

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

March, 2016 issue #91

Women Crossed Donner Summit Too

People have been crossing Donner Summit for thousands of years. The first emigrants crossed it to improve their lives as did later emigrants using the first transcontinental railroad and then the highways.

Once personalized motor vehicles, automobiles, motorcycles and even bicycles became available, people started to travel for adventure and pleasure. It was not easy initially for automobilists, motorcyclists or bicyclists and they were mostly men with lots of testosterone.

In the March, '15 [Heirloom](#) we covered Thomas Stevens who was the first to cross the Sierra, cross the country, and go around the world by bicycle. We covered George Wyman (June, '14 [Heirloom](#)) who was the first to cross the country on a motor bicycle in 1903. Alexander Winton was the first to cross the Sierra by automobile in 1901 (also the June, '14 [Heirloom](#)).

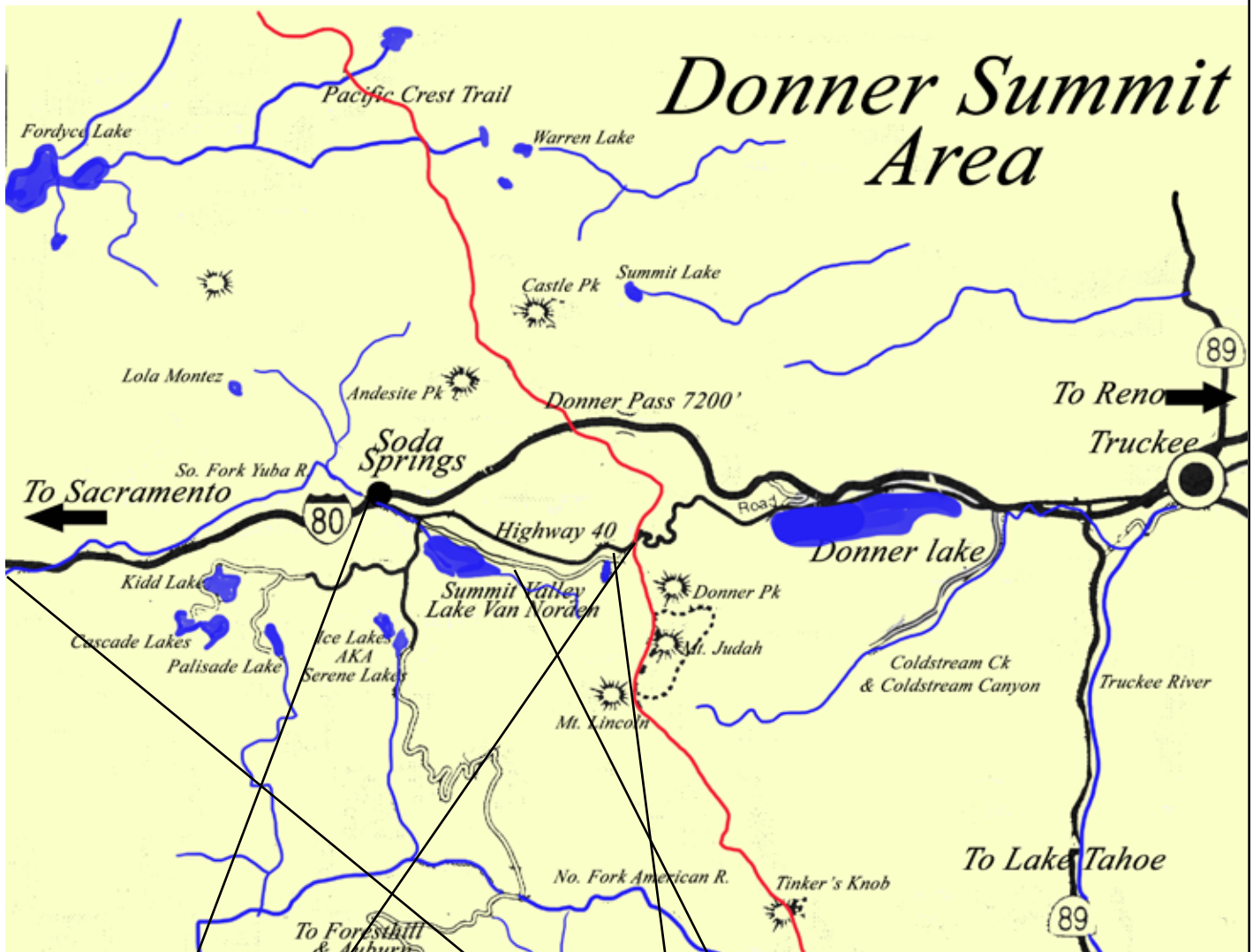
There were also women though who crossed Donner Summit. Anita King (February, '15 [Heirloom](#)), a movie actress, was the first to cross the country unaccompanied (in her car) but accompanied by a film crew that filmed footage for a 1915 movie, *The Race*. She crossed the country in 48 days. The next year Amanda Preuss (also February, '15 [Heirloom](#)) crossed the country unaccompanied in her car and unaccompanied by a film crew in 11 days.

It was the women motorcyclists who were really adventurous. They had no cars to camp in and had even less protection from the elements (the first autos had no windows or tops to keep out the elements).

The Van Buren sisters were not Victorian ladies. They boxed, swam, ice skated, canoed, etc. and won awards for their efforts. In 1916 they saw America heading for war and wanted to be motorcycle dispatch riders for the Army. To get publicity to help ready America for war and to bolster the standing of women for Army duty, they decided to ride across the country. They rode up Pike's Pk, experienced heat, storms, rain, washouts, wrecked bridges, landslides, and sometimes got so tired they fell asleep while riding and fell over in the mud. They crossed the country and Donner Summit. They did not get to be motorcycle dispatch riders in WWI.

Most endearing maybe was Effie Hotchkiss, who must have been a "pistol." As a girl she baked weekly cakes for the neighboring fire dept. who were supposed to be helping her become a lady but the lessons didn't take given her purchase of one motorcycle after another and her attempted elopement. Then she got the idea to ride across the country to San Francisco to the Panama Pacific Exhibition in 1915. She decided to take her mother with her.

Story Locations in this Issue



In This Issue

Fox Farm pg 2 (right where Donner Summit Lodge is today at the intersection of Old 40 and I-80.

Donner Pass Through the Seasons pg 13

Summit Valley stumps pg 7

Mud Lake pg 12

picture pg 14

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

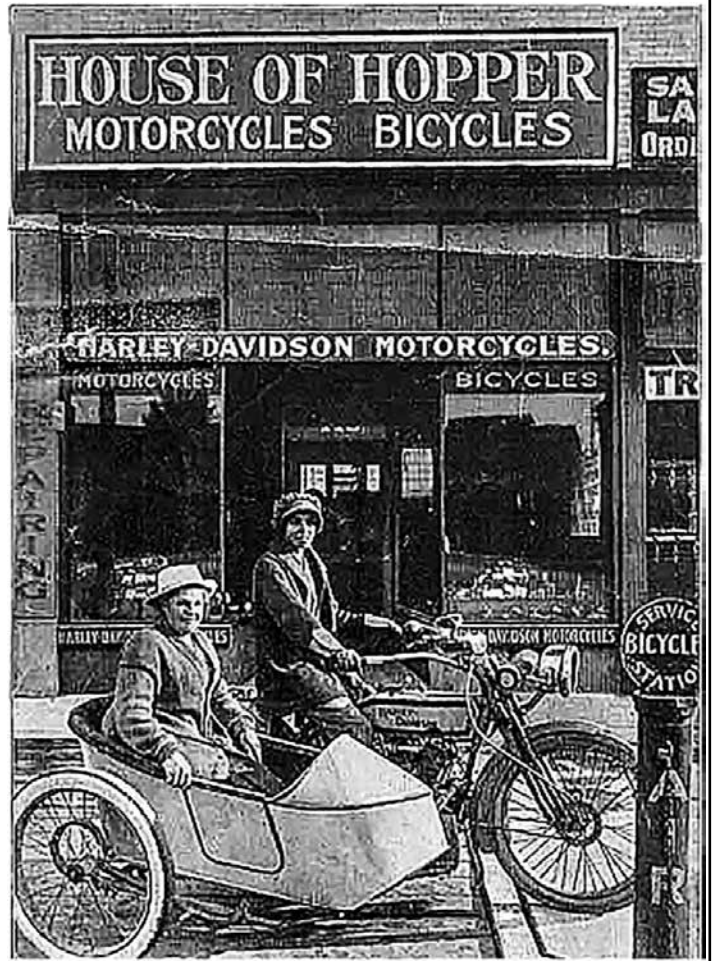
Effie's trip did not get much publicity because it was maybe overshadowed by WWI and the Lusitania sinking. Effie's trip was the first round-trip of the continent by motorcycle.

Effie needed a pistol for the trip. New York's purchase laws were a bit strict but the salesperson noted that it would be easier in New Jersey. So Effie reflected that New Jersey did not seem to care who got shot as long as it was done in "good clean fun."

Effie's mother drove her crazy with her tatting (making lace). "I loved my mother very much but was often tempted to commit mayhem with that tatting shuttle." A rain storm occasioned, "A resurrected Noah dashing by in his ark would not have been too surprising. The motorcycle had learned to swim..." Effie did not apparently swim well but her mother did and Effie thought her mother might save her in the deluge if the tatting did not get in the way.

When a tire flattened and was ruined Effie stuffed a cut up blanket in the tire. Effie and Mom were able to get to the next town where Effie was able to buy a tube with five patches on it for the price of a new tube. Effie said she'd gotten the better deal because she'd have paid double what she had paid for the used tube.

In San Francisco Effie ran over a man's foot. Eventually he came to New York to visit her and sealed the deal to marry her by giving her a shotgun. She was impressed he did not try to give her some "frilly feminine" thing. "I wanted him for keeps," she said. She went off to Oregon to live the life of a rancher without a motorcycle. She took her mother along.



Effie and her mom, 1915

Fox Farm Update

Faithful readers will remember that in our October, '15 Heirloom we ran the picture to the right of the Fox Farm, a precursor to the 1938 Donner Summit Lodge.

There is a dearth of information about the Fox Farm but we're still on the trail. On our search we found, from the Livermore Journal dated September 26, 1925 the following:

"George S. Fraley, telegraph company official, of Auburn and several of his associates have purchased 160 acres of land near Soda Springs, which is to be operated as a fox farm."

Title searches of properties in the area turn up Mr. Fraley's name. Stay tuned.



From the DSHS Archives

The First Notice About the Donner Party - 1847

"EMIGRANTS IN THE MOUNTAINS

"It is probably not generally known to the people, that there is now in the California mountains in the most distressing situation, a party of emigrants from the United States, who were prevented from crossing the mountains by an early heavy fall of snow. The party consists of about sixty persons, men, women and children. They were almost entirely out of provisions, when they reached the foot of the mountains, and but for the timely succor afforded them by Capt. J. A. Sutter, one of the most humane and liberal men in California, they must have all perished in a few days. Captain Sutter as soon as he ascertained their situation, sent five mules loaded with provisions to them. A second party was dispatched with provisions for them, but they found the mountain impossible, in consequence of the snow. We hope that our citizens will do something for the relief of these unfortunate people."

California Star January 16, 1847

The first party mentioned was led by Charles Stanton who left the train in Nevada and headed for Sutter's Fort. He got supplies and then, even though he had no family in the train, headed back to meet the wagon train. On his return trip two Native Americans sent by Sutter accompanied him. Stanton died as part of the Forlorn Hope and there is a monument to him near Cascade Lakes on Donner Summit. The two Indians were also part of the Forlorn Hope, and they were killed and partly eaten.

The second party was headed by James Reed, who'd been banished from the Donner Party after he killed someone in a knife fight. He was desperate to save his wife and children. He did make it up the mountains and did save his family as part of the third relief group.

Life Was Rough - 1864 and 1906

"SNOWSLIDE IN MOUNTAINS. Sheds Wrecked and Traffic Blocked for Several Hours.

"SACRAMENTO. Jan. 14. — About 6 o'clock on Saturday morning a snowslide on the Central Pacific Railroad at Eder [a RR stop a few hundred yards east of where the current railroad tunnel emerges from under Mt. Judah], a block-system station on the Mountain division, swept away 210 feet of double snowsheds and was followed by several other avalanches. Superintendent Jones of this city immediately went to the scene of the accident and had sent on to him all the gangs of men necessary to clear the wreck and enlisted also the several section gangs on the higher altitudes of the mountain division. In the meantime all traffic was blocked and east and westbound trains were held and the comfort of passengers looked after at way stations.

"The accident occurred about six miles east of Summit. The snow was very wet and heavy and entailed great labor to clear it away. ...The snow clung in masses to telegraph wires and they are broken in a hundred places. At Truckee five feet of snow was in the streets this evening, and at Summit nine feet have piled up."

San Francisco Call January 15, 1906

"The Rain at Dutch Flat - The Route Over the Mountains - Damage by Rain

"Dutch Flat, November 30th - 5 PM It has rained here for the last four days without intermission. The snow is reported from seven to ten feet deep on the Summit. Every exertion is made by California Stage Company to keep the road open to Virginia [City]. Monday's stage arrived from Virginia last night, with seven passengers. Tuesday's stage has not yet arrived.

"Several bridges in this vicinity are carried away, and the water in Bear river is within three feet of high water mark."

Sacramento Daily Union December 1, 1864

If you want to read more about Donner Summit's iconic snowsheds check out the [Heirlooms](#) for February, '15 to January, '16

From the DSHS Archives

Stage Ride Over the Summit and Beyond - 1865

"NEVADA. Over the Mountains

"Though a pioneer Californian, this is my first trip over the Sierra Nevadas. Whatever might have been, and were, the hardships of the early overland emigrants in their passage over the snowy mountains, it is only a pleasure trip now, even for ladies."

The correspondent to the New York Tribune left SF at 4PM in a steamer and by midnight was "lying quietly at the Sacramento wharf" to finish the night's sleep. After breakfast he was off "on the cars of the Central Pacific Railroad." In two hours the train was at Clipper Gap, the end of track. He admired the new "road" there not being a better one in the United States. It was solid, "evenly leveled, and scarcely any vibration of the cars is felt." He said one could read a newspaper as easily as at home while going 30 mph.

What a change by the time they'd reached Auburn where the correspondent had panned for gold 15 years before. No one could have imagined that the "Steam Horse" could come snorting through.

At Clipper Gap passengers changed from the train to Concord coaches that took off at a gallop on the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. They thundered along steep gorges and under solid rock walls. Although it looked fearful there was no danger as the coaches hurtled along at 10 mph. Sometimes coaches overturned and lives and limbs were lost or endangered and went down the precipices but that was likely due to carelessness. The road was a marvel.

All along the road were substantial and sometimes handsome dwellings. They were picturesquely situated. There were mountain streams and all the luxuries of civilization. As they approached the summit the surrounding peaks were coated in snow. The atmosphere was clear and exhilarating. The horses' feet whirled up clouds of dust just next to fields of snow.

At the summit "a magnificent view opens down the canon to Donner Lake, four miles below....As we go down the canon [sic], the scene is wild and fearful beyond description. In the descent, we pass through the remains of an enormous avalanche of snow, which came down from the overhanging peaks one day last Winter [sic], covering the road 200 feet deep, and burying beneath its chilling shroud two travelers, who were passing on foot at the precise moment. Five months after their entombment they were dug out, frozen stark and stiff. The holes from which their bodies were drawn were still intact in the snow wall, not a dozen feet from the passing coach. The road had been reopened by a deep cut, which uncovered the unfortunate travelers."

"Down, down, we thunder along; the road seems to cling like a thread along the perpendicular sides of precipices – down, still down, we go, 1,500 feet, in a mile or two, till we approach Donner Lake, four miles from the summit, where a chance was afforded to clean off the redundant dust, and satisfy our appetites on fresh Lake trout."

The road got harder in Nevada on the way to Virginia City where the stage stations were 15 miles apart and there was nothing else to be seen, nor were there opportunities for refreshment. At the stations the stableman was also "cook and all hands." The food was salt pork, tough mutton, saleratus biscuit, golden in color and horrible to the taste, boiled beans – the only "unbedeviled dish, though swimming in rather too much pork fat – and black coffee without suspicion of milk. As for water, it was of the alkaline variety, not much esteemed by unsophisticated passengers."

The correspondent had heard of rich gold and silver ledges in Nevada and was going to see for himself because it was "harvest time" for stage companies as people all flocked to get rich. Excitement was at its "hight." [sic]. "Hundreds and thousands of credulous miners and others are let into unprofitable enterprises." His visit gave him "great faith" that this was a genuine strike.

Marysville Daily Appeal September 15, 1865

Donner Party As Reported at the Time

from Crofutt's New Overland Tourist and Pacific Guide for 1879

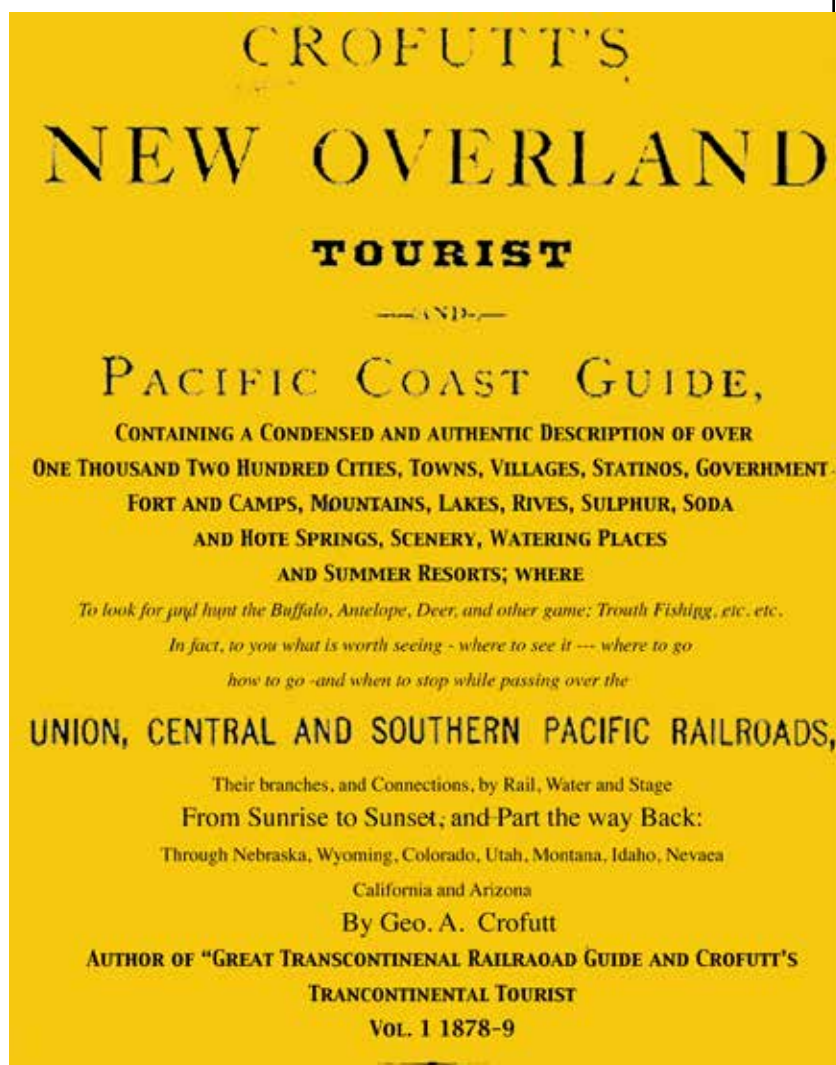
"Around this beautiful sheet of water[Donner Lake] -nestled so closely in the embrace of these mighty mountains, smiling and joyous in its matchless beauty, as though no dark sorrow had ever occurred on its shores, or its clear waters reflected back the wan and haggard face of starvation is clustered the saddest of memories- a memory perpetuated by the name of the lake.

"In the fall of '46, a party of emigrants, mostly from Illinois, arrived at Truckee River, worn and wasted from their long and arduous journey. Among that party was a Mr. Donner, who, with his family, were seeking the rich bottom lands of the California rivers, the fame of which had reached them in their Eastern home. At that time a few hardy pioneers had settled near Sutter's Fort, brought there by the returning trappers, who, with wondrous tales of the fertility of the soil and the genial climate of California, had induced some of their friends to return with them and settle in this beautiful land. The Donner party, as it is generally called, was one of those parties, and under the guidance of a trapper, was journeying to this then almost unknown land.

"Arriving at the Truckee, the guide, who knew the danger threatening them, hurried them forward, that they might cross the dreaded Sierras ere the snows of winter should encompass them. Part of the train hurried forward, but Mr. Donner, who had a large lot of cattle, would not hurry. Despite all warnings, he loitered along until, at last, he reached the foot of Donner Lake, and encamped there for the night. The weather was growing cold, and the black and threatening sky betokened the coming storm. At Donner Lake, the road turned to the left in those days, following up Coldstream, and crossing the Summit, near Summit Meadows, a very difficult and dangerous route in fair weather. The party who encamped at the lake that night numbered 16 souls, among whom were Mrs. Donner and her four children. During the night, the threatened storm burst over them in all its fury. The old pines swayed and bent before the blast which swept over the lake, bearing destruction and death on its snow-laden wings.

"The snow fell heavily and fast, as it can fall in those mountains. Most of the frightened cattle, despite the herder's vigilance, went off with the storm."

"In the morning the terror-stricken emigrants beheld one vast expanse of snow, and the large white flakes falling thick and fast. Still there was hope. Some of the cattle and their horses remained. They could leave wagons, and with the horses they might possibly cross the mountains. But there arose another difficulty, Mr. Donner was unwell, and could not go - or preferred to wait until the storm subsided; and Mrs. Donner, like a true woman, refused to leave her husband. The balance of the party, with the exception of one, a German, who decided to stay with the family, placed the children on the horses, and bade Mr. and Mrs. Donner a last good-by; and, after a long and perilous battle with the storm, they succeeded in crossing the mountains and



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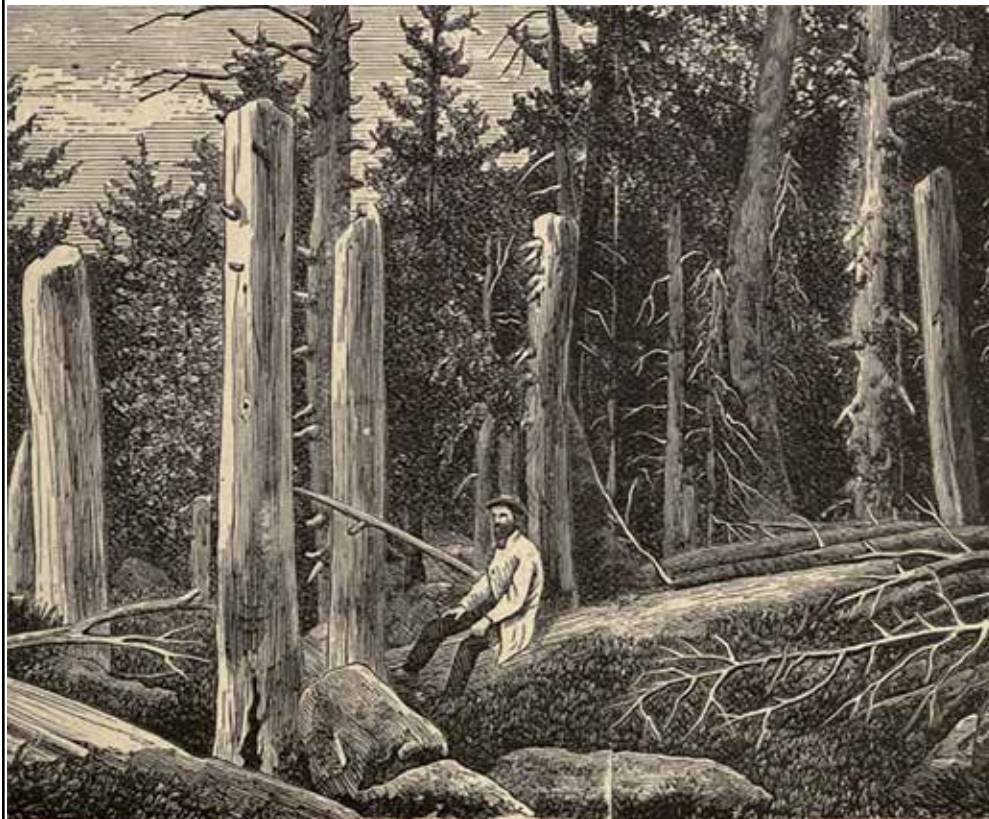
reaching the valleys, where the danger was at an end. The storm continued, almost without intermission, for several weeks, and those who had crossed the Summit knew that an attempt to reach the imprisoned party would be futile--worse than folly, until the spring sun should melt away the icy barrier.

"Of the long and dreary winter passed by these three persons, who shall tell? The tall stumps (see illustration) [there was no illustration in this edition but the one below was extracted from the 1884 edition] standing near where stood the cabin, attest the depth of snow. Some of them are 20 feet in height.

"Early in the spring a party of brave men, led by Claude Cheney, started from the valley to bring out the prisoners, expecting to find them alive and well, for it was supposed that they had provisions enough to last them through the winter, but it seems they were mistaken.

"After a desperate effort, which required weeks of toil and exposure, the party succeeded in scaling the mountains, and came to the camp of the Donners. What a sight met the first glance! In a rudely constructed cabin; [sic] before the fire, sat the Dutchman, holding in a vice-like grasp a roasted arm and hand, which he was greedily eating. With a wild and frightened look he sprang to his feet and confronted the new comers, holding on to the arm as though he feared they would deprive him of his repast. The remains of the arm were taken from him by main force, and the maniac secured. The remains of Mr. Donner were found, and, with those of his faithful wife, given such burial as the circumstances would permit, and, taking the survivor with them, they returned to the valley.

"The German recovered, and still lives. His story is, that soon after the party left, Mr. Donner died, and was buried in the snow. The last of the cattle escaped, leaving but little food; and when that was exhausted, Mrs. Donner died. Many dark suspicions of foul play on the part of the only survivor have been circulated, but whether they are correct will never be known, until the final unraveling of time's dark mysteries."



There are too many inaccuracies to correct in this summary of the Donner Party tragedy but one can imagine that tourists picking this up were interested in the story.

Left, Starved Camp, which was on Donner Summit, the engraving was made from a 19th Century stereograph. This one came from the 1884 Crofutt's. Seeing the note above about the stumps we did not want to disappoint our readers even though Mr. Crofutt apparently disappointed his 1879 readers by not including the engraving. Mr. Crofutt labled the engraving Donner Lake, but the photographer of the picture from which the engraving was made, Alfred A. Hart, said he took it at Summit Valley.

Book Review

Saving the Donner Party and Forlorn Hope.

Richard F. Kaufman, Ph.D.

2014 211 pages (including index)

What new could there be to say about the Donner Party? Newspapers and other publications at the time (see page 6 and the Heirloom in May) covered the emigrants caught in the mountains. There were articles afterwards about the lawsuits. The episode became fodder for the sensational reports of the time with rescuers arriving to find Mr. Keseburg, blood dripping from his beard, holding a leg that he refused to give up. C.F. McGlashan wrote the first book, History of the Donner Party in 1879 after interviewing survivors (see the Heirloom for April, '15). There followed a string of books over the century following, each with slightly different emphases. The end seemed sure to have come when Ethan Rarick wrote Desperate Passage in 2008 (see our May, '14 Heirloom). He took advantage of new archeological and scientific evidence. Who could have more to say? The diaries and survivor interviews had been pored over and over. Nevertheless, Richard Kaufman wrote Saving the Donner Party and it has a new emphasis.

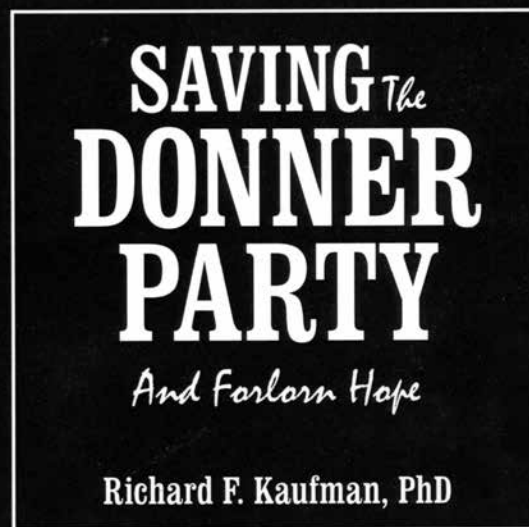
When the DSHS committee in charge of selecting books to be reviewed saw the title of this book it was intrigued. Most of the Donner Party is about the journey; cannibalism; surviving (or not) at Donner Lake; Patty Reed, her doll and experiences; Tamsen Donner as a heroine; the choices people had to make (for example how does a parent decide to leave the children and go for help? Will the kids die as orphans if the parents don't make it? Will the children survive without the parents?); the weaknesses of the party (lack of unity, bad choices, infighting); the left hand (wrong) turn; etc. but there's not a lot about the rescuers. The rescuers traversed Donner Summit multiple times. Starved Camp (see page 7 bottom), made up of rescuees, was on Donner Summit. The Forlorn Hope went over the pass and it was five members' survival that partly got the rescue ball rolling in California. The title of the book sounded good.

Just as the book was chosen from the shelf of books you can look forward to seeing reviewed in the Heirloom, the snow had started to fall on Donner Summit. What could be better: a good book, a warm spot to read, and outside the snow falling. One could imagine the Donner Party's tribulations but remain warm and snug, hot chocolate in hand.

There were three kinds of volunteers who volunteered to rescue the Donner Party. There were those out for glory and fame. Others wanted to make money from the government, get salvage (getting to keep part of the property recovered), and earn rewards. The third group were the humanitarians, those who went to save their fellows (see "Heroism on Donner Summit" in the May, '14 Heirloom).

Kaufman begins the story at Donner Lake with some members of the party making it to the top of Donner Pass with their wagons only to be disappointed by the depth of the snows and having to return. They wouldn't be able to get over the Sierra and so, set in for the winter at Donner Lake. Before committing this new fact about Donner Party wagons on Donner Summit to memory, read on. The party was in "appalling disarray" according to Kaufman and he lists many problems.

Kaufman paints a group that is not feckless though. Although they did not work together well on the trail and made many mistakes of judgment, when they found themselves stuck at the lake they did not just accept their fate. Getting a few wagons



up Donner Pass in the snow must have been extraordinarily difficult but wasn't the end of trying to help themselves. There were a number of escape attempts with the Forlorn Hope group being the one that did get some members over the Summit and into California.

It was the reporting of the Forlorn Hope as well as James Reed's (he'd been banished from the wagon train for knifing a man and had to leave his family) solicitations for help that got the public to pay attention and make donations and which were the impetus for five rescue parties (not including the U.S. Army visit to Donner Lakes in the summer of 1847). Kaufman goes into a lot of detail about each one of the rescue attempts and talks about Charles Stanton's and James Reed's relief efforts. Stanton had left the Donner Party with another member and headed to California for supplies while the wagon train was still far out in Nevada. Stanton was able to return with supplies and was part of the Forlorn Hope.

Read the book for the extra detail not mentioned in other sources. I did not know the Donner Party had gotten a few wagons up Donner Pass before settling in at the lake ("Two wagons made it to the top" pg xi). The date, October 31, was interesting too. Most years there is no permanent snow by then. It's not uncommon though and that "earlyish" snow trapped the Donner Party. Detail about the relief efforts includes the members of each attempt, how many horses and mules each party had, the amount of food, where food was cached and who supplied it, the background and events leading up to each attempt, etc. It's interesting to come across 83 year old Caleb Greenwood again (he'd guided the Stevens Murphy Party in 1844, the first wagon train to get to California with wagons). Kaufman talks about what was happening in California at the same time. For example James Reed was made a lieutenant in the Volunteers and went with some men to break a blockade of San Francisco. The blockade was over but trouble was brewing in Santa Clara so he had to return there instead of heading up sooner into the Sierra for his family.

Kaufman details the settlement at Donner Lake, who was living with whom and in what. It was interesting to note that there was some good distance between the dwellings. One would think the people would hunker together for support.

The Forlorn Hope experiences are recounted in detail and show the trapped emigrants' dire straits but also their resolution to survive. How anyone could survive the hardships is amazing. The members of the Forlorn Hope had to work together to prepare and some of those traveling were leaving children behind with others whom they must have trusted. The experiences of the Forlorn Hope are recounted almost day by day and give the reader an inkling of what it must have been like for those people sacrificing themselves to get help for the others at the lake. Of the 15 who went over the pass only five made it to California. They spent five days without food and two and a half days without fire at one point. Eventually they roasted the organs of some of the bodies at the "Camp of Death." Try to imagine the group's conditions. They had had no food for days. They were exhausted from trudging through the snow. When a multi-day storm hit, they got into a circle, each facing in, on the snow with a blanket over their heads for cover. They stayed that way for 36 hours while the snow piled up around them. There are more details making the attempt to get help heroic. The Indian, Lewis, had his big toe drop off from frostbite. Everyone's feet were wrapped in rags and soaked with blood as they walked. When they left the snow and no longer needed their snowshoes, they ate the rawhide strings. Mary Graves lost all of her toes. "None of the survivors could walk, Three weeks after their rescue," Kaufman says.

The conditions at the Donner encampment are recounted too. The actual Donners had tents, not even crude buildings as those who were at Donner Lake had. During one storm the occupants of one tent huddled together with only blankets and no fire. They were found frozen. Imagine surviving a Sierra winter in a tent.

It was interesting too, to read about the later lives of the various rescue party members and about the lawsuits that followed the Donner Party members' rescues.

So there is a lot of information in the book.

There is also a lot of what is not good.

There is an amazing number of typos (a particular problem with apostrophes either missing or put where they should not be), grammar errors, and awkward wordings ("...this would have been a salvation to the horror that they were about to find." pg 114 or "Sutter decided to defend Keseberg in the American Court, out of despite than anything else" pg 166).

There are errors in fact which then undercut other things Kaufman says. For example he repeats over and over that Charles Stanton's grave is at Cascade Lake [sic] where there is a ski lodge. There is no ski lodge at Cascade Lakes. There is no ski lodge for miles. He says over and over that Cascade Lakes and part of the rescuers' routes were in the Royal Gorge. The

Royal Gorge is miles away. He misnames Coldstream Canyon a couple of times at the beginning but by page 169 he has it right. (In fairness some early maps call Coldstream Cold Creek, but that should be noted so the modern reader can orient himself.)

Errors in fact undercut other assertions. For example, I was intrigued that some wagons had made it up Donner Pass before returning to the lake, "Two wagons made it to the top." That is elaborated upon fifty pages later, "On the following morning of October 31st two of the Breen wagons headed up Summit grade, and made it to the pass that evening after several rope-pulls over rocks and slippery ice. Snow covered the original trail going up... At the location of today's Donner Cut, wagons had to be disassembled to get over the face of a large rock, which took most of the day... By the end of the second day, two wagons were close to the top but stalled on the overhanging cliffs....Soon four wagons were marooned high on the summit road..." (page 52)

I had not read that before. On reflection though it appears Kaufman never even looked at geography. There is no "summit grade." There are no "overhanging cliffs" to be "stalled on". There is no "Donner Cut." Kaufman is making some educated guesses based on the Stephens Party's experiences and the famous painting by Harold Von Schmidt which shows wagons being taken apart and hauled up a rock face.

Our sometimes fact checker, Art Clark (see our Then and Now's in each [Heirloom](#)) reports, "In [Ordeal by Hunger](#) it says the Breens got a little ways past the lake, but stopped, and unloaded some stuff and strapped it to the oxen. They made it a little further, but then went back." Looking at other sources seemed like a good strategy so at that point we went to our DSHS library of authoritative sources and pulled out McGlashan's [History of the Donner Party](#). McGlashan wrote the first book about the events and interviewed the survivors who were still alive 30 years afterwards. McGlashan says, "Some wagons and families did not reach the lake until the thirty-first day of October... while others, on the evening of the twenty-ninth, struggled through the snow, and reached the foot of the precipitous cliffs between the summit and the upper end of the lake. Here, baffled, wearied, disheartened, they turned back to the foot of the lake."

Then, because we value our readers and want to do a good job by them in terms of historical accuracy, Linda Cashion weighed in with a quote From Patrick Breen's Diary. Patrick Breen was a member of the Donner Party and he was the one Kaufman says got to the top of the pass.

"Truckey's Lake. November 20, 1846

Came to this place on the thirty-first of last month; went into the pass; the snow so deep we were unable to find the road, and when within three miles from the summit, turned back to this shanty on Truckey's Lake; Stanton came up one day after we arrived here; we again took our teams and wagons, and made another unsuccessful attempt to cross in company with Stanton; we returned to this shanty; it continued to snow all the time. We now have killed most part of our cattle, having to remain here until next spring, and live on lean beef, without bread or salt. It snowed during the space of eight days, with little intermission, after our arrival, though now clear and pleasant, freezing at night; the snow nearly gone from the valleys."

Then there is a quote from H. H. Bancroft, "They reached the eastern base of the Sierra... a white wall glistening with frosted pines. Climbing upward as far as they could go, they found the top of Truckee pass five feet under snow... They ascended to within three miles of the summit, where they found ten feet of snow, each moment thickened by the clouds. It was very cold. The wind howled round the crags, and the whirling snow blinded, and every moment threatened to engulf them. They saw how impossible it was to proceed farther, so returning to the cabin, they made preparation to winter there...." Three miles from the summit is about at the western end of Donner Lake.

We can also throw in Edwin Bryant who wrote, [What I Saw in California](#) (Heirloom, April, '13) in 1846. Bryant had been a member of the larger train that included the Donners but then traded in his group's wagons for mules and so he arrived much earlier in California. In his book he said, "The snow commenced falling on the Sierra, two or three weeks earlier in 1846 than is usual, and when this party arrived at the foot of the pass they found it impossible to proceed from its depth."

Although Kaufman footnotes some things he did not footnote the four wagons reaching the top and so fact checking is not possible.

That brings up another problem. Kaufman keeps repeating himself. For example on page 126 he tells of the second relief getting to the Yuba Bottoms and finding the cache of food. A paragraph later he repeats the story again. On page 166 Kaufman has Keseberg admitting to "human consumption, as did the others..." and then on page 167 says, "Keseberg

admitted his consumption of the dead, but so did other survivors...”

Then there are silly statements. Only these mountain men could have survived, says Kaufman, but then he says Reed and McCutcheon survived at the same time and they were rescuing others including Reed’s children. Patty Reed had hallucinations and those “religious nuances...have far reaching consequences (pg 126)” says Kaufman. There is no follow up. What “consequences?” Since there are some errors of fact, it’s interesting to speculate about hallucinations Patty Reed may have had. Linda Cashion again weighs in, “It was Virginia Reed who may have had hallucinations and later converted to Catholicism upon reaching California. She was greatly influenced by the Breens who were Catholic and looked after Patty and Virginia after their mother left them as part of the first rescue party.”

There are a number of maps in the text to show the approximate locations of places and events. Their small size and low resolution makes them unreadable.

There are some lapses in logic. John Stark was the hero of the Starved Camp. He would not leave anyone behind and he had refused remuneration for his services during the third relief party. When Stark joined the fourth relief party, which failed, he joined because Patrick Breen “likely persuaded” him and Stark was “undoubtedly rewarded handsomely (page 155).” No evidence for the suppositions is given and it is not footnoted. It’s important because Stark was a genuine hero and his heroism is tainted by his “handsome reward.” On page 181 “indestructible mountain man” John Turner was accidentally shot (by himself) and died. That’s not “indestructible”. William Eddy on page 180 divorced “most likely from the effects of his encounters” as part of the Donner Party. There is no evidence cited that Eddy’s experiences with the Donner Party contributed to his divorce. He married again and did not divorce. At least the Donner Party is not given as keeping the marriage intact until his death.

There is also a lack of logic in one of Kaufman’s main emphases. New research that he says can be applied to the events of the Donner Party are tree ring analyses. Kaufman says that what trapped the Donners was not the “storm of the century” as other writers have written. Kaufman reports that using tree ring analysis the “information... is quite different than what earlier writers thought it to be.” He says that tree ring analysis shows that “weather phenomenon for the Sierras [sic] in 1846 and 1847 were slightly ‘dry years’ with a normal pattern of observable tree ring growth.” No doubt that’s true but that does not mean there were no big storms. The overall weather pattern does not define day-to-day weather. Kaufman says himself the party got to the lake on October 31. A big storm preventing travel with the snow not melting off is unusual. He describes there being three to five feet of snow on the top of the pass. On October 31 that would be unusual. So the Donner Party was affected by storms regardless of the winter’s pattern.

Then there are some errors in the footnotes. For example in footnote 61 Kaufman argues with George Stewart (Ordeal by Hunger) about the route. Kaufman holds out for the route that climbed “to the Cascade Lake...[sic]” Here perhaps Kaufman’s reliance on satellite imagery comes into question. Many times he resorts to satellite imagery to describe where he thinks the emigrants or the rescue parties actually were. That is no substitute for on the ground reconnaissance though. Cascade Lakes (actually two lakes, not one) are downhill quite a bit from Donner Pass, miles downhill.

It was with interest that we picked up Saving the Donner Party, but it was with disappointment that we put it down. There are a lots of good details, but some may be wrong and the reader does not know which, given that some definitely are wrong. The grammar errors and typos undercut the telling as well. Some of the repetitions are irritating and show a lack of author’s craft. That points out to the usefulness of an editor.

The various details about the rescue parties are interesting and will add to one’s knowledge of the Donner Party if one is familiar already. If one is not familiar I suggest Desperate Passage by Ethan Rarick (Heirloom May, ’14) or Ordeal By Hunger by George R. Stewart (Heirloom October, ’15). See also next month’s Heirloom for a review of Mark McLaughlin’s book, The Donner Party: Weathering the Storm.

Completely separate except that it’s a source in Saving the Donner Party’s bibliography is the site <http://user.xmission.com/~octa/DonnerParty/> You may want to explore the many resources.

Then & Now with Art Clark



This photo spot would never have been located without Google Earth, especially since the lake isn't on any maps that I know of.

1914 must have been a good year for water, since the lake was still full in July. As of today there's only a small puddle and a lot of mud.

Cisco Lake / Mud Lake

1914 and today

Caption on original, "Mud Lake John Clark Old Miner - W - Station Agent" "Cisco Lake July 1914"

Photo location N39° 18.297'
W120° 32.598'

Mud Lake, 1914



The original of this picture, from which the Then & Now came, came from the Wiggins Family Album which we presented in the November and December, '15 [Heirlooms](#).

Then & Now with Art Clark

Donner through the Seasons

Donner through the seasons

Located between McGlashan Point and Mount Stephens, this spot affords one a great view of Donner Peak and the railroad. The east end of Tunnel six is on the right, Tunnel seven is in the center, and Tunnel Eight starts on the left. It's a relatively short hike up from Old Highway 40 on Donner Summit.

Early photographs:
E. Peter Hoffman collection.

Photo location - N39°
19.101' W120°
19.464'



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On Line Archive of California

Here is a marvelous resource of all kinds of things. Go to www.oac.cdlib.org and browse.

To get started, go to "E" and then the "Eastman Collection." When the collection comes up search for "Donner" and you'll come up with all kinds of old Donner Summit pictures like the one to the right. That's Old Highway 40 at what is now the Sugar Bowl turn-off, just across from Donner Ski Ranch.

Have fun.



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