enhances that with asides about what was going on in California, hypothermia, starvation, snow blindness, calories needed by people in the situation and calories supplied by dried beef, the winter of '46 in other places, social issues like childhood, PTSD, cannibalism in history, etc.

Of course the story ends as it really did and there follows a strength of the book, what happened to the characters afterwards. Given the sometimes focus on Sarah Graves/ Fosdick the very complete story of her life after the Donner Party is very interesting and leaves the reader wondering what happened to Sarah after the winter of '46. She lost both parents in the Donner Tragedy and was left with the care of her siblings. She had no money and no prospects. She was in a strange land. What happened afterwards is really interesting.

Also interesting are Brown's thoughts on things as he retraced Sarah's steps. He considered himself and his own daughters who were Sarah's and Sarah's sister Mary Ann's ages. Could they have done it? "I wanted to see if I could intersect Sarah's trail, to see if it was still visible. Millions of salt crystals glittered and shimmered and crunched beneath my feet as I walked. But it was hot, and after about half a mile the flare of the sunlight off the salt had narrowed my eyes down to sweaty slits. A quarter of a mile farther on, I'd had enough - my eyes were painfully dry, my head was throbbing, and I felt vaguely nauseated.... I started up the car, turned on the A/C, put my fact to one of the vents, and eagerly sucked up the cool air. My God, I thought, those people were tough." They couldn't come back to the car and the A/C. when they were tired. They kept going hour after hour, day after day for a couple of thousand miles.

If you have not read about the Donner Party this is a good book. If you have a good knowledge of the story much of this book is a repeat. There is not enough of a focus on Sarah Graves or the asides to make reading about the Donner Party worthwhile. There is no new ground broken and there is so much else to read.

One of the good things about reading others' books is when one can look through their sources. That sometimes opens up new avenues for exploration. This book has a long, pages long, list of sources. Two websites are of interest:

Pg 152

We had a very slavish day's travel, climbing the divide. Nothing of interest occurred until reaching the summit. The scenery was too grand for me to pass without notice, the changes being so great;

Walking now on loose snow, and now stepping on a hard, slick rock a number of hundred yards in length. Being a little in the rear of the party, I had a chance to observe the company ahead, trudging along with packs on their backs. It reminded me of some Norwegian fur company among the icebergs. My shoes were ox-bows, split in two, and rawhide strings woven in, something in form of the old-fashioned, split-bottomed chairs. Our clothes were of the bloomer costumer, and generally were made of flannel. Well I do remember a remark one of the company made here, that we were about as near heaven as we could get. We camped a little on the west side of the summit the second night.

[www.donnerpartydiary.com](http://www.donnerpartydiary.com)

[www.utahcrossingroads.org/donnerparty](http://www.utahcrossingroads.org/donnerparty) has a "new light on the Donner Party."

One link, A company of emigrants in the mountains of California by Merryman, in the [donnerpartydiary](http://donnerpartydiary.com) site also led to many primary sources.

pg 285 the author on Donner Summit:

I was frankly stunned by the beauty of the place – the blue lake below me was just turning to violet in the early-evening light; the snowy peaks surrounding it were tinted gold and pink in the alpenglow. Taking in the view, I recalled how Mary Ann Graves had stood near this same spot and, even though she was embarked on a life-and-death endeavor, pause to marvel at the sight of so much grandeur encapsulated in one vista.

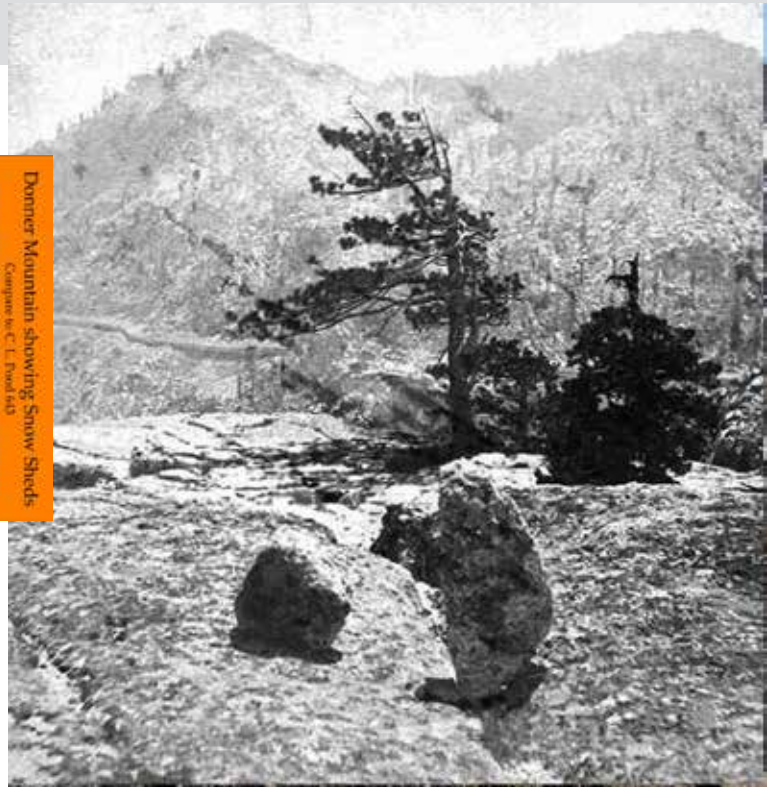
## Note:

You have noticed our monthly book reviews. You might want to do some reading of your own.

Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Saylor has a large collection of books for perusing, buying, or checking out.

You might even want to do a review for us.

# Then & Now with Art Clark

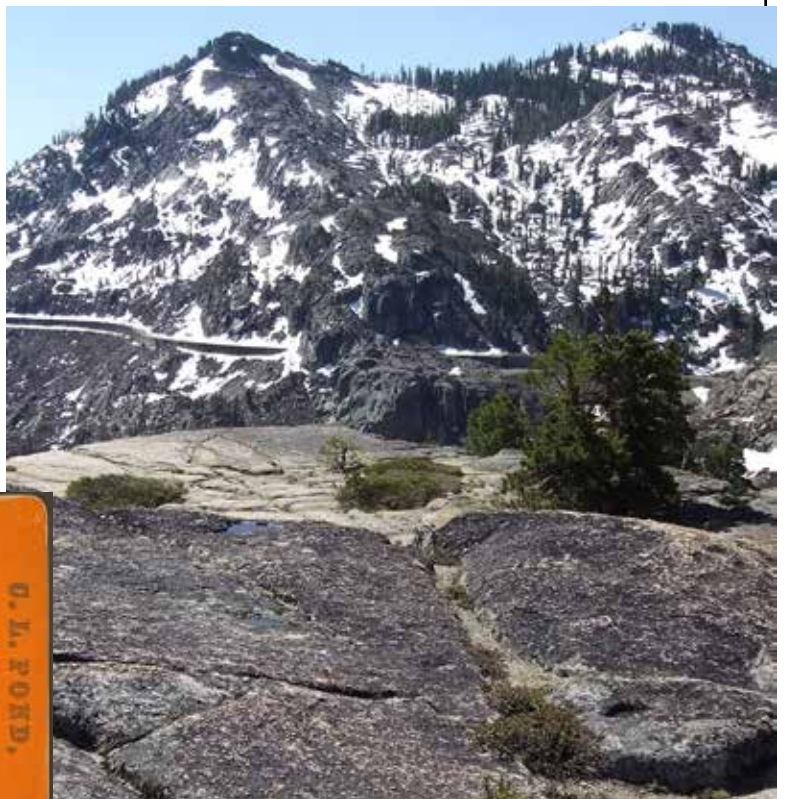


C. L. Pond 643 -  
Donner Mountain showing  
Snow Sheds -

Between Stewart Peak and Mount  
Stephens, this knoll provides a good  
view of the snow sheds below Donner  
Peak and Mount Judah.

The foreground standing rocks are no  
longer there but the cracks in the granite  
remain, along with the weathered juniper  
on the right. Wonder how old it really is?

Photo location 39° 19.413'N 119°  
19.413'N





# Then & Now with Art Clark



Alfred A Hart 104 -

## Yuba River Above Cisco.

Getting men and supplies up to where they were needed was a challenge for the railroad. The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road was the solution. Rock walls were built and filled along the canyon where necessary. This section is just west of Big Bend and can still be walked today. Just past here, heading west, the road disappears into Interstate 80.



Photo location 39° 18.256'N 39° 18.256'N



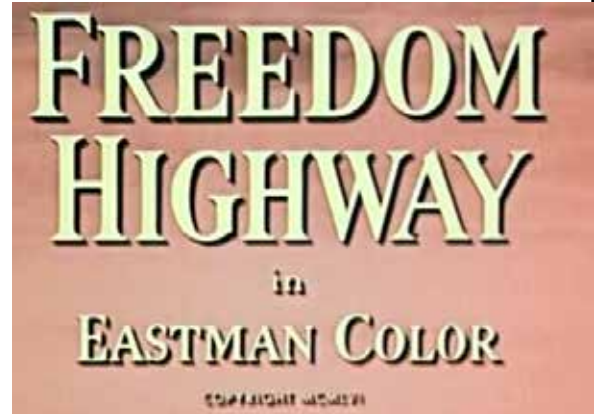
Here's a bit of fun miscellany.

## Freedom Highway - Down Freedom Road

Don Scott, author of the biography [Life and Truth of George R. Stewart](#), who visited our pages with an article in the October, '15 [Heirloom](#) ("Creating Something Where Nothing Was"), and who provided the impetus for our 20 Mile Museum sign for Stewart Pk. (see the October, '15 [Heirloom](#), our web pages or the sign in person on Donner Summit just above the bridge) sent along the link below.

It's a 30 minute commercial for Greyhound Bus filmed in 1956 replete with all the patriotism of the era. It starts with a wide-eyed Boy Scout, Tommy Kirk (of Walt Disney fame) taking a west to east cross-country bus trip to Washington D.C. People used to ride busses in the old days, the passengers are all dressed up, the bus is very comfortable and friendly, and the bus stations are immaculate. There's some interest generated with some character driven plot elements including a mysterious stranger, a cynical father, a Philadelphia Eagles football player, a guy named Waldo, a wavering prospective bride, and the Congressional Medal of Honor. Tommy is wide-eyed about all the history, elements of which many bus passengers have to share with him, and stories and patriotism are emphasized. It's a classic '50's period piece. Interwoven among the plot elements to illustrate U.S. history are snippets from old movies and television shows. There's also a lot of 50's television or movie type music like that about the Alamo and, of course, dramatic music.

Relevant for us is that just after the Pony Express segment the scene switches to the picture here. A perceptive viewer will note the bus is going in the wrong direction for a trip that started on the El Camino and went through San Francisco on its way to Washington D.C. but that's a small nit to pick (as is that they go past the Alamo then up to Chicago and then down to the Florida Keys on their way east from San Francisco to D.C.). The picture here is the Donner Summit or Rainbow Bridge in action in 1956 when it was only 30 years old and 30 years before its renovation. Check out our article index pages for full-length movies featuring Donner Summit in at least bit parts.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sabQjiP4gY4>

## Canadian Snow Shoes

Also from [High Road to Promontory](#)

Canadian snow shoes but soon abandoned for Norwegian each a strip of light wood ten to twelve feet long, four inches wide, and an inch and a quarter thick in the center; they taper in thickness towards the end, are turned up in front, and grooved on the bottom.

There is a broad strap in the middle to put the foot under and a balancing-pole to steady, push, and brake with. The latter will be seen as all-important, as a speed of twenty-five to thirty miles an hour is often attained on a steep hillside.

# 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 for this 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.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/temporary/heritageTrail.html>

### Fan Mail

"Editor Oudegeest" (Bill),

THANK YOU so much for the latest issue of "The Heirloom" - It is an organized and well written publication. You should be commended for your efforts.

My wife is both an Editor and Author for our local Tuolumne County Historical Society (TCHS), Quarterly Newsletter "The Chispa". She really appreciated your writing as well as; layout and presentation of the variety of pictures and news clippings - She knows the challenge of keeping with a format and specific number of pages.

After talking with Norm Saylor, we joined the DSHS in the summer of 2015, sometime around that time, I changed my Internet Service Provider (ISP) and e-mail address, thus missing "The Heirloom" Newsletters from 2015.

The wife and I are trying to build a small library at our Serene Lakes Family Cabin (Lots of leisure time, so something to read regarding the surrounding area). We have your "Donner Pass" book (From Norm) and several publications dealing with Hwy 40 and historic Southern Pacific operations over Donner Pass. I was wondering if it would be possible to obtain BACK issues of "The Heirloom" so we could place them in a 3-ring binder as something special for our library.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Donn Marinovich & Sherrin Grout  
Columbia, California

### Editor's Reply:

Reader Marinovich,

The editorial staff of the Heirloom is appreciative of your Encomia and happy you enjoy our local history.

Of course back issues are available and for free. Go to our website and click on the "Heirloom Newsletter" link. Choose a year and click. The contents of each issue are listed. Click on the issue you want the PDF will download. Enjoy reading the 95 issues previous to this one.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

Membership

I/we would like to join The Donner Summit Historical Society and share in the Summit's rich history.

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME(S) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ New Membership

MAILING ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Renewing Membership

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Individual Membership - \$30

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

\_\_\_\_ Family Membership - \$50

\_\_\_\_ Friend Membership - \$100

\_\_\_\_ Sponsor - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Patron - \$500

\_\_\_\_ Benefactor - \$1000

\_\_\_\_ Business - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_

Learn secrets of the Sierras as you hike with local historians.

DONNER PARTY HIKE  
OCTOBER 8 & 9, 2016



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[info@donnerpartyhike.com](mailto:info@donnerpartyhike.com)  
[donnerpartyhike.com](http://donnerpartyhike.com)



PRODUCED BY JUST IMAGINE MARKETING AND DESIGN COLLABORATING WITH DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

THANK OUR SPONSORS: Best Western Plus Truckee-Tahoe Hotel, Donner Lake Village Resort, Donner Memorial State Park, Donner Ski Ranch, Hampton Inn and Suites Tahoe-Truckee, Inn at Truckee, Tahoe Trail Bars, Truckee Chamber of Commerce, Truckee Donner Lodge, Wild Cherries Coffee House.