

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

September, 2017 issue #109

Bicycling Over the Sierra - 1894

Once the snow begins melting and the weather warms bicyclists begin to tackle the challenge of Donner Summit. A favorite route of the two-wheeled masochists is to start at Cisco Grove and ride to the summit for a thrilling ride down the other side to Donner Lake. That's the half way point because then there is the grueling ride back up three miles and a thousand feet to the summit before the downhill back to Cisco. It's not quite so hard doing the reverse because the really steep rise on the east side is done first. Other road bikers go farther, maybe to Truckee or even to Squaw Valley before returning. On a nice day there will be dozens of road bikers.

Mountain bikers too find their thrills on Donner Summit using new trails built by the Land Trust or the more numerous trails built by "trail fairies" which are ad hoc affairs. A popular ride is Old 40 to the Snow Lab, up the dirt road to Boreal, across the freeway using the underpass and over to the Hole in the Ground Trail which is a good technical ride, down to the fire station, and back along Old 40 where the car is parked.

The growing numbers of bicyclists on the summit now is a recent phenomenon but bicycling on the summit is not. In our March, '15 [Heirloom](#) we reviewed Thomas Stevens' book, [Around the World by Bicycle](#). He rode a "Penny Farthing" (or highwheel, high wheeler, or ordinary) and that makes his accomplishment fairly extraordinary. The bike had no brakes and no gears. Stevens took to the train tracks and then the snowsheds when he got close to the Donner Summit. He hadn't realized that when he left San Francisco on a nice spring day that there would still be snow in the Sierra. That was 1884.

Then in our April, '15 [Heirloom](#) we presented other bicyclists who crossed the summit in the late 19th Century. Bicycling had become a popular sport. It was inexpensive and there was a new freedom. A natural outgrowth of the popularity was the natural desire of some to push the limits and so many rode their bicycles across the country.

In our March, '14 [Heirloom](#) we presented a long lost 1901 photo album of two fellows who biked up from Sacramento to spend some time camping around Donner Summit.

We'd intended a few more articles about bicycles and Donner Summit but one thing or another, historically speaking, got in the way. There's been one folder of information that's been pressing to be exposed. Mark McLaughlin is a prolific local Tahoe-area

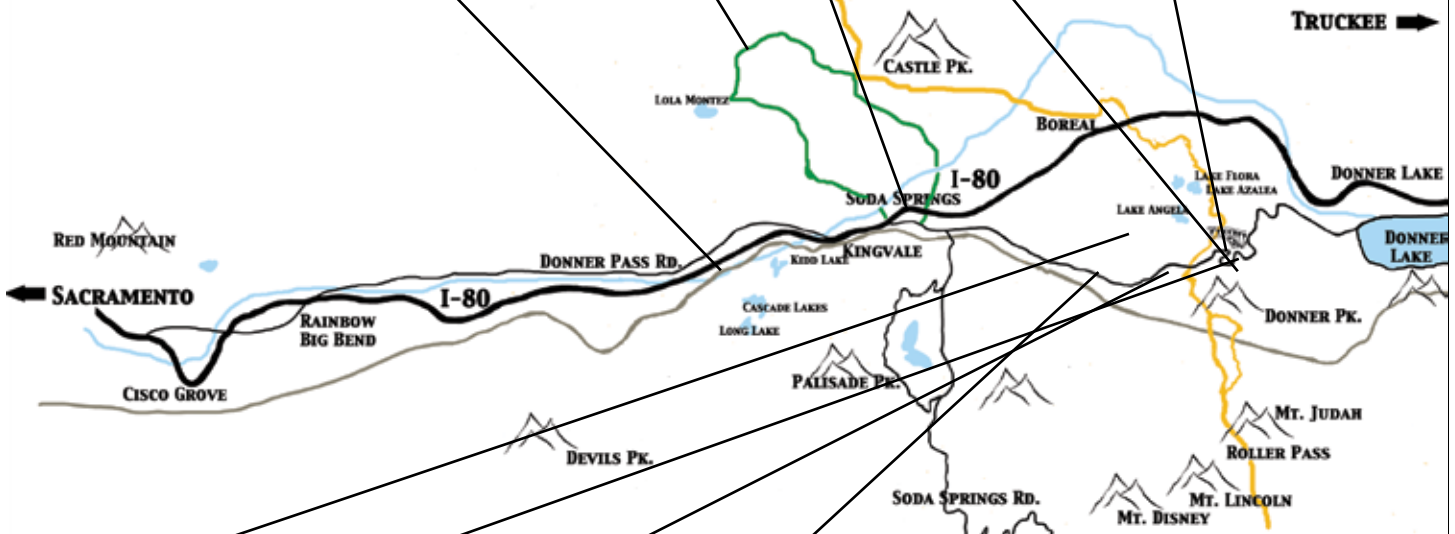


Thomas Stevens and his "Ordinary."

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DONNER SUMMIT



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L.A. Herald July 1, 1894

The railroad strike of 1894 was the reasons the Wilsons bicycled from Sacramento to Reno with a three years old



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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

historian. He spoke at a Donner Party Hikes (see the last page of this issue for this year's event) lunch and mentioned a family that biked across the Sierra in 1895. That's intriguing you have to admit, but obscure.

So the Donner Summit Historical Society's Obscure Historical Stories Research Team (OHSRT, pronounced Ohsurt) got to work and promised in the April, '15 [Heirloom](#) that "Our June [Heirloom](#) will have an article about N.E. Wilson, who bicycled with his wife and 3 year-old over Donner Summit in 1894." Well, we didn't as you can tell from perusing your carefully bound copy of the July, '15 [Heirloom](#). We can imagine that readers were disappointed although we didn't receive any complaints (possibly because the issue was so full of Donner Summit history that no one noticed).

The OHSRT had done the research though. Historical publications, old newspapers, and other sources had been scoured which all led to the University of Nevada at Reno. A trip to their library turned up documents and pictures. An old magazine turned up more. So here we have the story of Nathaniel Wilson and his ride over Donner Summit – on a bicycle in 1895, and then more.

Let's describe Mr. Wilson first to make the human connection to the fellow especially since the University of Nevada at Reno has a lot of information about him.

Nathaniel met his wife when he was twelve, in 1879. They were married in 1890 and would later have four kids but it's only the first kid who figures in this story, Nathaniel Estes Wilson IV. We'll call him Nat in what follows. Mr. Wilson attended the University of Maine and earned an MS in chemistry (later he got an honorary Doctor of Law degree from UNR in 1950 so he must have been special – keep reading). He worked at chemistry at the University of Vermont, then Cornell, and finally for private industry. Then he received an unsolicited letter from UNR appointing him to the agricultural experiment station. He hadn't even applied. He arrived in Reno in 1891 at the age of 24. There he worked on sugar beets and dairy. He took over classes for professors in other disciplines when they were sick or away. He became the head of the chemistry dept. in 1899 and temporary dean of the university in 1905. He resigned to go into the drug store business on Virginia St. in Reno until 1916. At that point he bought out his partners and brought in his sons. He later became a Reno city councilman and mayor. He served on the state Board of Education until 1948.

All that's nice but what has it to do with Donner Summit?

N.E.'s (that's what we always used to call him) first bike was a Spaulding which he got in 1882. It had a 48" front wheel with wooden spokes and steel rear wheel that was 16" in diameter. It must have been a lot like Thomas Stevens' bicycle (see pg 1). It had a "cast iron backbone." It must have been "fun" to ride.

In Reno N.E. and his wife got modern safety bicycles (the configuration we have today where wheels are the same size and generally with brakes). They joined a bike club. Then in 1894, three years after landing in Reno, he; his wife; and a friend, Bertha Bender ("a miss of sweet 17" according to the [L.A. Herald](#) on June 27, 1894), "wheeled from San Francisco to Los Angeles." They rode 515 miles in 12 days. That was pretty remarkable because there was little pavement in those days. The women carried light luggage and their bicycles had brakes. N.E. "carried a case fitting the frame of my wheel with sundry effects. On a seat in front of me and just behind the handle bar I carried my three year old son, Nat." N.E. had no brakes.

The group took the steamer back to San Francisco and then another steamer to Sacramento. They discovered that the railroad was on strike (the great Pullman Railroad Strike of 1894) and so getting to Reno would be impossible by normal method. Instead of languishing in Sacramento "we wheeled and walked from Sacramento over the summit and through Truckee down to Reno. This was a delightful trip." Because the railroad was on strike they were able to use the railroad's bed to travel at a nice even 3% grade up the hill and travel through the snowsheds with no fear of trains. N.E. made a log of their trip but that has disappeared.

That's the gist – well there's one more important part but you'll have to wait for that.

Much of what follows, starting on the next page, comes from the Student Record at UNR dated February 15, 1895 in an article titled, "Bicycling Over the Sierras" (sic)

The Great Pullman Railroad Strike of 1894

The railroad strike that stranded many but not the Wilsons, was the great Pullman Strike of 1894. The strike began in Chicago at the Pullman train car factory and spread west after the striking workers were joined by the American Railway Union (the badge given to Professor Wilson in Rocklin). The strike shut down freight and passenger traffic in 27 states and involved a quarter of a million workers. There was property damage and there were deaths. Militias were called out to stop the strikers. Ultimately the strike was not a success and collapsed by August.

Bicycling Over the Sierras

The Student Record Reno, Nevada February 15, 1895

The Wilsons and their friend, Bertha Bender, arrived in San Francisco by steamer following their trip to Los Angeles by bicycle and discovered the railroad was on strike, "...we were effectually cut off from all means of conveyance to Reno..." A "sympathetic" railroad employee told the travelers that "the walking is good if you do not wish to wait for the train." Bicycling seemed the only solution and not out of the question as it would be for most people. After all, they were well practiced. They picked up another friend and another person heading for Reno and took the steamer to Sacramento. The steamer was packed with people including militia being sent to Sacramento to deal with strikers.

By noon the party reached Roseville through the "oppressive" July heat and dust and continued on in the evening. Dinner was in Rocklin and bed was in Auburn at 11:30 PM. They'd gone 36 miles. In Rocklin some railway men gave Professor Wilson an ARU (American Railway Union) badge which they pinned to his satchel. That was met with approval of strikers they met on the trip and was maybe helpful.

Leaving Auburn the road did not look good so they took the railroad bed. After some flat tires it was Clipper Gap and New England Mills. They reached Colfax the next day "riding the ties." Some bike repairs and they were off, "the scenery at this point is beautiful - away in the distance can be seen Cape Horn, where the railroad creeps along built on the solid rock, right on the edge of the deep ravine through which winds the American River, the



swiftly flowing water sparkling in the sun like a long silver thread. Far down below us the little Nevada County Railway winds its way through a narrow cannon, its curves resembling the track of a huge snake." The Wilsons and Bertha Bender - courtesy of the Special collections and University Archives at the Mathewson Center University of Nevada, Reno. Imagine bicycling in the July heat and uphill in those costumes.

Far down below us the little Nevada County

Railway winds its way through a narrow cannon, its curves resembling the track of a huge snake."

They arrived at Gold Run at noon and then Towles. The next day they entered the snowsheds where the temperature was a delightful change from outside but it was harder traveling. They walked and rode occasionally taking drinks from "the finest, purest water on earth" which trickled out of the rock. About noon they came to a cook car where "the Chinaman in charge very kindly filled us up on railroad pie." When they reached Cascade (between Cisco and Kingvale) "the gentlemanly section boss had us go to his home and have lunch." They didn't mention they'd already had the railroad pie.

They arrived at the summit at 6 PM, elevation, 7,017 feet. They didn't stop though, and kept riding the ties entering "a tunnel which was so dark we were obliged to light our lanterns for fear of falling into a culvert." That was Tunnel 6. "It was a weird sensation to look on ahead and see light streaming through an opening which seemed to be about as large as a pinhole (see page



The "magnificent view the Wilsons would kind of have had in 1894 as they emerged from the snowshed and met the bus-minus the bridge, the old highway, minus the trees in the foreground, and minus the Lincoln Highway remnant hugging the mountain to the right. July, 2017. There is snow behind the photographer.

5 for a facsimile). The cold water dripping from above and trickling down out backs gave us the horrors.” Then they were into the snowsheds again. Shortly they came to the opening in the sheds where the Dutch Flat Road crossed through the sheds. There they met the Riverside Hotel bus (horse drawn wagon) heading to Sacramento. It had broken down due to the rough road. “The view at this point was magnificent; way below us lay Donner Lake, and right at the side of the road were ten feet of snow.” (The picture above was taken in mid-July of 2017 and there were still patches of snow around.) They left the sheds and took the road to the lake. It might have been a good road once but by 1894 “the road had entirely disappeared, having been washed out by the mountain torrents coursing down to the lake, leaving boulder after boulder exposed. Over these we climbed, pushing, pulling and carrying our wheels. We made but two miles in two and one-half hours, and during all this time my three-year old boy sat in his seat on the wheel without a murmur.” The road would later become the Lincoln Highway. It was better at the lake. Two ladies stopped the Wilsons asking for a newspaper which the Wilsons had and that brought an invitation to lunch at Donner Lake. The discerning reader will note here that the “lunch” in Professor Wilson’s description of their travels was the third one of the day and came late in the day. Then it was on to Truckee and arrival at 10 PM. Then next morning they were off to Reno. They took the Dog Valley route which proved “too steep for safe riding without brakes, [so] we borrowed (?) some cord wood and used it for a drag.” (The "drag" meaning they dragged cordwood to keep themselves from going too fast - something we don't typically do today.)

They arrived in Reno to “quite an ovation.”

The Tunnel 6 "pinhole" the Wilsons would have seen but taken in 2017.



Bicycling to L.A. in 1894

According to the Nevada State Journal (February 22, 1934) the Wilsons' trip along the coast from San Francisco to L.A. was a big deal in 1894. No one did things like that – especially women. The party had set out by train from Reno to San Francisco and there hopped on their bikes with the three year old, Nat, on the handlebars in front of dad. The women wore “rational costumes” which meant they wore clothes that were more “rationale” than acceptably fashionable (there was a Rational Dress Society in those days for, presumably, more rationale women). This meant simplified clothing for athletic endeavors which bicycling from San Francisco to L.A. certainly was. This simplified clothing meant hygienic woolen underwear, divided petticoats and skirts or knickerbockers under a skirt or maybe loose trousers gathered at the ankles. In this case the women wore bloomers, shirt waists, and sailor hats. Their bicycles weighed 37 pounds and they carried another 15 pounds of baggage on their handlebars. Nathaniel

Wilson had a somewhat lighter bicycle but 20 pounds of baggage and a 32 pound boy on a seat behind the handlebars..

Going uphill did not occasion anything remarkable but going downhill was something else. Wilson used fence rails and brush tied to the bicycle to keep from going too fast, "I went down the grades much easier than I could have done with a brake. If the good farmers have missed their fence rails they will find them near Gaviota." The L.A. Herald on June 27, 1894 also reported that Wilson "backpedaled" but that was as hard work as going uphill and twice as dangerous. Besides branches, the article in the Herald said Wilson used his ingenuity and tied all three bikes together so that the women's braking could also slow him down and "Professor Wilson and the baby were able to avail themselves of the holding power of the ladies' machines."

Bike riding downhill was not the only thing to deal with. One morning they stopped at a house to ask for milk for Nat and they were "roundly abused" and an ugly dog "was allowed to chase Mrs.

Wilson and it was only after I dismounted and drew my revolver that the man stopped grinning and called off the dog."

The adventure was novel. One newspaper said the women "can boast of being the first to enter our city on bicycles."



L.A. Herald June 27, 1894

They Weren't Done Crossing the Sierra by Bicycle

HE HAS A RECORD

Bicycling was a family affair for the Wilsons. By the time Nat Wilson was seven he must have been an accomplished bicyclist because his father and he rode over the Sierra to San Francisco and back. They rode 550 miles in ten days, the boy riding a "standard" bicycle but one "manufactured especially for him." Just like the trip when Nat was a passenger four years before, the two traveled on or next to the railroad and used the snowsheds, "Nat rode the ties like a veteran."

New York Evening Register September, 1898

Heroes of the Open Road---Back in '94



Professor Nat Wilson, Mrs. Wilson, their three-year-old son and Miss Bertha Bender, who got their names on the front pages of bicycling from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 12 days--back in 1894

Daring Cycle Trip Along Coast Made by Renoites

Nevada State Journal February 22, 1934

He Begins Well.
This is Nat Wilson, the 7-year-old son of Prof. N. E. Wilson, agricultural



A YOUTHFUL CYCLER.

Oregon City Courier September 2, 1898



More About 1867

This story is really just a teaser in honor of the 150th anniversary of an amazing feat that would be eclipsed in a few months (see the last sentence below). One day the [Heirloom](#) will run the whole story about the first locomotive over the summit. Meanwhile: The story of the first locomotive over Donner Summit is amazing. It is a testament to both the intrepid ingenuity of the railroad builders and to their frustration.

The Central Pacific (CPRR) was making only inches of progress a day on the summit tunnels. Sierra granite is among the hardest rocks on the planet. Tunnel 6, the longest tunnel at 1659 feet, took two years to build. Meanwhile the CPRR was foregoing money they could be earning racing across Nevada laying track. (To collect Federal money in the form of bonds they could sell the CPRR had to have contiguous track.) Someone had the brilliant idea to start laying track into Nevada. Then, when the tunnels were finished and the tracks all connected, the CPRR would reap a windfall.

To lay track into Nevada meant that there had to be track in Nevada and the equipment to lay it. Over the Sierra summit they took eventually eighty miles of track, parts of railroad cars to be assembled in Truckee, and three at least partly disassembled locomotives. The first locomotive and rails went over the summit in July, 1867, 150 years and two months ago (this would have been in the July [Heirloom](#) but the issue got too full and we didn't think you'd mind celebrating the sesquicentennial two months late). More was hauled over in subsequent summer months. The [Sacramento Daily Union](#) said, "The Pacific Railroad managers... are employing all the teams they can procure to haul... three thousand tons of iron across the summit..." By September there was one locomotive, the San Mateo, operating in Truckee. Here we have the only surviving guaranteed identifiable photograph of that locomotive, Alfred A. Hart #223, "Truckee River." (titled, "Truckee River" because the whole photograph shows this was taken alongside the Truckee River.) Although the title does not say "San Mateo" we are assured by Wendell Huffman of the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City, who is an expert on the CPRR, that this is the San Mateo.

More to come in further adventures of the railroaders in the January or February, '18. Stay Tuned. The whole full story will come later.

What's in Your Closet?

The Pearce Alpineer Ski Club Album

One of Norm's (DSHS president and museum curator) joys is when people walk in to the museum with historical items. In this case Jeff Pearce of Novato came in a few years ago and during the conversation promised to bring in some pictures his father had in an old album. It turns out there are thousands more in Mr. Pierce's collection which we may one day see.

Mr. Pearce is the Alpineer Ski Club historian and took that job over from his mother. He, his parents and sister, Anna, had been coming to the summit since 1946. The pictures here are all from the Alpineer archives.

The Alpineer Ski Club is located on Old Donner Pass Rd. (turn right just after crossing the overpass in front of Tunnel 6). The Alpineers initially rented the Macintosh Lodge from the Forest Service while building their own lodge next door. The Macintosh Lodge would also later become the Travis Lodge, used by Air Force personnel from Travis Air Force Base. That lodge was burned down in the 1970's as a fire fighting exercise.

In 1950 the Alpineer Lodge was completed and interestingly, the lower floor of the lodge was built from train shed timbers, like a number of Donner Summit houses. The timbers were available because the railroad was reconstructing snowsheds out of concrete.

The Alpineer Ski Club and the other clubs on Donner Summit were in their heydays decades ago when winter sports visitors gravitated to communal living arrangements. Chores and upkeep were shared. Today most visitors own or rent single-family houses and so the camaraderie of communal living is a thing mostly of the past.

Mr. Pearce described some of that camaraderie. There was an annual fondue party each spring held on Sugar Bowl's deck. There were dances, sing-alongs and games. There were many inter-club ski races. In San Francisco the Alpineers held folk dance classes at Druids Hall on Tuesdays. People from all the Bay Area ski clubs attended and the money raised on Tuesdays purchased building supplies to go up the following Saturday for building their lodge.

The Alpineer Club ran the largest Ski Swap on the West coast in the 60's and 70's.



1951 - Three lodges on Old Donner Summit Rd. (the Lincoln Highway dirt road) under the arrows: Oakland, left; Travis (Macintosh), center; and Alpineer, right; along with snowsheds leading to the two tunnels.



Alpineer Ski Club, 2017. We'd have done a Then/Now of the top picture but the trees are too thick today. The shed at left above appears in 1950's pictures.





1952: Hiking in to the Alpineer Lodge through the snowsheds from Donner Ski Ranch.



Inside the Macintosh Lodge, 1948

BEACON HILL LODGE



Beacon Hill Lodge ad from Downski, periodical of the Bay Area Ski Federation, 1952. This is part of the Pierce album.

Beacon Hill Lodge, named for Beacon Hill (Soda Springs Ski Area, named for the airway beacon on the hill) sat where the concrete foundation remnants are now between the old hotel and the general store. It burned in the 1970's.



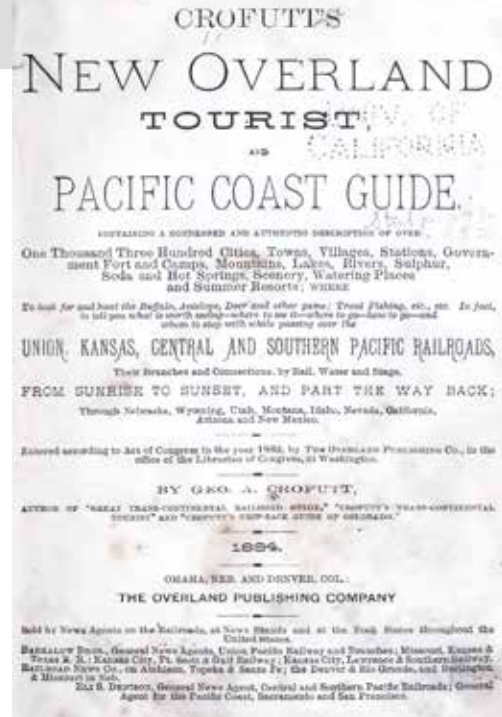
Building the Alpineer Lodge, 1947-48 - Macintosh Lodge in the background.

From the DSHS Archives

Cloudburst Damages Lincoln Highway

NEVADA CITY (Cal.), Sept. 15.—A cloudburst on the summit of the Lincoln Highway badly damaged the highway between Donner and Emigrant Gap. The damage is estimated at \$10,000. Fourteen automobiles are tied up at Donner as only unloaded cars can pass over the damaged road.

Sacramento Daily Union June 16, 1918



Summit Valley, 1879

"Summit valley, one of the loftiest of the Sierra valleys, lies to the west, a broad, grassy meadow, dotted with trees and lying between two lofty mountains, about two miles long by one mile wide. It is covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, affording pasturage for large bands of cattle, during the summer. It is all occupied by dairymen and stock-raisers, at whose comfortable dwellings the tourist will find a hearty welcome. It is a delightful summer retreat; a favorite resort for those who prefer the mountains, with their cool breezes and pure water. The valley is watered by many springs and snow fed rivulets, whose waters flow to the American River.

"This valley is becoming noted in a business point of view as well as being a place of summer resort. It is becoming celebrated as a meat packing station, it having been demonstrated that pork and beef can be successfully cured here during any portion of the year."

From Crofutt's New Overland Tourist Guide 1879 1884 pg 156



When Highway 40 was the main route across the country there were occasional accidents when people took the road down to Donner Lake too fast.

This picture comes from an album of Herb Frederick's who ran the Norden Store (next page) courtesy of his niece, Milli Martin. The date must be the late 1930's or so.

From the DSHS Archives



Above is the first version of the Summit Hotel which sat across from what is now Donner Ski Ranch in the area occupied by the cement block shop buildings. It burned in 1895 and was replaced by another version a few hundred yards south. Check our [Heirloom](#) indices to read more about the hotel and see pictures including one with their multi-story outhouse.



Above is the Norden Store. The building is still there but it's a residence. It sat on the north side of Old 40 the first building west of the Tri-Lodges (Clair Tappaan, Cal, and Nature Friends). The picture comes from an album of Herb Fredericks who ran the store via his niece, Milli Martin

As we research various stories about Donner Summit history we come across old books or newspaper or magazine articles that give us views on life in the old days. This comes from the Daily Alta California on September 14, 1889.

Passengers Transferred A Gap Left in the Overland Road by the Burning of a Bridge

Fire was an ever-present danger to the Central Pacific from the very beginning. The snowsheds were tinder boxes just waiting for sparks to cause fires in the sun dried, well seasoned wooden sheds that covered the tracks and protected them in winter. The original snowsheds were made of wood and the locomotives provided the sparks coming from their smoke stacks. Sometimes miles of snowsheds would burn at one time because snowsheds worked well as chimneys pulling air to the fires. If you want to investigate the subject see our August, '10 and July, '10 Heirlooms. There are some good stories there.

In September, 1889, twenty years after the Golden Spike had been driven at Promontory Point in Utah, there was a fire at Cascade, one of the many stations along the line. Cascade station sat on the tracks between what is now Kingvale and Cisco and just below Cascade Lakes. Today there is only a bridge there. The fire destroyed track and a mile and a half of snowsheds leaving a gap in the transcontinental line. The newspaper article remarks that there were nearly a thousand workers called in laying ties and track and repairing other damage. That's all obvious, but what about the trains and the passengers?



Some of the workers were engaged in transferring passengers and freight from one side of the gap to the other. "The scene during the transfer promises to be picturesque in the extreme. Many Truckee people went upon the train to witness the spectacle. Teams will haul the baggage, mail, and express by circuitous route over the mountains by the old emigrant road from Summit valley (today an old dirt road running at that point, alongside Cascade Lakes). Three hundred men are appointed to assist the passengers around the chasm [where the bridge had been before it too burned]. Temporary tracks will be laid to the chasm on either side, and the two trains will be on opposite sides within three hundred feet of each other [this would come later], yet five or six hours will be occupied in the transferring.



The article then says that the snowsheds would not be rebuilt because of improvement in rotary plows. They could keep the tracks free from snow. If that worked all of the snowsheds would be torn down. The first ones had just gone up in 1868. We know, of course, the snowsheds did not all come down. Most of the wooden sheds continued to be watched over by the lookout on Red Mountain (see the Heirlooms above) and protected by the fire trains (see the above Heirlooms and the February, '16 Heirloom). Eventually better snow removal machines would be adopted and most of the snowsheds would come down but only after they'd been replaced by concrete sheds first.



Cascade Bridge in 2015. Pictures by George Lamson.
Note the old stone work and that the bridge is metal now.

Book Review

Trail to California

The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly (1849)
245 pages edited by David Morris Potter

There are many books about the overland emigrant journey and there are many diaries written by participants. This one is unique because it's really three books in one. There is the diary of course, started by Vincent Geiger and finished by Wakeman Bryarly. The text is heavily footnoted by the editor which brings in much more illustrative material. Finally, one third of the book is introduction, which brings the reader a lot more in terms of background and explanation. All three provide a rich experience to what otherwise would be a very short book.

The diary chronicles the overland journey in 1849 of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly. Many diaries are sparse containing only details such as miles traveled and stopping points. The Geiger/Bryarly diary is rich. It lists miles and stopping places but also tells stories and details the journey with good descriptions.

The Diary

The diary is rich in detail. At one point the company has discovered they need to lighten their loads and that the trip will not just be the adventure many might have hoped for. It's an obvious insight but one we might not think of about the people involved. They'd brought too much. "We got into camp... and commenced lightening our loads. We threw away a large lot of horse shoes, all the boxes, lard & many other things... Many are complaining and if chance offered would like much to return. We have been vexed & delayed..." They'd just seen graves along the way and then more graves. Imagine the frustration and fear that would induce "many... to return" to their old homes. They'd already given up everything there and set their focus on the lives and opportunities. Then too, it wasn't all bad, "We caught a fine turtle & had a pot of good soup" (the footnotes note that turtle weighed 100 pounds).

Other entries describe what they saw and smelled. "We counted 50 wagons in the road before us. The road was awfully dusty & the stench from the dead oxen rendered it rather obnoxious... The [dead] oxen are strewed along the road, as mile stones...."

"We then gave our animals some grass & a little water, & then we 'turned in' to remain until daylight. The road for three miles was a solid mass of wagons." There must have been crowds of emigrants given the thousands making the journey and given that they all had to start at the same time of year from the same places. It's not something we think about or see in depictions of the overland journey.

There was beauty. "Two hundred yards in front, the water from the marsh around collected in a stream & running beautifully over the long grass, it made a fall of several feet into a pool This made a most delightful place to bathe, & the water itself was better than any we have had for several weeks. The grass between our corral & this [pool] was knee high, & the ground dry,.... This marsh for three miles is certainly the liveliest place that one could witness in a lifetime. There is some two hundred and fifty wagons here all the time. Some going out & others coming in & taking their places... Cattle & mules by the hundreds are surrounding us, in grass to their knees, all discoursing sweet music with the grinding of the jaws.... In fact the joyous laugh & the familiar sound of the whetted scythe [harvesting the grass to dry and take with them] resounds from place to place & gives an air of happiness & content around that must carry the wearied travelers through to the 'Promised Land.'"

TRAIL TO CALIFORNIA

THE OVERLAND JOURNAL OF
VINCENT GEIGER AND WAKEMAN BRYARLY

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

DAVID MORRIS POTTER

*Assistant Professor of History in
Yale University*

There was misery on the trip. "...we encamped in the headquarters of mosquitoes [sic]. No one can conceive of the annoyance of these devils incarnate until they have experienced what we did ... Our animals were very near stampeding from them & our guards were so busy saving their own eyes, that it was almost impossible for them to watch the animals."

Then there was the heat, so hot the sand blistered their feet and made the carried water so hot it made perfect coffee. The food was boring. There were graves by the trail. There were dead animals,, "Report says that 800 to a thousand animals are lying dead upon it [the road], & 100 wagons have been abandoned.". There was disappointment at not finding grass and joy at finding good grass, "cheering news... there has been discovered, within a few days, grass extending over 5000 acres, & up to the animals' bellies, distant only 7 miles from the slough. If this be true, we are safe..." There were the complaints and sickness. But all was not bad; there was also music at night.

After crossing the desert, "thousands of dollars worth of property thrown away by the emigration as laying here. Wagons & property of every kind & description, not saying anything of dead animals & those left to die... Machinery.... A steam engine & machinery... all sacrificed upon this Jornada."

The Introduction

The introduction is also rich with lots of background. For example, Bryarly was a doctor who served in the Mexican War. There he apparently met Geiger who had also enlisted as an officer. Following the war, life was too tame and the two decided to go to California, joining the Charlestown Co. The Charlestown Co. was a unique group heading to California. The group was a partnership rather than a group of people traveling together. They took applications, limiting membership to 75. Each member was charged \$300 to go to California. \$300 was much more than most emigrants would spend to get to California and went for buying supplies, wagons, mules, etc. Some of the money was spent on supplies shipped ahead around the Horn to California for use by the group when it arrived. Once in California the plan was to work as a collective. In addition to the \$300 each member had to bring along specific items: eight shirts, one pair of drawers, two pairs of shoes, rubber knapsack, gum overcoat, etc. They could only bring 50 lbs each of clothing and needed personal items. Each member had to have a physical. Each member received a pair of "revolving pistols (\$20 pair)" and the group took along a cannon. All that showed good organization and was a good reason why the group was so successful and so fast. Another reason was their guide. In the end the Charlestown Co. traveled faster than most, lost only a few animals and four men. The analysis of the success is an interesting read especially when compared to other groups' travels.

The introduction also goes into what happened after the group reached California which is an interesting read.

An example from the introduction illustrates the dangers of the journey and gives insight into the migration, "...the experience of the Charlestown Company reflected the experience of overland emigrants as a group.... One death by cholera, one by drowning, one by accidental gunfire, none by hostility of the Indians..."

The introduction has analysis of the trails and the amount emigrants spent on the journey typically, \$50 to \$100. That was something I'd never read before and showed why so many took the cross country route rather than one of the others (around the Horn, across Panama, or across Mexico). There's also a discussion of mules vs. oxen in case you ever want to go.

The footnotes

The footnotes are rich bringing in lots of quotes by other pioneers to illustrate the travel: cholera, waiting for the grass to grow before starting, breaking animals to harness, etc. Details tell things we wouldn't think of, such as livestock being stampeded by "thousands and millions of bugs, covering the ground entirely" or "tormented by clouds of beetles."

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.

The footnotes also bring in relevant passages from other diaries. As an example, "Andrew Orvis had made the journey as far as the desert with no especial difficulty. But when he had completed four-fifths of the crossing, trouble began: 'In 8 miles of the [Truckee] River my horse bigan [sic] to fail and I had to go slow but I drove

him until with 3 miles of the river. I cold [sic] not get him any farther. I was over come and tired out. I would travel a little and I would lay down on the sand and rest and the sun shining on me. There is no timber thare [sic]. I thought I would never get through and I laide [sic] down to kick the bucket; but I thought of home and it give me a little more grit and I would get up and stager [sic] along. I was so thirsty my tonge [sic] and lips cracked and bled but I was able to get to the water and after drinking a little – I dare not drink much – I felt better. Towards knight, [sic] I took some grass and water in my canteen back to the horse. He was in the same place I had left him. I poered [sic] water I on the grass and he ate and then he went to the river first rate.”

Other quotes show the Charlestown Co. was not alone in its experiences, “all along the desert road from the very start even the way side was strewed with the dead bodies of – oxen, mules, & horses, & the stench was horrible. All our travelling experiences furnishes no parallel for all this.”

Donner Summit

Of interest to those of us in the neighborhood of Donner Summit is the wagon train’s arrival at Donner Lake before heading up Coldstream Valley. They had had to cross the Truckee River 12 times to get that far. Here Bryarly describes the Donner Party encampment which was a natural attraction to emigrants coming upon the site, “these mournful monuments [the burned cabins] of human suffering...” “There were piles of bones around but mostly of cattle, although I did find some half dozen human ones of different parts. Just to the left of these was [sic] a few old black burnt logs, which evidently had been one of those [cabins] which had been burnt. Here was nearly the whole of a skeleton. Several small stockings were found which still contained the bones of the leg & foot. Remnants of old clothes, with pieces of boxes, stockings & bones in particular, was all that was left to mark that it had once been inhabited.... The trees around were cut off 10 ft. from the ground, showing the immense depth of the snow must have been.”

Compared to the horror of the Donner Camp was the beauty of the Truckee River, “Here, upon our left, distant some hundred yards from the road was Truckee River in all its glory again, splashing & dashing over rocks Here we met one of our advance who informed us we were but five miles from the base of the great bugaboo, that which has caused many a sleepless night, with disturbed dreams to the discouraged emigrant, ‘The Sierra Nevada’ Mountains. We were much inspired & equally rejoiced....”

"One mile brought us to the foot of the ‘Elephant’ itself. Here we ‘faced the music & no mistake. The ‘Wohaugh’s’ could be heard for miles, hallowing & bawling at their poor cattle who could scarcely drag themselves up the steep acclivity.” The Charlestown Co. doubled their teams and “after considerable screaming & whipping, thus arrived safe at the top.” It took four hours for them to get up and they were happy it was not “much worse.”

One would think that at the top of the mountains it was all downhill to Johnson’s Ranch, their California destination, but it wasn’t. "We again rolled at 2. Everyone is liable to mistakes, & everyone has a right to call a road very bad until he sees a worse. My mistake was that I said I had seen ‘The Elephant’ when getting over the first mountain. I had only seen the tail. This evening I think I saw him in toto. I do not know, however, as I have come to the conclusion that no Elephant upon this route can be so large that another cannot be larger. If I had not seen wagon tracks marked upon the road I should not have known where the road was [probably Big Bend where you today can see rust marks on the granite from emigrant wagons], nor could not have imagined that any wagon& team could possibly pass over in safety.”

They did pass over in safety and arrived at Johnson’s Ranch. There the Charlestown Co. broke up into groups. They discovered that gold mining was not a job for large groups. Bryarly went on to other interesting things and was successful.

"...we were but five miles from the base of the great bugaboo, that which has caused many a sleepless night, with disturbed dreams to the discouraged emigrant, ‘The Sierra Nevada’ Mountains. We were much inspired & equally rejoiced....”

Then & Now with Art Clark



"Charles E Davis - Index Card 78 - iCruil but Beautyfull -" [sic]

"Lines of trees mark where unknown partys [sic] of brave Pioneers passed up and over this great Serrias Bearer. Taken from above Donner Lake." [sic]

This photo, taken around 1927, is a view from the south end of Mount Judah. Tinker Knob and Anderson Peak are visible along the Pacific Crest Trail. Davis spent two years tracing the Pioneer routes. This is one of over 1000 photographs he took documenting his project.

Photo Location 39° 17.822'N 120° 18.986'W



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 arborglyphs left by Basque sheepherders and others on the summit. Sheep were a big industry on the summit (See the August, September and October '13 [Heirlooms](#)). Here we have the underpass that goes under I-80 just about exactly north of the Snowlab. The underpass was built during the construction of I-80 so that sheep, which were still grazed in summers on the summit, could access the meadows below Castle Pk. which is just on the other side of the freeway.

If you want to visit, take the dirt road that leaves Old 40 for the Snowlab (there's a 20 Mile Museum sign there) and bear left at the fork when the road goes up the hill to the lab. Follow the road around heading for the sounds of the freeway. There's a little "bushwacking" but then you'll come to the scene below. The picture, in the old stereo format is by Art Clark.



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

What's in Your Closet

There was not room on page 8 to include a request.

You may have old pictures or paraphernalia related to Donner Summit history. We'd love to make copies and it may be that there are details in the pictures that you don't notice that would help illustrate the history of Donner Summit. Not only would we be happy to copy but we'd be happy to analyze too. That brings up a good idea for the next issue. Stay tuned.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org

Membership

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

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

____ New Membership MAILING ADDRESS _____

____ Renewing Membership CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

____ Individual Membership - \$30 (Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

____ Family Membership - \$50 _____ Friend Membership - \$100 _____ Sponsor - \$250

____ Patron - \$500 _____ Benefactor - \$1000 _____ Business - \$250 _____ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

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



Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



Pick up or download the brochure

47 interpretive signs along Old 40

<http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>

Fan Mail

We get queries from time to time which we answer. Some queries come with compliments. Below is a query, a compliment, and a response which others may be able to use.

"Hi, Guys or Ladies

"Let me begin by telling you how much I enjoy the monthly newsletter. It is something I wait for eagerly each month. I read it cover to cover(begining to end?), always learning something new and interesting. I appreciate its high production value. This newsletter alone makes the annual DSHS dues more than a great bargain.

"I wonder if you could give me some information. I am planning to hike to Roller Pass with my grandson in the near future. While I actually enjoy wandering around looking for old trail markers, etc., I would like this trip to be one in which the route is easily followed—I don't think he is as much into "wandering" as I might be. So my question is "How easy is it to follow trail markers from the Coldstream Canyon OCTA marker to the top of Roller Pass?" He is twelve years old and would have no problem with the length of the hike, but I want him to have a positive initial experience in hiking the Donner Pass area, so a well-marked trail is important. A different route will be selected if the Coldstream Canyon trail is difficult to follow..."

"Bill Sullivan Sonora, CA."

Mr. Sullivan,

Thank you for your email.

Your adventure to Roller Pass from the east would be fun. The problem is that there is no clearly marked trail. It's certainly doable because you can see the geography as you progress up Coldstream. Just keep going toward the saddle between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. That's how the wagon trains did it.

No one has marked that particular trail at least with markers that have lasted. There has been marking of the Emigrant Trail as it goes over Coldstream Pass (between Judah and Donner) and those marks are little green metal circles with white "ET's". I don't know where they start in Coldstream however. There are a number of trails and with the popularity of mountain biking there are even more trails so that can be confusing which is why I say let the geography be the guide. Another option would be to come at it from the west. Take the Pacific Crest Trail to Roller Pass and then go down it heading east into Coldstream Valley. Keep going until you get to where someone is meeting you with a car. You could also do a loop. Go up to Coldstream Pass or Roller Pass and then down the other side and over to the other pass. We've hiked around back there, below Roller and Coldstream and although it can be confusing you won't get lost if follow the geography. You will come to trails and can follow them as long as they go in the direction you want to go...

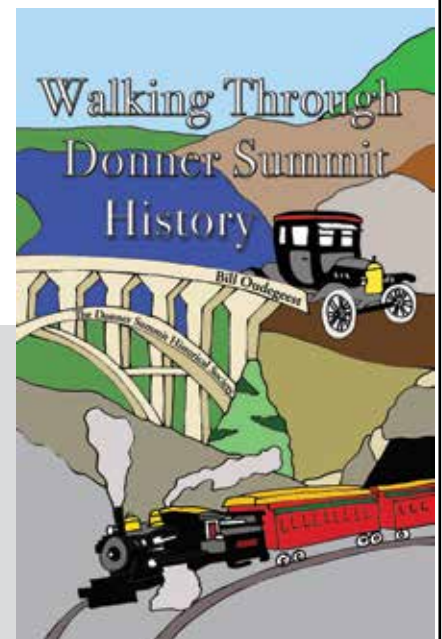
Take a look at our brochures page, <http://www.donnertsummithistoricalociety.org/pages/brochures.html> There you can see and download brochures. "Historic Hikes" has Roller Pass in it. Your grandson may also like "Tunnel 6" if you decide to visit that too. The brochures are free at the DSHS in Soda Springs.

Bill Oudegeest

It's late summer and you may want to do some history walking.

Walking Through Donner Summit History is still available at the little store in Soda Springs, at the actual DSHS, on our website (<http://www.donnertsummithistoricalociety.org/pages/store.html>), at the visitors' center at Donner Lake and at the California Welcome Center in Auburn.

You can see the contents at the web page above.





DONNER PARTY HIKE

OCTOBER 14 & 15, 2017

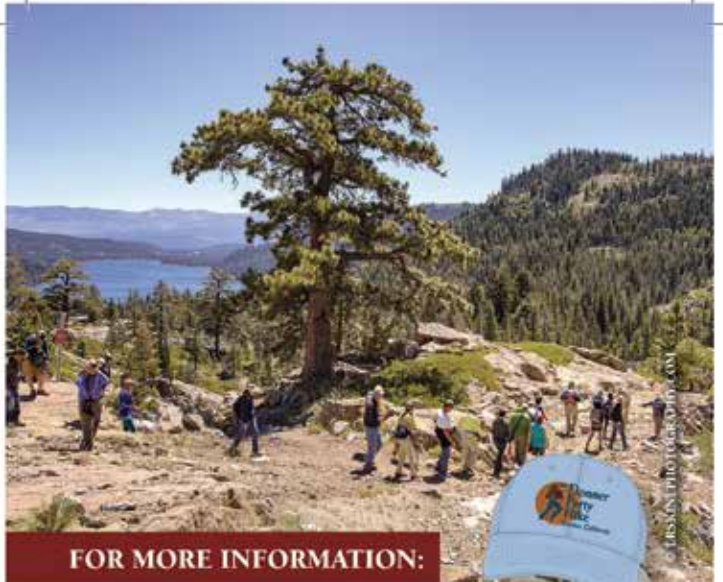


© ELSINE PHOTOGRAPHY.COM

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



FOR MORE INFORMATION:
info@donnerpartyhike.com
donnerpartyhike.com



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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

info@donnerpartyhike.com
donnerpartyhike.com

Register early and get your commemorative baseball cap!

Explore scenic Donner Summit with local historians on interpretive walks and hikes. As you trace the steps of the emigrants, imagine the clip-clop of oxen and the rumble of wagons of the countless pioneers who scaled the mighty Sierra Nevada in search of a better life.

SATURDAY HIKES—Choose from one of six hikes ranging from 3.5 to 6 miles with varying degree of difficulty. Explore the trails, see petroglyphs or the China Wall. Stroll through meadows or discover hidden Sierra lakes. Price includes guided hike, commemorative hat, hamburger lunch and afternoon presentation. **SATURDAY HIKE:** \$75 per hiker (\$85 after October 3rd)

SUNDAY WALKING TOUR—Learn about the grueling mishaps of the Donner Party and the archaeological finds that remain. Then, it's on to all new Donner Memorial State Park to view the Murphy Cabin Site and Pioneer Monument. Price includes guided hike, commemorative hat, hamburger lunch and afternoon presentation plus the Sunday interpretive walks. **SATURDAY/SUNDAY TWO DAY PACKAGE:** \$100 per hiker (\$110 after October 3rd)

LODGING PACKAGES—Area lodging packages are available for participants.

REGISTER TO SECURE YOUR SPOT IN TIME—Tour size is limited. Reserve your spot on the trail by October 3rd for early savings.



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Fanfare for the Common Man

Stephen Harris works with the Truckee Donner Historical Society. As a local historian he is interested in the Chinese who built the Transcontinental Railroad. As he read more about the Chinese the more impressed he became with what they'd done. These Chinese were common men but they did heroic things (see the Heirlooms in June-December, 2016 for various stories or see the Exhibits page on our website*). Stephen's mind came to Aaron Copland's "Fanfare to the Common Man" as a kind of celebration.



Then Stephen had an idea. A brass ensemble would be a perfect celebration 150 years after the Chinese had done their work. He contacted a number of musical groups until he found one in Reno as struck with his idea as Stephen was. At the end of August they traveled up from Reno one evening and walked the trail down to the China Wall. There they took out their brass instruments and played Copland's classic atop China Wall (above). The music celebrating the common man echoed across the canyon. Nearby rock climbers stopped to listen. A mountain biker below on the granite slab stopped. People on top of Tunnel 7 had a great view and listened. Some people at the petroglyphs looked up and stopped walking. The sun had dropped but there was orange in the sky to the west. Dusk was descending and the evocative music reverberated against the granite walls. It was a celebration.

It was brass players of the Reno Wind Symphony that took Stephen up on his idea. Steve Martin is the group's leader. Steve said they were "people who believe music should be part of occasions like this" so when the opportunity arose they decided to take part.

Also present was Min Zhou, a documentary film maker who made a 21 minute film about the Chinese called "Crossing Donner Summit" (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/chineseworkers>). Another movie is coming out in October about what happened to the Chinese after the driving of the Golden Spike in 1869. Min filmed the Reno Wind Symphony members.

Stephen thinks some kind of physical memorial to the Chinese is needed. (That said, there is a monument to China Wall at the climbing wall below as well as a 20 Mile Museum sign for China Wall along Old 40 directly below.

<http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/exhibits.html>

Look for the Chinese exhibits under "Tunnel 6"

Margie Powell Annual Hike

In Mid-August, in conjunction with Placer County Museums' Heritage Trail, The DSHS held the annual Margie Powell hike down Summit Canyon. Right, one of the groups getting an introduction from the best view spot before heading down.

Next year - a new hike. Keep an eye on the [Heirloom](#) and/or our website.

