

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society



April 1, 2018 issue #116



Sword in the Stone - Donner Summit Edition

Sometimes there are long lines. People wait patiently their turns in summer heat, or the fall chill before the snow, their turns to try to remove the sword from the stone. As they wait they share their stories and why it will be they for whom the sword will loosen. All have failed. The story is that he (she) who pulls the sword from the stone inherits the dragons' treasure (see "The Dragons of Donner Summit" in the April, '14 [Heirloom](#)) but no one has been able to extract the sword from the stone.

Here is where rigorous historical research should be of use. No one knows for sure that sword extraction and treasure go together. No one knows what the source of that story is so the veracity is questionable. There is a sword in the stone near Lake Angela however as you can see in the above photograph too. There were dragons on Donner Summit (see the April first, '14 [Heirloom](#)) and there was treasure. No one doubts any of that.

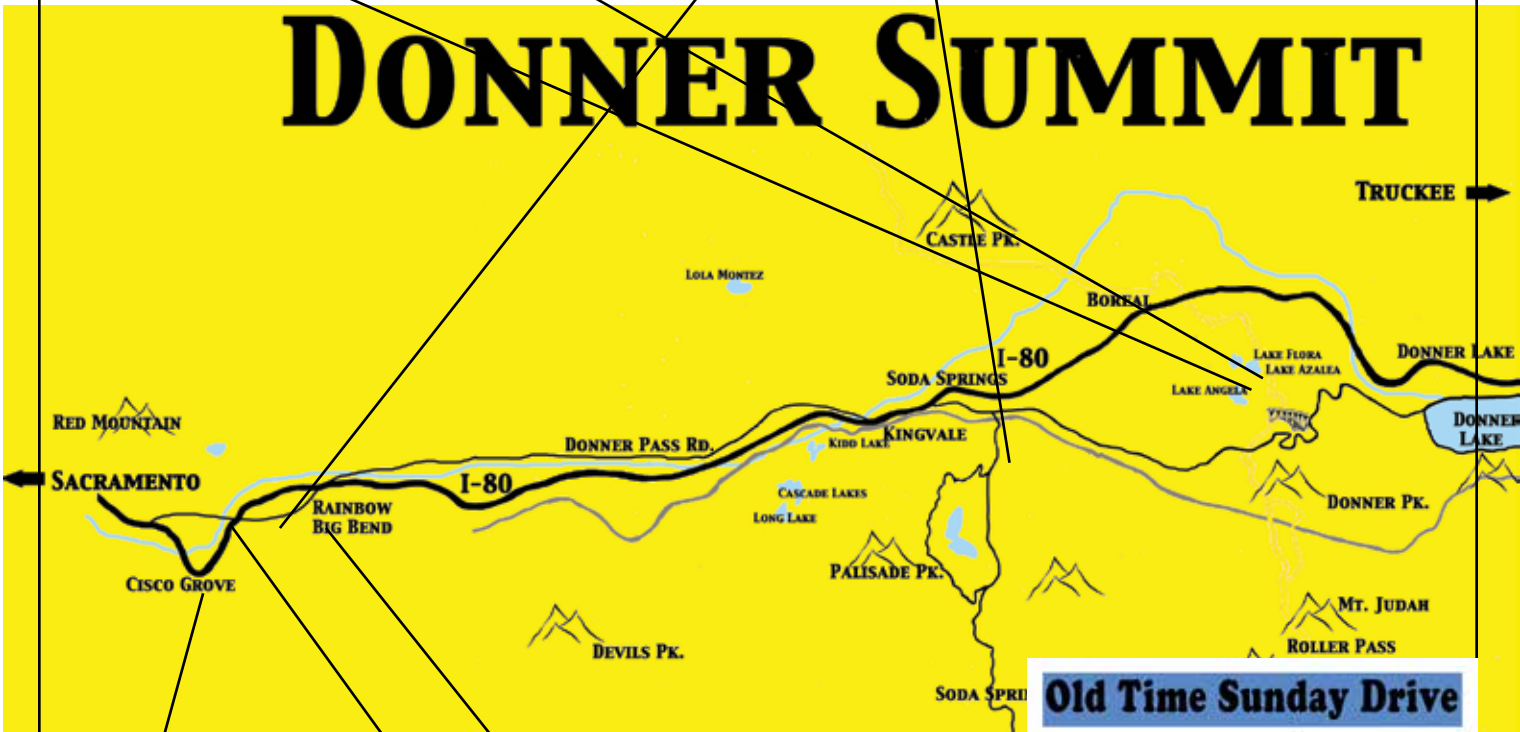
No one, of the many, who has tried to pull out the sword has been successful – clearly no one has been in possession of the right characteristics. But what are the right characteristics? What happens when the sword is extracted? Despite searches, nothing has turned up satisfying answers.

We do know that the snows of winter fall each year on the sword in the stone on Donner Summit and it remains buried until spring.

Story Locations in this Issue

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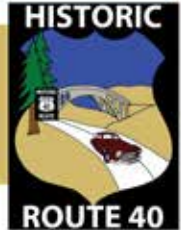
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Upper Cisco pg 11 photograph pg 11 old building pg 17

Old Time Sunday Drive

**Next Time
Take Scenic
Old Hwy 40
instead of I-80**



- Historic Towns
- Interesting Scenery
- Fascinating History
- Picnic Spots
- A Slower Pace

Take a look at our guide to Old Highway 40 turn by turn instructions from Barchin to Truckee, broken into four legs and including pictures and history.



And while you are at it, check out the 20 Mile Museum - interpretive signs from Spanish to before Donner (based on US 40). Information at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

editor:
Bill Oudegeest
209-606-6859
info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit



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

Kathy Slocum, former leader of the Donner Party Hike event trying her best in 2017 during a Donner Party Hike practice hike.

You can imagine the embarrassment as claimants try to extract the sword to no avail while people are watching

This is best done in private.



Dragon Treasure above Maiden's Retreat, Donner Pk. in the background. [Heirloom](#) archives the April first, '14 issue



The FBI Comes to Soda Springs, 1955

Mostly from the Oakland Tribune April 2, 1955, 63 years ago

FBI Nabs “charming” Sierra Couple in \$77,270 Bank Embezzlement

Bill and Pat Ryan were the ideal couple when they came to live in “the little resort community of Soda Springs on Donner Summit.” They were “likeable and friendly.” Upon arriving in town they stayed a few weeks at the Soda Springs Hotel before buying “an \$8,000 home (below is the house today) on Highway 40 across from the Soda Springs Hotel.” They’d had an inheritance they said.

They joined the community, meeting everyone and going to parties. In those days Soda Springs had, according to the Tribune, 300 residents. Today full-time residents are about a fifth of that. The proprietor of the Soda Springs Hotel, Brant M. Chaplin (note that he’d sold the Rainbow Lodge in 1951 – see page 4) “described the couple as ‘attractive, quick to form friendships and active socially in the community.’”

On April 2nd the FBI arrived in three cars with nine agents. “Ryan” came out of the house and “the FBI men converged on him with their guns drawn.” “Ryan” put up his hands. He and his wife were arrested and the “Ryans” who turned out to be Ruth and Clyde McElvain. They were wanted for having embezzled \$77,250 from the Bank of Greensboro, NC. Just before being taken away by the FBI Ruth went to the hotel and asked that they take care of their “English bull” named “Mr. Bill.”

Mr. McElvain admitted to the FBI that Ruth had indeed stolen the money while working as a teller at the bank although he said she’d taken “between \$38,000 and \$40,000” the previous year. With the money in hand they’d “gotten a ride to Winston-Salem, N.C. where they took a plane to Dallas, Tex., and another plane to Denver, Colo. There they bought a station wagon and went to a dude ranch near Meeker, Colo. There they remained until” October. From there they drove through the west until they ended up in Soda Springs. The FBI said Mrs. McElvain had taken another \$40,000 during the previous year.

Unfortunately a lot of the money had been lost to bookies and racetracks.



The Soda Springs community was amazed and thought the Ryans “should get an Oscar award for the best acting of the year.” “Their arrest was a genuine shock to the people of Soda Springs.” It should be noted that the story was reported nationally and not all newspapers were as sympathetic. The Star Press in Muncie, Indiana said, “Both McElvains reportedly used intoxicants to excess, quarrel frequently, are free spenders and race track attendants.” It also reported more than a half dozen aliases used by Ruth McElvain. The newspaper reported that and that both “should be considered dangerous” five days after they’d

been apprehended.

Update from the Reno Gazette-Journal on June 14, 1955. Clyde was given six years in prison and his wife, who did the stealing, received 4 years in prison. The article said Mrs. McElvain had been used by her former husband who was also convicted and received five years. The McElvains said they’d been trying to recover the shortages in Mrs. McElvain’s accounts by gambling. Her former husband, Leonard Sykes, had placed bets for them. The McElvains testified against Sykes.

Ruth McElvain
Muncie Star Press., 4/7/55



More on the FBI in Soda Springs, 1955

It's a good story, the FBI coming to Soda Springs. We'd initially reported the story in our July, '10 [Heirloom](#) because it's one of those stories Norm remembers because he was there.

"Bill Ryan" had just stepped off the snowbank on the edge of Old 40 when the two FBI cars swooped in. "Bill" raised his hands and said something like, "You've got me."

Norm Sayler came over and wanted to know what was going on. The agents told him to mind his own business but at that point "Ryan" vouched for Norm as a friend and handed him his cowboy hat. That hat sits today in the DSHS - picture above. We bring up the story again because we'd come across the [Oakland Tribune](#) article on the previous page while looking for other things and because further searching turned up other details. Then too, this time the editorial staff thought adding the picture above and the house on the previous page were good additions.

A detail missing from all the newspaper articles was how the FBI narrowed their search to Soda Springs. "Bill" had been gambling in Reno and his gun fell to the floor attracting attention and then an investigation. That's something Norm remembered and which gives un an advantage over "run-of-the-mill" organizations. Come in and visit the hat and talk to Norm.



From the DSHS Archives

Storms on Donner Summit can be pretty spectacular. At least some have to be so in order to get the average 34' of snow each winter that we see. Here is an article from the [Sacramento Union](#) newspaper about a particularly good storm in April of 1880

[Sacramento Daily Union](#), April 17, 1880

THE STORM ON THE MOUNTAINS. Avalanches— Blockaded- Desperate Situation. A NIGHT OF TERROR ON AN EMIGRANT TRAIN. Herculean Exertions of the Railroad People.

[SPECIAL BY TELEGRAPH TO THE RECORD-UNION.]

Alta, April 10th. Fearful snow-slides are reported at several points on the mountains.

The storm began at 3 o'clock Wednesday afternoon, and has continued ever since.

Eighteen inches of fresh snow has fallen at Alta, and from three to five

feet at points near the Summit.

The snow-storm extends westward to Colfax.

Avalanches commenced coming through the snow-sheds yesterday morning.

The Virginia express, due in Sacramento yesterday at 3 o'clock, is blockaded at Cisco. The west-bound overland, due in San Francisco this forenoon, and this morning's westbound express, are held at Truckee. The east-bound overland and express of yesterday are held here. The west-bound emigrant train, due at Sacramento at 6 o'clock last evening, is snow-bound at Emigrant Gap.

Superintendent R. H. Pratt and Master Mechanic M.

W. Cooley, who left Sacramento yesterday forenoon with a special train and a large force of workmen, and with a plow and ten engines, passed the night somewhere east of Emigrant Gap. No tidings have been received from them since last evening.

Heavy slides have occurred at Butte Canyon bridge, half a mile west of Cisco, at a point one mile east of Emigrant Gap, at two places near Tunnel No. 2, at the siding half a mile east of Emigrant Gap and between tunnels 10 and 11, east of the Summit.

No estimate can be given of the damage done to the snowsheds, nor can any idea be formed of when the blockade will be cleared.

The present storm exceeds all others of the season in violence and destructiveness. The storm of two weeks ago is not to be compared with it in severity.

Snow has been falling very rapidly this morning. The telegraph wires are nearly all down to the eastward, and working badly to the westward.

The railroad company are putting forth every exertion to clear the road, and Conductor Dave W. Willard is doing all in his power for the comfort and convenience of the snow-bound passengers at this point. All have enjoyed a good breakfast, and at present are snowballing, singing and having a jolly time.

[SECOND DISPATCH.]

The Situation Growing More Desperate.

Alta, April 10th. — Hourly the situation grows more desperate.

Train number six, two miles east of Emigrant Gap, is the objective point of all efforts and struggles made thus far. This train, halted by a snow slide, was subsequently caught in a second slide. Three fright [sic] cars were overthrown and badly crushed. At the rear of the train were the emigrant coaches, filled with men, women and children. The shock occasioned by the snowslide as it crashed through the train, and the constant fear that other slides would follow and bury them in its depths, caused the most agonizing terror to these poor emigrants. During all last night their terror was pitiable in the extreme. This morning their sufferings were augmented by the lack of food. The cries of the women and children were perfectly heartrending. In icy sheds, with part of their train crushed by the terrible slides, with avalanches momentarily expected from the overhanging mountainsides, with hunger and cold and the dreadful storm and their wintry surroundings — the situation of these people beggars description.

At half-past 5 last evening Superintendent Pratt and Master Mechanic Cooley, with fifty men, took supper at Blue Canyon and started to relieve the imprisoned train with five engines. It took them over sixteen hours to make Emigrant Gap, distance six miles.

All night long, without a moment's rest, they battled with the deep snow and deeper drift [sic]. Arriving at the Gap at 11 o'clock today, they ate a hurried dinner and pressed forward toward the crippled train.

The snow-plow train which yesterday left Emigrant Gap to relieve No. 6 was found hopelessly imprisoned by slides, which, crossing the track in its rear, rendered a return to the Gap impossible. Releasing this train and liberating the engines and forward cars of No. 6, the relief train' backed to Emigrant Cap, reversed the engines and plow, and then ran to this place for reinforcement. This train reached here at 7:30 this evening.

Meantime fifty workmen arrived here from Sacramento on a special train, and again reversing engines and plow. The snow-plow train started for Emigrant Gap shortly after 8 o'clock with these workmen.

M. W. Cooley came down on the snowplow and returned with it. From him your reporter learned that Superintendent Pratt has issued orders to have an abundant supply of provisions sent to the blockaded emigrants.

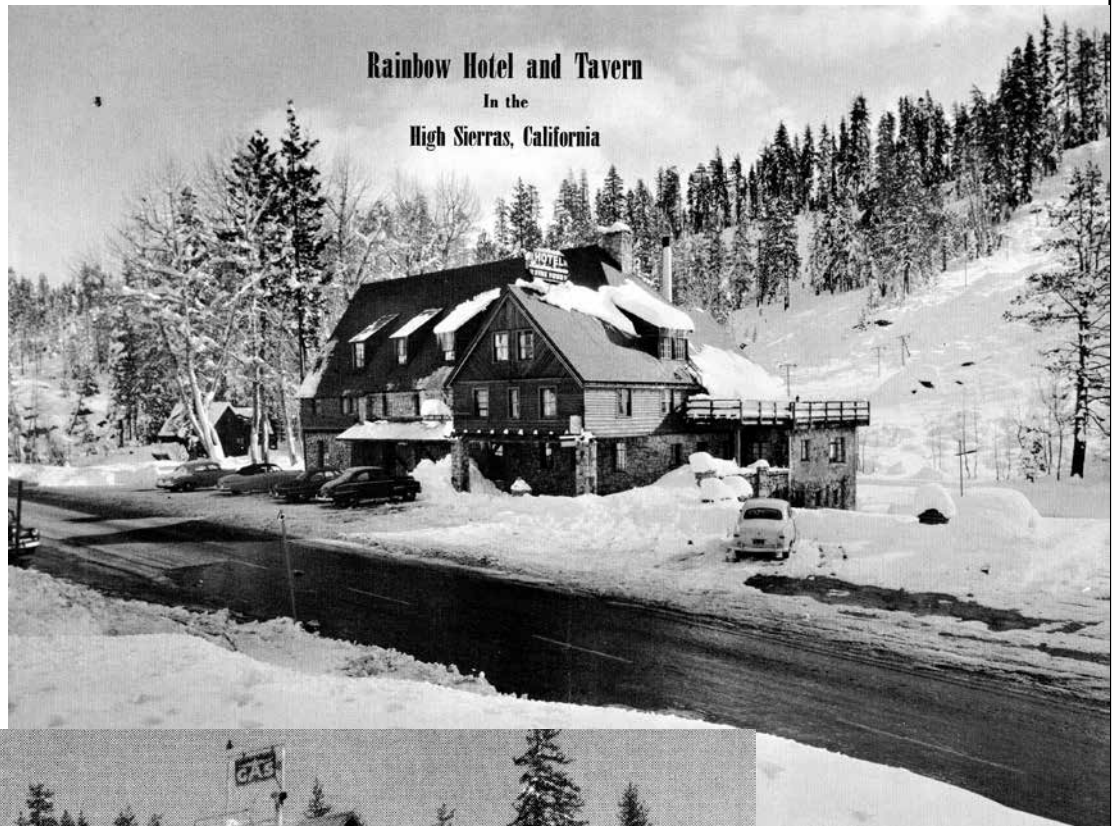
The battle is also being zealously waged from the eastward. The Truckee plow, with fifty or seventy-five men, left Truckee this forenoon, with orders to run to the blockade. At Tamarack this plow encountered a huge slide, and no further tidings have been

cont'd to page 20.

What's in Your Closet?

Rainbow Lodge sales brochure 1951

Bobby Chaplin brought this brochure in to the DSHS. His parents, Brant and Doris Chaplin, owned the Rainbow Lodge in 1951 when they put it up for sale. They had also owned the Soda Springs Hotel. Kenny and Esther Heinbeck bought Rainbow Lodge in 1951.



Garage across from Tavern

The garage at left is nothing but stone walls today.

The ski slope at the top of the next page is Donner Ski Ranch.

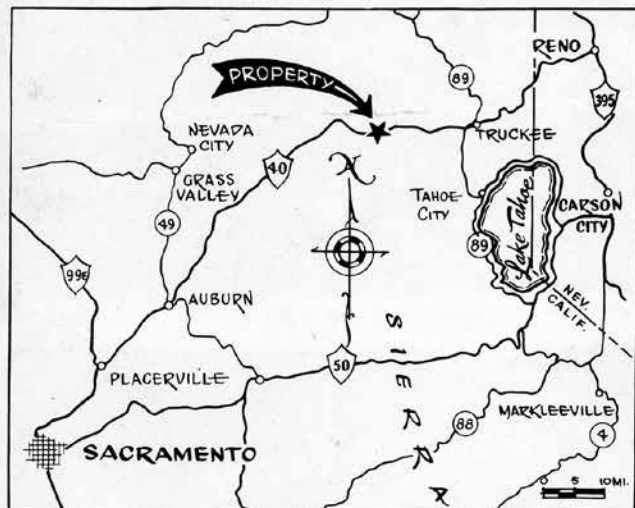
From the DSHS Archives



Ski Slope near Donner Summit



The Yuba River



PRICE: \$195,000

Fully equipped, stocked and furnished. (Included are such items as \$14,000 liquor stock, on sale and off sale liquor license. Linens, bedding, utensils, Monterey style furniture, Simmons mattresses throughout. Complete inventory available.)

PREVIEWS LISTING NO. 70392

Previews Incorporated has made every effort to provide accurate information. Offering is subject to errors, omissions, prior sale, change, withdrawal without notice and approval of purchaser by owner.

Owner authorizes one commission up to 5% of the selling price to the selling broker.



Garage across from Tavern

TABLE OF FACTS

LOCATION: In the heart of the High Sierras on all-year U.S. Transcontinental Highway No. 40, 7 miles west of Soda Springs, Placer County, California. Nationally known ski resorts of Squaw Valley, Sugar Bowl and others within a few miles; Reno, 52 miles; Truckee, 19 miles; Sacramento, 86 miles; San Francisco, approximately 160 miles. Grammar and high schools at Truckee with school bus service at door; S.P. train stops at Soda Springs; Greyhound bus depot at hotel; delivery service from Sacramento 4 times weekly.

LAND: Approx. 400 Acres, average elevation 5,300 feet. U.S. Highway No. 40 bisects property for approx. 1½ miles. Yuba River traverses property 1½ miles. Land ranges from open to pine-covered slopes. Directly back of the tavern, served by a "J" bar and rope tow ski lift, are a beginners' slope, bunny hill, and 1,200 ft. professional run. Ski season from Dec. 1 through mid-April. Hiking, riding (corrals and horses leased), fishing and swimming in natural pool in river during summer. Two trout pools. *Water:* 50,000-gal. open top concrete spring fed reservoir, gravity flow to building, 8,000-gal. buried oil storage tank.

OPERATION: All-year operating season. 37 rentable bedrooms with accommodations for from 75 to 100 overnight guests during peak of season. Ski chalet with dormitory for 22 overnight guests. Average number of employees, 12. Approved by American Auto. Ass'n., Duncan Hines and Ford Magazines.

MAIN LODGE (HOTEL and TAVERN): 53 Rooms (37 rentable bedrooms). 3 floors, Swiss Chalet style, built 1929 with subsequent additions, remodeled and redecorated 1948-50. Stone and timber construction on full concrete basement; cedar shake roof; steel casement windows; tile, hardwood and pine floors; galv. iron and copper plumbing; knotty pine and paneled interior finish. Large oil-burning, steam-circulating furnace; radiators; oil-burning water heater. PS electricity with stand-by auxiliary system. Own sewage disposal plant.

MAIN FLOOR: Large Reception Hall with Hotel Office; Lounge with fireplace; manager's or owner's 2-Room Apartment with Kitchenette and Bath; Dining Room (52 capacity), large view windows; completely equipped Cocktail Lounge with bar and tables. Private Dining Room; men's lav.; efficient Kitchen with hotel-size oil-burning range, 2 walk-in refrigerators.

SECOND FLOOR: New Wing: 10 de luxe Bedrooms, each with full Bath. Old Wing: 7 Bedrooms, each with washbasin. Public Bath.

THIRD FLOOR: New Wing: 15 semi-de luxe Bedrooms, each with washbasin and stall shower. Public Bath. Old Wing: 7 Bedrooms, each with washbasin. Public Bath.

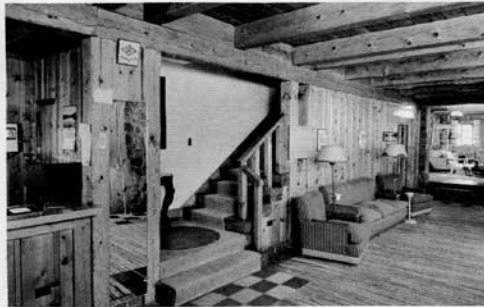
BASEMENT: Full, concrete; 7 Help's Bedrooms; 2 Public Baths. Ski Shop, Furnace Room, several large food and liquor storage rooms, separate outside entrance.

SKI CHALET: Same construction and style as main building. 3 floors. First Floor: Lobby with large fireplace; Kitchen, 2 lavs. Second Floor: 3 large Bedrooms, dormitory style, containing 22 beds. Third Floor: Motor for ski tows. Note: This building is usually rented to clubs, groups, etc.

3-STORY GARAGE: Directly across highway from Hotel. 40-car capacity. 2 electric and 1 hand-operated Associated Gas pumps, stock of auto accessories (tires, tubes, spark plugs, etc.) and GM fully equipped tow truck. Second Floor: 4-Room Apt. (2 bedrooms). Third Floor: 2 Bedrooms, Bath.



Front of Tavern — Ski Chalet at Left



Reception Hall



Cocktail Lounge and Bar



One of the Ski Tows

Famous Year 'Round

400 Acres, 1½-Mile Frontage
In the Heart of California

Strategically situated on all-year U.S. Transcontinental Highway No. 40, the Rainbow Hotel and Tavern is nationally known as one of the outstanding year 'round resorts in the High Sierras. Sturdily constructed of fieldstone and cedar, this 3-story combination hotel and tavern is beautifully appointed, completely furnished and equipped. It contains a total of 53 rooms with 37 de luxe and semi-de luxe bedrooms, a dining room accommodating 52, an attractive cocktail lounge and bar and reception lounge. In addition there is a ski chalet with dormitory for 22 overnight guests and, directly across the highway, a 40-car

In the page to the left the lower right picture shows the rope tow that was behind Rainbow Lodge.



Rear of Tavern and Chalet



Dining Room

Resort Hotel-Tavern

Frontage on U. S. #40
California's Finest Ski Country

garage with two apartments above. The 400-acre property fronts for approximately 1½ miles on each side of the highway. The Yuba River, affording summer swimming in a natural pool, traverses the property for the same distance. Directly to the rear of the hotel are slopes for beginners and professionals served by two ski tows, while within 7 miles are the famous Soda Springs and Sugar Bowl ski areas with numerous slopes and tows.

Successfully and continuously operated since 1929, it has recently been remodeled and redecorated, is in excellent condition throughout and is offered completely furnished and equipped.



Ski Chalet and Tow



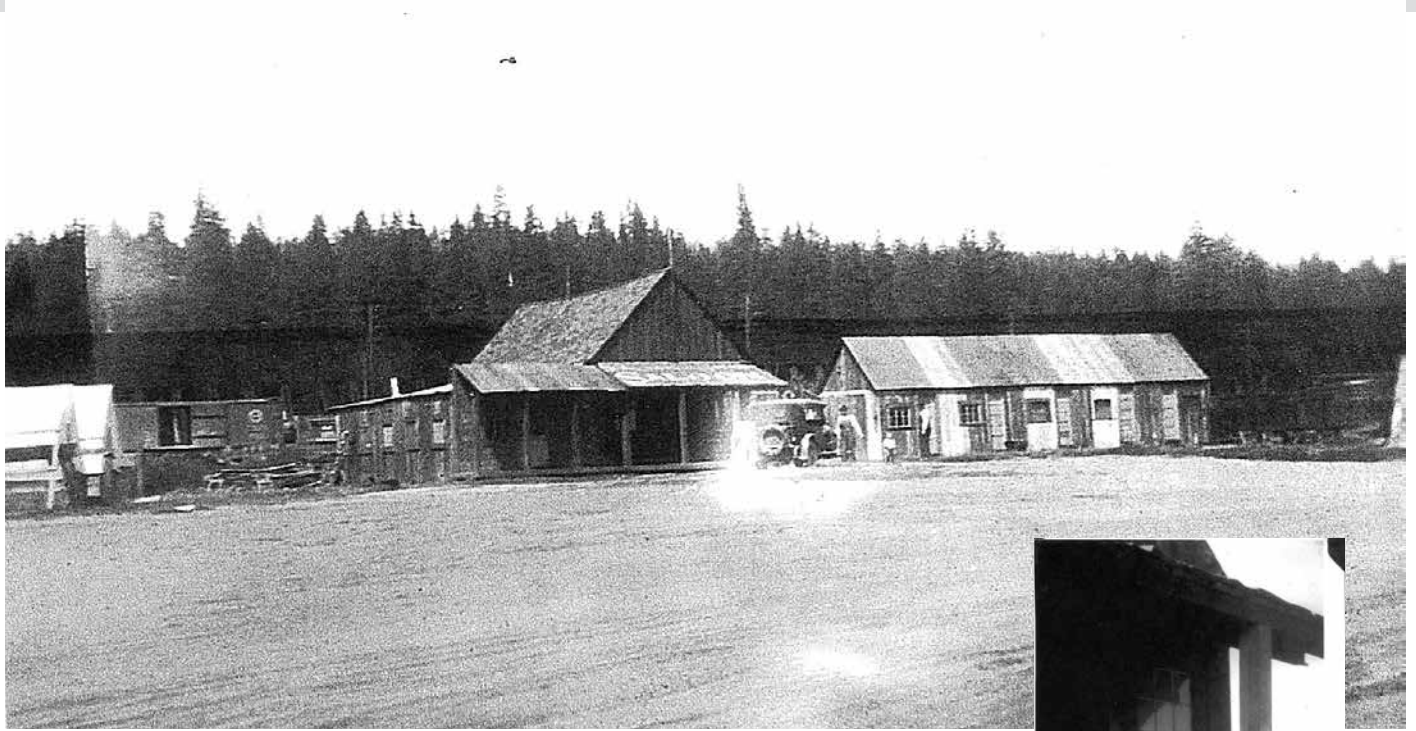
Owner's Bedroom

What's in Your Closet?

Are there old things in your "closet" that have to do with Donner Summit history? We'd love to take a look and copy what you have.

Let us know: info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

From the DSHS Archives



Soda Springs, circa 1922

In 2017 Gaylene Knezovich-Collins of Rough and Ready found an old box of pictures in her house many of which were of Donner Summit. She cast about on the Internet and found the Donner Summit Historical Society and that's where she met Norm Saylor, the president. They "hit it off" and Gaylene donated the collection to the DSHS. Our March, '17 [Heirloom](#) introduced a few of the photographs. Here we have two more, above and above right. The third picture comes from Norm's collection to illustrate the same building at the same time.



The picture above is of the Soda Springs Station (and saloon) which was the train stop for people coming to the summit to go to Summit Soda Springs, the resort eight miles south at the Cedars. Note the snowsheds running behind the saloon building.

The site sits where the Soda Springs Ski Area parking lots near the dam are located. That will be a story in a coming [Heirloom](#).

The woman in the photograph above right is unknown but perhaps a Knezovich-Collins relative relaxing on the saloon porch with the town dog while her father stopped for a beer and some political discussion. Does that read too much into the photo?



From the DSHS Archives



Study this photograph a bit before reading on.

Here is a lot of Donner Summit transportation. The photograph, taken about 1962 shows the Yuba River just west of Big Bend. The new I-80 freeway is being constructed where you see the overpass. Old Highway 40 is clogged with traffic underneath the overpass and the original Lincoln Highway/Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. is visible at the right end of the overpass. It's too bad the photographer didn't wait a bit for a train to go across the background.

The Naming of Cisco

Phil Sexton Improves the Story

In November of last year our feature story was “Cisco, 1867.” One of our readers is Phil Sexton who used to be the ranger at Big Bend and local historical luminary. He has since moved on to the State Railroad Museum in Sacramento and recently received a promotion moving him to the State Capitol building with the responsibility of overseeing more museums.

Last month Phil weighed in on the San Mateo, the first locomotive to cross the Sierra. The month before he had read the Cisco article and offered some good information. The Naming of Cisco just had to wait a little longer for exposure.

The historic Cisco ... named for John J. Cisco, who, among other things, was the Treasurer of the CPRR. He had also been the Assistant NY State Treasurer, and in this role had been of great assistance in helping to maintain financial stability in the state when Jay Cooke, a corrupt financier, moved into the New York financial world from PA.

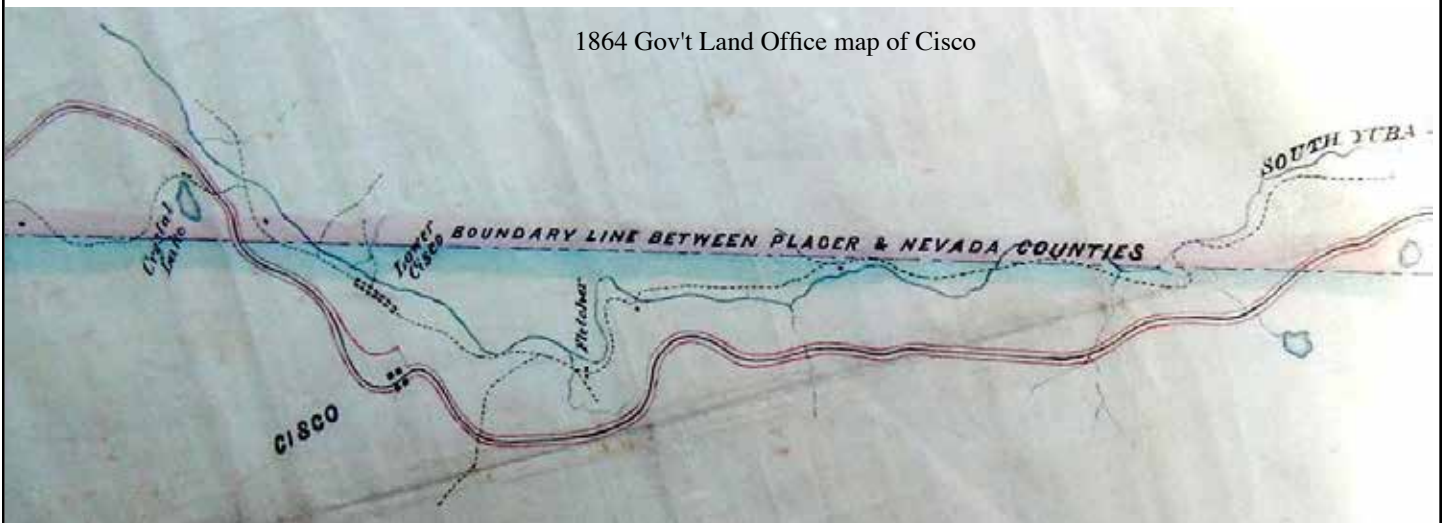
Cisco was also an assistant Secretary of the Treasury under two Democrats. When Lincoln was elected, Cisco was a democrat and opposed Lincoln, but he was kept on, in spite of political opposition from other Cabinet Secretaries such as William Seward. Cisco was loyal to the administration, in spite of his political differences, but in 1864, he resigned due to health reasons. This set off a lot of shenanigans, since his position was a very coveted patronage position... Cisco delayed his resignation, but he eventually left, but still had loyalty and influence on Solomon Chase, the Secretary of Treasury. During this time, the town we know of as “Cisco” was named for him, as well as a Texas town on the Texas Central railroad, due to his work in helping to secure financing for the railroad.

I’m not aware of any explicitly corrupt actions that he took on behalf of the railroad, but he was certainly a player at high levels, and having a town named for you was generally a quid pro quo for having “helped” the railroad.

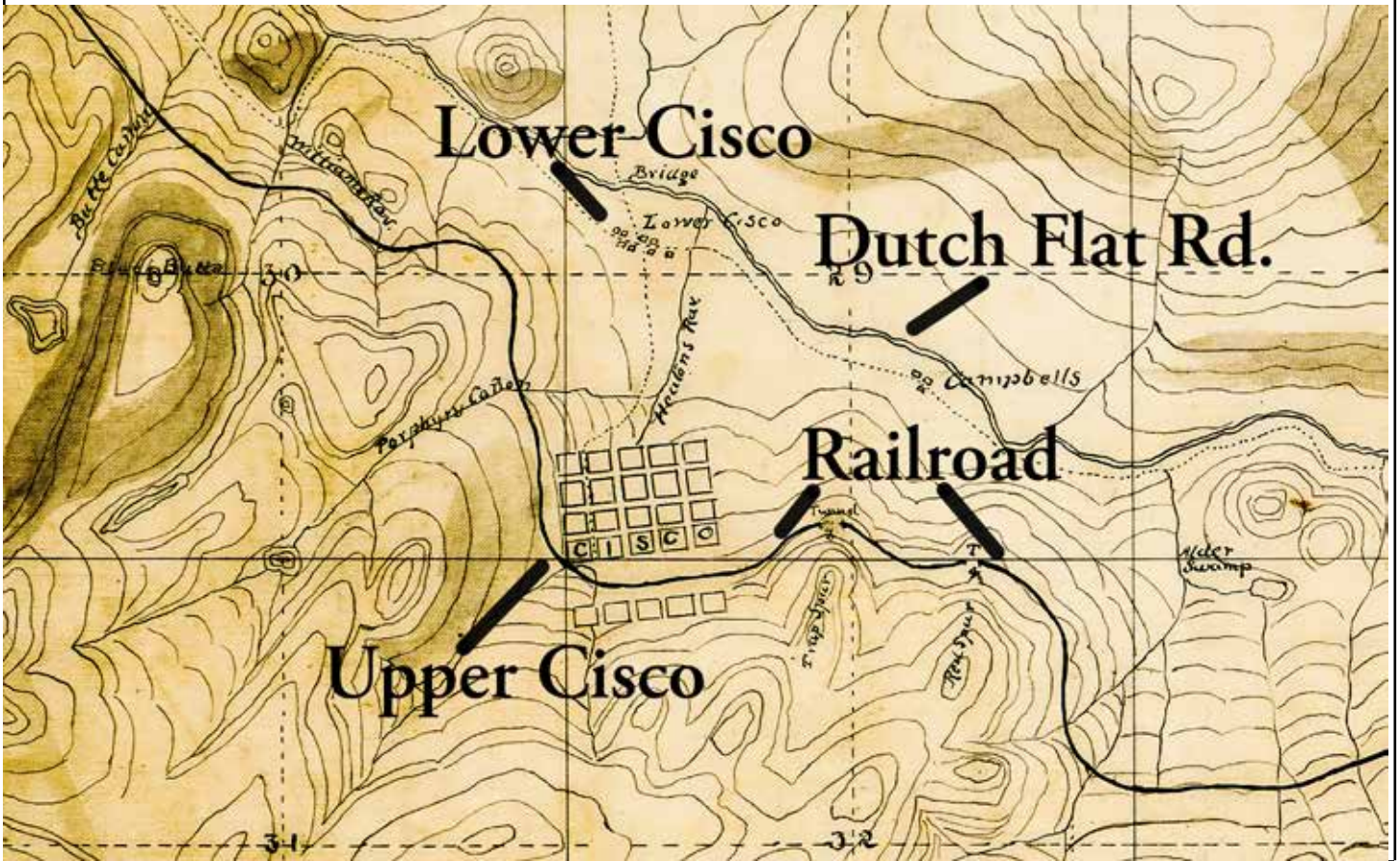
... There were two Ciscos, upper and lower. Upper Cisco is the railroad town, and lower Cisco, about where Cisco Grove is today, was the junction of the Dutch Flat Road and the Meadow Lake Road, now the Rattlesnake and Fordyce roads that goes past the campground. They are, of course, pretty close together, but in the time they were as far as I can tell, two separate settlements, and they show this way on the 1864 GLO map of the railroad. The 1918 USFS map shows Cisco and “toll house” where lower Cisco was located....

Whenever I see “Cisco Grove” in print I tend to giggle a little bit because I once saw a Sac Bee article that stated that Cisco Grove was named for a nearby stand of Cisco trees, so of course I contacted the reporter. He told me that he had “misunderstood” the campground manager, I think. Also note that the CPRR ad you show in this issue also calls the town “Cisco.” As far as I can tell, the name “Cisco Grove” was probably a creation of the owner of the gas station/resort in the 1930s. One little bit of trivia is that the folk singer Cisco Houston is thought to have adopted his professional name after passing through Cisco Grove in the 1930s as a youngster.

1864 Gov't Land Office map of Cisco



Upper Cisco, 1866



Book Review

Bud and Me The True Adventures of the Abernathy Boys

Alta Abernathy 1998 162 pages

This is an amazing story for any time but particularly in the time of “helicopter parents,” arranged “playdates,” and news stories about Child Protective Services being called on the parents of children at the playground alone. This was the old days.

When Louis “Bud” Abernathy and his brother, Temple, were nine and five years old respectively, they went across country in 1909. That was just their first trip without parent or chaperone.

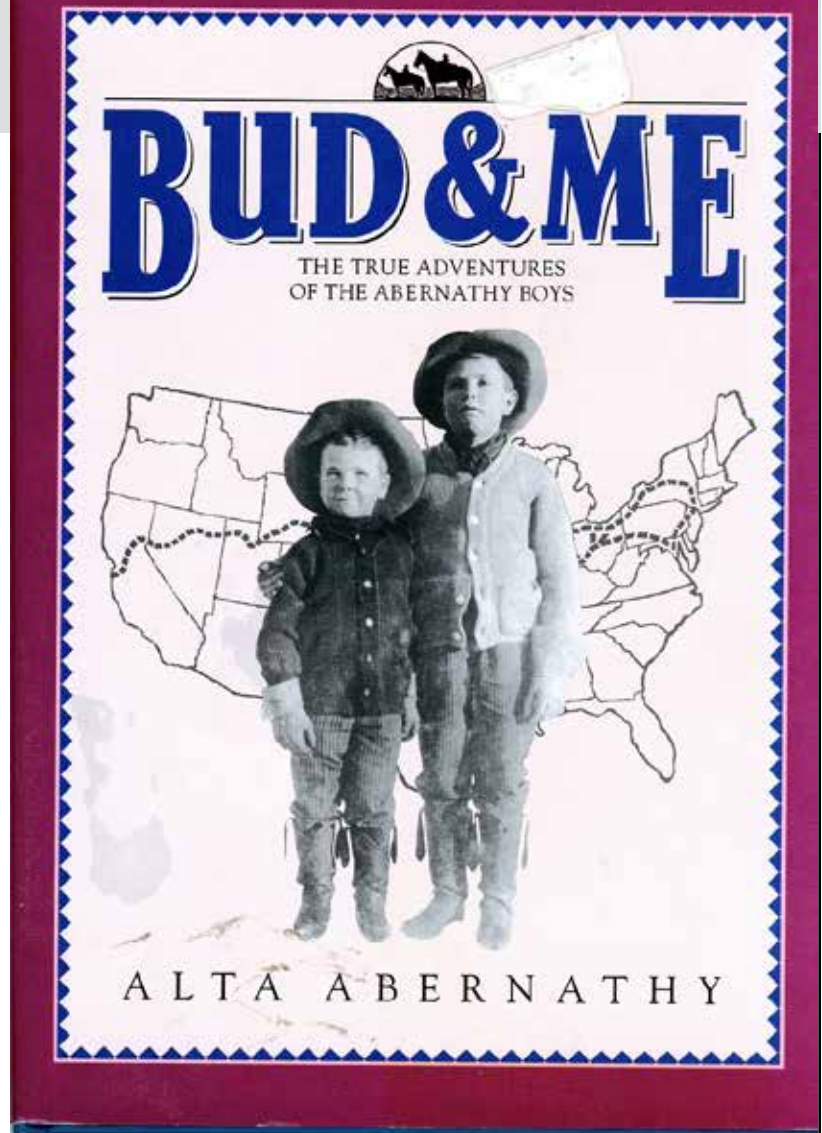
“Catch ‘em-Alive” Jack Abernathy was a U.S. Marshal in Oklahoma appointed by Teddy Roosevelt in 1906. His wife had died in 1907 leaving him with six kids. Jack got his nickname because he could catch wolves alive and that made him famous enough to meet Teddy Roosevelt. He was a big believer in self-reliance and taught that to his children. When Bud and Temple were nine and five years old they told their father they were going to ride from Oklahoma to Santa Fe. They’d heard lots of stories about the west and decided they wanted to see it for themselves. After some thought and a short trial trip their father agreed.

The boys dealt with scorpions, heat, gyp water (causes diarrhea), a wolf, quicksand, a hail storm, a mad jackass, a sandstorm, and rustlers. The trip took two weeks.

That was for practice. Next they wanted to go to New York to meet Teddy Roosevelt on his return from foreign lands. That was 1910 and the boys had reached the ages of ten and six. New York was, and still is, 2,000 miles away from Oklahoma.

At first look letting a nine and a five years old, or a ten and a six year old a year later, go off by themselves seems irresponsible, but their father was well-known and “all of his interesting friends” looked after the boys in towns and gave them places to stay and eat. Out in the wilderness there was no one to look after them except themselves, and for a few days, a cattle rustler and his gang. There were incidents. The cattle rustler story is a good one. The boys had come across his gang’s cabin and stayed the night not knowing what he was or who he was. The rustler and his gang followed the boys from an unseen distance for a couple of days and then sent “Catch ‘em-Alive” a note. The rustler and Jack had once had a shoot-out over illegal activities but apparently some code of the west let that go when the boys showed up at the cabin.

The further east the boys got the more attention they drew from the public and newspapers. They got to visit a zoo, drive a train, visit a firehouse and go on a fire call, drive a car, get fingerprinted at a police station, visit the Wright Brothers’ aeroplane factory, see Halley’s Comet, visit with President Taft, and visit Washington D.C. and climb the Washington Monument.



Oklahoma Boys End Ride From New York

Abernathy Boys Finish Trip, but
Fail to Make It Within
Set Time.

San Francisco Chronicle October 31, 1911

Then they were off to New York and “people lined the streets to cheer... We were apparently celebrities.”

In New York they were in the 5th Avenue parade for Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders and they met Teddy Roosevelt.

The horses were shipped back to Oklahoma and then the boys convinced their father to buy an automobile, a Brush, which was small. Bud got driving lessons, Jack bought a car too and hired a chauffeur. Off they went back to Oklahoma.

Their celebrity brought the boys more opportunities and adventure including movie making. The celebrity also brought a challenge. Could the boys ride from New York to California in sixty days? There could be no riding on Sundays and they could not sleep or eat under a roof during the trip. If they could, they’d get \$10,000. The challenge was accepted in 1911. The boys were eleven and seven years old. They started on August 11, 1911. The journey was much like the one to New York from Oklahoma with the addition of deserts and mountains. That brings us to where we would be concerned.

In Reno they were asked if they were going over the Sierra and Donner Pass and of course they said yes. It was then they learned of the Donners. Their version follows.

Back before the Gold Rush George Donner was leading a big group of people. “A huge snowstorm came up, and they were stuck. All but a few people died,... some starved, some froze... They found buggies, wagons and horses scattered all over the side of the mountain. Some had fallen over cliffs and into gorges. Some got caught in snowslides and rock slides. And even a few survivors would have starved if they hadn’t... If they hadn’t become cannibals!” Here the story had been told to the boys by a young girl with dramatic effect, and it’s based on the memory of Temple, seventy-plus years later. So the errors in fact can be forgiven.

To get to California from Reno one must cross the Sierra and the boys took the Donner Pass route, “riding through mist and occasional sleet, we climbed a twisting wagon trail up the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevadas. Before long, the air got cold, the road was slick, and Wylie and Big Black had a hard time keeping their footing.

“We stopped at Donner Pass, even though it made me extremely nervous to imagine the gruesome events that had taken place on that spot. Fearing that we too, might get caught in a snowstorm, we hurried on. After all, it was now mid-October, almost the exact time of year the Donner Party met their fate in another blizzard.

“At one point we came to a dark hole in the mountainside, a railroad tunnel. Living dangerously, we galloped through at top speed, hoping a train wouldn’t come...

“The summit was a disappointment – flat like a tabletop instead of rounded into a peak. It had several houses, the homes of rangers I guess, but we didn’t see anyone, and we rode right on.”

The boys arrived in San Francisco and met their father.

The book is short and simple. It was told by Temple’s wife from the first person point of view of her husband, seventy-seven years after the extraordinary journeys in a style that is without much detail and with simple vocabulary and



Abernathy Boys San Francisco Call, October 31, 1911

construction. That would make it seem to be a kids' book especially given the subject, but the lack of detail, the lack of fleshing out the stories and providing some drama or conflict, makes it less than what it could have been. One example of the lack of detail is the end. These boys were interesting and one would like to know what became of them. Bud became a lawyer, district attorney and judge. There is nothing about his family and there is nothing about Temple, the narrator. Since all of the dialogue was made up, it could have been infused with more detail and a bit of drama – such as fleshing out some of the incidents. Perhaps the biggest example of lack of detail is just how long did it take the boys to go from New York to California? By how much did they miss the sixty days? The book doesn't say but The San Francisco Chronicle on October 31, 1911 said, "The actual time occupied in riding has been sixty-two days, so the boys have lost the prize of \$10,000 which they were to receive by a narrow margin of two days. Abernathy says that the boys lost because of delays in Wyoming and Iowa by floods."*

The San Francisco Chronicle on November 23, 1911 carried a notice that the boys would be giving a talk at the YMCA and would recount "the most daring features of the ride and the rescue of the boys from the Hudson river [sic] by the United States revenue cutter Manhattan." That would be illustrated with 6,000 feet of "moving pictures." That rescue in the Hudson River sounds interesting. It's not mentioned in the book.

Following their trip and not earning the \$10,000 the boys went on to the Vaudeville circuit as noted by the Danville Kentucky Advocate Messenger on November 1, 1911. The boys traveled the vaudeville circuit recounting their exploits and then their father put them in military school.


The Oakland Tribune carried a number of advertisements for the boys' vaudeville performances in notices of presentation at the Broadway theater in Oakland. The Abernathy Boys would tell their story and present "their own exclusive motion pictures on western life.... The Abernathy Roundup, the Abernathy Kids' Rescue, Marshall Abernathy's Wolf Hunt, The Abernathy Kids' Western Trip, the Bank Robbery, and the Abernathy Kids' Eastern Trip." This would be the "most lengthy and interesting bill yet presented at Oakland's popular photoplay theater, 'The Broadway.'" Oakland Tribune December 12, 1911

The Danville Kentucky Advocate Messenger continued with the boys' later life: Jack became a secret agent for Mexico and then a successful wildcatter. He died in 1941 age 65. Temple "followed his father into the oil business and worked as a driller in fields throughout Texas." Bud became a lawyer and practiced in Wichita Falls. The Brush Motor Car Co. went out of business in 1912.

Then for a final follow-up The Des Moines Register (June 2, 1995) and several other newspapers reported about Hart and Starr Moss, brothers, who rode across the country in 1995 for charity and who were inspired by the Abernathy kids. They had an adult with them all the time and took longer. Hart was an eighth grader (13) and Starr a second grader (8). They didn't go over Donner Summit though.

*Here's where some text in the book would have been useful concerning the trip's length. Different newspapers report different things: for example, The San Francisco Chronicle (10/31/11) said the trip went from August 1 to October 30 ----- that's 91 days. Bud and Me says they started 8/11 so that's 80 days. The Los Angeles Times (8/20/11) says they started on the 1st of August too. The Paris Texas News on 7/31/11 said the boys left on August 1 but arrived in San Francisco on October 2nd – that's 62 days

**Abernathy Boys
Near End of Ride
Across Country**



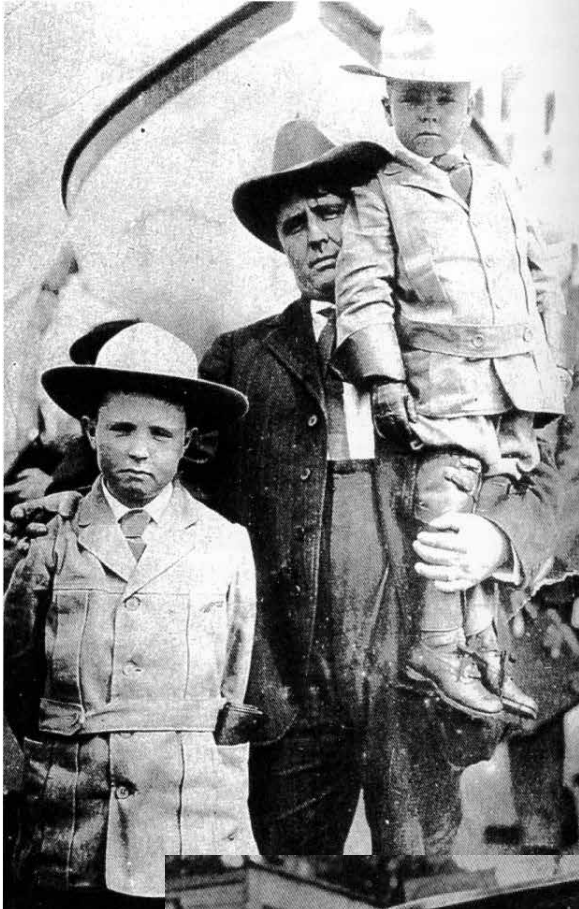
LOUIS AND TEMPLE ABERNATHY.

**Oklahoma Youngsters Pass
Through Sacramento En-
route to Bay.**

Their transcontinental horseback trip practically completed, the two "Abernathy boys," Temple and Louis, aged 7 and 11 respectively, who rode from Oklahoma to New York to greet ex-President Theodore Roosevelt on his return from Europe and who are now on their way from New York to San Francisco, arrived in Sacramento yesterday on the home-stretch of their ride. They were accompanied by their father, J. R. Abernathy, who has been with them since they crossed the Rocky Mountains.

The \$10,000 purse offered them by several millionaires of New York if they made the trip in sixty days after their start August 1 from Coney Island, was forfeited, on account of the unavoidable delays they encountered on their way. The trip is being completed for the record it will make.

October 29, 1911
Sacramento Union



Abernathy Boys and their father from the book.

TRIP ENDED, BUT \$10,000 IS LOST

Young Oklahoma Riders Fail to Cross Continent Within 60 Day Limit

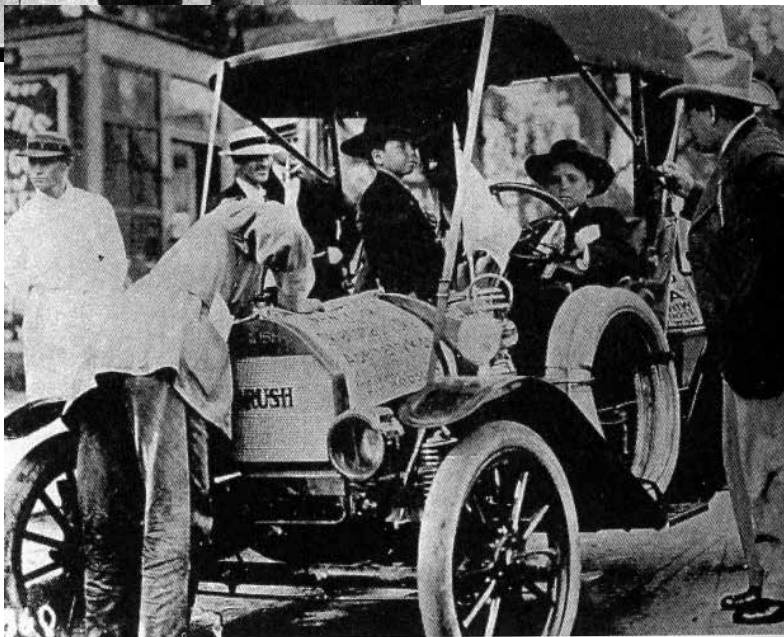
Sleepy and saddle weary, but happy because the long coast to coast horseback ride was ended, Temple and Louie Abernathy, the Oklahoma City boys, who started from Coney Island, N. Y., on August 1, reached San Francisco from Vallejo at 5:30 o'clock last evening.

The young riders turned their horses up Market street, galloped out through Golden Gate park and at 6:30 o'clock eight steel shod hoofs were planted in the sands of the Pacific ocean, while two exultant boys rose in their stirrups and waved their hats.

Accompanying the boys on several stages of the journey was their proud father, "Jack" R. Abernathy, for 11 years a United States marshal at Oklahoma City, and a personal friend of Theodore Roosevelt.

Temple Abernathy is 7 years old, Louie is 11. The boys' actual time was 91 days. The distance, as taken, covered 3,619 miles. Neither would consent to riding on Sunday, and in addition to this, they were delayed by sickness, accident and weather long

October 31, 1911
San Francisco Call



The auto "Catch 'em Alive" bought after the first trip to New York which the boys drove home.

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.

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



There's all kinds of old stuff lying around on Donner Summit. Here is an old building sitting by the side of the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway. To find this go down Old 40, Donner Pass Rd. to Big Bend. Park at the fire station and then look across the street at the garage. Behind the garage is a Lincoln Highway marker. Go left a couple of hundred yards on the old highway (watch for traffic*) and you'll come to the building here. If you go right at the marker and left at the first and only dirt road there, you will be able to walk along the Yuba River on the old highway. It's a nice walk and you'll be passing old stone cabins. That's a good starting point for a hike to Huysink Lake too. You'll see the USFS sign marking the turn off from the old highway.

*Just kidding about the traffic (but nothing else in this issue) - It's April 1st after all.

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](#).

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

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

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

- New Membership
 Renewing Membership
 Individual Membership - \$30
 Family Membership - \$50
 Patron - \$500
 Benefactor - \$1000

DATE _____
 NAME(S) _____
 MAILING ADDRESS _____
 CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____
 (Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)
 Friend Membership - \$100 Sponsor - \$250
 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 at the DSHS at <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>



Pick up or download the brochure

46 interpretive signs along Old 40
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>

Storm - continued from page 6

received concerning its progress. Should it clear this slide it will probably press forward until the heavy breaks are reached at Butte Canyon bridge.

Meantime, however, slides have occurred at Tunnel No. 13 and at Jones' Mill, east of the Summit, so the Truckee plow cannot return.

Between Cisco and Emigrant Gap several new slides have crossed the track.

The storm continues with unabated fury.

The east-bound overland of to-day arrived here this evening, and was coupled to the two passenger trains already hailed here. A dreadful night awaits the poor railroad men. The wind is cold and piercing, the darkness profound, and the task both dangerous and herculean. Working like heroes all night and all day to-morrow they will scarcely be able to clear away the slides which have already occurred.

Sierra Speaker Series: Canine Search for the Donner Family Camps at Alder Creek with John Grebenkemper

April 21 @ 5:00 pm - 6:30 pm Free

Picture of a Canine Forensics Investigator in the Fields **INFORMATION:**

Complimentary refreshments will be served, with beverages available for purchase. A \$5 donation is suggested for this free program. Parking is free.

In early November 1846, the George and Jacob Donner families and their teamsters arrived at Alder Creek, about 3 miles north of downtown Truckee. The divided Donner families had decided to camp at Alder Creek because there was less snow than at the Donner Lake camps. Over the next 5 months, eight people camped at Alder Creek would die from starvation. Recent exploration by canines from the Institute for Canine Forensics have located human remains scent in the Alder Creek area.

This talk will explore the Donner party travels cross-country and their winter camps at Alder Creek. The canine results and other evidence suggest the specific locations of the George and Jacob Donner camps. These two camps are hundreds of yards from the traditional area associated with the Donner family camps.

Doors open at 5 pm | Program begins at 5:30pm

Letter to the Editor

Thanks again for another wonderful Heirloom. Jim and I enjoyed watching the YouTube video of ski jumping at Berkeley (Jim went to Cal in the 70s and had never heard about this - though he and his friends did try to inner tube down strawberry creek one spring). I also enjoyed reading the stories about Scotty. People who have lived on the summit are so amazing. We were happy to hear that we got some snow this weekend. We plan to head up to our Emigrant Gap Lodge in a day or two (of course by then the snow may be gone). Thanks again for keeping the history of the summit alive!

Carol Guida, Emigrant Gap.

