

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

January, 2018 issue #113

In the September, '17 Heirloom we had a short story about the first locomotive over the summit. It was a difficult job hauling 40 miles of track, car parts and locomotive over the summit to Truckee in the summer of 1867, but it was just for practice.

“It may be that nothing like it had been done since Hannibal led his war elephants over the Alps.”

Moguls and Iron Men 1964 pg 162-3

By Sled Over Donner Summit

That sounds like a fun time.... but wait ‘til I tell you

The first Locomotives to Cross Donner Summit

Two railroads started from opposite ends aiming to meet somewhere in the middle and complete the transcontinental railroad. It was a huge job to cross a continent by rail; it had never been done before – anywhere. The building of the tunnels on Donner Summit, through solid Sierra granite, had also never been done before. The project was *the* engineering feat of the 19th Century up to that time.

The Union Pacific had a comparatively easy route laying track going west just as the first part of wagon train journeys was relatively easy (see sidebar page 3). There’s a lot of flat prairie. The eastern railroad, the Union Pacific, also had ready access to supplies, steel, and manufactured goods. They could communicate easily and materials could be delivered quickly.

The Central Pacific, going east from Sacramento, was separated from the industry that supplied rails, iron, and locomotives by two oceans and a continent. The CPRR had to wait months for communication to be completed and had to plan far in advance for building materials. The CPRR was at the mercy of shipwrecks and storms. It was at the mercy of the Sierra too – the hardest part of the transcontinental crossing. Donner Summit is at the top and it was the most difficult part of the Sierra crossing.

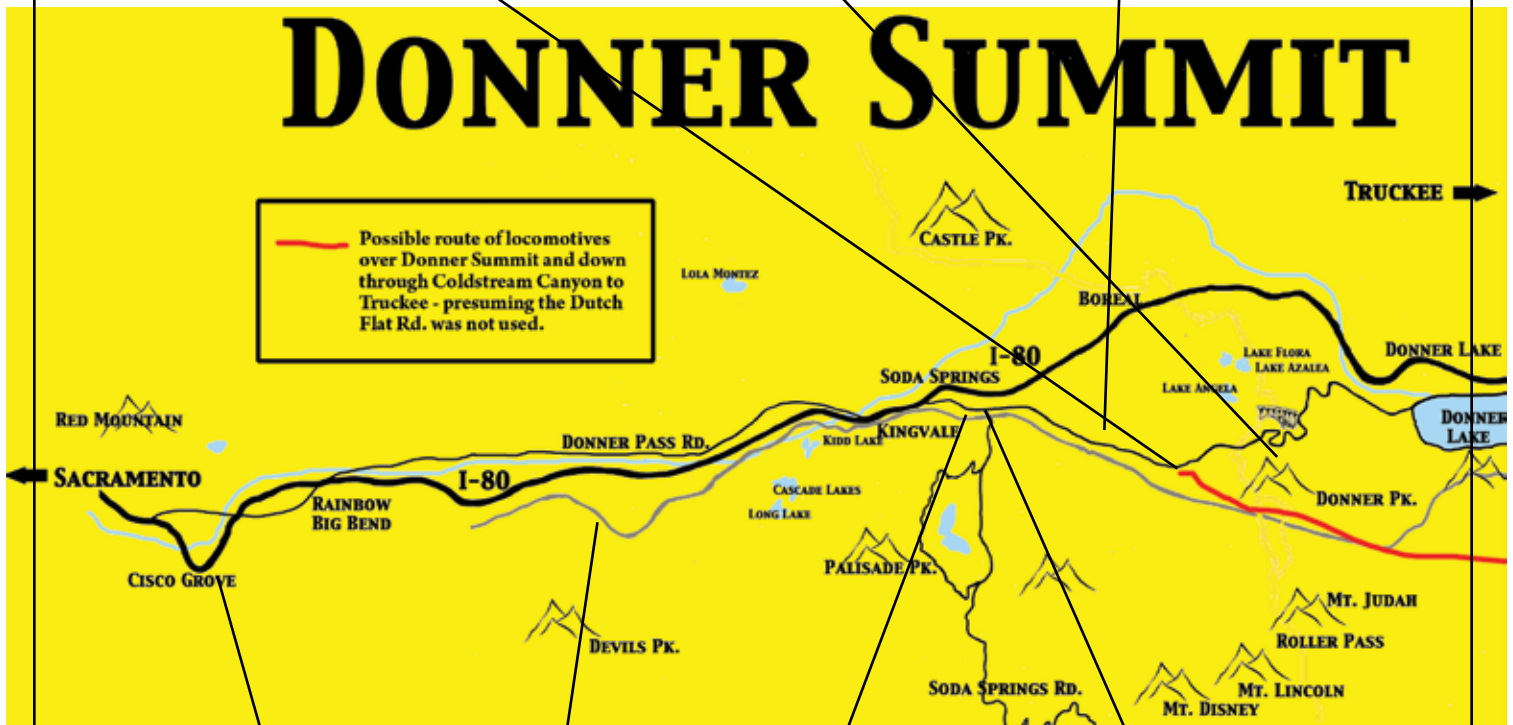
There was the topography of course. Mountains are hard to cross. The high point of the route is 7000 feet. There was snow too. An average of 34 feet falls at Donner Summit each winter and the winds pile snow into huge drifts. Wind and snow bring avalanches. Avalanches bury people and buildings. It happened again and again.

“It is impossible,” he said; “no human power can force an engine up the grade which can be obtained. They cannot reach Auburn. ...Talk about a [rail]road over the summit; it is absurd.”

"The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69" (1868) by "Old Block" - pen name for Alonzo Delano. "Old Block" was a 19th Century author and social commentator. In the quote above he was commenting on some people's belief that a railroad over the Sierra was impossible.

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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

And then, there was the granite. Fifteen tunnels had to be blasted and dug through the mountains. Just at the top, on Donner Summit, was the toughest and longest, Tunnel 6. The Chinese workers had to go through 1659 feet of solid granite.

It took two years to complete Tunnel 6 and that was with workers working at four faces at a time (from the east and west as well as from a shaft down the center so they could work from the inside out) 24 hours a day six days a week. They made progress of only inches a day.

The railroads got paid for the track they laid both in money (via bonds they could sell) and in land. The more track that was laid the more money the companies got. The Union Pacific was laying track like crazy and taunted the CPRR that they'd get to California before the CPRR even got over of the Sierra. They even printed a map showing their line reaching the California border. The Central Pacific was stuck at tunnel 6. Easy flat Nevada land lay just down the hill and taunted the Big Four too, but the CPRR couldn't get to it. They were stuck in the Sierra.

The solution was to do the building where it was easiest and so get more miles done. Once the easy part was done and connected to a finally finished Sierra crossing, money would flow.

Three thousand Chinese workers were taken off the western slope and sent down the other side of the Sierra, between Truckee and the Nevada line to grade the route. That was easy but that only got the rail bed graded.

To do a railroad track, spikes, ties, and supplies are needed. Railroad cars and engines are needed. But how can those tons of materials and equipment get to the other side if there are no tracks on which to convey them?

Exactly what happened is confusing to decipher because long afterwards, before the Pacific Railway Commission in 1887 (sidebar pg 5), there were different stories. Some people involved said they took three engines, two dozen (or as many as 40) rail cars and 20 (or 40) miles of track over the Sierra. Some said everything was hauled over on sleighs or sledges in the winter of 1866-67 a whole year early. There was one trip or there were a few trips.

According to contemporary letters among the Big Four and contemporary newspaper articles, though, the first engine went over Donner Pass in July, 1867 along with the trucks (wheel assemblies) for rail cars. The railcars were assembled at Coburn's Station (shortly to become Truckee). More material went over on the road in the following months.

Everything that first time went on wagons.

So while construction continued on Tunnel 6, work also progressed from Truckee to the Nevada line. Whenever Tunnel 6 was done, the orphan rails to the east would be connected with the California rails. Indeed, in December, 1867 the first locomotive



Alfred A. Hart #223 The locomotive San Mateo. The San Mateo was pulled over Donner Pass in the summer of 1867 on wagons. This photo has been cropped.

Comparing Route Portions

From Newcastle, CA to Wadsworth, NV the CPRR route was 157 miles and took 41 months to build: February, 1865 to July, 1868. The CPRR used an average of 11,000 men and sometimes as high as 13,000. This included the Sierra.

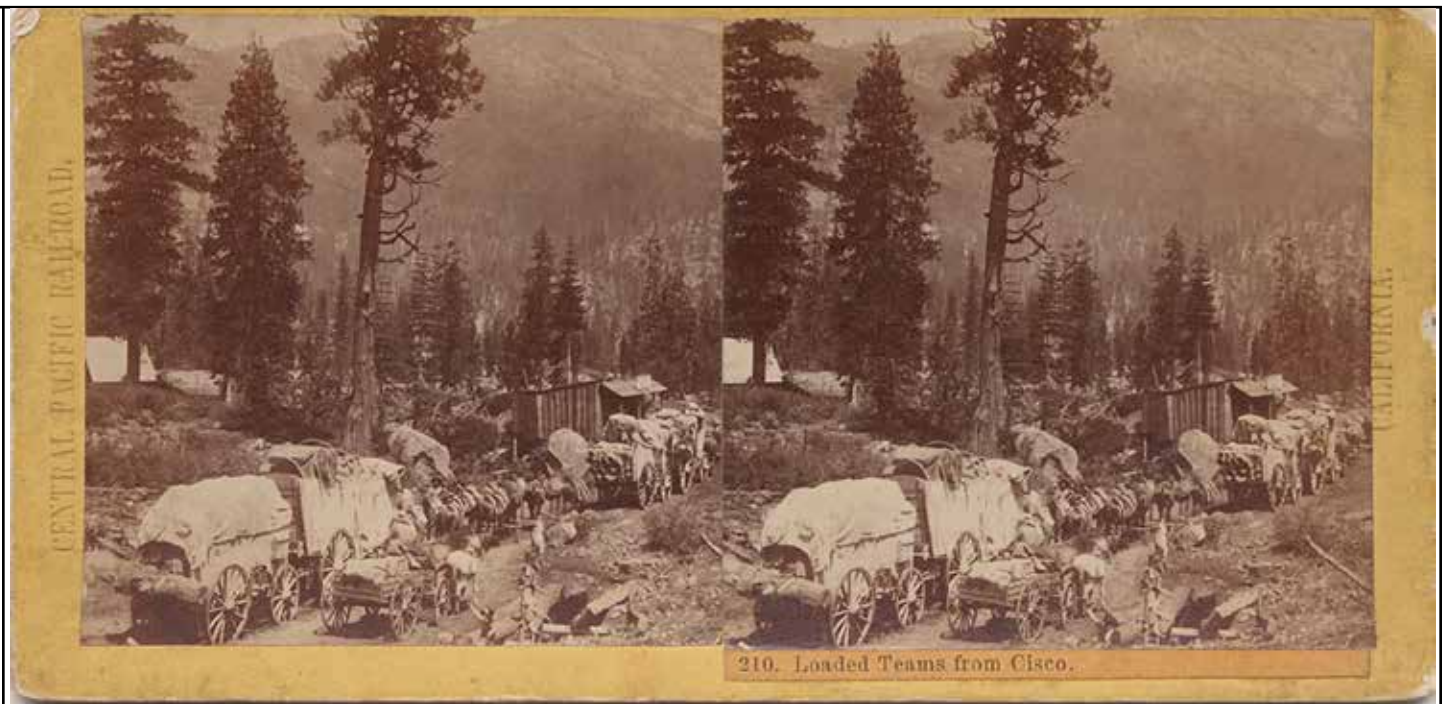
From Wadsworth to Ogden, Utah, the distance was 555 miles and took only 10 months July, 1868 to May, 1869 using only 5,000 men.

I WANT TO CONTRACT FOR THE
HAULING OF
3,000 tons railroad iron
from cisco to Coburn's station
(TWENTY MILES). I WILL PAY ten
dollars per ton
and Toll Free
[The Dutch Flat Rd. was a toll road]

Sacramento, July 17, 1867

C. CROCKER

Sacramento Daily Union July 23, 1867



Alfred A. Hart #201 Loaded Teams at Cisco (Dutch Flat Rd.)

ran into Nevada on the new track but Tunnel 6 was barely done; there was no track into Truckee. The first train using tracks to Truckee crossed the Summit in January, 1868 and the first through passenger train was in June of that year.

Finding a locomotive to send over the mountains in July, 1867 was difficult. The Central Pacific was using all of its engines and had none to spare. The Western Pacific RR though, was in trouble and sold out to the Central Pacific. Coincidentally they had ten engines, some of which were still in their shipping containers. They were brand new and came to the Central Pacific, "Assembly required." That first engine was sent by boat to Sacramento, then by train to Cisco, and finally over the Sierra by wagon. By September it had been assembled in Truckee and named the San Mateo (picture page 3). It was the first engine over the Sierra.

When it was assembled it joined newly arrived railcars whose timbers were milled in Truckee. 3000 tons of rail followed along later and just at this time Coburn's Station became Truckee.

The San Mateo was just for practice and when you get good at something you have to "push the envelope." The next trick was to get two more locomotives, more miles of track, and more car parts over the Summit but by then the railroad men were thinking in terms of crossing during winter. That would be a feat to be proud of. Ads were purchased soliciting teamsters (right).

Two more engines, more flat bed rail cars and more track went over in early 1868, 150 years ago this month, and had arrived in Truckee by the end of February. That meant they went over in mid-winter on the snow, as testimony at the Railway Commission had said. The Daily Alta California newspaper said in February of 1868, that "The new forty-ton locomotive "Onward," three days from Cisco, arrived at Coburn's in safety this afternoon. Sufficient

Two fine locomotives have been sent across the Sierra by horsepower, and are now being put together for use upon the Truckee River and eastern portion of the road, until the gap at Coburn's makes an unbroken rail to Sacramento, which will be about the 30th of June.

Daily Alta California February 25, 1868

Teamsters Ahoy!

I desire to contract for the hauling of 2000 Tons of Iron from Cisco to Coburn's Station to be delivered in 90 days. Snow all the way and Splendid Sleighting! A Liberal price will be paid.

Chas. Crocker, Superintendent, CPRR
page 5 col 6 January 20, 1868 Sacramento Union

motive power and material is in transit now... to complete the contemplated one hundred miles of track by the time the connection is made at the summit.”

Here we should stop to consider this. A locomotive had arrived in Truckee. February is at the height of winter. An average of 34' of snow falls each winter on Donner Summit. The workers had hauled a many-ton locomotive up the mountain, over the snow, and then down to Donner Lake and Truckee. Along with the locomotive came tons of iron, tons of rail, and car parts. It's incredible. Unfortunately for us they were more interested in hauling the locomotive than in taking pictures or otherwise commemorating the feat. Those remembering after the fact did not all remember well or remember details.

That winter, 1867-68, the weather was horrible. Storm followed storm. The stage between end of track at Cisco and Virginia City, sat stuck in the deep mud for six weeks. Passengers were carried on mules. There was a fall of 40 feet of snow higher up with a snowpack of 18 feet.

Once winter got going well the CPRR got to work meeting the new challenge. They transferred locomotives in parts (some obviously quite large), rail car parts, track and supplies on oxen-pulled sleds over the Summit from Cisco to Donner Lake, 28 miles. The oxen had to wear snowshoes to keep from sinking into the snow. At Donner Lake the sleds were unloaded and wagons were used to get to Truckee.

Imagine the work. Each length of track in those days was 24 feet long and weighed 523 lbs. A mile of track weighed 100 tons. Locomotives weighed many tons and still do. The San Mateo weighed about 30 tons fueled and full of water. It had gone over in summer but apparently that was just for practice. Since we don't know how disassembled the San Mateo was when it went over the Summit we don't know how much it would have weighed. "A lot" is a good guess though. No one knows the names of the two locomotives that went over in winter so their weight can't be guessed.

Freight charge over the snow was triple a summer haul.

The route for the Locomotives Over Donner Summit

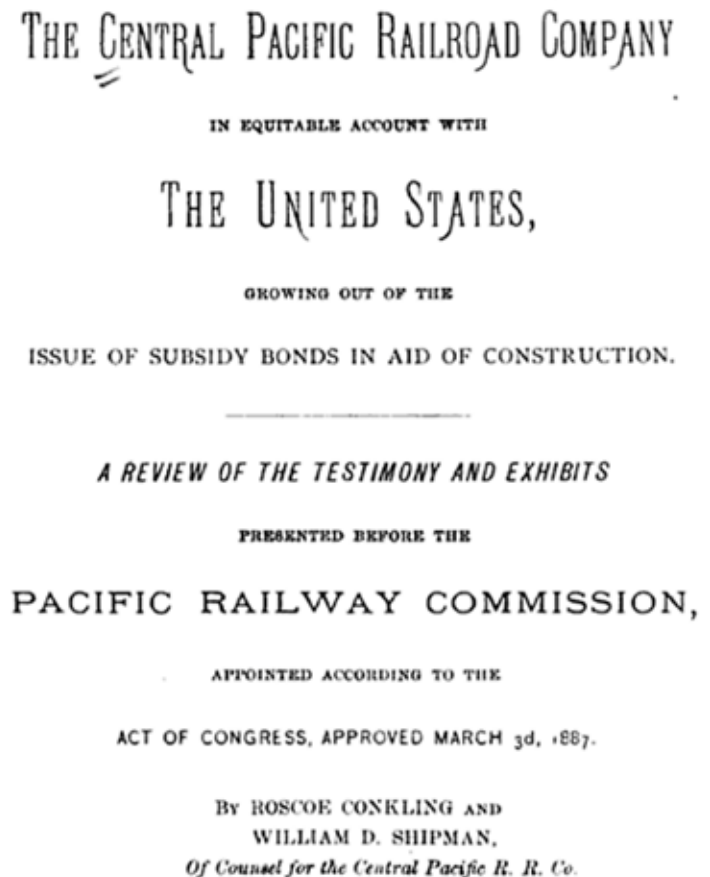
At first thought the route of the locomotives, track and car parts over Donner Summit is obvious. Everything went on the Dutch Flat Rd. That was built especially to help with the building of the railroad and as a toll road to enrich the Big Four.

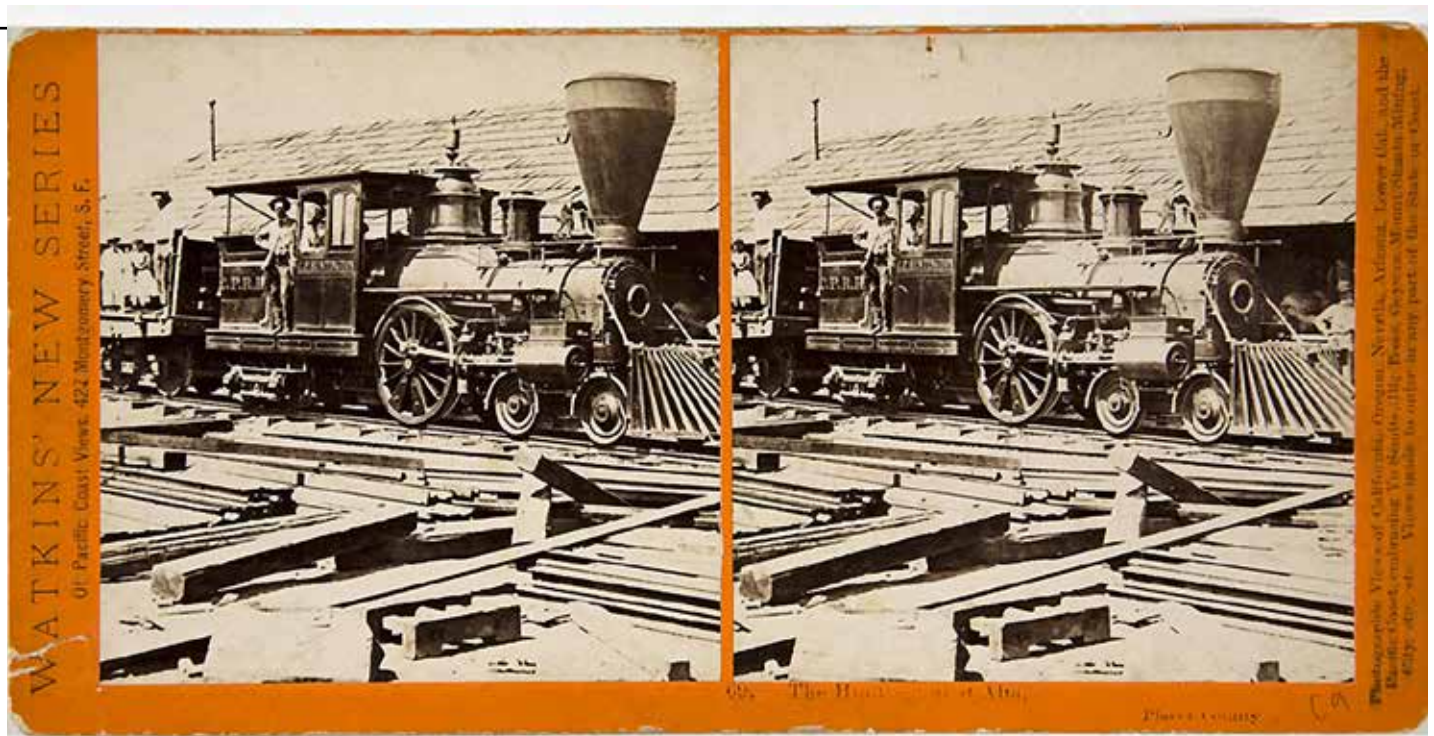
It is possible that the San Mateo used the Dutch Flat Rd. in the Summer of 1867. It is doubtful however. That road had huge amounts of traffic on it (picture top of page 4). According to Wendell Huffman (Nevada State railroad museum) in his book Waiting for the Cars (good book - see the March, '13 Heirloom), up to 58 train car loads a day were loaded onto wagons at Cisco to travel on the Dutch Flat

As the snow gained and the working space became more crowded, in order to waste no time with idle men Crocker loaded his extra laborers, their tools and supplies, upon ox-sleds; sent them across and down, to prepare the way through the Truckee River canyons near the Nevada line, or twenty-eight miles.

He followed this thrust with a reinforcement of forty miles of track equipment—rails, ties, fastenings, forty freight cars and three locomotives. For the twenty-four miles from Cisco to Donner Lake ox-teams and sleds hauled these tons of freight up to the summit through snow eighteen feet deep on the level, forty and sixty feet deep in the drifts; over and down again to the lower, more open country near the base of the east slope. Here the loads were transferred to wagons and mud-skids and log-rollers for the four miles to the Truckee. No stranger procession ever had traversed the western trails. Unhampered by snow the men might work freely blasting a way in expectancy of the rails.

Bulding the Pacific Railway 1919 pg 122





C.P. Huntington - duplicate of the San Mateo - see page 9 also

Rd. To go with that traffic there were also stagecoaches, individual travelers, stock, and freight wagons not attached to the railroad. It was said that a teamster pulling out of traffic might have to wait a couple of hours to get back on the road because the traffic was so heavy.

The Dutch Flat road was built so two wagons could pass each other but none of those wagons carried locomotives. When the Sacramento came up to the Summit by wagon from Gold Run the year before so it could serve as a donkey engine at the top of the central shaft of Tunnel 6, oncoming wagon teams had to be blindfolded so they would not bolt. The Dutch Flat Rd. also has sharp curves (you can walk it - see our Summit Canyon brochure). A locomotive on a wagon, even disassembled, not only would have been a sight, it would have blocked traffic. It might not have even made the sharp turns. Oncoming mules would have bolted to catastrophe since the drop in spots is significant. Did we mention that the road was crowded too?

Another solution was to take the old Emigrant Road over Coldstream Pass which had been used prior to the Dutch Flat Rd. Emigrants had first used Donner Pass but they had to take apart their wagons to get over the rock ledges. In 1846 Roller Pass had been discovered but that was horribly steep. That same year Coldstream Pass had been discovered and it was that pass that was the route of most of the Donner Summit emigrants. On that route the locomotives, track, and car parts would probably not have met any oncoming traffic, would not have blocked the road, would not have stamped oncoming teams, and would have been easier to control. See the red on the map on page 2.

We don't know if that scenario is true. People in the old days did not write enough down to satisfy people today. It's very frustrating.

In the Winter of 1867-68 the next two locomotives and accouterments went over the Summit. They had to have gone over the old road. Winter snow falling on the Dutch Flat Rd. would have made travel on it impossible.

The wagon-road below is lined with slowly moving teams, the drivers cracking their whips, and smacking their lips at the prospect of supper. The loud, sharp reports of blasts as of large rifled guns seem to crack the very mountains. Thus observing, I push forward, when a warning note is heard, and a rush of three-score Asiatics for a culvert betokens danger. I am eight hundred feet from the blast. Smiling at the frightened haste of these stupid fellows, I watch the effect. Bang! bang! bang! Grand is the sight. "Hurry down to this culvert, sir, hurry!" cries a foreman. "Why, there is no danger here." "Hurry here; the big blast is yet to go." Down the bank and into the culvert I, too, tumbled; and the next instant, with a sound as of thunder, a young volcano showered its stones in the air, rending trees, tearing the ground, and falling all about and over our hiding place. "A lucky escape for you, sir," set me thinking if I had not made a mistake in thus throwing away a chance of making more money, without exertion, in one day than ever before-namely, out of my life insurance policy.

The Overland Monthly,
September 1869, 244- 249

Contemporary accounts talk about not even being able to keep the tunnel portals open and the workers had to go through snow tunnels to get from living space to work space. Avalanches came down the mountainsides and the angle of snow lying on the road would have prohibited travel. The old road would have been possible – but barely. There was no traffic. There were no cliffs to drop avalanches, it was not windy. It did have a lot of snow (winds can keep Mt. Judah, overlooking Coldstream Pass, relatively free of snow).

As one goes up the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) and goes past the eighth switchback to where one sees Sugar Bowl and Mt. Disney off to the right, one can look down off the side of the trail. There is clearly unnatural grading there. It has been suggested that was the route of the San Mateo. The following Winter even over the snow, that would have worked better than the Dutch Flat Rd. We just don't know the exact route however.

“The portals of the summit tunnel were buried under fantastic drifts, the Chinese encampments were snowed under. The Chinese dug chimneys and air shafts, lived by lantern light. They tunneled in from the camps to reach the bore of the tunnel itself, and the work continued, although materials now had to be lowered forty feet or more by steam hoist from the surface of the snow, and the waste from digging taken out in the same way.” On Christmas Day, 1866, the Dutch Flat Enquirer reported that “a gang of Chinamen employed by the railroad were covered up by a snow slide and four or five died before they could be exhumed...The snow fell to such a depth that one whole camp of Chinamen was covered up during the night...”

from "The Indispensable Enemy
Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California"
from testimony to the Pacific Railway Commission, 1887

“As the snow line was reached, the depth of snow increased towards the summit, from a few inches to over fifteen feet on a level from actual measurement. The ground was kept bare for the graders by shoveling; upwards of one-half of the labor of the entire grading force being expended in removing snow.... It required an army of men to clear away and keep clear after a storm for a small gang of graders.

“We hauled over that snow to Donner Lake the material for a railroad track of forty miles, with all the trimmings, three locomotives and forty cars. We built forty miles of railroad in the Truckee Canyon before the connection was made by way of the Summit.... In that manner we forced our way across the mountains at an enormous cost. It cost nearly three times what it would have cost to have done it in the summertime when it should have been done..... This material that we hauled from Cisco we hauled to Donner Lake on sleighs, and then reloaded it on to wagons and hauled it over a muddy road to Truckee, and there we commenced laying the track, and laid 40 miles in that way.” Once spring arrived workers were sent back to the Summit to dig out ten or twelve feet of snow so the grading gangs could prepare the route for track laying. As they worked on the Summit tunnels the workers sometimes had to dig snow tunnels of hundreds of feet to get to the areas to dump the excavated rock and to the workers' camps. “The snows were so great ...the snow slides carried away our camps, and we lost a good many men into slides; many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted.” ...

James Strobridge
before the Pacific Railroad Commission, 1887

“We gather the following interesting items relative to the Pacific Railroad...” At Cisco “the snow is of an average depth of ten feet, and five heavy locomotives and a large snow plow are rapidly laying bare the rails....”

“Two fine locomotives have been sent across the Sierra by horse power, and are now being put together for use upon the Truckee River and eastern portion of the road, until the gap at Coburn's makes an unbroken rail to Sacramento...”

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad “it will be but about six days railroading and four days staging to New York; and everybody who chooses can visit the old folks at home...”

Daily Alta California
February 25, 1868
Virginia Trespass,
February 17, 1868

"From a friend we learn that the cars of the Central Pacific Railroad are running to the west end of the long tunnel. Thence to Coburn's Station it is thirteen miles, and passengers go this distance in stages. For this little ride the Pioneer Stage Company is charging the snug little sum of \$4 per passenger, and ten cents a pound for baggage over 30 pounds to each passenger. From Coburn's to Reno is 34 [more or less illegible number] have to pay \$4 each for the privilege of riding over it. The car accommodations on this part of the road are very inadequate, and frequently one hundred passengers are packed in a sixty passenger coach. . . ."

Several months earlier it was clear that passengers were carried on open flat cars. This is the only evidence I have found suggesting that a real passenger car was operated on the isolated track on the Truckee. I have no idea when or how it was taken across.

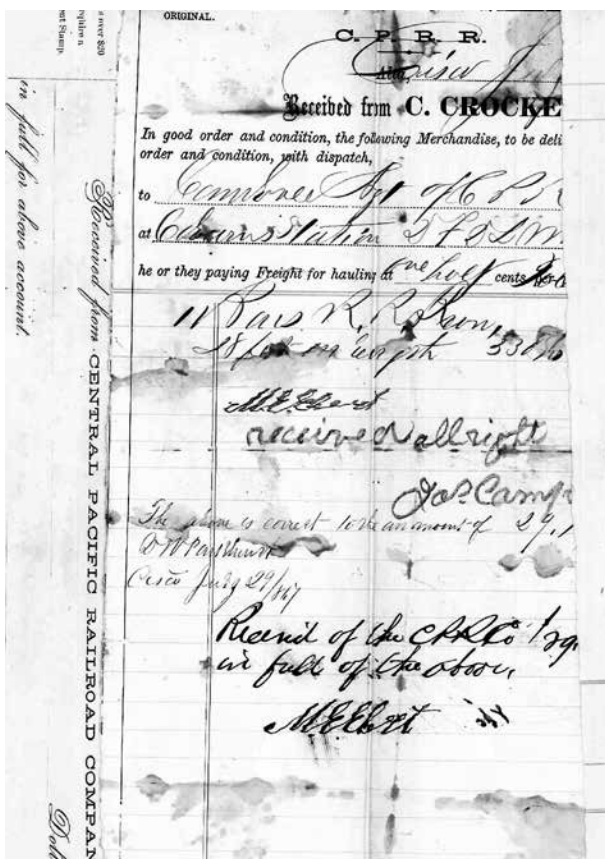
from Wendell Huffman
 Nevada State Railroad Museum, Carson City
Sacramento Union
 June 3, 1868
Grass Valley Union
 June 2, 1868

All Bills must be handed in on or before the Third day of each Month, or they will have to lie over. No Account will be Allowed unless Certified.

CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPANY,

To

| 1867 | | | | To | | | |
|------|----|------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|-----|----|
| July | 22 | Paul Smart | Freight on Cars | Engines & Drm | Coico to Coburn | 150 | 69 |
| | 23 | " Ball | " " | " " | " " | 88 | 05 |
| | 21 | " Watten | " " | | | 117 | 20 |
| | | " Smy | " " | | | 47 | 55 |
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| | | " Ball | " " | | | 83 | 82 |
| | | " | " " | | | 18 | 75 |
| | | " Ketchum | " " | | | 196 | 66 |
| | | " Statuta | " " | | | 59 | 31 |
| | | " Hickman | " " | | | 36 | 85 |
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| | | " Ball | " " | | | 69 | 01 |
| | | " Elliott | " " | | | 29 | 15 |

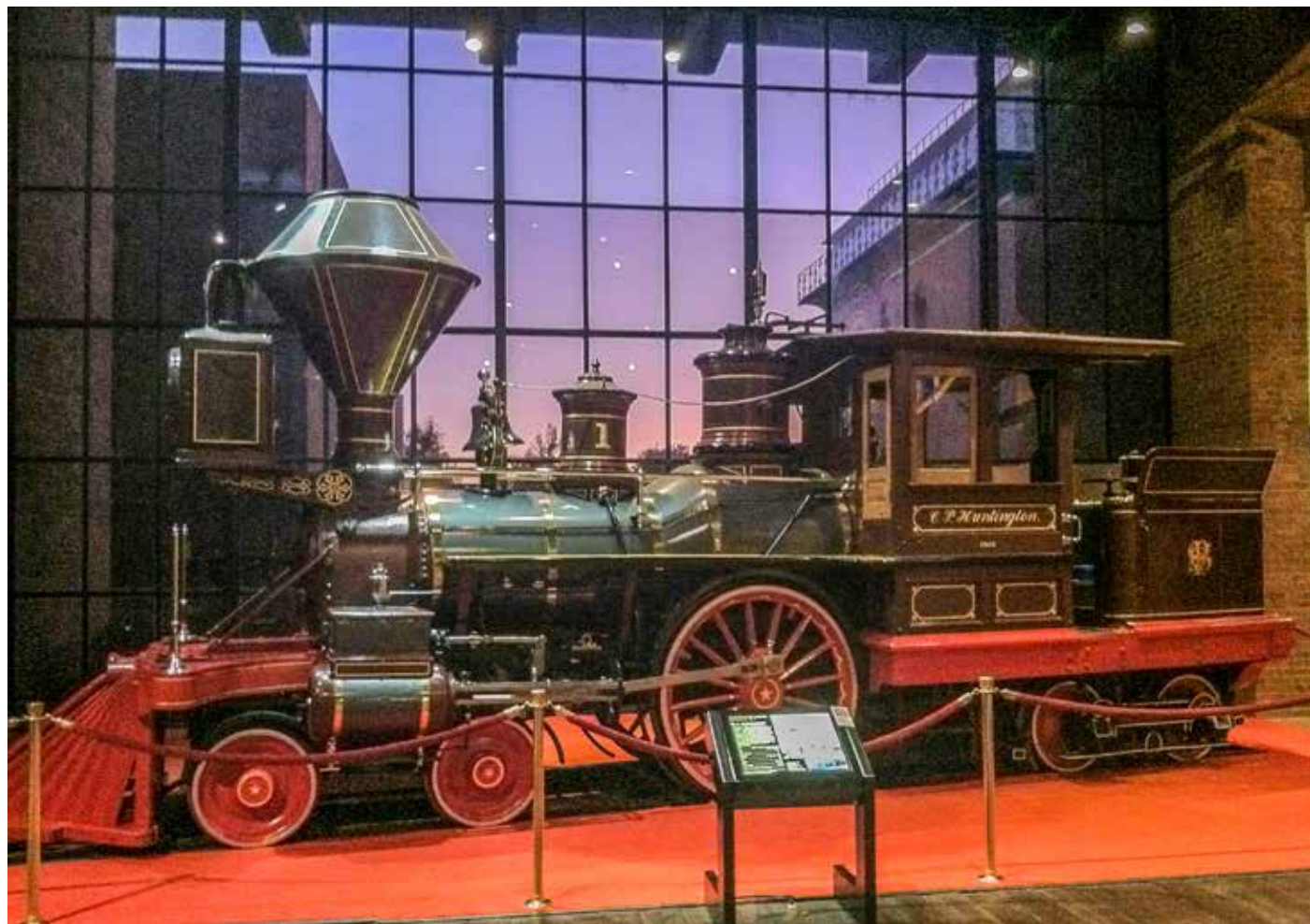


These two documents on this and the previous page come from the California State Railroad Museum's library in Sacramento.

The one on the previous page invoices the CPRR for transporting freight from Cisco to Coburn's (Truckee).

The one to the left is apparently a receipt for payment for services above given by the "Elliott" in the list above.

Below, the C.P. Huntington, duplicate of the San Mateo, in the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. The photograph is by Phil Sexton who used to be a ranger at Big Bend on Donner Summit.



The Iron Horse

Melodrama, Indian attacks, worker strike, beautiful girl, Hell on Wheels, evil landowner, more villains and bad guys, handsome pony express rider, renegade white man, old time dentistry, Chinese workers, fights, and battles.

The "Iron Horse" is a silent movie made in 1924 to commemorate the building of the transcontinental railroad. It was deemed by the Library of Congress to be "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" and was placed on the National Film Registry. It was the biggest hit of the Silent Era, the top grossing film in 1924, and was John Ford's fiftieth film and his favorite. It was also Ford's first serious western as opposed to his previous "shoot 'em up's." It was also filmed on location and some of the film's locations were in Truckee and the Sierra.

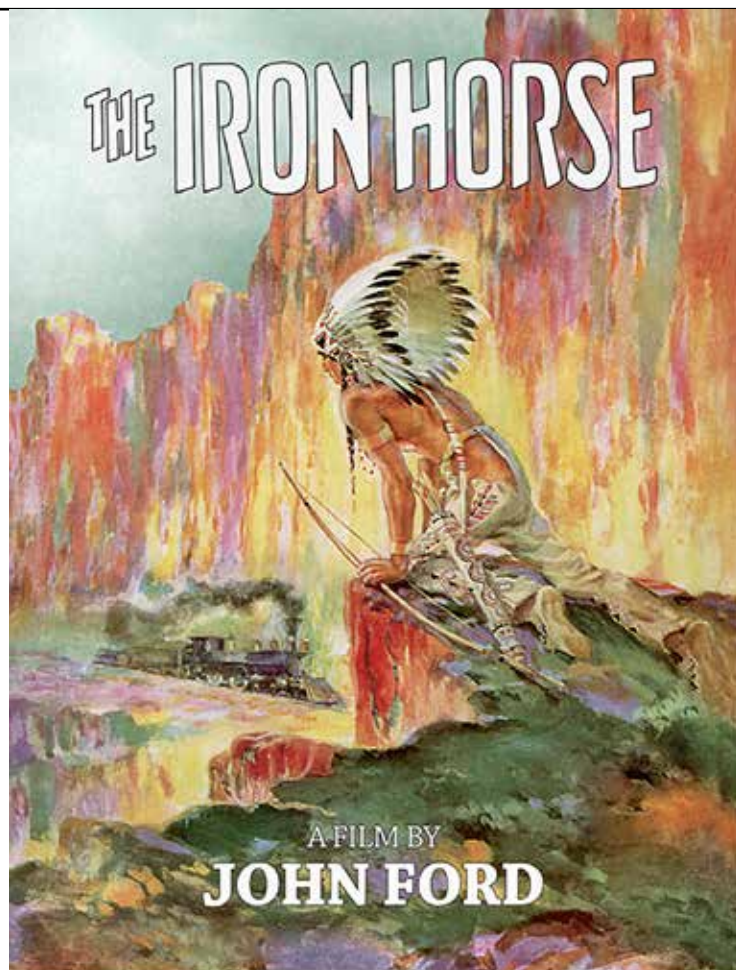
It's a classic melodrama that lasts a couple of hours. The railroad is building the transcontinental across the country. In Wyoming the big landowner and big evil-doer, who only has two fingers and a very evil demeanor, wants the route to go through his property. The hero has all his fingers and is handsome and broad chested. He knows there is a shorter route that will not be bothered by Indians. He knows because his father showed it to him just before he was murdered by a band of Indians led by a renegade white with two fingers.

The bad guy has an assistant bad guy who is engaged to the beautiful girl. He and a Pony Express riding hero go out to check out the shorter route. There is attempted murder. The route aims for the two fingered bad guy's land. The pony express rider reappears. There is a fight, another fight, the two fingered guy is exposed.....

It's a fun movie from the silent days with classic melodrama elements and is a 1920's version of a western.

The reason I was watching it was because there are some scenes relevant to Donner Summit. In one scene there are Chinese drillers drilling just as they did in the old days – two guys using sledges while a third rotates the bit (see the next page). There is a large tunnel with lots of Chinese workers. Finally, they re-enact hauling a locomotive over Donner Summit (next page) so they could continue the building on the other side of the Sierra while Tunnel 6 was being completed (see the lead article in this [Heirloom](#)). It may or may not be done in the way it was originally.

In [The War, The West and The Wilderness](#), the author Kevin Brownlow says in an article about "The Iron Horse," "Publicity for the film described how this was done exactly as it had been done originally – with two hundred and fifty Chinese labourers and fifty head of horses. The Chinese



were retired railroad workers who, despite their advanced age said the publicity, heaved the locomotive across the snow. Disaster almost struck when half-inch cables began snapping, but everyone stayed at his post. In reality, the locomotive had stubbornly refused to move and Ford had tried dollying the camera past the engine.“

Certainly the locomotives were not hauled over assembled as shown in the movie, but rather in shipping crates and very large pieces and were assembled in Truckee. Still that was a massive feat which was done three times for three locomotives, 80 miles of track, various bits of iron needed to lay track, and railroad car parts.

In reality the movie crew tried hauling a locomotive but gave up after a few hundred yards and they were hauling a smaller version than what the guys in the old days had to haul. People were tougher in the old days.

The video is available on-line in multiple places both to view and for sale. Be sure to pick up the American version which is a little longer and better quality than the international version.



Hauling a locomotive over Donner Summit. In reality the locomotives hauled over Donner Summit were partially disassembled. How disassembled we don't know nor do we know which the second and third locomotives to cross the summit were. The first was the San Mateo.



"Chinese" workers drilling - authentically



from "The Making of the Iron Horse" from the book, The West, The War, and The Wilderness. Chinese workers are hauling a locomotive over Donner Summit.

George O'Brien and Madge Bellamy. You can see this is classic melodrama and deeply emotional.



From the DSHS Archives



Highway
U. S. No. 40
via Auburn

WINTER sports are already under way at **SODA SPRINGS . . .** and there's plenty of snow to provide excellent skiing. Come—join in the grandest sport of all—fun in the snow. New and modern steam-heated hotel.

Equipment Available—Skis, Toboggans, etc. Also Instruction.

SODA SPRINGS
● HOTEL ●
Soda Springs, Calif.

Oakland Tribune January 20, 1938



TRUCKEE
12 Miles
SODA SPRINGS
7 Miles
RAINBOW TAVERN
1 1/2 Miles * AUBURN SKI CLUB

Those of you who have not yet been thrilled by the joys of a Winter vacation in the High Sierra are invited to come and enjoy yourself.

You can rent equipment. Skilled instructors are available, rates for both accommodations and equipment are reasonable.

SODA SPRINGS HOTEL, Soda Springs
RAINBOW TAVERN, Soda Springs

13 of 32

Oakland Tribune January 13, 1938

Dutch Flat Road in Winter

From this road [Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.] the scene was strangely beautiful at night. The tall firs, though drooping under their heavy burdens, pointed to the mountains that overhung them, where the first that lit seven tunnels shone like stars on their snowy sides. The only sound that came down to break the stillness of the winter night was the sharp ring of hammer on steel, or the heavy report of the blasts.”

Abstract of a paper read before the American Society of Engineers, Jan. 5, 1870, by JOHN R. GILLISS, Civil Engineer, Member of the Society and engineer for the Central Pacific Railroad who oversaw construction of the summit tunnels.

From the DSHS Archives

Be Careful Out There

Miscellaneous Advertisements

Heatonville Hotel

At the junction of the Dutch Flat and Meadow Lake Wagon Roads, Heatonville

Wash. Madden.....Proprietor

The Attention of the traveling public is respectfully directed to the above Hotel. Furnished rooms for Families and every attention is paid to the comfort and accommodation of families.

People from California or Nevada going to Meadow Lake, will do well to stop here, it being much nearer than any other point on the Dutch Flat Road, and

The Only Practical Route to Meadow Lake.

A Saddle Train leaves the Hotel every morning on the arrival of the Stage going West, returning from Meadow Lake in time to connect the same day with the Stage going East.

Meadow Lake Morning Star
June 6, 1866

Heatonville was Cisco

The last couple of Heirlooms featured Cisco Grove as part of our 1867 series. There just wasn't room for the Heatonville Hotel.

The "Meadow Lake Wagon Rd." is still there today. Take the Cisco exit from I-80, go to the north side and turn left. The road is the first right before the campground.

Lone Skier Found Frozen To Death Near Soda Springs

SODA SPRINGS; Jan. 16 [1940] - The frozen body of Frans M. Wiessing, 23, who lost his way Sunday on a solitary ski trip in the mountains south of here, was found today on the slopes of Lyons Peak.

The body was found by a searching party headed by Forest Ranger John R. Hogson, two miles south of the Summer home of Allen Chickering, San Francisco attorney [the old Mark Hopkins estate which is still in the hands of the Chickering family and who, parenthetically at the second level of parentheses, were one of the four founding families of Sugar Bowl.]

Tracks made by the young skier in his wanderings through two days and two nights showed he had been within 200 yards of shelter at the Chickering house on two occasions.

Hogson telephoned J.D. Bafferty, supervisor of the Tahoe National Forest here that Wiessing had been dead for five of six hours.

Wiessing had abandoned his skis last night. The body was found four miles from where the searching party came upon the skis.

Wiessing arrived at Norden on a special snow train at 7 A.M. Sunday, rented a pair of skis and started out alone.

Young Wiessing was employed as a clerk in a San Francisco steamship office. His father, H.P. Wiessing, a writer, is reported to be in Europe.

Fresno Bee
January 16, 1940

Book Review

The Good of It All

Thornton Round 1957 243 pages

When autos were new “autoists” were quick to push the limits of their new vehicles as well as themselves. The Good of It All is a book about the reminiscences of Thornton Round whose father decided to take the family across the country from Cleveland to California and back in 1914. It’s a simple book which will take the reader on the same journey, a journey that was difficult at the beginning of the motor age. That’s maybe interesting to Heirloom readers who are interested in what auto travel was like in the old days. On the way back the family did cross Donner Summit so we can see what that was like.

On the one hand there is not much detail about the trip but on the other hand what detail there is is amazing because Thornton wrote the book 42 years after the trip. He’d been fourteen during the crossings and drove one of the two cars the family took.

Beyond the simple story and recounting of hotels, meals, and campsites there are a lot of pictures and auto ads from the time and the beginning starts with the actual letters that Round’s father wrote to the Cleveland Automobile Club recounting the journey.

The family took two cars. One was a Winton 6 which carried people. The other was a Ford which carried the baggage.

Thornton drove one car along with one passenger. His brother drove the other carrying other family members.

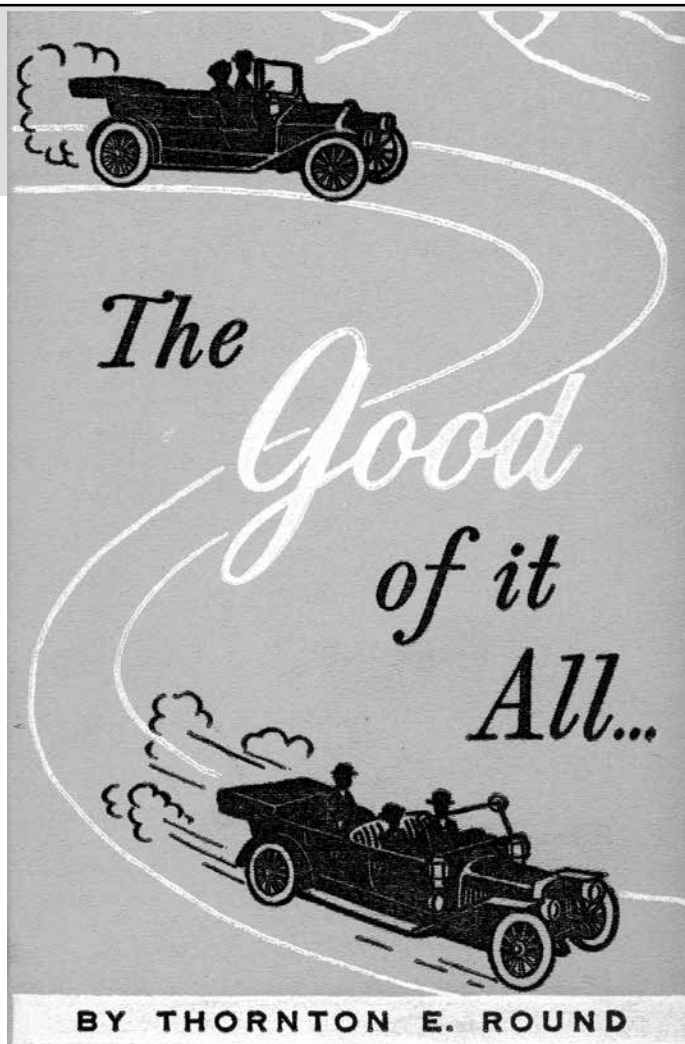
The real point of the book for us, besides the description of crossing Donner Summit, is what auto travel was like. The family left Cleveland on June 21. It took 19 days of travel to get to Los Angeles during which they traveled 3360 miles. They figured they went 166 miles a day and each day was nine – ten hours of driving. That was averaging 16 mph. The “speed limit in the majority of towns [was] eight miles per hour.” The autos averaged 7.65 mpg. Gasoline cost 12-55 cents. Hotels were \$3.00 a night, two to a room, with a bath. They were \$1.50 a night for no bath. They were \$1.00 a night for single rooms.



THE LADY LOOKS WORRIED, SHE SEEMS TO BE LOOKING FOR HELP THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN IN UTAH.

There were all kinds of episodes: a disappearing road, being chased by shotgun wielding men, a plank road in the desert sand, dismantling and reassembling the engine one night so they could travel the next day, the ghost town of Goldfield, NV, deluges, wrong turns, skidding off the road, mountain lions, seeing a couple of movies, pouring gas into the carburetor a little at a time so they could travel 1 ½ miles, and using a rope wrapped around the rear tires to provide traction in the sand.

A continual source of irritation were flat tires. They



had 175 flats and 17 blow outs. Most of the flat tires were because of horseshoe nails or pieces of horseshoes. One task each night was to patch the tubes from each day's flats.

From L.A. the family headed into the Central Valley seeing Bakersfield, Fresno, Sequoia Nat'l Park and then on to San Francisco, up to Eureka, back to S.F. and then back across the country.

Besides the constant flats, breakdowns were not uncommon.

We're left to wonder about the comfort given that the cars were not enclosed and they traveled in the constant dust and dirt and then the heat of the desert. Directions were not clear. They had to ask the way from locals because there were no signs. One book they had "told us to look west and note another higher range of mountains - go to the north end, bear left around them, and use a compass. That was it, and according to the book, from there on you were on your own."

Crossing Donner Summit

"We started off in a gay mood for Reno, and this turned out to be the toughest one-hundred miles I have ever driven... we came to the Donner Pass. The road was narrow, and we had to resort to constant carburetor adjustments... There were dangerous unfenced gaps in the mountains, and no warning signs. We worked our way along very slowly, with our ears attuned to the least noise that might indicate an approaching car. With all our caution we had many narrow escapes.

"We came to Donner Pass without further mishap. I don't believe I have adequate words to describe the real beauty of Donner Pass. It gives one the same sensation as would be felt by going over it in a plane. As we stood looking down I had a floating sensation... As we stood at Donner Pass and gazed below, I lost all fear as I looked at one of the most beautiful blue lakes I have every seen. Everything below us seemed suspended in shimmering sunlight."

They all reached Truckee and then Lake Tahoe, "one of the playgrounds of California today." They decided to head off to Reno. Here Thornton Round's memory got the best of him 42 years after the event. He says they went into the snowsheds after getting to Lake Tahoe. Knowing what we know though, the snowshed crossing had to be on the way to Truckee and not to Tahoe.

"...we met our next challenge in the form of a snow shed through which we had to pass. I stopped the Ford, got out, and walked ahead to do a bit of reconnoitering. By now the Winton had pulled up to the rear. We turned off both motors so that we might have absolute silence. I put my pencil on the railroad track and listened for vibration which would indicate an approaching train. There was none so I figured it would be safe to proceed. I motioned to Ray to go ahead with the Winton. Ray guided the front wheels of the car over the tracks but that was as far as he got. There was a steep downgrade that dropped off directly opposite the railroad tracks. The Winton was too long to make the dip it would have to in order to nose over the track and start downward. The big car was hung in mid air on the edge of the snow tunnel.

Needless to say, a railroad track is no place to tarry, and we were scared stiff. "

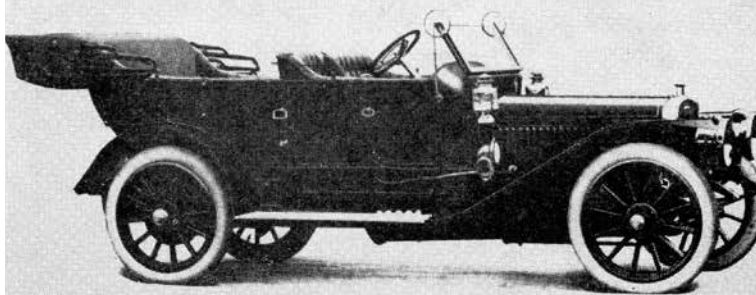
Eventually after removing Mrs. Round and the baby from the car they were able to bounce the car free and then over the tracks. The Ford made it easily.

Given the 42 year delay in writing down the episode, we can forgive Mr. Round for his geographical error. That bring up the question though - where did they get stuck? See the next page.

"There is great danger in the mountains in going over the cliffs. The driver must be cool headed with a through knowledge and control of his car. In the desert it is hazardous to travel alone, always travel in pairs. I would not suggest more than two cars, for stops on account of repairs hold up the bunch. If trouble occurs in the desert, it is best to have a second car that can take the ladies to the nearest town, also brings back supplies or mechanics....Don't go until you are quite sure the desert is dry, also the mountain passes.."

Louis D. Round, 1914
To the Motorist Magazine

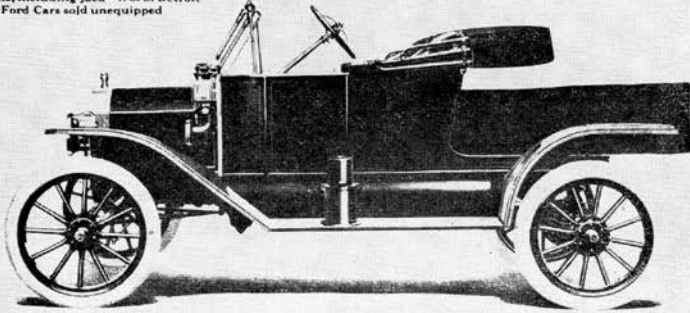
*THIS CAR PICTURED BELOW WAS THE
CAR IN WHICH MY BROTHER DROVE
AND ACCOMPANIED ME ACROSS THE
COUNTRY. 1912 WINTON SIX.*



THIS IS THE MODEL T FORD IN WHICH I DROVE
ACROSS THE COUNTRY
WHEN HENRY FORD PUT OUT THIS MODEL
IT BECAME THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE FORD MOTOR CO.

Ford Model T Runabout
2-Passenger—4-Cylinder—20 Horsepower Car
Price \$325 includes top, top cover, automatic
brass windshield, speedometer, two 6-inch gas
lamps, generator, three oil lamps, horn, and
tools, including jack—f. o. b. Detroit
No Ford Cars sold unequipped

1913



Where Did They Get Stuck?

Thornton Round noted that their cars had to go through the snowsheds to get across the tracks.

Since that crossing was in the neighborhood of where they could overlook Donner Lake the spot had to be at the east end of Tunnel 6. There travelers paralleled the tunnel until it was time to cross the tracks. Then they opened a barn door on one side of the tracks, went through the snowshed and across and opened the door on the other side. "Listening" by putting a pencil on the tracks may have been a good idea. No train coming? The driver went back to the auto, drove into and down the snowshed to the opening on the other side. He then emerged above Donner Lake. The picture here is of an auto having crossed the shed and on the way down to Donner Lake.



Cars did get stuck at the spot the Rounds did and there were accidents. To solve the problem the underpass, a few hundred yards east was built and put to use, according to [Oakland Tribune](#), on August 23, 1914. That was perhaps just after the Rounds went over the pass given the start on June 21, the stay in L.A., the three days to S.F., then to Eureka, back to S.F. and then over the Sierra.

Auto emerging from the snowshed crossing at the east end of Tunnel 6 before the underpass was constructed.

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.

What's In Your Closet?

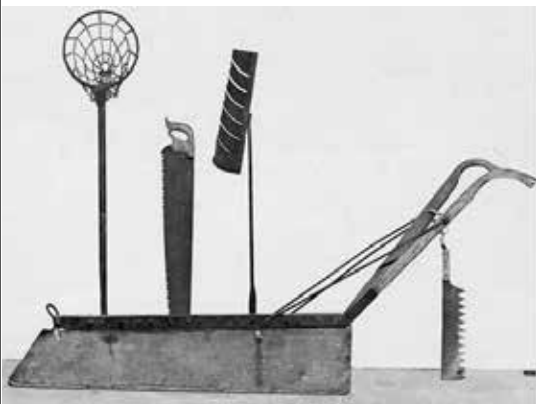
Iron Chain Seine

You never know what will walk in the door at the DSHS. One day in September the tool to the right came in with Roberta Pearson from Pla-Vada.

Roberta said it was an ice harvesting tool and since there used to be ice harvesting on Donner Summit (stay tuned for a future Heirloom) Norm said, "Sure." The top picture is a close up of what turns out to be an iron chain seine. Below that the whole tool is posing in front of the DSHS. Below left is a collection of ice tools which includes an iron chain seine (from the Illinois State Museum's website).

We checked with the local ice expert, Reno's Tom Macaulay who is the "iceman" but he does not know how the seine was used.

Maybe you know how it works? Maybe you have historical items you'd like to donate or let us copy? Let us know: www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org



The appearance of the seine in the Heirloom then led to including the photographs below of the ice saws in the DSHS collection. The little picture on the ice saws is enlarged below and shows icemen in Truckee. The photograph is part of Norm Saylor's huge collection of historical photographs. Ice harvesting on Donner Summit did not prove successful because of the heavy snows (average 34' each winter) and ice harvesters moved to Truckee where there is less snow and it's colder.



Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

View this page on your computer - in color

Nevada County has received a grant from the Federal Government to upgrade old Highway 40, Donner Pass Rd. (FLAP grant: Federal Lands Acquisition Program). Surveying and planning are underway now and work will be done in 2019.

As part of the planning some of Old 40 has been unearthed. Engineers have drilled core samples through the modern asphalt to the 1937 concrete road that lies underneath and is eight inches thick or so. Here we have that historic concrete exposed for the first time since WWII. The cores were brought into the DSHS by one of the engineers doing the testing. Take a look at the pictures in color, on your computer. It turns out 1937 road constructors were artistic. Note too the thickness of the steel rebar – $\frac{3}{4}$ " and that the aggregate in the cement is smooth river rock rather than today's typical jagged aggregate.



To add to the core sample pictures the DSHS Historical Photograph Retrieval Team (HPRT) dove into Norm's collection of old photographs and turned up some pictures of Highway 40 when it was a concrete road. Then for good measure, Norm turned up an old ad for Calaveras Cement which was used for Highway 40. The age of that artifact (top next page) is pretty clear as you can see from the calendar. You might want to save this. You never know when you'll need a 1938 calendar.



Quick Non-Comprehensive History

First came the Native Americans, traveling over Donner Pass, their annual migrations marking the first trails. Then the wagon trains came along, first up Donner Pass then Roller and Coldstream Passes. Coldstream became a freight and stage road.

The railroad built the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. to help with railroad construction and make money as a toll road. It ran up Donner Pass and along Van Norden. Once the railroad was completed the road was mostly abandoned.

next page second column

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The first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway, was inaugurated in 1913 and ran along Van Norden, through what is now Soda Springs Ski Area's parking lot and over the tracks just south of the Donner Summit Lodge building.

The Donner Summit Bridge was constructed in 1926 and that caused a rerouting of highway travelers onto Highway 40. In 1937 the highway was "concreted." While the concrete was being laid traffic was diverted back on to the old Lincoln Highway, again went along Van Norden, through the Soda Springs parking lot and joined Highway 40 at the Donner Summit Lodge.

Highway 40 was "asphalted" probably after WWII judging from various pictures which show concrete or asphalt.

Above: concrete Highway 40 looking west with Lake Van Norden on the left and Beacon Hill (today's Soda Springs Ski Area) in the background.

Right, Norden Store, just up the road to the east of the picture above. View is looking east towards Donner Pass and Mt. Judah.





And then one more of the Norden Store and the concrete highway looking east.

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.



Despite the caption it's really Soda Springs looking east on Old 40

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.

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

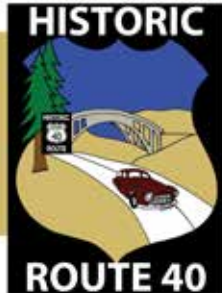
_____ Patron - \$500 _____ Benefactor - \$1000 _____ Business - \$250 _____ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

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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 Rocklin 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 Nyack to below Donner Summit on Old 40. Information at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

**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>

