

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

February, 2019 issue #126



## The Story of B & His Crossing of Donner Summit, 1867

On March 7, 1867 a fellow who signed his letter, "B" wrote to the [Sacramento Union](#) to describe his "TRIP OVER THE MOUNTAINS" the month before. He had headed from Virginia City to Cisco. Writing letters like this to newspapers was not uncommon at the time and these letters give us good views into life at the time. "B's" crossing of the summit is nothing less than heroic and gives a good idea of what travel could be like in the old days. That a newspaper would devote a whole column (about 27 inches of text) to the letter about the trip is perhaps also a testament to the difficulty and the interest readers had about what was happening in the mountains. It's a good story and here we digest it a bit, because "B" was a bit "wordy," and add paragraphs, something 19th Century correspondents seemed allergic to.

To set the stage, 1867 was a big year on Donner Summit. The construction of the Transcontinental railroad was in full swing. Thousands of Chinese were engaged in the effort. Tunnel 6 was half done and the workers would break through in August. End of track was at Cisco and there trains disgorged travelers, workers, equipment, and supplies in a never-ending stream. Traffic on the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. was packed with as many as 57 train car loads being unloaded per day (that amazing statistic comes from Wendell Huffman's [Waiting for the Cars](#) - March, '13 [Heirloom](#)), contents put on freight wagons, and teams traveling on to the Summit, Truckee, Virginia City, and points east. That count did not include stagecoaches, other wagons, herds of animals, and independent travelers. Cisco was also the jumping off and return point for people headed to Meadow Lake, a short-lived gold mining town just to the north (July-October, '13 [Heirlooms](#)). In winter, when "B" took his trip there would have been less traffic but supplies and equipment were still arriving for railroad work because the work on the tunnels continued despite winter. There were a few hundred workers at the Chinese workers' camp on Donner Summit working on the tunnels.

Even in winter, February, 1867, there were still travelers on the Dutch Flat Rd. heading over the summit to meet the train at Cisco.

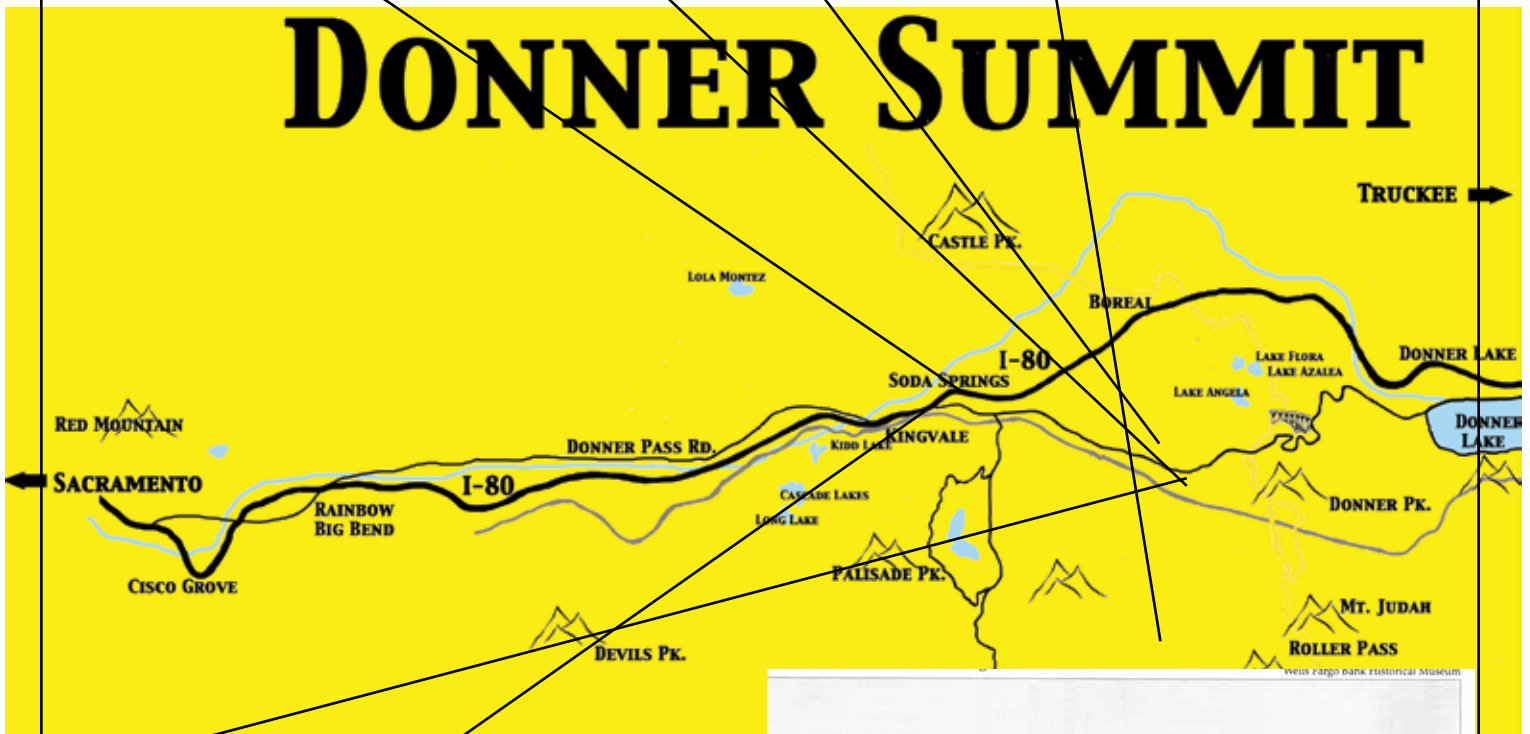
To further set the stage, "In January 1867 [Dutch Flat Enquirer](#) said, "...we are now in the midst of one of the most severe winters we have experienced for years..." Edwin Crocker said the storms that winter of '66-'67 were "The worst storms in the mountains ever known to white inhabitants"

John Gillis, a civil engineer for the CPRR read a paper before the American Society of Engineers in January, 1870 describing the weather that winter. He read off a list of storms and then got to February:

"This [the ten foot storm], the heaviest storm of the winter, began February 18th, at 2 P. M., and snowed steadily until 10 P. M. of the 22d, during which time 6 feet fell... the barometer kept low and the wind heavy from the south-west for five days more, by which time a fresh supply of damp air came up from the Pacific... It snowed steadily until March 2d, making ten feet snow and 13 days storm. [The snow] drifted so furiously during that time that the snow-tunnel at east end of tunnel No. 6 had to be lengthened fifty feet."

# Story Locations in this Issue

Soda Springs Station, pg 3   Oakland Ski Club pg 5   Donner Ski Ranch pgs 10-11   Sugar Bowl pg 10



Vanderford's pg 15   Donner Summit Lodge pg 15



A canvas-topped mudwagon, with the flaps down, heads for the Nevada mines in 1905.

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



There had been so much damage to the railroad by weather that in some places “the fills.... are so completely washed out that nothing but the rails are to be seen suspended in the air, resembling telegraph wires, being from ten to twenty feet high.” (also the [Dutch Flat Enquirer](#), January 27, 1867) That’s a good visual. Parenthetically, that was also the winter that the stage got stuck in the mud at Gold Run for six weeks. At the summit the weather was more severe.

We should note here that “B” traveled back over the summit to Cisco on the 21st of February.

In other 1867 news, on February 9, 1867, nitroglycerine was first used on Tunnel 6. Progress on the tunnel increased from 1.18’ per day to 1.82’ per day. Also in February the central shaft of Tunnel 6 was completed – it had been begun the previous August – and workers could then work from four faces in Tunnel 6 rather than just two. They could make a few more inches of progress per day. Later in the summer the first locomotive would be hauled over the summit to assist with railroad construction from Truckee to Nevada.

That’s enough ‘stage setting’. For more go to the [Heirlooms](#) in July and August, ‘17

“B” arrived in Virginia City from Sacramento for a two week stay on February 7. The trip from Sacramento to Virginia City had taken 24 hours and compared to the trip back, the subject of the letter, that was the easy part. Keep reading. Why “B” went to Virginia City he didn’t say, although he did carry some “bullion” back. The story is about the trip back not “B’s” stay in Virginia City so we should not digress.

“B” left “Virginia” as people familiarly called it in those days,

in a “mud wagon” (like a stage coach but less plush - see the sidebar above and previous page) with ten other passengers at 6 AM on the 21st. “The wind blew a perfect gale and the snow fell very fast.” Mud wagons have little protection against the weather.

Mud wagon: a light-weight square wagon with a canvas top and side-curtains. The design was simpler than a stagecoach’s and the ride was rougher. The coach’s sides only went halfway up the body. It was a tough vehicle, good for mountain roads because of its low center of gravity and was good on muddy roads because of its wider wheels. They had two or three seats inside and baggage was stored at the back. People sat three to a seat. Side-curtains provided the only protection against storms. See the previous page for a picture.

Going uphill, twice the passengers had to get out and hold on to the side of the wagon “to prevent the wind from blowing it off.” At Crystal Pk. (just over the California border) there were a couple of feet of snow which was “still falling fast.” At that point the passengers were to switch to sleighs which were to have been sent from Cisco but the sleighs had not arrived. While the passengers waited they tried running in snowshoes and “After considerable tumbling and slipping we succeeded in getting along tolerable well.” They waited twelve hours, until 2 A.M., at which time most gave up and followed the drivers’ examples and went to bed. There were not enough beds, though, so many slept on the floor. The sleighs arrived at 2 P.M. the next day and there were four feet of snow on the ground. Before getting on the sleighs everyone tied barley sacks on their feet, which, “B” said, “I can recommend as the best overshoe to be worn in snow...”

Three miles later they’d reached another stage station where there “was nine feet and a half of new snow.” The road was blocked beyond that with snow and snowslides. They stayed the night. The next morning “B” and three others waded

three miles through the snow to the next station, Virginia House, "sinking into the snow every step nearly to our waists." There they helped some men break open the road and they'd broken about ¾ of a mile by the time the sleighs caught up. A little later one of the road breakers stumbled against something. It was the foot of a man frozen to death.

"B" and the other passengers traveled along until 10 that night. There was eight feet of snow. The next morning they set off and again the passengers helping break the road by walking and riding loose horses. They got to Pollard's at Donner Lake by 1 P.M., having gone twenty miles. The snow was "eight or nine feet" deep. There the stage agent would not let the drivers go on and that "somewhat displeased us." For comic relief "B" noted that a local Indian had said, "D-n this country ; I don't like it. It snows and rains every Fourth of July. I'm going over to California, next Summer." [sic].

The next day the drivers had apparently gotten permission to continue. It was "snowing very fast, wind blowing hard" and everyone walked breaking trail assisting the sleighs up to the summit. At the top they could get back into the sleighs for the downhill to Summit Valley, "where the road was very, very bad – snow 15 feet deep." "B" and two others "walked across the valley, two miles, to Tinker's Station (top of page 3)," where they waited for the sleighs. The sleighs got stuck though and had to go back a ways.

The next day the roads were better but the snow was still falling. It took all day and into the evening "by walking and working hard most of the time" to get to Cisco. The next day they were told the sleighs could not continue but they were told they could walk eight miles to Emigrant Gap and get the train. They stopped for the night at another station short of Emigrant Gap and the next day waded through the snow the rest of the way. There was no train; it was another two and a half miles down the track. They walked the requisite distance and were told the train was another three miles down the track.

After another three miles in the snow they came upon the train and "Governor Stanford and Charles Crocker, bundled up in their large coats and comforters, mounted on top of the famous snow plow- four locomotives behind them, snow to the north, south, east and west, under, above and all around them. In fact they were snowed in, and could not get home... We were compelled to walk on to Alta, sixteen miles from where we started in the morning."

Finally the next day they caught the train at Alta and got "safely home, after having traveled ten days from Virginia City." He signed his letter, "Yours, etc., B."

And we complain about chain controls.



Here's a little known piece of Donner Summit history. The transcontinental railroad was critical to the transportation of war materiel and equipment to the west coast during World War II. Donner Summit was closed and guarded by the army during the war. In the picture above, from the Oakland Ski Club collection (see the next story) show club members are awaiting permission to check the lodge building in 1945. Pictured are, "Dot, Vi, Larry, Fran, Laverne, Betty, Eileen."



Here's another surprise from the Oakland Ski Club photo album (see the next story). Here is Starr Walton in 1958 or 1959. Young Starr would become a member of the U.S. Olympic team in 1964. Perhaps Starr showed up in the album because she met other ski fanatics at the club.

Much later, Starr would go on to other fame as a founder of the Donner Summit Historical Society and a board member. She has a house directly across from the DSHS.



# Oakland Ski Club and Memories of a Time Gone By on Donner Summit

“It stands today as a living memorial to all the ‘Oskies’ who, through their ambition, saw their dream realized- a true tribute to unselfish cooperation.”

(The San Ramon Valley Times (February 12, 1991))

Paul Craig is a DSHS member as well as an Oakland Ski Club member. In late 2017 he saw an Heirloom article about one of the Donner Summit ski clubs and he thought an article about the Oakland Ski Club was in order. He didn't have any research materials and neither did the DSHS though.

Our research department tried contacting the Oakland Ski Club but without much success. Then, months later, Charlie White, who has a real estate business at Donner Lake, brought in a binder of Oakland Ski Club material. What a bonanza! We'd like to do stories on all the ski clubs and lodges on Donner Summit since they represent a life gone by. Over the first ten years of the Heirloom we've covered the Army-Navy Club, the Auburn Ski Club, the Dartmouth Outing Club, Sierra Ski Club, South Bay Ski Club, and even a “new Mountain Club” that never actually got anywhere.

In addition we've covered various lodges: Heidleman, Hutchinson, Cal Lodge, Clair Tappaan, “Lodges of Donner Summit”, Norden Store and Lodge, Alpineer, Sugar Bowl, Travis, and Cramptons.

So to get another lodge's history was great and very thoughtful. Here we'd advertise wondering “What's in Your Closet?” Maybe you have some material related to Donner Summit history and it's just gathering dust. We could resurrect the story.

Today skiers and boarders travel to ski areas by automobile. Many return home after a day of skiing. Others stay in rental houses, second homes, or hotels. In the old days travel was much slower and more dicey. For those staying overnight, accommodations were mostly very different.

There were no four-wheel drive automobiles and no interstates. Travel on two lane highways was at the speed of the slowest driver. Some people took buses or trains to the slopes and once there, they stayed in lodges and at ski club facilities. That communal living was very different from today. After skiing people did not go off to individual homes but were part of a vibrant après ski lifestyle of games, drinking, conversation, dancing, and other group activities. Somehow skiers were able to get to the slopes the

next day for more skiing. Norm Saylor, president of the DSHS, remembers those nights and then coming to work at the Soda Springs Ski Area the next day with ice packed into his cap to ameliorate the effects of the previous evening. Norm doesn't do the ice in the cap trick anymore.

Ski clubs were one way that skiers could engage in the sport. They provided entertainment and recreational opportunities and they provided transportation to the slopes by organizing car caravans or bus or train trips. So people would travel to the slopes in groups rather than drive separately. Some ski clubs also built lodges for their members and members ate and slept communally and had chores to do around the lodges.

Ski clubs must have been pretty popular. In 1949 there were 22 clubs in the Bay Area (or 18 depending on the newspaper article). A January 16, 1949 San Francisco Examiner article titled “Bay Area Becoming Skiers' Capital” said, “Bay Area residents not only join resort clubs – such as the Yosemite Winter, Sugar Bowl Ski, Auburn and the new Flying Fifty, which expects to have a membership of 1,000 before the season is over – but they have clubs of their own.” In 1949 the Bay Area Ski Federation had 18 clubs as members each with 100 – 500 members and the Stanford Ski Club “usually had a membership of 1,000.”

It's into that context that we fit the Oakland Ski Club.



“The First Club  
Logo”



# A Few of the Oakland Ski Club's Fun Activities that were not skiing.



1951 Mardi Gras

1960 fashion show.

Carson White and OSC queen Dottie Duggan in 1951 advertising a film at the Berkeley Community Theater.

Winter parade in 1951







OUR 1ST LODGE IN COLFA 1938

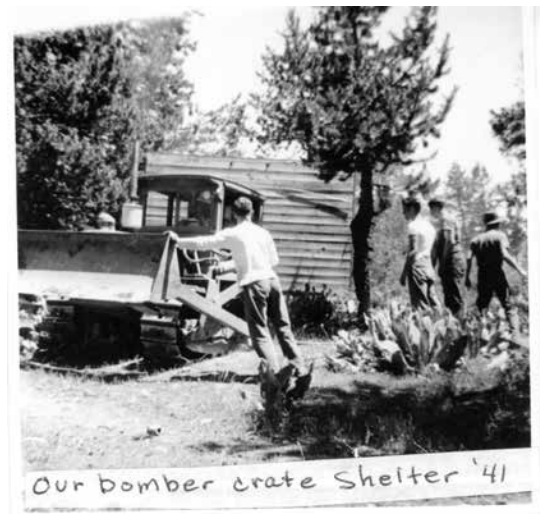
The Oakland Ski Club was maybe formed over tea on September 23, 1938 by "A group of H.C. Capwell Department Store employees.... When they were looking for means to promote the sport and sell more ski equipment and apparel." (*Oakland Tribune* May 8, 1988) That reasoning was no doubt good for Capwell's. For individuals the purpose of the club was to provide accommodations, ski meet and snow condition information, and fill a "Great need for a source of winter sports information in Metropolitan Oakland." It should be said that in "The Life and Times of the Oakland Ski Club 1939-1998" one of the charter members, Eileen Wise, did not remember anything about Capwell's selling more as the reason behind the club. She remembered, "It was the idea to help each other have transportation by pooling their cars, et cetera." The first president was Albert Grasmoen. The "original five members took in 50 charter members ..." to get the club

started. Members were called "Oskies."

To start, the club hosted events every other week in Oakland. Movies were shown of ski events in Europe and the U.S. Attendance at these events was 3-500 people. Regular monthly club meetings featured guest speakers, ski gymnastics, films of recent trips and social time. The club hosted many non-ski activities in the off-season to "keep up the spirit of the club: beach trips to Santa Cruz, balls, fashion shows, costume parties, ice rink skating parties, horse back riding, swimming parties, and open grill wiener roasts." See the previous page. Annually a queen was chosen to preside over the annual ball.

In winter the club sponsored ski trips using members' cars and cars were all filled. Bus trips were also scheduled. The club hosted inter-club ski events and races.

By 1950 the *San Francisco Examiner* (2-5-50) said the Oakland Ski Club was the "largest and one of the oldest" in the Bay Area. It was one of the "more social type" clubs. Activities at those kinds of clubs included group transportation, group rates, and lodges at which members



Right: field kitchen

## Oakland Ski Club Lodge Construction, 1940

## Communal Living at the Oakland Ski Club

Below, "by everyone pitching in the Oakland Ski Club lodge is always shipshape." The "house mother" or "slave driver" is usually a man and gets free board and lodging..



could stay for as little as \$1 a night. Members could split the cost of transportation and lodges had kitchens to reduce meal costs. In the case of the Oakland Ski Club it had a "handsome two-story ski lodge at Donner Summit, within half a mile by ski from Sugar Bowl and Donner Ski Ranch."

Within a couple of years of the founding, the club began to consider the idea of a lodge on Donner Summit. An early club member, Judy Dondero, remembered, "Before the lodge was built, we'd bring our sleeping bags, find a place where nobody was sleeping, take off your boots and curl up for the night. You could be so surprised the next morning who you'd be sleeping next to."

The scrapbook contains a picture of the first lodge in Colfax in 1938 (see previous page). Some members also remembered packing into the "sardine can" which was a four room cabin at the Fox Farm (where Donner Summit Lodge is today). Others stayed in the "North Pole Annex" at Vanderfords (across from Donner Ski Ranch) which had "frozen heat and natural ventilation." Perhaps one of those is what Ms Dondero was referring to. Their own lodge would certainly be preferable.

Here we need a short digression since the lodge at Colfax came up. In another group of ancillary materials there is an article from the Auburn Journal, dated February 25, 2000. In it Carson White, Charlie's father, said the juke box was playing a polka, and "I looked around the floor for a partner at the Oakland Ski Club in Colfax. The pretty blue-eyed blonde Swedish girl looked eager to dance; so I approached her timidly. She smiled beautifully and rose to the occasion. I had been skiing for three years with a group of fellows



Above, "Ski Talk." Sitting around the lodge's "big open fire" residents hold a "gabfest" which leads to someone suggesting "fold dancing." Carson White, album donor's father, is second from the left.

every weekend and had no social life until now. It was New Year's Eve in 1939. So it was an ideal beginning to our relationship, which led to marriage in Oakland in '42." The girl's name was Vi and there are pictures of her throughout the scrapbook. (See page 11 for examples).

Members found a good spot for the lodge in 1939, about a half mile from Sugar Bowl in one direction and a half mile from Donner Ski Ranch in the other. The spot was below the railroad tracks. The club leased the plot from the Forest Service for 99 years (The Times 2-12-91) at \$25 a year (undated/unsourced newspaper article from 1998). Construction was started in 1940 and the building shell was erected in 1941 with the roofing being done just as news of Pearl Harbor came over the radio. Because Donner Summit was closed by the Army during WWII to protect the transcontinental railroad's transportation of war materiel, the building was not completed until after the war. On September 22, 1946 the building was dedicated. One must note here there are discrepancies in the Oakland Ski Club history. A Ski Heil magazine article says the club was started in 1935 and a September 22, 1946 Post Enquirer article says the dedication was on the eleventh anniversary of the club's founding. Other sources, more sources, say the club was founded in 1938. We mention that only to share with our readers the diligence to which our research staff goes and the fallibility of primary sources (history at the time) even though the people were actually there.



The building was completely built by volunteer labor. It had been “designed by Frank Merwin to hold 60 people and is completely equipped with a modern kitchen, hot water system, and sanitary facilities.” During the building a 1998 unsourced newspaper article said volunteers cooked over an open fire, once even during a blizzard and sheltered in “discarded bomber crates (see previous page) from McClellan Field Lodge” (which was next door between the Oakland Ski Club and the Alpineer Ski Club - see the October, '17 Heirloom).

The lodge cost \$35,000. People were housed “double bunk style, the women downstairs and the men upstairs.” (San Francisco Examiner 2-5-50) Interestingly the lodge could accommodate 40 men and 20 women. At this time club membership was limited to 150 so as not to overcrowd the lodge.



A (probably) 1946 newspaper article highlighted the opening of the new lodge saying that the new lodge would be ready as soon as wiring and plumbing was done and kitchen equipment installed. Then the article highlighted a special train leaving Oakland “early New Year’s Eve” (1946). It would stop over in Sacramento “for a party at a ballroom rented for the occasion. An orchestra will travel with the party and there will be dancing and the usual merrymaking on the train.” The train would leave Sacramento on New Year’s Day and be sidetracked on Donner Summit so people could ski New Year’s Day. It would return to Oakland that evening arriving back at 10 P.M. “It sounds like a great party,” the reporter said, “that is if anyone is able to ski the next morning.”

The San Francisco Examiner (2-5-50) explained how the Oakland Ski Club worked. The Wednesday before the weekend was the deadline to sign up to have a space in the

lodge. If one did not have a car available he/she would call the ride chairman to see who was going up. On Friday evening thousands of skiers were on their way to the Sierra on Highway 40. If there was falling snow cars chained up at Baxter. On the summit members parked at Donner Ski Ranch Chalet. They put on their skis and skied the half mile down to the lodge carrying what they needed. If the weather was bad, people would walk through the snowsheds for a distance before dropping down to the lodge. If a train came through “we had to really suck it in, because we had a pack on our back and there was not very much room between us and the train. And if the train stopped, we had to just wait until the train started again. So it was very adventurous” (Grace Yank in “Life and Times...”)

At the lodge earlier arrivals had the fire going, the record player (old-fashioned music playing device using vinyl disks with continuous grooves from which needles collected vibrations that became music) playing, coffee brewing, and clothes drying.

The next morning the lodge chef had fruit juice, hot cakes

OSC SONG  
(Roll out the Barrel)

Join the Oakland Ski Club  
 We'll have a barrel of fun  
 There's always something a-doing  
 Our program includes everyone  
 All winter we'll schuss and we'll  
 slalom  
 To learn how good skiing is done  
 We may not be the bestest ever  
 But our sitzmarks are second to none!

LET'S GO A-SKIING

Let's go a-skiing; we'll have a barrel  
 of fun  
 Let's go a-skiing; we'll take the blues  
 on the run  
 Schuss-track we're coming, singing a  
 ski heel of cheer.  
 Now's the time to go a-skiing, cause  
 the snow is here.

# General Fun at the Oakland Ski Club

and “a special omelette” (.50 cents per person) for skiers heading off to the slopes. Guests could not head off to the slopes immediately though, because at least some had “kitchen detail”. After skiing there was hot buttered rum or “gluehwein (hot wine)” at the Sugar Bowl Lodge done by someone called a “drink concocter.” At dinner time (\$1.25 per person) there was the half-mile ski back to the Oakland Ski Club’s lodge. Once evening chores were done there was folk dancing. Up at the Donner Ski Chalet there might be color slides and new ski movies. That required a ski up to the Chalet. The author of the San Francisco Examiner’s Feb. 5, 1950 article wondered “How skiers can ski all day, talk skiing all evening and then sit through ski movies all night is one of those things that only a skier can explain.”

Since the building of the lodge in the 1940’s it has undergone several renovations: 1957, 1961, 1973, 1977, 1979. Improvements of various kinds were done: new roofing, new sewage system, a dishwasher, a change to individual rooms from the dormitories, etc.

Today the Oakland Ski Club is still going strong and that calls for a little philosophizing. The Club is perhaps a little anachronistic, going back to a simpler time. People traveled together to the Sierra and lived communally. If they took the train it was a convivial atmosphere. Living weekends at the ski clubs or lodges was communal with people sharing meals and chores and sleeping in dormitory accommodations. People worked together to build, improve and renovate the lodges. Today most people travel singly or just as families. There are no train rides and accommodations are for single families. There’s no shared work and no shared après ski fun.

The author of “The Life and Times of the Oakland Ski Club 1938 – 1998,” Peter Simons, posits some ideas about why the Oakland Ski Club has lasted. He said we have a transient world and some people want to connect to something that’s been around a long time and will continue to be around. Within the club they find a sense of a family which is otherwise absent from their lives. The Club blends tradition with modern needs and maintains basic principals.”

Maybe so.

## ‘LITTLE MAN’ CRASH



DIGGING OUR CARS OUT

Why the headline at top says what it says, is not noted. Here OSC members get ready to ski at Sugar Bowl. Above, 1939, something we all have fun with even today. Above left, some OSC members at Donner Ski Ranch, 1951. Below left, a “quartet of lovely lassies” heading for the train to Donner Summit and the Oakland Ski Club. Below, “pig tailed skiers” at Soda Springs, 1945.





"Oskie Champs, 1948" at Donner Ski Ranch.

Below, Vi and Eric Johnson (see the 1/11 and 2/14 [Heirlooms](#)). Right: "Lars, Midge Hogarty, Eric Johnson, Betty Wachs, Ralph De Monte, Vi, Bill Carpenter"



## Oakland Ski Club Today





# B. D. POLE TOW GRIP

Pat. Pend.

This ad is in the Oakland Ski Club album. A clever device for rope tows.

Younger readers, familiar with high speed quads, have only heard of rope tows. The rope went from the bottom to the top of the hill and back down. To use it one steps up to the rope and gradually squeezes. A squeeze that was too quick would yank the skier off his feet so everyone behind in line could laugh.

At the top of the hill the skier simultaneously let go of the rope and stepped out of the grooves or depression under the rope in the snow. Here was another place to provide amusement for other skiers.

Enough rope tow usage and one's collection of ski mittens and gloves was full of holes.

People have it so easy today.



A. Used as a bar type

## Instructions

1. Place loosely on rope. A slight leverage action will engage it firmly.
2. To disengage grip remove the leverage pressure.
3. When using as a "J" bar remove weight of body from pole before attempting to remove grip.

## To Install

1. Remove screw.
2. Place on pole at smallest point.
3. Slide to within one inch of Handle (soap or wax will make grip slide easily).
4. Reset screw.

● **Enjoy More SKIING**  
● **With Less Effort**

This New Invention Eliminates All Strain and Hazard in Using a Rope Tow.

1. EASY TO USE.
2. EASY TO INSTALL.
3. SAFE TO USE.
4. ATTACHED TO YOUR SKI POLE. PERMANENTLY OUT OF THE WAY AND EASY TO USE.
5. CAN BE USED EITHER AS BAR TYPE (See fig. "A") OR AS "J" BAR (see fig. "B")



B. Used as a "J" bar

**B. D. MANUFACTURING CO.**  
5463 MASONIC AVE. OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Bob Dye - O.S.C.

From 1/15 Heirloom when Charlie White donated some old ski equipment to the DSHS.

"The little gizmos here are quite clever. They are rope tow grips. The small one clamped to the ski pole and then the "C" part was moved on to the rope. As the pole was pulled back, friction increased, and the skier moved up the hill."



# Reminiscences from the Oakland Ski Club

## **Jinny's Recollections of Fun Times Skiing – the early years.**

Jinny (last name indecipherable in the hand written letter to Vi White, Carson's wife) wrote her reminiscences of the Oakland Ski Club in January of 2008.

Jinny met her husband, Les in 1950 at the Oakland Ski Club and they were married in 1951. He was a newly graduated teacher and she worked for a map company, and through them, for the Army Corps of Engineers.

They would often drive five hours on weekends to the Oakland Ski Club for two days of skiing. "The club was warm, clean, good food, family style, hosted by the caretaker, 40+ members all with the same goal of ripping full blast down the snowy mountains and return at night hungry, happy, cold, wet, and full of tall tales full of great experiences for the day. Prices for skiing \$4.00 and up at Sugar Bowl."

The other large resorts were not in existence yet but there was another on Donner Summit, "Donner Summit Ski Hill [presumably Soda Springs] with a small lodge, active bar, poor food and small parking area."

A little trick Jinny passes on is to attach a rag or bandana to the radio antenna (a long wire that stuck up from near the windshield and connected to the radio to provide reception) of the car so you can be sure you don't dig out the wrong car. Use that next time you're driving on Donner Summit during the 1950 snow season.

"The hardest part of weekends fun was when we finally arrived at the summit/Sugar Bowl garage area above the Oakland Ski Club..." First they had to find a place to park but could not have any tires on the road or risk a ticket or get hit by a snowplow. Then it was down that "not inviting hill," across the railroad tracks sometimes through very deep snow to the Oakland Ski Club (OSC). Each person carried an army issue rucksack and heavy gear needed for the next day. A flashlight was always carried along with "gloves, hat and some real nerves." Trains went through the "large timbered snowsheds, pitch black at night and scary even during the day." Oskies would look for the openings in the snowsheds one person following the other as it got darker. Friends, brought along, wished they'd stayed in San Francisco at this point. Hearing a train coming people would first wonder which track it was on and then press themselves against the walls. Jinny brought along a friend one time named Maury. Maury got down to the sheds with Jinny and her husband just as a train was coming. They pressed against the sides of the snowshed to keep from being scraped along by the train with Maury jammed against the wall "clutching this very large roast..." The train passed and then they went down through the snow to the Club. Maury "trudged down the trail, entered the lodge and to the horror of the members.... [there stood 5'2" Maury] in a white army knee length parka, covered in snow and the blood from the meat all down the front of said parka." The roast was safe for the next night's dinner but Maury never carried food again.

"Oh the stories that were told at the lodge with a good drink, old friends and racers bragging about their hairy times on Disney..."

"A few drinks, a full belly, warm wool socks sometimes worn to bed in your sleeping bag... A skier's dream." Some people, if they were lucky, had lockers at OSC in which they could keep sleeping bags, pillows, toiletries, booze, crackers and whatever..."

Jinny and Les wanted to spend their 1952 one year honeymoon in Sun Valley skiing. They'd brought along a college guy to share expenses. As they headed for OSC there was a storm brewing. A plane was flipped over in Vacaville. Palm branches were laying in the streets of Sacramento. That should have been a clue. As they got up Highway 40 they came to the "gate tender" who had closed the road. He said the storm was a "doozy." Jinny and Les told the gate keeper they were on their one year honeymoon and Les had been on the San Jose State ski team. They knew the road. The tender opened the gate and shook his head. The honeymooners drove off into the blizzard with their traveling companion. That was the storm that stranded the Streamliner, "San Francisco" for three days at east of Emigrant Gap. Les and Jinny got over the Sierra but then were stranded by snow and high winds out in Idaho. It took a whole day before they and a long line of cars was rescued.

After a week in Sun Valley the pair returned to the Sierra to find huge snows. Truckee was buried and tunnels had been dug into the stores. Driving to the summit was "awe inspiring" once the gate on the highway was opened. It was "like driving in a tunnel, nothing as far as you see but white." Later that year they had to crawl under the telephone wires to get to the "buried ski lodge." Propane tanks exploded, homes were crushed by tons of snow, there were no places to park. Fireplaces and chimneys were full of snow. It was hours of work and blisters to clear the snow. Ski area chair lifts could not run "until tunnels at the top and bottoms of the lifts were dug."

After the snow comes the warmth, “the melting, the view of the lake and the mountains, the fishing, old friends stopping by for a chat and drink... and then, it starts all over again, turn up the heat, fill the house with supplies another winter comes in over the Donner pass [sic] again. A beautiful mind blowing place to live and enjoy what God has given us.”

Jinny had six kids, two girls and four boys. “They grew up at the lodge, work parties, skiing, dressed alike so I could spot them on the hill...”

### **Paul Craig : Snow in the Mountains: Recollections of 'old days' at the Oakland Ski Club**

I moved to California in 1975. Long ago. Good decision. Never regretted it for a moment. I knew I wanted a place to go in the Sierra. Should it be off highway 50 or I-80? I-80 looked to be better for snow and traffic. A friend told me of the Oakland Ski Club. Hard to get to in the snow, but a great group of people. I was an active member for many decades; now a senior member who gets up for a couple days in the summer.

In the winter in about 1980 I taught an evening seminar at UC Davis. It became my habit after class to drive up to Sugar Bowl and ski for a few days. In those days one had to park under the lot at the Magic Carpet and hike down the hill to the OSC lodge. There were two train tracks One ran through the Mt Judah tunnel – as it does today. The other followed the high route, and the snow sheds. Today that's a bike and hiking route. No more trains.

One snowy winter night I drove slowly through a blizzard from Davis, and prepared to ski down to OSC. I'd done this many times before, and wasn't bothered by the snow or the dark. I put on my leather boots, strapped on my wood cross country skis and started out. The powder snow was up to my waist. The flurries made seeing hard. It was a lovely night.

I descended the steep hill behind [south of] the magic carpet. I knew I would shortly come to the train tracks. Suddenly a pit appeared. No. A trench. I'd arrived at a 10 foot deep trench in the snow cut by the mammoth blower plow. Beneath the top layer of powder snow was a trench of Sierra Cement. What to do? I took off my skis and cut steps in the vertical ice-wall. Then carefully descended.

Once in the trench there was another – bigger – problem How to get out. I cut steps in the opposite wall, and hoped no train would come. Fortunately none did. It took seemingly 'forever!' I felt incredibly vulnerable.

Below the train tracks was more deep powder, which I negotiated successfully. I passed the deeply snow covered Jeffrey into which I'd fallen a couple years previously. It wasn't a 'gentle Jeffrey' at all. It's still there. That's a snow story for another time.

I saw the light of the Oakland Ski Club. The snow was so deep I had to enter via the second floor. Inside it was warm and toasty. Exhausted, I had a beer and slept the sleep of the deserving. Skiing at Sugar Bowl the next day was uncrowded and fantastic.

A few years later the railroad decided to abandon the route I'd taken, and maintain just one track – through the Mt Judah Tunnel.

-----  
The blower snowplows are still used. They're brought out when when the snow is really deep:

movies at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo-mA5KCsyI&t=124s>

and

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpi\\_XjW64Yc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpi_XjW64Yc)

[or search on YouTube for “rotary Donner pass” or rotary Emigrant gap] .

You don't want to get in the way of those rotary plows. They'll eat you alive and spit you out in small pieces. Thank heavens for the train buffs – “foamers” – who love trains and make fantastic videos – including these.



# From the DSHS Archives



The picture to the left is the Donner Summit Lodge in 1945 and is part of the Oakland Ski Club's album.

Santa Cruz Sentinel February 23, 1942

This was apparently a bit of a gossip column.

“Under the tutelage of “Walter” of Soda Springs, Carolyn How has discovered two new thrills in ski life. She learned the excitement of “shussbooming” on the Soda Springs hill as she, Walter, and Keith, and Howard schussed this long hill with no turns, ending occasionally with a “sitz-christie” but usually right side up. Thrill number two was “The Tinker Polka” and the Russian folk dance “Krokovich” as taught by “Walter” at the Polka spot.

Dave Curtis did some skiing; but from Dopey’s recollection of the trip she sees him in her mind’s eye surrounded by a stack of hot cakes and five eggs for breakfast each day; seven or eight sandwiches at noon and three helpings of tamale pie at night.

Oh yes, almost forgot – this was to be a survey of snow conditions and skiing the Sierras. Soda Springs “J” Bar is a thrill of a lifetime to anyone who is beginning to feel confident on skis. Dopey took three rides to the top coaxed on by skiers Curtis and Sarcander who rode the steep hill all right (seems about like the face of Half Dome in Yosemite), but Dopey got down only by perpendicular slide slipping and “ski-bogganing.”

The Sierra Club rope tow hill is open to the public and is one of the best all around enjoyable slopes we’ve found.

Vanderford’s rope tow is good for beginners.

Crowds are less than usual this year. Much of the ski terrain is closed to the public sector because the army is patrolling the railroad lines over Donner Summit.

The Sugar Bowl is popular on Sundays but the crowds are too small during the week to bring much activity there. Only way of entrance is on the four-mile road from Soda Springs because one can not cross the railroad tracks except at this spot.

HOUSE OF VANDERFORD  
— Guest Card —  
Name Miss Violet Haugen  
Arrival 2/27/41 <sup>AB</sup> Room No. E-1  
Departure \_\_\_\_\_  
No. In Party \_\_\_\_\_

Above is also from the Oakland Ski Club album. Apparently some members stayed at the House of Vanderford before the OSC lodge was finished.

Who was Miss Violet Haugen?

# Book Review

Chuck Oldenburg

After many years of book reviews about books having to do at least tangentially about Donner Summit, we are coming to the end of the list. Here is a second book that's not about Donner Summit but comes with a good recommendation. Chuck and Christina Oldenburg (Serene Lakes) read it and said, "We found it fascinating! I think you and your followers would agree." Having the responsibility of a lot of newsletters and other things, our editorial staff suggested the Oldenburgs give the review a try and Chuck did:

## Sage and Sierra

Carol DeDecker Wiens & Joan DeDecker Busby

The most scenic route from Donner Summit to Los Angeles is Highway 395 with snow-capped Sierra peaks on the right. The town of Independence is 215 miles south of Reno in the Owens Valley, not far from Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in California at 14,495 feet. West of Independence is the Sierra and east is sagebrush leading to the Inyo Mountains. Two octogenarian sisters are authors of a memoir about growing up in Independence in the 1930s and 1940s.

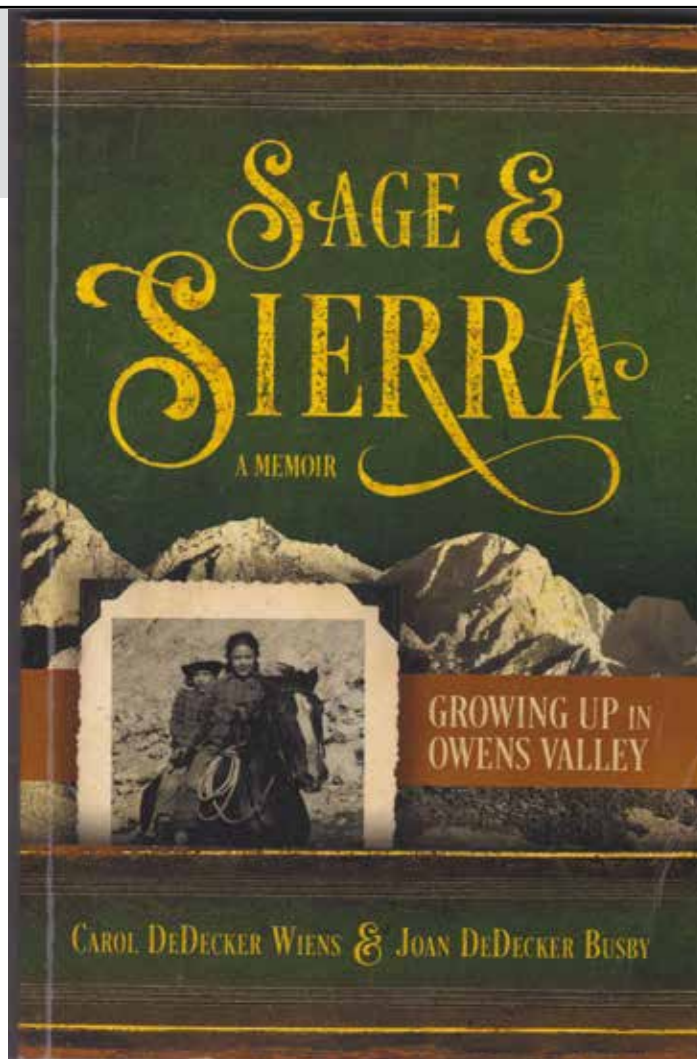
In November 1935, Paul DeDecker, his wife Mary and their two daughters, 3-year old Joan and 2-year old Carol moved from Los Angeles to Independence, population 720 and elevation 3927 feet. Paul worked for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

In 1940, Paul and Mary decided to see what was behind the high peaks. They rented two horses and a mule from a local packer and went up into the Tyndall Creek basin at 11,000 ft. They were enthralled by the beauty and solitude of the wild world of granite. Paul caught golden trout. Mary discovered rare wild flowers. The next summer Paul and Mary stayed up in the mountains for two weeks. In subsequent years the girls went along.

World War II brought changes, such as rationing, Victory Gardens and the Manzanar Relocation Center seven miles to the south. Staff members sent their children to Independence for school. Japanese children had their own school.

The authors detail several family trips in the high Sierra when Carol and Joan became dedicated back packers. Mary catalogued mountain wildflowers. Paul sought out very high altitude lakes to fish for golden trout.

Early in 1947, Carol and Joan hiked the John Muir Trail alone



from Bench Lake to Mount Whitney. But their most amazing story is described in the chapter titled, "Mount Whitney in the Moonlight." It was a hot day when they climbed up to Mirror Lake at 10,640 feet and stayed there until the moon rose. At 11:00 p.m., each with a supply of lemon drops, raisins, nuts and a canteen of water, they hiked up to Trail Crest, 13,600 feet, where they discovered that the water in their canteens had frozen. Finally they arrived at the top of Mount Whitney, 14,495 feet. On the way back they climbed Mt. Muir at 14,015 feet.

By this time in the book, I could only say "Wow!" But there are many other interesting chapters about life in Independence, e.g, high school memories, skiing at Onion Valley, hiking in the Inyo mountains, etc. Each chapter is written by either Carol or Joan, and they tend to alternate, an interesting writing style.

After graduating from Owens Valley High School in the early 1950s, both Carol and Joan attended and graduated from Pomona College.

The book also contains several family snapshots taken while Carol and Joan were growing up.

## Note:

You have noticed our monthly book reviews. You might want to do some reading of your own.

Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Sayler has a large collection of books for perusing, buying, or checking out.

You might even want to do a review for us.

Truckee Republican August 19, 1908

You will remember that last month's book review was Survival at Boiler Point, the reminiscences of Vesta Mandeville of her life at Lake Tahoe. Her father was a game warden, Sydney James Mandeville. The end of the book consists of Mr. Mandeville's log books as he went about his game warden rounds. As the DSHS research team was culling Truckee Republican newspapers we came across an article that included Mr. Mandeville. We thought we'd print it here.

## IN POLICE COURT CIRCLES

### Game Warden Gets Busy and Likewise the Constable, So Does the Judge Eventually

It may be that appearances pointed out that Judge Long was having a vacation from his official duties. If such was the case events of the past few days have been quite to the contrary, as he has been more than busy with trials and tribulations of all sorts.

Last Friday the Honorable Bud Temple brought a person who gave his name as William Steele before the Judge on a warrant charging him with grand larceny preferred by one Steve Bessegrhini, wherein he was accused of having removed various pieces of gold from Steve's person. Of course, that would never do, for, while it might be true that Steele needed the gold in his business, yet it was also true that it was the property of Bessegrhini, and inasmuch as it was removed from his person without consulting him, he felt very badly about the affair, and decided that the only way the matter could be satisfactorily settled would be through the courts of Uncle Sam. It took just two days and part of the night for the case to come to an end, and when it was concluded the Judge concluded the best way out of it would be to hold Steele over to the grand jury, so that in default of \$2000 bail he will be the guest of the court awaiting the pleasure of that august body.

Then on Monday Game Warden Mandeville brought four Greeks down from Soda Springs station, charging them with illegal fishing and hunting. Two of them, Bill Daseill and Gus Drugas, were fined \$20 for illegal fishing, and a partner, Frank Smith, was turned loose, his circumstances being somewhat different. P. Kalamara, one of the four, was charged with shooting robins, and, upon pleading guilty, was given the minimum fine of twenty dollars. All were then allowed to go, but not before Judge Long gave them to understand that no further such foolishness would be tolerated or up they would go for the limit. Then Sid wasn't satisfied with bringing in four, so he chased out after another man who was accused of stealing one of the nozzles from Hose House No. 2. He got him all right, but it turned out to be that the fellow wasn't the thief, as the nozzle had been gone for two months, while the dope fiend had been about town only two weeks. So this morning he was turned loose, after having been given a warning to get out of town in ten minutes. It is, of course, needless to say that he immediately got.



# First Indoor Ski Meet, 1947

One of the clippings in the Oakland Ski Club scrapbook is from 1947 reporting on an the first indoor ski meet , “San Francisco again leads the ski world with the first indoor ski meet on record.” Three clubs participated and the Oakland Ski Club won.

The meet was held on a “fiber-matted-incline” but the article does not say where that was. It did describe the “run” “which consisted of two alternative flushes, a tight combination of gates and a pair or one footed straight schusses.” I guess it could have been considered at least somewhat dangerous since the article noted that although there were penalties there were no “casualties.”

The event must have happened during winter since the article went on to say that although there was ice and slushy snow “around the ski tows at various centers, reports reach us of super powder at the upper levels.” Some skiers had “left the madding mobs around Beacon [Beacon Hill [today’s Soda Springs Ski Area] for the higher elevations atop Boreal.” This was some years before Boreal Ridge hosted Boreal Ski Area. The skiers “found peace, solitude, wonderful scenery and perfect snow.” Today they’d have to go to Castle Valley across the freeway.

## Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Under the left hand arrow, of course, is Tunnel 6. On this fall day there were quite a few people exploring the tunnel and the snowsheds beyond. Just to the left of Tunnel 6, below, is the building that housed the last blacksmith on Donner Summit (you can see the overpass in front of Tunnel 6 on the right side of the photograph).

The real point of this though, is the strip of concrete to the right of the lower arrow. That is the remains of the Donner Summit turntable that turned the helper engines around so they could head back downhill to help other trains cross the summit.





Above is another view of the pictures on the previous page. The white building in the background is the first version of the Summit Hotel and sits about where the concrete buildings across from Donner Ski Ranch sit today. The building in the background with the cupola is the roundhouse and the turntable sat in front. The snowshed in the foreground leads to Tunnel 6.

This "Odds & Ends" section 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](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass the one to the editor - see page 2

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



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.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

\_\_\_\_ Business - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

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

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

# 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. Available on line on the brochure page of [donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://donnersummithistoricalsociety.org), at the DSHS (at the blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs, or the visitors' centers in Truckee and Auburn.



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](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

