

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

January, 2017 issue #101



## The Donner Party & Donner Summit - Part II 170 Years Ago This Month

Occasionally at the DSHS we get queries about the Donner Party . Some people want to come visit the museum to learn about the Donner Party. That's one of the hazards of being the *Donner* Summit Historical Society. Last month we opened this series with Part I which was an introduction. In the coming few months we'll see what was happening, regarding Donner Summit, 170 years ago.

Donner Summit is most well-known for the Donner Party even though half of the party was down at Donner Lake, miles away and a thousand feet lower in elevation, and the other half, including the Donners, was even further away at Alder Creek. Since the Donner Party was not in the neighborhood so to speak and because there is a fine historical society in Truckee (Truckee Donner Historical Society) we don't cover the story here on Donner Summit. The saga has been covered in numerous books, stories, and videos. What could we possibly have to offer? Then too, we have so many stories here, being the most significant historical spot in California and maybe in the entire Western U.S.

It turns out, after thinking about it, that there is something relevant to Donner Summit to offer. The Donner Party did have a connection to Donner Summit or rather half did – the half who escaped the tragedy or were rescued from the tragedy. They all went over Donner Pass and some of the more dramatic episodes took place on Donner Summit: the escape of the Forlorn Hope, Starved Camp, the four rescue parties, the heroism of John Stark, and the end of Charles Stanton. Those are all stories for another Heirloom, except for John Stark. His heroism was in the May, '14 Heirloom. One day we'll delve in depth into the various stories. For now, "The Donner Party and Donner Summit."

The focus of this story is what the Donner Party had to do with Donner Summit 170 years ago in December, 1846. We'll follow that through in the next couple of months until the final rescues in the spring of 1847.

The Donner Party that was trapped at Donner Lake arrived at the lake on October 31. They had had many troubles since taking their fateful left hand turn onto the Hastings Cut-Off just after Ft. Bridger on July 31st. Lansford Hastings was ahead of them on his cut-off with another wagon train and the Donners simply started to follow along hoping to slice hundreds of miles and weeks off the trip to California.

The first problem arrived six days later when they found a note from Hastings saying the route ahead of them was impassable. Riders rode ahead to find Hastings who came part way back and pointed to another route, which he'd not taken. Here was a second fateful turn. Hastings had gotten his wagons through his route and the Donners would get through the variation, but only after exhausting work. There was no trail to follow. They made only two miles a day cutting their way through the wilderness.

# Story Locations in this Issue

Charles Stanton's grave, pg 5

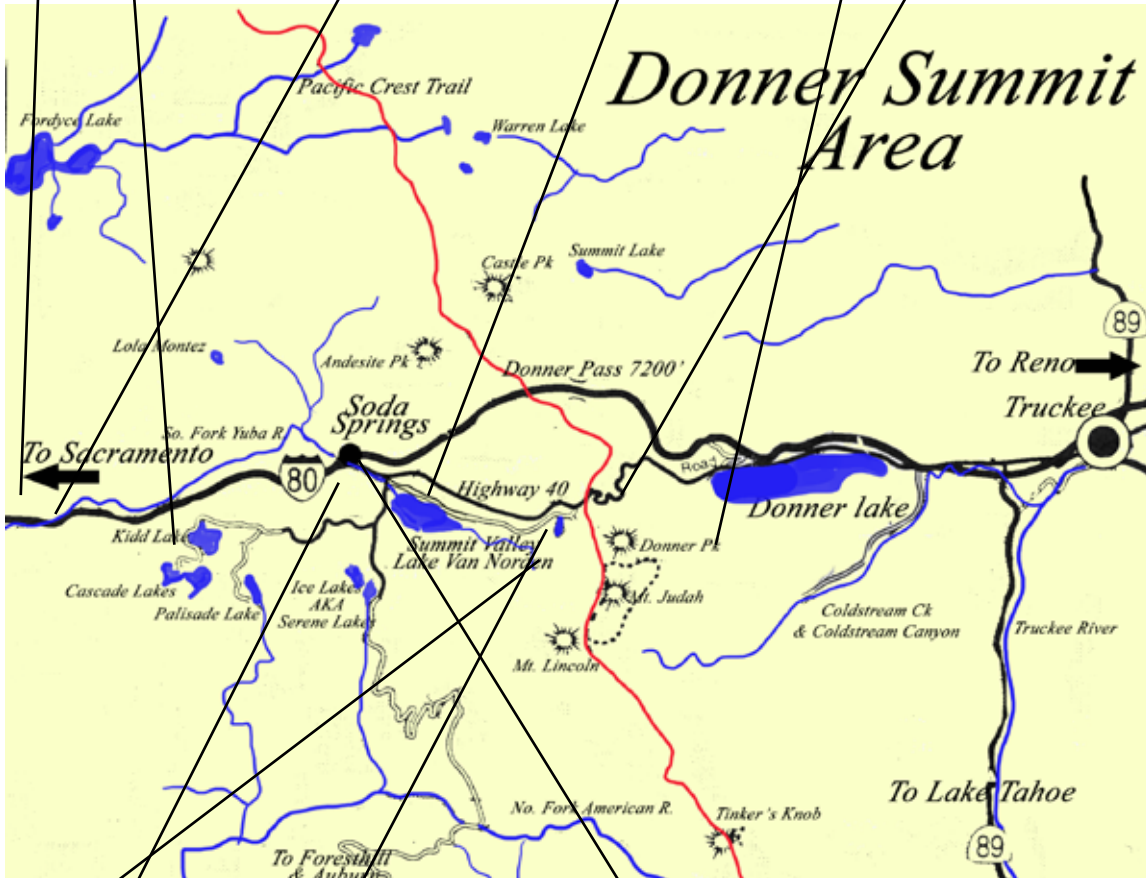
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Soda Springs Station pg 10, Donner Summit photo pg 10,

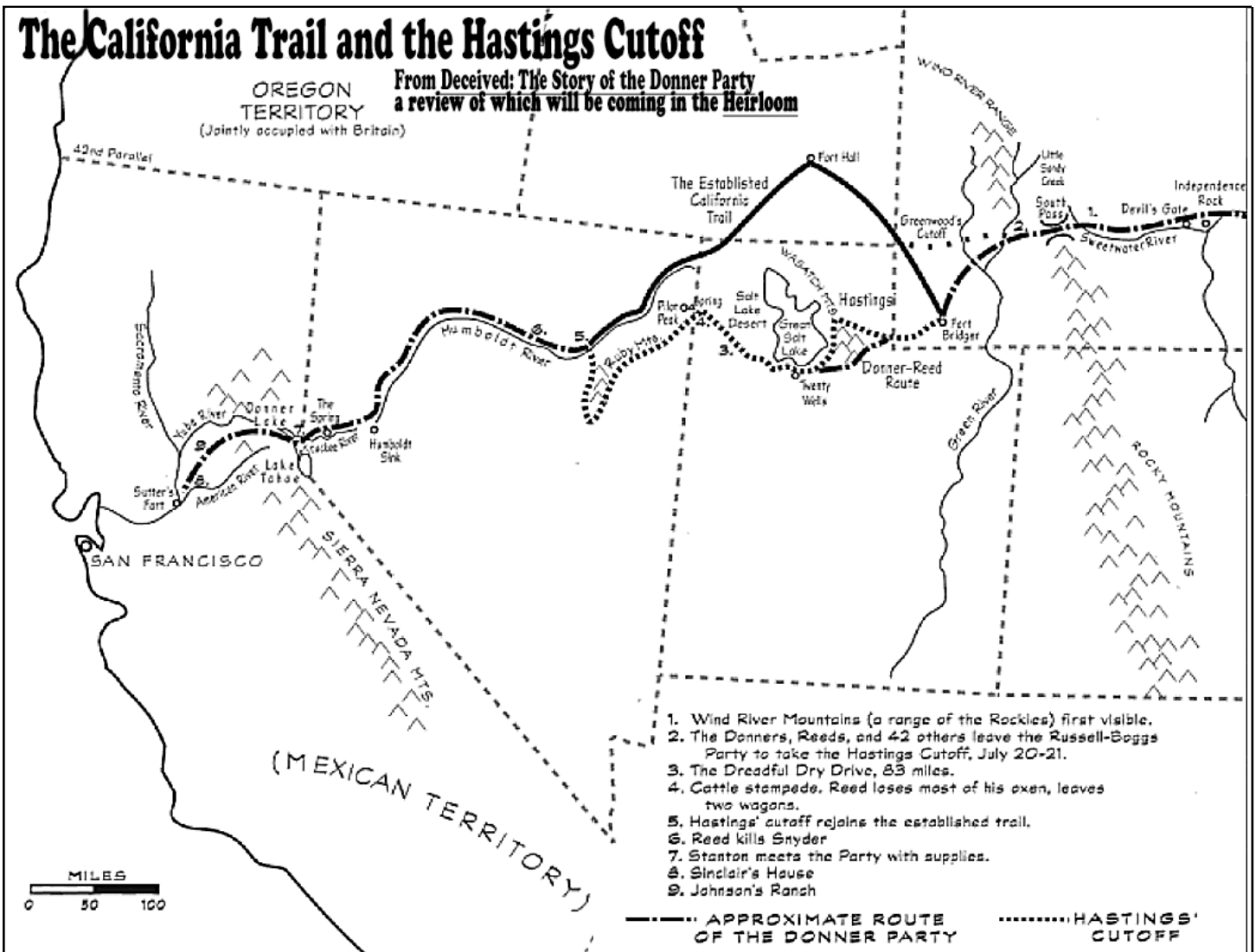


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Unless otherwise noted, the photographs and other historical ephemera in The Heirloom's pages come from the Norm Saylor collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society

# The California Trail and the Hastings Cutoff

From Deceived: The Story of the Donner Party  
a review of which will be coming in the Heirloom



It must have been exhausting and disappointing – California was beckoning. How many were thinking, “if only we hadn’t followed that SOB”? Of course worse was to come.

Two weeks later they found another note from Hastings saying it would take only two days to cross the desert. It took five. It was 80 miles across, not 40. Water ran out. Oxen and cattle ran away. Wagons were abandoned. People were exhausted. They were miserable and worse was yet to come.

The cut-off was 125 miles longer than the route others were taking on the California Trail. The Donners spent 68 days doing what others spent 37 days on to get to the same point. That put them even further behind than they’d been before. How they must have hated Hastings.

Then there was accident, death, banishment, and maybe murder. Food ran out. There was dissension in the group. It was getting worse. And worse was yet to come.

Then they saw the Sierra – squarely in their path. It was terrifying for some emigrants. The Donner Party members were so close to California but now there was another monstrous

obstacle. Would the journey never end? Could it get worse?

The Donner Party missed another turn into Coldstream Canyon. Coldstream Pass had been discovered earlier that season and the top could be reached without taking wagons apart and carrying things over various rock ledges. There was snow on the ground so they’d missed the turn off and went the way the emigrants of ’44 and ’45 did. Half the party ended up at Donner Lake. Imagine their frustration as they looked up at the steep granite walls. There appeared to be no route up. It was snowing. More was coming. Worse was yet to come.

It was October 31, 1846.

**November 3,** Many of the Donner Party tried for the summit. They abandoned their wagons and loaded things on oxen. Adults carried children. They struggled through drifts of snow feet deep. Charles Stanton and one of the Indians Sutter sent with Stanton to bring food to the party, struggled to the top of the pass. Snow was chest deep. It was too hard to go on. They returned to the rest of the group which was camped below in the snow. They wouldn’t move. They had no energy.

They would try to cross in the morning. Darkness arrived at their camp a few miles west of the lake and a few miles short of the top of the pass. More snow began to fall.

Panic and despair set in. They'd suffered so much and now this. Could anything more go wrong? Virginia Reed described things, "When it was seen that the wagons could not go through the snow, the goods and provisions were packed on oxen and another start was made... men and women walking in the snow up to their waists, carrying their children in their arms and trying to drive their cattle... We camped within three miles of the summit [ the bottom of the pass]. That night came the dreaded snow. We children slept soundly on our cold bed of snow... every few moments my mother would have to shake the shawl – our only covering – to keep us from being buried alive. In the morning the snow lay deep on the mountains and valley. With heavy hearts we turned back." Their dreams of California, even though they were so close, were shattered. Despair.

Snow continued for three days. The Party settled in at Donner Lake.

**November 13** Another storm ended and 15 people headed for Donner Summit: three fathers, two young women, Charles Stanton and the two Indians Sutter had sent back with Stanton. They waded through snow that was ten feet deep. They failed and returned to the lake exhausted. They could not get through the snow and get over the pass; they could not go through the snow and go back to the Truckee Meadows (today's Reno).

**November 22** 22 people with seven mules headed for the top of Donner Pass. The snow was six feet deep. There was an argument. The mules could go no further and Stanton would not leave the mules. He'd given his word to Sutter to bring them back. Wm. Graves said, "We could see nothing but snow and the tops of pine trees." No one could go on without Stanton or the Indians to act as guides. At midnight they arrived back at Donner Lake.

**December 16.** The Forlorn Hope left Donner Lake heading for Donner Pass. They hoped their food would last six days. It might take ten days to get to help in California they thought. The snow was eight feet deep at the lake. Seventeen started, fifteen on snowshoes. The youngest was 12 years old and the oldest 57 years old although most were in their teens and early twenties. The oldest woman was 23. There were four fathers and three mothers in the group who had left their children at Donner Lake. Two people were a married couple. The oldest, Franklin Graves, took along two grown daughters and a son-in-law. He left his wife and seven other children at Donner Lake. Which was a better choice? Fight snow and weather to head for California to get help and maybe never see your children again, or stay at Donner Lake to protect the children? Could the people to whom the children were entrusted be trusted?

The going was too hard and the two without snowshoes went

back to the lake.

The group went four miles the first day getting to the head of "Truckey's Lake." Walking in snow is difficult. Snowshoes make it less difficult but still one sinks into the snow and forward momentum is lost as one pushes off for the next step and sinks a bit more. Snowshoes pick up snow too, making each step heavier. Wool and flannel clothing gets saturated with sweat from the inside and melting snow from the outside. Misery.

The next day they headed up 1,000 feet to Donner Pass. Mary Ann Graves (20 years old) said, "We had a very slavish day's travel, climbing to the divide" but she also said "The scenery

"My shoes were ox-bows, split in two, and rawhide strings woven in, something in form of the old-fashioned, split-bottom chairs. Our clothes were of the bloomer costume, and generally were made of flannel."

Mary Ann Graves

was too grand for me to pass without notice." She also reported that someone else said, "We were as near to heaven as we could get."

**December 17** the Forlorn Hope struggled to the top of Donner Pass. They camped just west of the pass and built a fire on a log platform on the snow which was twelve feet deep. Coffee and few strips of beef were all they had after their exhausting day. They'd gone six miles.

There were snow flurries and high winds but at least it wasn't snowing again - yet.

**December 18** The day started, according to Wm. Eddy's journal, beautifully with clear skies. It would have been "delightful" except that the snow lay so deep. The party got through Summit Valley along "Juba creek" going about six miles.

**December 19** About 11 at night it began snowing. The wind was blowing cold and furiously. Three days out from the lake the storm continued and "feet commenced freezing," said Wm. Eddy. It snowed all day. The Forlorn Hope was without shelter except for blankets. Blankets must have become soaked as did clothing. They made about five miles that day perhaps to about today's Kingvale.

**December 20.** The Forlorn Hope struggled on. There was only one day of food rations left. Charles Stanton became snowblind. They went about four miles.

**December 21** Charles Stanton died. Wm. Eddy said "provisions [were] exhausted."



**CASCADE LAKES  
CHARLES T. STANTON,  
WHILE ATTEMPTING TO LEAD SEVERAL  
MEMBERS OF THE DONNER PARTY  
TO SUTTER'S FORT,  
DIED OF EXHAUSTION NEAR HERE  
DECEMBER 21, 1846**

"Then they wrapped their blankets about them and slept upon the snow till the morning light recalled them to their weary travel. On that morning of their fifth day out, poor Stanton sat late by the camp-fire. The party had set off, all but Miss G., and as she turned to follow her father and sister, she asked him if he would soon come. He replied that he should, and she left him smoking. He never left the desolate fireside. His remains were found there by the next party who passed." Eliza Farnham, California Indoors and Out quoted in The Donner Party Chronicles pg 235

"And Mr. Stanton, who sacrificed his life to assist his companions – for he had no family or relations in the company – should be held in honored remembrance by everyone who can appreciate a noble act. [As we ascended the Sierra] the clouds on the mountains looked very threatening, but he naturally looked at the bright side of things, and assured us there was no danger, little thinking that the next summer's sun would bleach his unburied bones, not far from that spot." John Breen quoted in Donner Party Chronicles pg. 235

There is a marker sign below Cascade Lake noting that Charles Stanton died there but contemporary sources say that Stanton was with the group when it camped along the "Juba river" which is quite a way away.

**December 22** Another storm hit the Forlorn Hope. It "snowed [sic] all last night Continued to Snow all day with Some few intermissions..." Wm. Eddy. They stayed in camp all day.

**December 23** They realized they'd made a wrong turn. The Indians were "bewildered."

**October 24** The "storm recommenced with greater fury; extinguished fires," said Wm. Eddy. The storm had increased so much they could not travel. As the storm raged around them they sat in a circle covered by blankets. John Sinclair, Alcalde of No. California, who interviewed members of the Forlorn Hope (and whose report is included in Edwin Bryant's What I Saw in California) said Wm. Eddy suggested they all sit in a circle on a blanket. Their feet pointed in to the center of the circle and blankets were spread over their heads. Snow and wood held the blankets down on the outside of the circle. Snow fell and closed off openings. Body heat made the cold less unbearable. The group sat that way for 36 hours while the

storm raged. Once the storm had abated one member of the party found some cotton stuffing in her cape that was still miraculously dry. It served as tinder to start a fire.

**December 25** There were only eleven members of the Forlorn Hope still alive. Two had died. Mary Ann Graves said, "Father died on Christmas night at 11 o'clock in the commencement of the snow storm."

**December 26** Wm. Reed said, "Could not proceed; almost frozen; no fire." They'd been four days without food and only a little food before that.

**December 27** The Forlorn Hope cut flesh from a dead companion's body, "roasted it by the fire and ate it, averting their faces from each other and weeping." (Donner Party Chronicles pg 238) The two Indians refused to eat. Lemuel Murphy, aged 12, died.

Alcalde Sinclair captured some of the pathos, "How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm ! Oh ! How they must have thought of those happy, happy homes which but a few short months before they had left with buoyant hopes and fond anticipations ! Where, oh where were the green and lowery plains which they had heard of, dreamt, and anticipated beholding, in the month of January, in California ? Alas ! many of that little party were destined never to behold them. Already was death in the midst of them."

**January 1, 1847 (170 years ago this month)** The Forlorn Hope turned into the American River drainage away from a better route in the Yuba/Bear River drainage. There were only ten members. They carried dried human flesh. Their feet were bloody and frostbitten.

**January 5, 1847** Mrs. Reed, Virginia and two others tried to escape Donner Lake and get over the pass.

**January 8** They return to the lake.

**January 17** Wm. Eddy arrived at Bear Valley. The seven surviving members of the Forlorn Hope, five women and two men, had been rescued a few days earlier by Miwok Indians. Two Indian boys helped Eddy to the nearest settler's house where Harriet Ritchie broke into tears when she saw him. He was staggering and emaciated. Four people from Bear Valley retraced Eddy's bloody footprints to find the other six survivors lying in the mud. It took 33 days for the Forlorn Hope to travel from Donner Lake over Donner Summit and down to Bear Valley.

News spread in California of the Donner Party's fate and rescue parties were formed. People who could have easily stayed comfortably in California, with plenty of food, would endure the hardship of carrying heavy packs uphill through the

snow. They would endure hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake.

Here we'll take a break until next month to see what happened in February of 1847, 170 years ago next month.

## Donner Party and Donner Summit 170 years ago this winter

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 fail trying for Donner Summit.

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 the 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 at Starved Camp

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

## In the Museum

This is the first in what will be a long series of articles about the contents of the Donner Summit Historical Society's museum at the blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs. The building is full of items related to Donner Summit history and will provide the bases for lots of stories so keep your subscriptions up to date.

The heart of the museum is Norm Saylor's incomparable collection of thousands of historical photographs, most of which have to do with Donner Summit history.

Norm has long been collecting old photographs but really started in earnest because of two things. The first thing was Margie Powell. She was the energy behind the formation of the Donner Summit Historical Society. Before she got to that project Margie had been writing about local history for the Serene Lakes Property Owners' Association. Many of the subjects she tackled ended up in her book, [Donner Summit a Brief History](#). In writing her book she needed some pictures for illustration which her pal, Norm Saylor, could help her with. That sent Norm off to finding more pictures. Just about that time he learned about EBay which became his main source for photographs. As of the end of 2016 he'd bought several thousand items from EBay. EBay has not been Norm's only source. He's gathered photographs from a long list of friends and acquaintances, books, other places on the Internet, and wherever else he could.

Eventually Norm has built a collection of thousands of photographs which he's sorted into binders for the small photos and onto the walls, into drawers, and on counters for the larger ones. Some have been turned into a continually running slide show in the DSHS.





Norm Saylor with some of the binders of photographs in his collection along with a new find, calenders from 1938 on a circular for Calaveras Cement, the cement used to repave Old Highway 40.

As our crack [Heirloom](#) interviewing staff was talking to Norm about his collection the question arose, which is your favorite? Norm paused, thinking. He said there was no way he could choose a favorite. They were “all my favorites.” He paused again and his face softened. No, he had favorites. His favorites were any that were of the Donner Summit Bridge, the icon of the community on Donner Summit (and the logo of the DSHS) and Lake Van Norden, full of water. So here we include two of Norm's favorite subjects.

Lake Van Norden, he said, meant so much to the community and to the communities down river. It made the community, before the dam was breached in 1976. There were so many activities that centered on the lake: water skiing, boating, fishing, camping, even gliders (wait for a future [Heirloom](#)). The lake filled each winter and then PG&E let water out all summer. That provided summer flow in the Yuba River and so the lake provided a river for Kingvale, Pla-Vada, Rainbow, and Cisco, which are all small communities in the Donner Summit neighborhood. Here you might like to get our new brochure, “Lake Van Norden History of a Sierra Jewel,” available on the brochures page on our website and at the DSHS.



From 1976 to 2016 there was a small lake providing recreation, habitat, and scenery for Donner Summit. It, and the surrounding meadow, said Perry Norris, executive director of the Truckee Donner Land Trust, was the jewel of the Sierra. There was nothing like it anywhere else in the Sierra and would be preserved. The Land Trust bought the lake and surrounding meadow from a failed development scheme and then drained the lake. It is a jewel no more. Norm would like to see the jewel restored.



# From the DSHS Archives

<b>U. S. WEATHER FORECAST</b> FAIR BUT WITH CONSIDERABLE CHANGES THURSDAY - FRIDAY FAIR - NORMAL TEMPERATURE; MODERATE WEST AND NORTH-WEST WIND OFFSHORE.	<b>The San Bernardino Sun</b> <i>A Newspaper for San Bernardino County.</i> And The Daily Orange Ball News	<b>SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY</b> WITH 18,000 POPULATION IS SIXTH IN CALIFORNIA AND WITH 2,500 SQUARE MILES IS LARGEST IN AREA IN AMERICA.
FORTY-SECOND YEAR	TWENTY-EIGHT PAGES	THURSDAY MORNING, JANUARY 16, 1936

## 15 HURT AS SNOW BURIES S. P. LIMITED

<b>GOV. MERRIAM VOICES PRAISE OF EXPOSITION</b>	<b>Navies' Limitation Comes to End When Japan Quits Parley</b> Race for Sea Armament Expected Despite Mutual Desire Expressed by Powers	<b>HAUPTMANN'S PROBERS FACE LIFE STRINGS HARD TASK IN DRAW THINNER PLANE WRECK</b>	<b>Girl Is Born After Death Of Mother</b> <small>(By United Press)</small> PENN. YAN, N. Y., Jan. 15. —An unusual feat in surgery was performed here tonight. Mrs. Lester Eyrick, an expectant mother, of Dundee, N. Y., was admitted to the	<b>ONE CAR TIPS OVER BENEATH TONS OF SNOW</b>
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## ESCAPE IN TRAIN WRECK WAS 'MIRACLE', SAY PASSENGERS

Theodore Judah said that snow was not a problem on Donner Summit (see the [Heirloom](#) for February, '15). Before they'd even finished the transcontinental railroad the railroad was building what would eventually become forty miles of snowsheds to protect the trains, the track, and travel on the transcontinental route. Given that we have an average of 34 feet of snowfall each winter those snowsheds have proved useful not just against the snowfall but also against the avalanches that are not uncommon. Old newspapers contain lots of stories of closed tracks due to snowfall and avalanches. Here is one from January, 1936 reported in a number of newspapers.

[Oakland Tribune](#), January 16, 1936. Headline: "One Car Tips Over Beneath Tons of Snow"

An avalanche struck near Donner Summit seriously injuring three passengers on their way to an automobile dealers' convention in Oakland and crushing one rail car so that it was only two feet high. The snowshed that covered the track was also destroyed.

There was a "tremendous crash" and then "pitch darkness." The injured were "tossed around like pebbles" and knocked out. Two hours after the accident the injured heard thumping and they began yelling. A fellow came along in a little passageway in the wreckage with a flashlight and they all crawled out of the wreckage then through a hole in the snow and out to safety. "It was mighty good to see daylight even if it was cold and snowing pretty hard."

There was more from first hand accounts: "Hayden was pinned by his seat and the collapsed framework of the car, Gibson said...." "We dug at the snow, and finally managed to clear it away, but it was three hours before workmen from the wrecking train finally got him free."

"C.A. Oddermott, the San Francisco conductor, said he was standing on the platform when heard a roar. "I thought the whole side of the mountain was coming down on the train," he declared. "I expected everyone in the crushed car would be killed and can't understand how we escaped a more serious catastrophe."

"The first thing we knew, there came a terrific jar. The car seemed to telescope and overturn at the same time. I guess I was knocked out for a time," said a Mr. W. A. Sheppard

"We were trapped in the car for what seemed like hours, until the rescue crew got busy with jacks and acetelyne [sic]



# Slide Crashes Through Snow Sheds, Trapping 3 Coaches Of S. P. Limited In Sierra

15 Passengers Injured When Enormous Mass Of Snow and Dirt Sweeps Down On Sheds Near **Donner Summit**

INFLATIONISTS  
TO STAGE FIGHT

Top previous page, [L.A. Times](#) January 16, 1936. Second headline and bottom of this page, [Oakland Tribune](#) January 13, 1936

Above, the [Santa Cruz Sentinel](#) January 16, 1936

torches, and made an opening in the side of the car near us."

The article reports that the "Southern Pacific's westbound transcontinental train, the "Pacific Limited" was buried in a snowslide on Donner Summit. Eleven (or fifteen or three depending on the newspaper) people were injured. Rains had saturated the snow which "smashed through snowsheds" wiping out 210 feet of double snowsheds and engulfing the end of the train just as it was pulling into Eder Station. Eder was a stop on the railroad around the curve that follows after Tunnel 13 going east. Eder is maybe a quarter mile from the tunnel today used by the railroad and six miles east of the summit. The slide overturned the observation car and passengers had to make their way through buried coaches. The last three cars were unhooked from the train and the train went on to Colfax. A wrecking train was dispatched from Sparks to clear the wreckage.

After escaping the slide the train was delayed by another one. The [San Francisco Call](#) reported on January 14 that the same storm left five feet of snow on the streets of Truckee and 9 feet had "piled up" on the summit.

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## *Eleven Passengers Injured as Snow Buries S. P. Train*

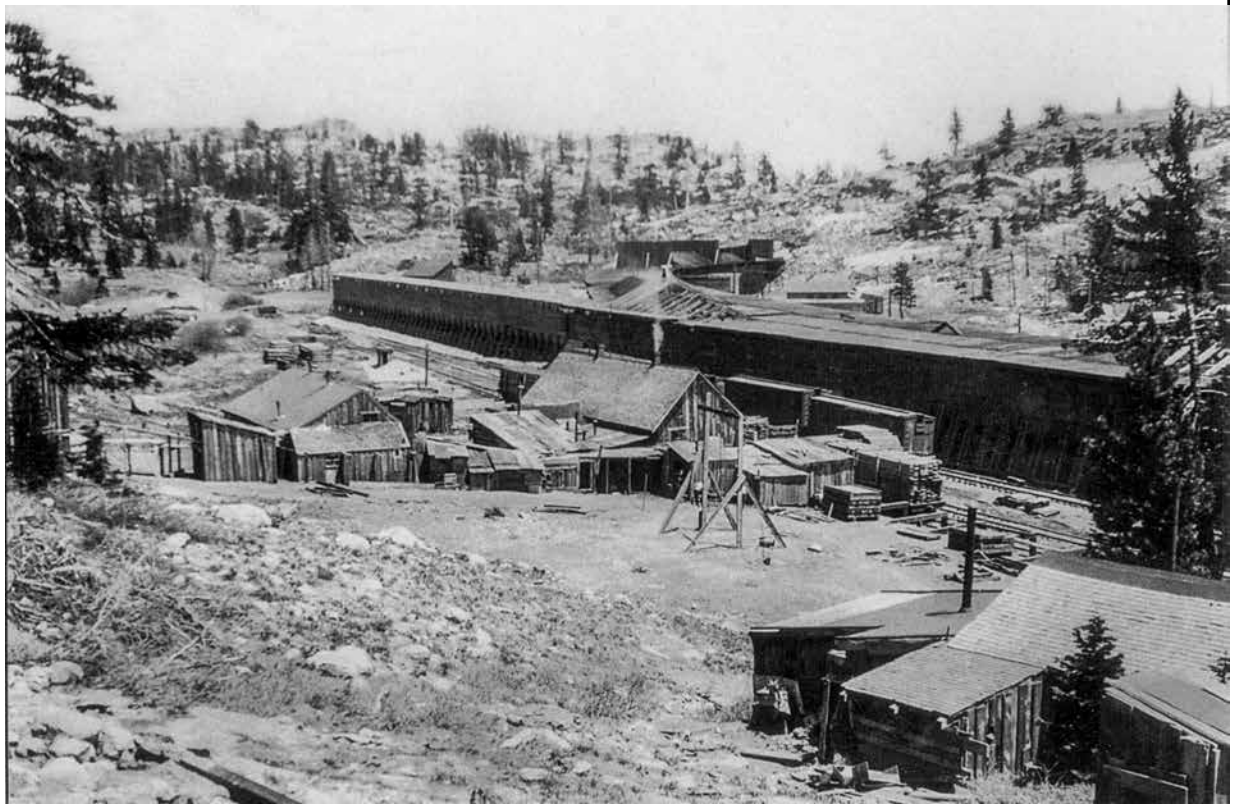
Rear Portion of Limited Engulfed by Avalanche Near **Donner Summit** in High Sierras

# From the DSHS Archives



Above, the train used to stop at Soda Springs Station. The station above was abandoned about 1950. The photo is from 1944 when the tracks were guarded by the army and the summit was shut down to visitors to protect the transcontinental railroad for the War effort (a future [Heirloom](#)).

Below, "Donner Summit Looking East." The snowshed leads into Tunnel 6. There were a lot of buildings in the area.



# From the DSHS Archives

## Early Skiers Movie - YouTube

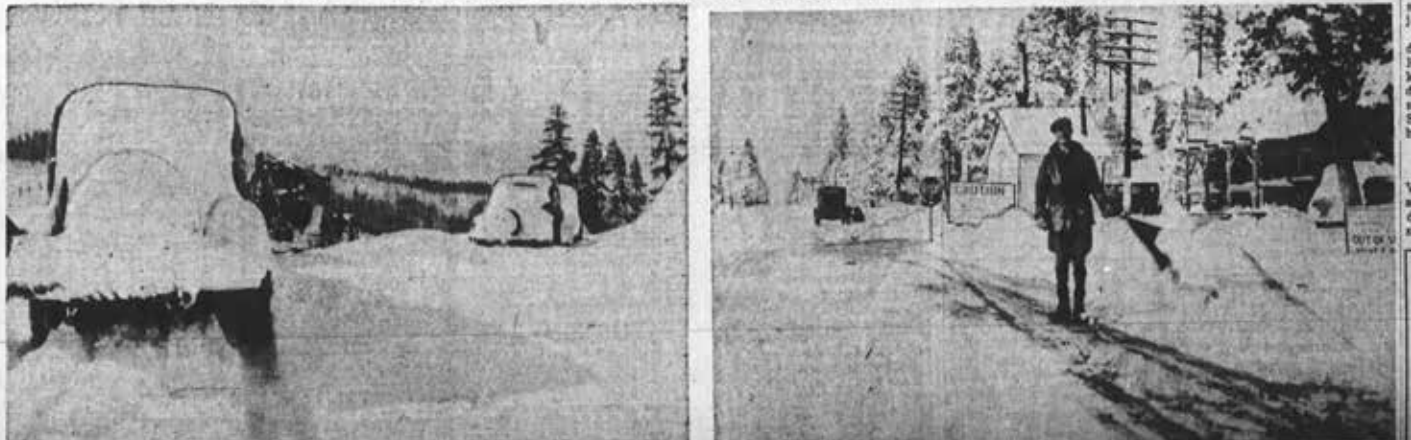
Norm Saylor found an early ski movie call "Early Skiers" on YouTube. This is vintage footage (circa 1930) of ski touring and telemarking at the top of Donner Pass before Sugar Bowl Ski Resort was even thought of. You will also see skiers in the snowsheds (walking, not skiing).

## Johnny Ellis and Skiing from Donner Summit

In the days before ski lifts some hardy skiers could get some good long runs skiing from Donner Summit to Donner Lake. Johnny Ellis (see the April, '09 [Heirloom](#) who had the first rope tow on Donner Summit and who subdivided Lake Mary) advertised the fun:

"The west side of Donner Peak grades from nursery slopes to very long runs of intermediate class.... From the northeast knob of the mountains is a run for experts, a run to become the Hell's Highway of the west. A place for experts to break ribs and records... drops 1500 feet in  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles and then keeps going down. 2000 feet of downhill per run, and your drive back half of it by car on the highway....with two cars to shuttle a party can ski downhill all day."

## TOW CAR BRIGADE ACTIVE AS FIRST WINTRY BLASTS SWEEP SIERRA



Here the [Oakland Tribune](#) reported the first storm of the 1935 season. Cars were stopped at the "Truckee checking station" to be sure they had chains

[Oakland Tribune](#) December 14, 1935



# Book Review

The Emigrant's Guide  
To Oregon and California in 1845  
Lansford Hastings  
265 pages

Being in the area of Donner Pass\* I've always wondered what it was about Lansford Hastings' book, *The Emigrant's Guide*, that lured the Donner Party into taking the left hand turn. The "short cut" slowed them down so they arrived at Donner Pass when there were feet of snow on the ground. They couldn't get over Donner Summit. They were trapped. The more I read about Hastings in other Donner Party books (see the book review page on our website or Heirloom indices on the Heirloom pages) the more questionable he looked. The book has been on the DSHS ready to review bookshelf for some time. Here, maybe, we answer the question.

## First a little background.

James Reed, Donner Party personality who was expelled from the group after killing another member and who got to California early and started rescue attempts, said before turning off onto the cutoff, "The new road, or Hasting's Cutoff is said to be a saving of 350 or 400 miles in going to California and a better route." He hoped it would be seven weeks to Sutter's Fort, 700 miles on the "fine level road, with plenty of water and grass." On July 31 the party turned onto the Hastings Cutoff, leaving the California Trail almost everybody else was taking.

Six days later the wagon train found a note from Hastings. He said the road ahead was almost impassible. James Reed rode forward to meet Hastings and get help with an alternative. Hastings came part way back and pointed to another way, one he'd also never been on. It was terrible. There was no trail to follow. They made only two miles a day and had to cut their way through the wilderness

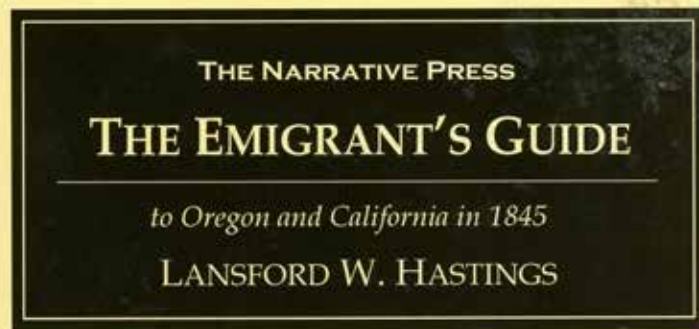
Two weeks later there was another note. It would only take two days to cross the desert in front them. That was also bad advice. It took five days. It was 80 miles across, not 40. Water ran out. Oxen ran away. People were exhausted.

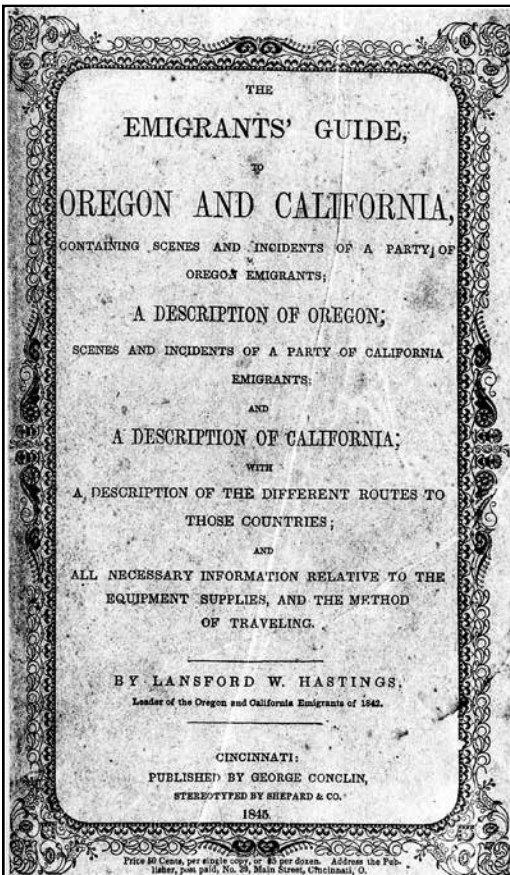
When the Donner Party left the Hastings Cutoff, the "short cut," and rejoined the California Trail they'd gone 125 miles farther than they would have and spent extra weeks doing it. The Donner Party spent 68 days on The Hastings Cutoff while other parties spent 37 days on the California Trail to get to the same point.

James Reed's daughter, Virginia, wrote, "O Mary I have not wrote you half of the truble but I hav Wrote you anuf to let you now what truble is but thank the Good god and the onely family that did not eat human flesh we have left everything but I don't cair for that we have got Don't let this letter dishaten anybody never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can."

The Donner Party was late to the Sierra. They missed the turn to Coldstream Canyon and were trapped at what would soon be

\*Because the Forlorn Hope and the rescuers of the Donner Party went over Donner Pass and Starved Camp was somewhere in Summit Valley we can cover the subject.





called Donner Lake, just below Donner Pass. The Hastings Cutoff, among other things, was the undoing of the Donner Party.

Hastings was part of a party going to Oregon and then he led a party to California in 1845. In 1846 he went back to Fort Bridger to greet emigrants and steer them to California.

There he picked up 60 wagons

and headed back to California leaving notes for following emigrants to take his trail. The Donner Party was just a bit behind and missed connecting to Hastings. Those who did go with Hastings made it to California.

## The Emigrants' Guide

The Emigrant's Guide was more of a sales brochure than a guide to get to California. It was a very long sales brochure though (232 pages of the 265) that extolled the virtues first of Oregon and then of California.

The first few chapters, 110 pages, focus on his trip to Oregon, a narrow escape from Indians, and descriptions of Oregon, but since most readers here are not headed to Oregon in 1845 we can dispense with that part. Besides, the lists and statistics are a bit tedious.

More of the book is about "that highly important country" Upper California (only Upper California because of the "extremely narrow limits of this small work"). Hastings' Upper California extends from the Pacific all the way to the Rockies (this was before the Mexican War when the area was all one big territory belonging to Mexico). Here again there is tedium. Hastings lists landmarks without names but with latitude and longitude and other information. Without names or Google Earth nearby the modern reader is lost.

Beyond the lists all of Hastings' descriptions of California are in the superlative. The climate is in perpetual spring.

There is snow in some places but lasts only two or three hours. "No fires are required, at any season of the year..." Vegetables are planted and gathered at any season. There are two grain crops annually. "Even in the months of December and January, vegetation is in full bloom." "December is as pleasant as May." In the mountains of course it's different so "You may here enjoy perennial spring, or perpetual winter as your options. You may in a very few days, at any season of the year, pass from regions of eternal verdure to those of perpetual ice and snow."

Such a good climate promotes health, "There are few portions of the world, if any, which are so entirely exempt from all febrifacient causes... no... noxious miasmatic effluvia... The purity of the atmosphere, is most extraordinary, and almost incredible. So pure is it, in fact, that flesh of any kind may be hung for weeks together, in the open air, and that too, in the summer season, without undergoing putrefaction." "...disease of any kind is very seldom known..." Any sickness is mild and so people seldom resort to medical aid. People were unanimous that "...this is one of the most healthy portions of the world... few portions... are superior... in point of healthfulness and salubrity of climate."

Heavy timber stands abound with trees being 250 feet high and 15-20 feet in diameter. A multitude of crops are grown. The "climate and soil, are, eminently adapted" to grow almost anything and here Hastings lists a couple of dozen kinds of crops. It's so easy to grow things that all a farmer has to do is "designate a certain tract as his oat field, and either fence it, or employ a few Indians" and he reaps a crop. Besides all the delicious fruits there is wine "which always constitutes one of the grand essentials of a California dinner" and here Hastings noted that his temperance pledge did not include wine.

There are immense herds of animals too and domestic animals can be reared "with little, or no expense. They require neither feeding nor housing and are always sufficiently fattened..." Horses are found in "herds almost innumerable, and they are always in the best condition" so they can be ridden or driven for days without food or rest. "...cattle are much more numerous then [sic] the horses; herds of countless numbers are everywhere seen... farmers have, from twenty to thirty thousand head."

There is game of every description and he lists more than a dozen and this provides us with a wider view of mostly pre-settled California. There are herds of elk and antelope. Wolves are so numerous that it's a waste of ammunition to kill one. There are bear, both grizzly and brown. The "fur bearing animals are much more numerous... than in any other section of the country.... Especially the beavers, otters, muskrats and seals." At some times of the year "the whole country, [is] literally covered with the various water-fowls..." One could fill a feather bed "in a very

few hours.” The noise of “innumerable flocks” can be deafening “blackening the very heavens with their increasing numbers...” with “tumultuous croaking and vehement squeaking.”

The fisheries “are unusually plentiful.” Hastings lists ten species and then moves on to shell fish which “abound... in great profusion.”

For all the wealth of natural resources and agriculture there was an ample market that could absorb all resources so emigrants to California could be assured of success. Better yet, there were no price fluctuations in markets as there were in the United States.

Although California was an “infant country” its commercial prospects were “scarcely equaled” and in a few years would “exceed, by far, that of any other country in the same extent and population, in any portion of the known world.” “In a word, I will remark that in my opinion, there is no country, in the known world, possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country, in my opinion, now known, which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respect, to promote the unbounded happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened man.”

Hastings goes on to describe other aspects of California and then gives some insight into the 19th Century mind. He was clearly anti-Catholic and castigated the missions and the “despotic and inhuman priesthood” which have huge resources and “palace like edifices” to accommodate “religious oppressors” who have “keys of both heaven and hell” and who are the “authorized keepers... of the consciences of men” but who enslave and oppress the “unsuspecting aborigines” and the “lower orders of the people, to a most abject state of vassalage.” He goes on with anecdotes of priestly perfidy.

The population of California, according to Hastings, was about 31,000 people of whom 20,000 were Indians. The “foreigners” in California were almost exclusively from

the United States and were “generally, very intelligent... and they all possess an unusual degree of industry and enterprise.” They are even of better quality than others who “emigrate to our frontier. They possess more than [sic] an ordinary degree of intelligence, and... possess an eminent degree of industry, enterprise and bravery” just because they’ve gotten to California. No one will embark on so “arduous and irksome” a feat as to come to California without the “requisite” bravery, strength, and more than “ordinary share of energy and enterprise.”

Not only do the residents of California have such “leading traits of character” but they have “extraordinary kindness, courtesy and hospitality... A more kind and hospitable people are nowhere found... Here... the citizens and subjects, of almost every nation in the civilized world, [are] united by the silken chains of friendship.”

Mexicans were different though. The Mexican character was composed of ignorance, superstition, suspicion, and superciliousness. “More indomitable ignorance does not prevail... they are scarcely a visible grade, in the scale of intelligence, above the barbarous tribes by whom they are surrounded...” The reason for that was intermarriage with the Indians. Hastings said you can not tell the difference between those of mixed race and Indians in intelligence or appearance. Hastings described the hierarchy from top to bottom: Americans, Europeans, Mexicans, the mixed races, and “the aborigines... who have been slightly civilized, or rather *domesticated*.” [Hastings’ italics]

Having introduced the marvelous country of California in 132 pages (leaving out the Oregon part), it was time to guide the emigrants to California. Having heard of Lansford Hastings and his *Emigrant’s Guide* I’d always thought that it was an emigrant’s guide for getting to California and not a guide book of California. It turned out though, that it is mostly a guidebook. Oregon and getting there takes up 100 pages or so. The guidebook of California takes up 130 pages or so. The guide getting to California is only 30 pages or so and most of that is taken up with what to take, how to travel, lessons for traveling by wagon train, etc.

There is only a single sentence in the guide for getting to California that would lead the emigrants, like the Donners, astray. Hastings suggests emigrants leave the main route short of Ft. Hall “thence bearing west southwest, to the Salt lake [sic] and thence continue down to the bay of St. Francisco...” Emigrants had the guidebook and having read of California’s wonders, they were salivating at the prospect of getting there. No doubt they discussed California over their campfires. They knew that Hastings was waiting at Ft. Bridger since news traveled along the

## Note:

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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.



trail. They were probably disappointed that they'd missed Hastings when they arrived, but they were excited, and when they saw Hastings had gone a different route from the one taken by most wagons, they went after him. Unfortunately Hastings did not know what he was talking about.

In the last part of the guide Hastings considers the different routes to California and after analysis, recommends the route over the Sierra, Donner Summit. The route was 2100 miles and should take, Hastings said, 120 days. In particular it was so much easier than the trip to Oregon.

Here, in describing the route emigrants should take, Hastings exaggerates the easiness, "Wagons can be as readily taken from Ft. Hall to the bay of St. [sic] Francisco, as they can, from the States to Fort Hall; and, in fact, the latter part of the route, is found much more eligible for a wagon way, than the former." That route lay over plains, valleys, and hills, and amid "lofty mountains; thence down the great valley of the Sacramento, to the bay of St. Francisco." The Indians, he added, were "extremely timid and entirely inoffensive."

The route sounds like a sightseeing trip and California, the land of dreams, was just down the road. Thousands of emigrants would object to Hastings' characterization. Crossing the desert in Nevada was excruciating. People and animals died. The heat was almost unbearable. People left behind not just treasures but things needed to start life in California because they could carry them no further. See the sidebar here for John Steele's description in 1850 of people emerging from the desert and Bennett Clark's 1849 description. Emigrants would also have objected to Hastings' characterization of the Indians too who often stole or wounded livestock, the wounded having to be left behind for the Indians.

Having barely survived the desert emigrants next approached the Sierra. That was not just traveling among "lofty mountains." The Sierra was the hardest part of the entire trip. Emigrants looked with terror at the looming mountains. How could they be so close and yet so far? How would they get over the Sierra. They must have cursed Hastings. At least one might expect that at the top it was all downhill from there to California. It wasn't. It was almost as bad as the east side going up.

The emigrants did not know all that of course when they picked up Hastings' book. Since it was filled with so much detail about California and so much seemingly good advice about traveling in a wagon train, his credibility was assured and people followed. So when he left notes behind as he traveled west in 1846, some people reasonably followed them.

## Advice from Lansford Hastings

Take oxen instead of mules or horses to pull the wagons because, among other things, "Oxen endure the fatigue and heat, much better than either horse or mules... There is no instance, within my knowledge, of any emigrant's being required to leave his oxen by the way, because of excessive fatigue or extreme poverty; for, as a general thing, they continue to thrive, during the entire journey."

Hastings 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 for those of us who know what came next.

# Then & Now with Art Clark



## Hampshire Rocks

Just east of the Rainbow Lodge, the South Yuba River makes its way over smooth sculpted rocks. In the fall, the river's flow is small, and peaceful. In spring, it rages! Here you see the Lincoln Highway about 1920 next to the river above. Below you see Old Highway 40, Donner Pass Rd. (or Hampshire Rocks Rd. depending on what you want to call it). Why Hampshire Rocks is named Hampshire Rocks has been lost to history.

Photo position N 39° 18.649' W 120° 30.416'





# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, “Odds & Ends” of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes\* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we’ve been collecting them. Now they’re making appearances in the [Heirloom](#). Last month we covered the concrete arrows from the transcontinental air route and the abandoned Tunnel 4.

This month it’s a gondola sitting out in the forest.

Last month in the December, ’16 [Heirloom](#), there was a story about the MHRT (Mobile Historical Research Team) visiting Big Bend and finding Hilda’s Camp, a Chinese railroad workers’ camp. Both Sue Ellen Benson who lives summers in Big Bend and Art Clark of the MHRT have pictures of an old gondola car sitting out in the forest and so the MHRT, since it was in the neighborhood, decided to do a little treasure hunt. After not much searching the car was found. It appears, from Sugar Bowl publicity, to be one of the first iteration of cars put into service in 1952 (according to Rob Kautz, retired Sugar Bowl CEO).

There is a small mystery regarding the car. Some years ago when Sue Ellen and Art had each photographed it initially, it sat about fifty yards away from where the MHRT re-found it. Who moved it and why? Who left the bikini card in the gondola car (picture next page)?

There will be more about gondola cars and how they got away from Sugar Bowl in a future [Heirloom](#). Keep up your subscription.

The Magic Carpet was installed at Sugar Bowl in 1952 by Jerome Hill, scion of the Great Northern Railway family. The first cars had the “toaster” design (see the next page). It cost 15 cents one way and 25 cents round trip and took the place of the previous method of getting into Sugar Bowl, tractor drawn sleigh.

The Magic Carpet was re-engineered in 1958 and the gondolas became four passenger cars. Where gondola cars went when they were done being gondola cars is a mystery except for some of the cars. One became a lift shack at the Soda Springs Ski Hill according to Rob Kautz. John Slouber, who was Royal Gorge

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\*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.



Top: found gondola car sitting about center left. I-80 is in the distance.

Middle: Art Clark trying out the gondola car.

Bottom: another view.





CEO, bought a number of them for warming huts which is probably what the one Sue Ellen and Art found.

The found gondola car sits above Rainbow Lodge which used to be part of Royal Gorge and which for awhile had a cross country trail leading to it from Summit Station in Serene Lakes.

One day we'll do a story about the Magic Carpet. Meanwhile one of our 20 Mile Museum signs covers it. That you can find at the Magic Carpet in summer and fall as well as on our website

Left: the first iteration of Magic Carpet gondola cars, from a Sugar Bowl postcard. Note that it matches the one on the previous page.



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## Fan Mail

Thanks for another interesting issue. I've forwarded to all our board members & others.

Wayne Teague   Membership Director   Nevada County Historical Society

Congratulations! A wonderful issue. And many thanks for all the creativity and hard work you have put into these newsletters. Best regards, Ernie

Dr. Ernie Malamud, Paris

Congratulations on the milestone. Let's see – average pages 16? So that's at least 1600 pages that you have churned out. You're a machine!

Art Clark, Yuba City

Wow: One hundred issues of interesting historical reading is quite an amazing accomplishment. Ya done real good. Wishing you many more super years.

Marshall Fey, Reno