

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

March, 2017 issue #103

## Sleuthing History at Hi-Res

Norm's extraordinary collection of thousands of historical photographs is a wonderful resource. That's especially true if you go deeply into them, looking closely, looking for detail and sometimes finding treasures.

Case in point: Norm has a number of pictures of the old weather station that used to sit just east of Donner Ski Ranch (e.g. top of page 3). It used to guide airplane pilots on the transcontinental air route by providing weather information and directions. The roof was painted with "SF-SL 15" for San Francisco – Salt Lake City Station #15 so pilots knew where they were along the route and in which direction to go. The beacon on Signal Pk (Donner Ski Ranch), along with other beacons including one on Beacon Hill (Soda Springs Ski Hill) also helped guide planes. (see the July, '11 [Heirloom](#) or our 20 Mile Museum sign for the transcontinental air route on our web pages or on Donner Pass Rd./Old Highway 40 after snow melt at the summit).

Today the buildings are all gone although the beacon on Signal Peak is still there and you can see the foundations of both buildings that made up the weather station by taking a quick walk up from Old 40. Parenthetically the old garage and very decrepit building almost at the crest of Old 40 was also associated with the weather station too.

Norm wanted a picture of the buildings viewed from the north which hopefully would include the second building that served as sleeping quarters for the staff. That building does not appear in photographs of the station, at least not obviously. So Norm went looking for a picture that showed the second building. Because he has remarkable vision and knows what he's looking for, he honed in on a couple of pictures. The picture with the "treasure" is the picture here. It's been made a little larger than the actual postcard size it is. Look carefully. Can you even see the weather station building that used to be just above Old Highway 40 at the top of the pass and one peak east of Donner Ski

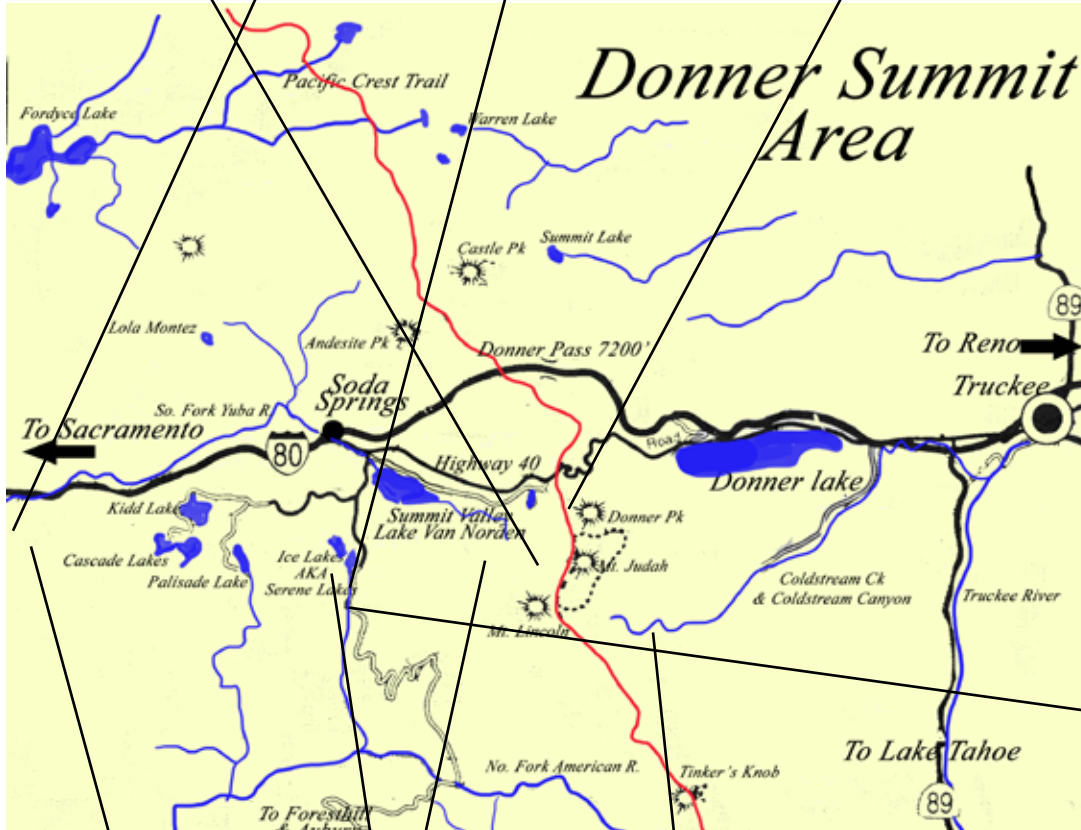


# Story Locations in this Issue

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Serene Lakes Lodge Sign pg 7



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Big Bend picture pg 6

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Sugar Bowl Palisades pg 9

Norden Station pg 17

Locomotive pg 16

## Emigrant Gap Hotel

Jim and Carol Guida own the historic Emigrant Gap Hotel building. Carol has been collecting history of that area for a long time and has created a blog which Heirloom readers might be interested in.

The address is: [emigrantgaplodge@blogspot.com](mailto:emigrantgaplodge@blogspot.com).

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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

## Ranch's Signal Pk.?

Norm then gave the picture to Mike Overhauser of Serene Lakes. Mike does fine photography and is pretty good with PhotoShop. He scanned the pictures at the highest resolution he could and zeroed in on what Norm thought would be fertile spots. The zoomed in section is middle, right. Now look closely.

Finally, we have at the bottom what could be seen in the blown up section. At the ends of the red arrows (if you are reading this on your computer or printed the [Heirloom](#) in color) are the weather station building to the right and the sleeping quarters building to the left.

Norm was satisfied. He has a record of the other unphotographed, except for maybe once, building.

The picture above right of the beacon comes from the Norm "Red" Rockholm collection (see the November, '09 [Heirloom](#)). Red had helped put up that particular beacon.

To read about the arrows associated with the transcontinental air route that the MHRT found at Troy and Donner Ski Ranch, see the December, '16 [Heirloom](#) - the 100th edition of this august historical Heirloom quality publication.



Here is a more standard view of the weather station looking uphill from the east. The weather station is on the peak just right of center. In the depression to the left of the station you can see one of the beacons. That was just one of the weather station buildings. The other was to the east.



# The Donner Party & Donner Summit - Part IV

## 170 Years Ago This Month

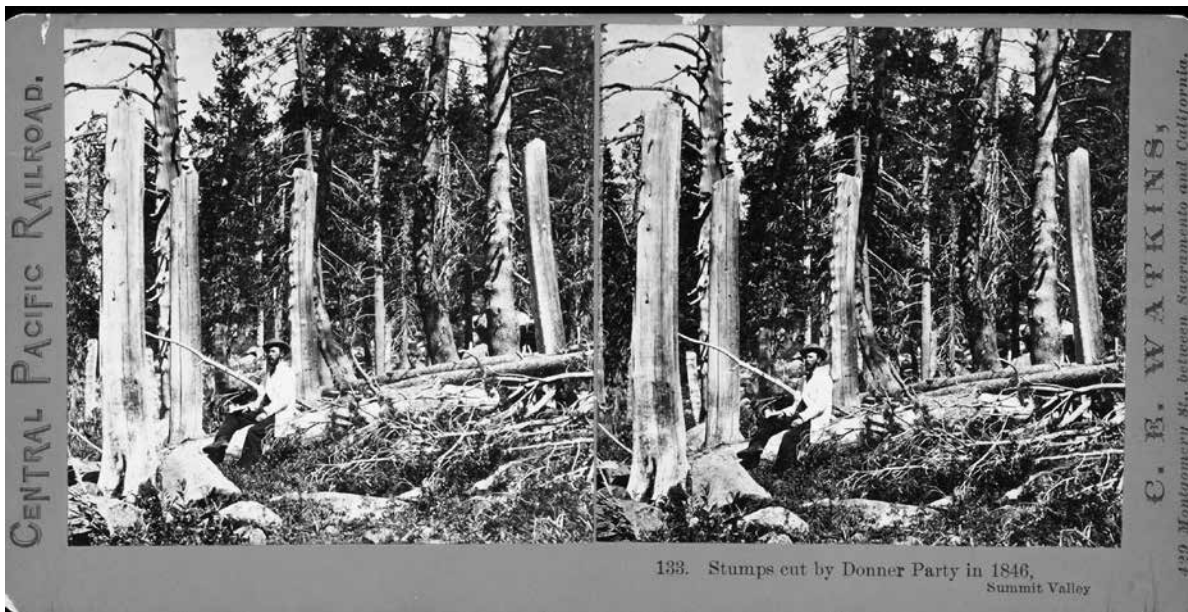
Last December we started a series focused on The Donner Party and Donner Summit. Since the Donner Party action did not take place on Donner Summit the Heirloom has not covered the topic since that's in the province, historically speaking, of the highly reputable Truckee Donner Historical Society. Some of the action did take place on Donner Summit and that ought to be covered though. The Heirloom is a responsible publication after all and covers what it should. The escapees from the Donner tragedy, the party called the Forlorn Hope, crossed Donner Summit and spent some miserable days doing it. The rescue parties crossed Donner Summit on the way to Donner Lake. The rescues all came across the pass as well. Here we have March, 1847, 150 years ago this month, on soon to be called Donner Summit.

**March 3, 1847** Second rescue leaves Donner Lake and gets to what will be called Starved Camp in Summit Valley on March 5.

“The sky look like snow and everything indicates a storm god forbid wood being got for the night and Bows for beds of all, and night closing fast, the clouds still thick in terror terror I feel a terrible foreboding but dare not communicate my mind to any, death to all if our provisions do not come, in a day or two and a storm should fall on us, very cold, a great lamentation about he cold.” [sic] James Reed.

The storm did hit them. It was heavy, blinding, and the winds howled. People cried and prayed. The four rescuers kept the fire fed. James Reed became snow blind. The last of the provisions the rescuers had brought with them were eaten – one spoonful of flour per person.

“My dreaded Storm is now on us comme[nce]d Snowing in the first part of the night and with the snow commen[nce]d a perfect Hurricane in the night. A great crying with the children and with the parents praying crying and lamentations on acct of the cold and the dread of death from the Howling Storm the men up nearly all nigh making fires, some of the men began to pay several became blind I could not see even the light of the fire when it was blazing before me.” [sic] James Reed.



Stereo photograph by Carleton Watkins labeled "Stumps cut by Donner Party in 1847 Summit Valley." This was the site of Starved Camp, a site now lost to history.

“Young Brine [Breen] fell into the fire and burned himself.”

**March 5** 2nd Relief was on the way out and was in Summit Valley. A storm raged adding another foot of snow to the 15 feet that were on the ground. The men were up all night feeding the fire. There was no food.

“it has snowed already 12 inches, still the storm continues the light of Heaven, as it were [sic] shut in from us the snow blows so thick that we cannot see 20 feet looking against the wind. I dread the coming night.” Pg 300 Donner Party Chronicles. James Reed pg 358 Ordeal by Hunger

The fire melted the snow forming a pit and the pit got deeper “Freezing [sic] was the cry of the mothers... to their little starving freezing children,” “night closing fast and with it the Hurricane increases.” [sic] James Reed page 300 Donner Party Chronicles

“the cries and prayers continue all night. “of all the crying I never heard nothing ever equaled it,” [sic] James Reed The fire almost completely died; only two men were able to do anything about it. “All might have perished had not Bill McCutchen kept the fire going.” Page 300 Donner Party Chronicles

**March 6** Isaac Donner (5) died in Summit Valley, after the third night of the storm while lying between his sister Mary (7) and Patty Reed (10)

**March 8** The storm had lasted for three days. By March 8 no one has had any food for 24 hours. Reed, his two children and others left Starved Camp and reached what is today Kingvale, along the Yuba River, that night. 7 Breens, Elizabeth Graves, 4 children and Mary Donner stayed at Starved Camp. The pit got deeper.

2nd relief party was met by the 3rd relief near today's Cisco Grove. The third relief included Wm. Foster and Wm. Eddy who had survived the Forlorn Hope (see the December Heirloom for Pt. I). They were on their way back to the lake to save their children.

**March 9** At Starved Camp Elizabeth Graves and Franklin Graves (5) died. The sinking fire reached the ground 15' below the snow level. There were eleven still alive.

Parentetically, two “rescuers,” Charles Stone and Charles Cady agreed that for \$500 they would take three of Tamsen Donner's children to safety. The three girls said goodbye to their parents. Cady and Stone dropped the children off at Donner Lake and headed for Donner Summit. They ignored Starved Camp – “their packs stuffed with booty.” (Donner Party Chronicles pg 303). There was “unheroism” as well as heroism.

## Donner Party and Donner Summit

October 31, 1846 Donner Party arrives Donner Lake

November 3, 1846 The Party tries for Donner Summit  
Panic and despair set in.

November 13, 1846 15 people try for Donner Summit  
They fail.

November 22, 1846 22 people and seven mules try for Donner Summit. They argue and fail

December 16, 1846 The Forlorn Hope make it over Donner Summit. 7 of the 17 will survive to reach California in 33 days.

December 21, 1846 Charles Stanton dies near Cascade Lake.

January 5, 1847 Four people try for Donner Summit. They fail.

February 18, 1847 The First Relief arrives in Summit Valley.  
Snow was 30' deep.

February 22, 1847 30 people make it to the top of Donner Pass.

February 26, 1847 more die on Donner Summit.

February 27, 1847 the 2nd Relief meets the 1st relief somewhere on Donner Summit.

March 3, 1847 The 2nd Relief gets to Donner Summit from Donner Lake – Starved Camp.

March 5, 1847 2nd Relief is camped in Summit Valley. A storm rages.

March 6, 1847 Isaac Donner dies in Summit Valley.

March 8, 1847 James Reed takes those who will go away from Starved Camp.

March 9, 1847 More die at Starved Camp.

March 13, 1847 The 3rd Relief arrives at Starved Camp. 11 people are lying at the bottom of the deep pit.

March 14, 1847 The 3rd Relief arrives back from Donner Lake.

March 16, 1847 John Stark's heroism

**March 12** There was cannibalism at Starved Camp.

**March 13** 3rd Relief party arrived at Starved Camp. There were eleven people at the bottom of the deep pit. They'd been just lying there with no food in the cold since March 6. What did they think as they waited for death? What did they talk about? What did they think when the 3rd relief arrived and looked down at them? Most of the relief party continued to Donner Lake.

**March 14** 3rd Relief returned from Donner Lake and crossed Donner Pass.

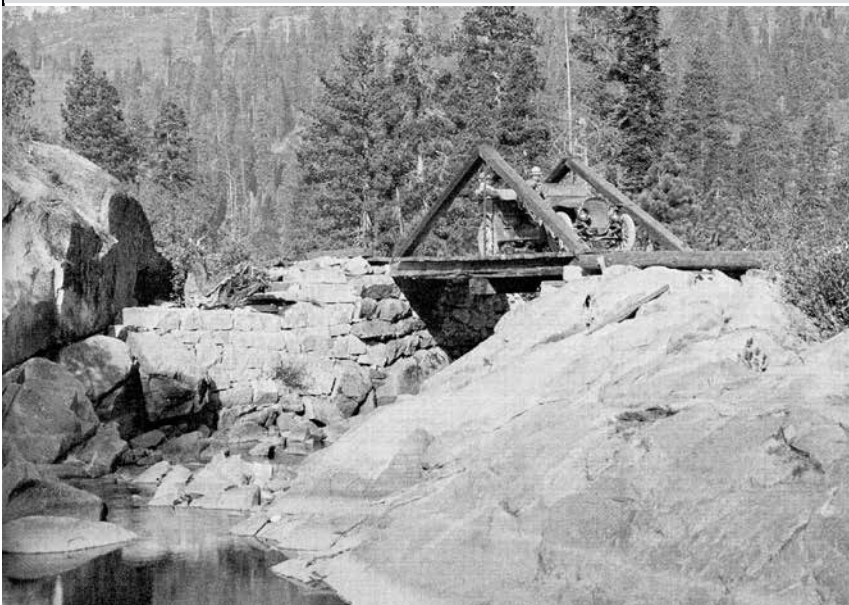
**March 16** John Stark's heroism (see the May, '14 Heirloom). The rescuers in the 3rd rescue party looked at the people in the pit at Starved Camp. There was no way to get them all to safety and so they decided to take only two children. The rest would be left to die.

John Stark would not stand for that. That meant that nine people, mostly children, would die on the mountain, exposed

to the elements at the bottom of a very deep pit in the snow. John Stark decided he would save all nine, "Already shouldering a backpack with provisions, blankets, and an axe, he picked up one or two of the smaller children," carried them a little ways, set them down and then went back for others. He repeated the whole process again and again and again. "To galvanize morale, he laughed and told the youngsters they were so light from months of mouse-sized rations that he could carry them all simultaneously, if only his back were broad enough." Once they were out of the snow he would eat and rest he said, but not before. He saved all nine. That is extraordinary. That is heroism. It was also heroism he never got contemporary credit for.

James Breen later said, "To his great bodily strength, and unexcelled courage, myself and others owe our lives. There was probably no other man in California at that time, who had the intelligence, determination, and what was absolutely necessary to have in that emergency." He also said, "Were it not for him I would probably not be here today. Few men have the resolution and physical strength that he had and if he had less of either he could not have done what he did. He was what I will call a perfect man, perfect in both body and mind... All honor to your memory brave generous honest Stark..." Donner Party Chronicles pg. 309

## From the DSHS Archives



Bridge over the Yuba River at Big Bend. This was the Lincoln Highway. There is an automobile on the bridge.

We throw in the one below because it is a close-up of the photograph at the bottom of page 11. It does not come from the Knezovich-Collins album and is an earlier date, apparently. It is Soda Springs Station in maybe a second iteration. This was the RR station where people debarked to catch the stage to the actual Soda Springs about 8 miles down the road. The station sat in what is now one of the parking lots for Soda Springs Ski Area. For an earlier iteration see the March '13 Heirloom or check our Heirloom indices.



# From the DSHS Archives

Greg Zirbel is a history buff down in Truckee. One day he arrived at the DSHS with something to add to the archives, the sign above that he'd found at a neighbor's house. His neighbor, Zoe, had found the sign, badly weathered, at the dump. She restored it and put it on display. Zoe died in a bicycle accident and the property's new owner gave the sign to Greg. Greg brought it to the right place.



Ice Lakes was renamed Serene Lakes by real estate developers. The lodge was built initially in the 1940's and then expanded. It was torn down to make way for a new Ice Lakes Lodge in 1997.

Greg makes interesting bird houses and brought along the model of the DSHS, left. It's about 18" wide. If you're interested in bird houses: Greg Zirbel ~707-217-3690 [www.NeatTweets.biz](http://www.NeatTweets.biz) Historical Landmark Replica Birdhouses "NeatTweets Workshop" on Facebook Find NeatTweets at: Marty's Cafe - 10115 Donner Pass Road Call to visit the workshop studio.

## *Facetiae*

### **Central Pacific Snow-Sheds**

On the topmost height of Red mountain a light prominence, that looks no larger than a bushel basket, can be seen, which is a telephone station established by the Central Pacific Railroad company. This is a house occupied by two watchmen, who are on the lookout for fires in the snowsheds. They can take in the whole line of snowsheds with their natural sight and by the aid of glasses. If they observe a fire in or near the sheds on any part of the line, they immediately notify the station at Cisco by their telephone line, and forthwith the information is sent by telegraph to the station at Sacramento, and in a minute or two the order is sent up the line to Blue Canyon and the Summit, where the fire trains are constantly on duty, to precede to the point where the fire is prevailing. The fire train consists of a locomotive, with two tank cars filled with water, which is thrown with hose by a steam force pump. When the fire trains are sent out they have the road, all other trains near the point of danger being stopped. The services of these fire trains are frequently called upon, but they are so prompt in action that they generally subdue the fires before much damage is done. The system is as near perfection as it can well be made, so that any great destruction of the sheds is now nearly impossible.

*(Reno (Nev.) Gazette March, 1888)*

# Lost: A True Story

By Jim L White © 2007

It had been a great day of skiing at Sugar Bowl, even though it had stormed all day. The storm had brought lots of that cold light powder snow Sugar Bowl ski area has been famous for. We had been riding the chairlift and skiing on Mt. Disney during the storm. There was a poma lift and a rope tow lift too at Sugar Bowl, but the Disney chairlift was the only chairlift in the Donner Summit area during the winter of 1946-47.

We were all so young, most of us just out of the armed forces after World War 2. This was a Sacramento Jr. College (later called Sacramento City College) Ski Club ski trip. We had met early that morning at the old Gibson Bus station on 12th street in Sacramento for a ski club day outing at Sugar Bowl. Most of us skied at Soda Springs ski hill, where all they had was a J bar and a rope tow lift. Going to Sugar Bowl to ride the Disney chairlift was a really big deal to us. We of course rode on the tractor pulled sled from Soda Springs all the way into the Sugar Bowl. What a lot of happy laughing college kids, the Donner Blizzard underway was no problem for us at all

After the hard day of skiing in the storm and back in the bus at Soda Springs we were ready to head down the hill and go home. The bus lurched forward and out on old highway 40, heading down the hill when the leader started a head count. Something was not right, the count was wrong. Was someone missing? Someone asked where Grant Cox was and no one seemed to know. The leader yelled at the driver to stop. He counted heads again. We were one person short!

Grant Cox was a really good skier and mountain man. He was older than most of us, mid 20s or so. Grant had been in the Rangers, a specially trained combat unit, trained to survive in any weather conditions. Survival skills were a Ranger's main game. They were experts in survival. He would be O.K., probably just missed the tractor sled train leaving the Bowl at 4pm. He was probably hoofing it out along the edge of Lake Van Norden. Nothing to do though but to send a party back up the road to look and if he was not on the road to check out the lodge at Sugar Bowl. A small party of volunteers got off the bus to go search, the rest of the group continued on to Sacramento. A phone call later that night confirmed that Grant's model A Ford was still parked at the Gibson Bus Depot, his ski-trooper ruck sack was found at the bottom of the chairlift where he had left it that morning. The search for Grant Cox, ex U.S. Ranger, Mountain Man, and expert skier was on.

The Donner Blizzard continued all night with more than four feet of new snow on the ground by the next morning. Many of the ski club members had returned by morning along with

many volunteers from the Soda Springs and Truckee area. We formed a search party of about 25 people, headed by U.S.F.S. ranger Max Williamson. Later Constable Johansson from Tahoe City joined the party, representing Placer County. At Sugar Bowl, interrogation of ski club members in regards to who had seen Grant last, revealed that I had been the last one to see him. He had ridden up the lift with me at about 3:25pm just before the lift closed at 4pm. He was wearing a ski trooper reversible ski parka with the white side out. We got off the lift on top of Mt. Disney in zero visibility. Grant turned east, headed toward the Palisades (a ridge of rock pinnacles along the highest ridge) and I turned toward the west, headed down the Meadow Run. Grant was not visible to me after about 20 feet of travel. This was my last run for the day since the storm had been very tiring. The lift closed at 4pm and it was dark almost at once.

Bill Kline, head of the Sugar Bowl Ski School talked to the search party about snow safety. Bill said avalanches were going to be a major danger to our search party. Bill introduced a Swiss ski instructor named Rusty who gave us a 30 min lecture on avalanche survival, telling us the avalanche danger was extreme and teaching us how to swim if we were caught in a avalanche. He warned us to stay away from the Palisades and the bottom of any steep north facing slopes. The bottom of Mt. Lincoln was also to be avoided. The search group was very somber. It had been snowing more than one inch each hour all night with no let up in sight. Rusty looked grim as we were divided up into search teams of 3. We had no radios or way to notify others if Grant was found (only the military had walkie talkies) so we were told the ski school bell would be rung which would be a signal to return to the lodge. My team was assigned to ride up the lift and ski along the ridge to the Crow's nest (a rock pinnacle along the ridge to the west) calling out Grant's name as loud as we could. After reaching the Crow's Nest we descended in waist deep snow and plodded over to the upper end of Lake Van Norden. Most of the searchers were dressed in war surplus ski clothing, since regular ski clothing was expensive and not much of it was really on the market for us to buy. The mostly cotton and nylon ski parkas were soon soaked from the warming storm and felt like they weighed a ton. Our skis were made of laminated wood and equipped with cable bindings which when adjusted loosely, permitted our heels to rise up and made hiking in the heavy snow possible. We had to stop from time to time to scrape frozen ice from the bottom of our skis. This added to our labor in this deep soft snow. Most of our ski bottoms were pine tarred or painted with a coating to permit them to slide, and this worked poorly in this kind of snow.



Back at the lodge we found every one soaked and tired but willing to go out again. Several very loud roars were heard as avalanches thundered down from the Palisades and Mt. Lincoln. We were warned again not to go near that area since it was too dangerous. This of course was the very area Grant was last seen heading for. We searched until dark and found nothing.

That night we were housed in the Chalet (separate from the main lodge, it was equipped with bunk beds and was a less expensive way to stay at Sugar Bowl) and were fed bowls of hot beef stew and French bread which we wolfed down

as only exhausted young men could do. We sat around after dinner and wondered if Grant could have gone south over the summit ridge and into the Onion Creek drainage. This was a wild steep area which drained into the north fork of the American River. If we went down into Onion Creek in this very deep snow, how would we ever get back up the hill? Lying in bed that night we listened to the wind howl and the snow blow against the windows of the chalet. I wondered where Grant, right at this moment could be? It stormed all night.

The storm continued for 4 more days with highway 40 closed most of the time. The storm turned so warm that it almost rained on our already soaked clothing. We had done every thing we could do, and it was not enough. The search was called off at this time. The Sugar Bowl staff was to keep an eye out for Grant the rest of the winter and we agreed to meet the next summer for



Above: Skier with the Palisades in the background where we think Grant died in an avalanche.

Below: A ski searcher on the ridge behind Mt. Lincoln in a storm.



a ground search, after the snow had melted, but nothing was found.

To our great sadness, Grant Cox was never seen again, nor were his remains ever located.

Footnote: This story first was published in the February, 2008 issue of Sierra Heritage magazine. About 2 months later I was contacted by a woman, who someone had sent my story, who said she was on our ski-bus trip and had been with Grant Cox at Sugar Bowl that day. She

also stated that she was engaged to marry Grant Cox. She reminded me that she had pounded on the bus door when the bus was ready to leave, to see if Grant was in the bus. Her call jarred

my memory and I did remember her pounding on the door and asking about Grant. This was followed by our head count and the first discovery that Grant Cox was indeed missing. In her call to me, 62 years after our ski trip, she wanted to know if Grant had ever been found? I was in shock that this woman was still remembering our trip and still wondering if Grant had been found. I told her no” that Grant had not been found and then she mentioned “how hard it had been on Grant’s parents and her. Talk about a “ghost from out of my past”. I still cannot forget our loss of Grant Cox.

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Jim White was a Fish and Game Warden on Donner Summit starting in 1957. In 1970 he was put in charge of all Fish and Game training and safety statewide. Jim conducted cold weather survival training, wilderness horse use and snow avalanche programs in the Donner Summit area for various agencies, companies and colleges. Jim (88) and Shirley (86) live in Auburn and still ski, hike, fish and camp the high backcountry of Nevada and Placer Counties. He can be contacted at padhorski@wavecable.com.

# What's in Your Closet?

## The Knezovich-Collins Album

This "What's in Your Closet" feature is a popular one with the DSHS staff because we hope it encourages people to bring in local history we can save.

Gaylene Knezovich-Collins of Rough and Ready found an old box of pictures in her house. Whose they were she did not know. There were some notes about Donner Summit and some were dated 1920 so she went on-line and came across the Donner Summit Historical Society. That led her to some phone conversations with Norm Saylor. Over a month or so of conversations she decided the DSHS was a good place for copies of her photographs and she traveled up the hill to make her album donation and have a conversation.

Gaylene and Norm had a good time looking over the photographs and Gaylene appreciated Norm's being able to show her photographs from his collection of subjects in her album from different perspectives. An example of that is the bottom pictures on pages 11 and 6. Norm was also able to identify many of her pictures.

These are just a few of the dozens of photographs. There are three more on pages 12 & 13.

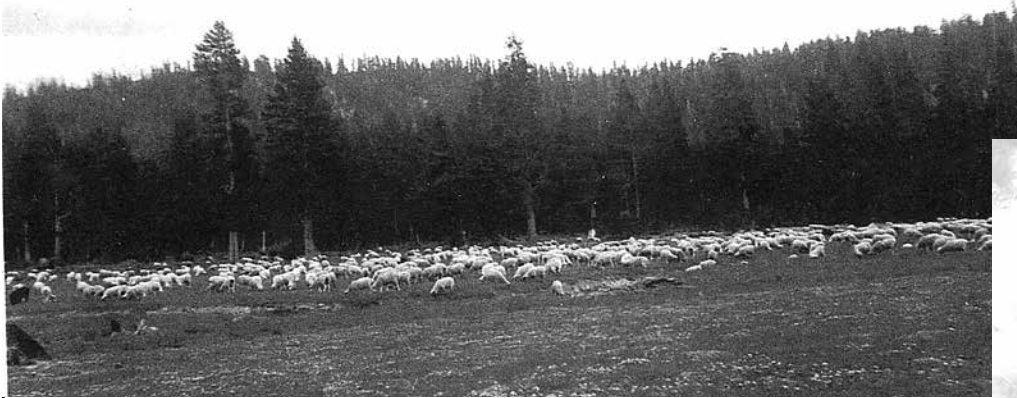
You may have some old pictures or items having to do with Donner Summit history. Bring them in. We'd love to talk to you about them. Norm may be able to identify locations and we'd love to make copies. Then you can keep your treasures and we can preserve history.



Top: Auto Camp at Cisco, 1920 on the Lincoln Highway.

Middle: Cisco Hotel and cottage. The site would be up the hill from the current gas station.

Left: Unidentified people along the Yuba River.



Top left: Mark Hopkins' (one of the Big 4 of the transcontinental RR) house at the Cedars. Right top: unknown but somewhere on Donner Summit.

Middle: sheep were a big deal on the summit at one time.

Right: a fisherman of young age at Ice Lakes.

Below: Soda Springs station. The spot is on the south side of the tracks just where the dirt road, the old Lincoln Highway, that runs along Van Norden comes into the Soda Springs Ski Area parking lot. The snowsheds are in the background. The current Soda Springs is on the other side of Old Highway 40/Donner Pass Rd., the far side of the snowsheds in the picture.



# Then & Now - Ice Lakes

Typically this is Art Clark's corner and we had a page composed with some Then & Now's of the Lincoln Highway and ads on the rocks above Donner Lake, but it occurred to the editorial staff that some of the Knezovich-Collins pictures would make good Then & Now's. That's flexibility. Art's pictures will be in the May issue.



The two old pictures here come from the Knezovich-Collins album on page 10 and both are of Serene or Ice Lakes in 1920. There used to be three lakes at Ice Lakes prior to the dam's building in the 1940's. Above is the third lake, Sybil, subsumed by Lake Serena when the water rose. Left is that area today, an inlet off Lake Serena.



Above is a picture of sheep grazing on the shore of Lake Dulzura, one of the two current Serene Lakes today. We received the album too late to replicate the view so relied on one of George Lamson's drone overheads of the same area showing the big changes since 1920.

The "now's" on this page are by George Lamson

# Mifs York Mystery ca. 1910

Our editorial staff did not come to the Heirloom inexperienced (as you can probably tell from the quality of the Heirloom material). The staff earned their “stripes” doing history columns for the Serene Lakes Property Owners’ Association (SLPOA) which is just outside Soda Springs. Serene Lakes used to be called Ice Lakes for reasons that will be the subject of a future Heirloom, so stay tuned and keep up your subscription. It’s a good bunch of stories. (That’s a hook to set anticipation.)

For two decades before the Heirloom was conceived we’d been collecting local history and that inspired Margie Powell to found the Donner Summit Historical Society. Almost no sooner did the Heirloom get off the ground than Margie passed from ALS. You will note that we hold annual Margie Powell hikes in her memory (the next one will come in August and will go down Summit Canyon but that too is for a future Heirloom).

That’s all preface to this short story which was occasioned by the serendipitous donation of the Knezovich-Collins 1920 photograph album. One picture in that album, below, said it was taken from the porch of “Miss York’s” cabin. That sent us searching through the unfortunately unindexed SLPOA newsletters (note that DSHS Heirlooms are indexed for easy reference). The Mifs York article of 1998 turned up and takes its place here after a little more introduction.

The Cedars is a private community six miles down the Soda Springs Rd. from Serene (Ice) Lakes. The road makes a nice trip to Auburn if you like but that’s a different story and will not be in a future Heirloom. The Cedars is near the site of the Mark Hopkins estate (top picture pg 11). Mr. Hopkins was one of the Big 4 of Transcontinental Railroad fame and the estate will someday get into the Heirloom. There was a hotel there, at what is the original and actual Soda Springs, in the late 19th Century. Many famous people visited, taking the stage from Soda Springs Station to Summit Soda Springs as it was called. It was quite a resort for the high society types, but I digress and should leave the story for later. In the early 20th Century the Cedars was established and one of the early residents was Josie Freeman who wrote a diary in 1900 (which will also some day appear in the Heirloom). Josie Freeman mentioned visiting a Mifs York at Ice lakes - the name on the photo in the Knezovich-Collins album. That said,



View from the porch of Miss York's cabin. The lake is Lake Dulzura at Serene Lakes taken in 1920 looking toward the south to where the Serene Lakes/Ice Lakes Lodge would later be built. The view is about what the view would be from the original settler's cabin which was built in 1866. The photo comes from the Knezovich-Collins album.

there was also another reference. Patsy Fish, who has a house at the Cedars, contacted her aunt (this was 1998) who was 93 at the time. Mrs. Fish asked her aunt if she remembered anything about a railroad line at Ice Lakes the possibility of which we were investigating at the time because of a unique man-made feature in the land (another future Heirloom story – isn’t that an intriguing clue?) Her aunt had first visited Ice Lakes when she was nine, about 1914. She remembered an old woman they used to visit at Ice Lakes, but could not remember her name. As far as we can determine there was only one person at Ice Lakes in those days - Mifs York.

The original search for Mifs York was serendipitous. Ordinary people living ordinary lives don't occasion much comment so the chances of finding Mifs York were probably pretty slim. She is mentioned, though, in Josie Freeman's diary, "Faint Murmurs from the Pine Trees Reach My Ear the Pinehurst Diaries of Josie Freeman." That diary is in the state library in Sacramento. It took a morning to read there since it's not available to check out. Subsequently we've been given a couple of shortened versions by people at the Cedars. Eventually, in the third volume Mifs York turned up living at Serene Lakes. Since

contemporary maps only show the ice houses and Fitz William's cabin, perhaps Mifs was living in whatever remained or had been remodeled of his original 12 x 12 cabin. Maps though weren't always accurate since some mapmakers simply chose to copy their predecessors' efforts - dishonest of course but there it is. Here are most of the references to Mifs York in the diary. There are a lot of untold stories there.

**Early fall of 1908** "I hope poor Mifs York won't be burnt out as she has only had her bungalow a year on the shores of Ice Lakes and she had had one siege already by those dirty housebreakers this spring." [There was a wildfire burning west of Ice Lakes at that time]

**Summer, 1910** "Mifs York who had ridden over with the stage driver swears - to visit - me for a couple of hours... we had dinner and quite a nice chat and were enjoying ourselves - when she had to return."

**Later in 1910** "She has been ill the past winter with nervous prostration poor girl, her family put too much on her - and she isn't strong, then she had everything burnt up of her things she had stored this past fall at Soda Springs Station - also stealing of her purse, by a scamp of a porter from the Summit - she is sending to Prison for three years - so she had much to irritate her in her bungalow life the past six or eight months yet she like the rest of us- she fights it out."

**By 1917** "She is looking very well for she is rather stout we had a nice chat, then dinner went off all right, she brought me some nice bread - a luxury (she buys her bread from Laura, at Soda Springs Station, who makes such nice bread.)"

In 1919 "Mifs York and her boy, Victor Nelson arrived today... Poor Mifs York she evidently comes on her visit here to revive old associations just for the love of Jacobs [?] - in past days and the happy hours of the past I feel so sorry for her lonely and unhappy life she has been obliged to live just owing to her deformity. Why so unfortunate. She brought eggs and a half box of fruit which comes nicely as the railroad strike is on since yesterday... Mifs York has gone to a shady spot to read to Victor... she dotes on the masculinos, always off on them, a very lonesome woman who longs for companionship of some kind."

The diaries stop shortly thereafter and there is no more news of Mifs York, that is until the Knezovich-Collins album appeared with its reference to the view from "Miss York's" cabin, the photo on the previous page.

Perhaps Mifs' story would be interesting. Apparently she didn't live at Ice Lakes full time since she stored things elsewhere sometimes. Perhaps her parents "who put too much on her" had died by 1919 leaving her some money with which she hired her "boy" since earlier entries make no mention of any companions. What was her deformity? Why was she so lonesome? What did she do with her time? Why did she choose to live at Serene Lakes at least part time especially in winter, or what did she do in winter? Did she like snow? What became of her bungalow? Did she leave any messages in bottles or carved in trees?

A look at assessor's records would tell us what she owned including personal property. A look in the recorder's office would tell us what she bought and when and where. Perhaps Mifs bought her cabin and land from the Summit Ice Company's successor, the Union Ice Company. Summit Ice harvested ice at Ice lakes for a few years then moved to Truckee and eventually became part of the Union Ice Co. Interested historically-minded treasure hunters could have fun here searching - feel free. Other good sources would be the local newspapers, census records, county directories and even State records. There's so much to do.

In 1997 I did a series of articles about the origins of Ice Lakes (today Serene Lakes) and the first settler. The story will appear in an Heirloom someday. The gist is that Fitz William Redding Jr. settled at Ice Lakes and built a cabin. He went down to Sacramento to his parents in the winter of 1866. He came back up in the spring, got sick, went to his parents, and died, age 21. At the end of the series of articles I romanticized "Serene Lakes, the Novel in which Fitz William's girlfriend named Dulzura, Serena, or Sybil (the names of the three Ice Lakes), inconsolable with grief, moved to Ice Lakes after he died in 1867 so she could be near his dreams and essence (something like Gray Friars Bobby). We could imagine her walking the shore of the lake named for her hearing perhaps Fitz William whispering in her ear and imagining his hand stroking her cheek as they made their plans for their land, future and family. She would have stayed, of course, so that she was the one still there decades later to be visited by a young girl, Patsy Fish's aunt, on her way to the Cedars.

Of course this bit of information about Mifs York puts a hole in "Serene Lakes - the Novel" unless Mifs was the girlfriend?

You will note, parenthetically that there were a lot of references to future Heirloom subjects. This is Heirloom issue 103 and you might be worrying that shortly we'll run out of Donner Summit history. The references above are just a few of things saved up waiting to appear. So keep up your subscription.

# Book Review

Last month in the February, '17 Heirloom's “@ the Museum” feature, two of Norm’s favorite books were listed: U.S. 40 by George Stewart and Donner Pass Southern Pacific’s Sierra Crossing by John Signor. This month, rather than keep you in suspense, we review the latter. Keep in mind you can check the book out of the DSHS, buy it at the DSHS, or discuss it at the DSHS.

## Donner Pass Southern Pacific’s Sierra Crossing

John Signor 1985 290 pages large format

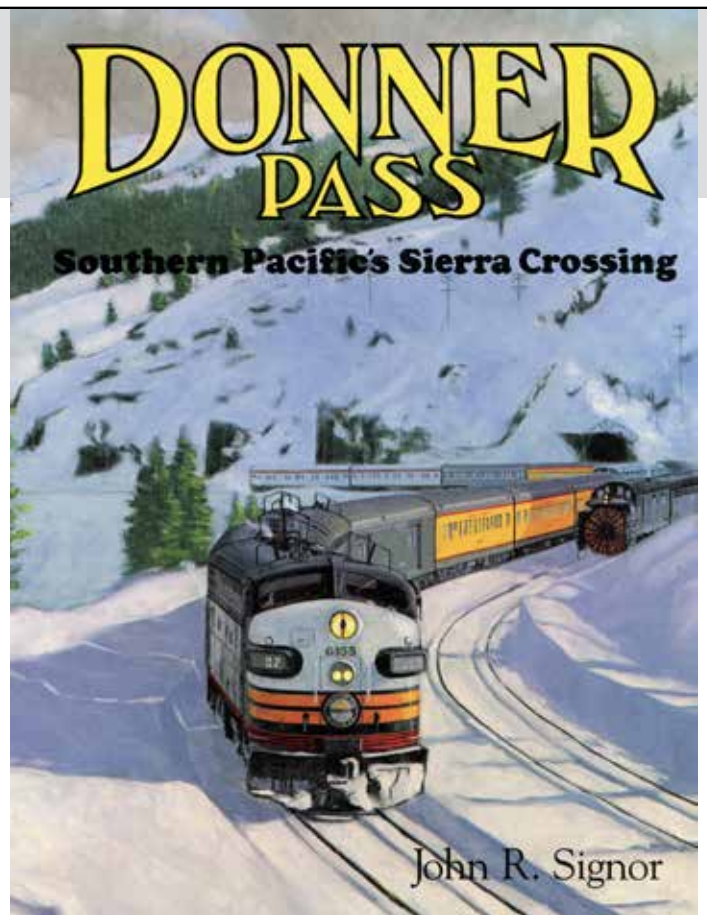
You don’t need this review if you are a railroad buff. The jacket tells you all you want to know: 492 illustrations, 20 maps, route profiles, passenger train list, and documentary reproductions. The book lives up to its jacket. It’s well illustrated and there’s a lot of detail: trains; engine numbers, types, and changes; railroad facilities; maps and route changes, and railroad equipment.

If you are more the generalist or with an interest in specific history, like for example, about Donner Summit, then there’s lots for you if you read what’s of interest and skip the rest.

The book is divided into four sections: Construction and Early Operation 1860-1899, The Harriman Influence 1900-1929, The Modern Steam Era 1930-1955, and Contemporary Operations 1956-1985. Each section has a large portion dedicated to old photographs.

Southern Pacific did not build the transcontinental railroad but that’s where the story starts. First there were the explorers and then the emigrants. With the Gold Rush there was a huge influx of people to California and people began to pressure for a railroad across the country. Theodore Judah wanted a railroad across the country too and he was a railroad expert. He also had the vision and energy to get the thing built. He evaluated various possibilities and settled on Donner Pass as the route. Then he started lobbying, raising money, and gathering investors. The Central Pacific was incorporated June 28, 1861. War had broken out and that made Congress disposed to supporting the building of a railroad as a way to keep California in the Union. The Pacific Railway Bill was passed in 1862 setting things up. The CPRR received a 400’ right of way, twenty alternating sections of land per mile, and a cash subsidy. The railroad would get \$16,000 per mile in the flats and \$48,000 per mile in the mountains. Construction started January 8, 1863 in Sacramento.

Following completion of the transcontinental railroad the



CPRR expanded acquiring other railroads. The Southern Pacific was organized in 1865 and the CPRR’s Big Four acquired control in 1868. The Southern Pacific then consolidated other railroads. The Southern Pacific Co. was formed in 1884 and consolidated it all under its control.

Signor covers all of the subjects: community growth (Truckee, Cisco, Wadsworth), placement of facilities, methods of operation, changes over time, etc. For example, Summit was 105.2 miles from Sacramento. It had a telegraph and an engine house with room for twelve locomotives. There was a turntable and the Summit Hotel. Adding to the recitations are charts such as the one listing railroad stops in the Donner Summit area: Crystal Lake, Cisco, Tamarack, Mountain Mill, Cascade, Patterson’s Summit Valley, Summit, Strong’s Canyon, Stanford, Miller’s, Donner Lake, and Truckee. All of those were railroad stops with at least some facilities. Except for the Truckee stop, all are gone today.

In the text there are interesting facts. Passenger service started transcontinentally on May 15, 1869. From Sacramento to Chicago it took five days and two more days to New York. From Sacramento to Truckee it took eight hours and 35 minutes. Locomotives pulled trains over the Summit at 10 mph and a precaution to prevent runaways, the downhill speed was limited to 25 mph. Signor covers accidents, snow and responses, fires, fire trains, and the first telephone.

Edward Harriman had bought and modernized the Union Pacific and then acquired the Southern Pacific with a view to doing the same thing. His program resulted in “a series of improvements to the Donner Grade, which ... would take this winding single-track mountain bottleneck and transform it into a modern transportation corridor.” There was new equipment, line changes, and facilities changes. Modern equipment was installed. Automatic signals went in and double tracking was laid.

Eventually as you are reading, unless you are a railroad buff, the recitation of facts, engine numbers, train numbers, schedule changes, etc. gets tedious. For example there is a discussion of locomotive changes and how much their

pulling power increased. You have to be a real buff to be interested. The same goes for the list of fruit express train numbers. So skim. You'll shortly get to another collection of photographs and more general facts that fit your interest. The facts do give the reader a sense of the importance of the line from all that was transported: granite, pulp for paper, cordwood, fruit, passengers, lumber, etc. It was integral to the economy.

“A more grand or more exhilarating ride than that from Summit to Colfax on the Central Pacific Railroad you cannot find in the world.... The rush and vehement impetus of the train and the whirl around the curves past the edges of deep chasms among forest of magnificent trees fills you with wonder and delight.” (ptg 35)

Adams and Bishop's Pacific Tourist, 1883

There are lots of stories such as the development of the cab forward Mallet locomotives and the changes that occasioned such as the changes in snowshed design, locomotive smokestacks to dissipate the smoke and the summit turntable.

There is a description of the coming of double tracks to Donner Summit including the second Summit tunnel, #41 in 1925. Interestingly, it's 132 feet lower than Tunnel 6 and amazingly it cut 1.29 miles off the route over the summit. It was the third longest in the U.S. With it came a concrete station, Norden, which took over from Summit.

There is a small section about the Tahoe Branch which SP bought in 1925 and abandoned in 1943. There are interesting old pictures there too including a panorama of Truckee that's about 36" wide.



Above: locomotive in ColdStream derailed by snow.

In later sections the reader gets a sense of the change in traffic over time and the effects of the Depression and the coming of the automobile to train traffic and the passenger-freight mix. Interestingly the SP ferried autos from Sacramento to Reno for \$15. You just drove onto the baggage car.

There is a section about the Snowball Special which took winter snow enthusiasts to Donner Summit. It became so popular that it required 60 extra trains per January-March season. WWII ended that along with plans to improve the Norden “Ski Hut,” the station where skiers left the train on Donner Summit (top next page).

The Ski Hut was 128' long and 28' wide. It was semi-rustic with oiled pine walls, a cement floor, ski rack, restroom, and lunch counter. Motor sleighs left every few minutes for Sugar Bowl with which SP was working. On the Snowball Special mittens,

“Bucking snow was a term that held much meaning in the early days and to say it was thrilling work was putting it mildly. Roaring into a snow bank at speed, with such unseen dangers as fallen trees, rocks and ice, was a contributing factor to the frequent derailments and even death.” Pg 45



socks, and ski clothes were sold and equipment was fitted. The war stopped the Snowball Special when Donner Summit was shut down to protect the transcontinental railroad from sabotage. The popularity of automobile travel prevented its return after the war.

There's a good description of the 1952 City of San Francisco which was trapped for days in the snow (below). Since 1889 there had never been a need to shut down the line for an extended period of time due to weather. Then came January, 1952. On Thursday January 10, 1952 the barometer dropped. Snow fell. On the 12th the streamliner ran into a snowslide. Then a train derailed. More snow fell. A rotary plow broke so snow could not be cleared. On the 13th wind and snow accumulated at the rate of 1" per hour. The City of San Francisco streamliner became mired in the snow after an avalanche. 227 passengers were trapped. Snow kept falling.

The wind rose to 80-90 mph. The highway below the train was closed. Surplus Army weasels and dog teams were called in. By the 16th road crews had gotten to Nyack from which they could launch rescue operations and passengers were walked down through the snow to the highway. On the 18th the train was freed from the snow.



above: the Norden Station where the Snowball Special passengers could start their skiing adventures.

Left: the City of San Francisco mired in snow at Yuba Gap.

## 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.

## Note

Due to the length of this Heirloom the new features, "@ the Museum" and "Odds & Ends of Donner Summit" have been left out but will return next month.

**DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
[www.donnersummithistricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistricalsociety.org)

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_

## Letter to the Editor

Just a head's up. The Rainbow Lodge is now open for dinner and drinks every Friday - Saturday - Sunday after 4 PM. Please make mention of this in the next issue of Heirloom. Their number is 530-562-5060. Thanks!

Ron Kaminkow

## Special Notice Donner Party Class

Donner Party Class offered March 25 at Truckee Meadows Community College.

### The Donner Party Tragedy

The saga of the Donner Party is a tragic icon of the American West. Learn the inside story of these doomed pioneers' 2,000-mile trek and their entrapment in the Sierra from nationally recognized expert and author Frank X. Mullen. View hands-on artifacts of that fateful journey, explore the mechanics of wilderness survival, and gain a deeper understanding of America's period of Manifest Destiny.

Schedule : One-afternoon session, Saturday, March 25, 1-4 PM, at TMCC Meadowood Center campus, Tuition: \$39.00; Materials Cost: \$0.00

Students are encouraged to read articles and view videos about the Donner Party prior to class.

SIGN UP BY PHONE: 775-829-9010 (easiest way)

[www.wdce.tmcc.edu](http://www.wdce.tmcc.edu) (You can sign up on the Web but the TMCC site can be confusing.)