

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

June, 2020 issue #142



Heroism Over Donner Summit

Settin' 'er Down On the Hump

For the First Time Air Mail Plane Cannot Go Over Peaks in Face of
Blizzard; Forced Down.

How Pilot Vance Faced Queer, Unheard-of Air Currents that Almost
Tore His Ship Asunder

Oakland Tribune March 18, 1923

We've spent a lot of [Heirloom](#) space on Donner Summit firsts: wagon trains, the transcontinental highway and the transcontinental railroad. We've spent virtually no space on the first transcontinental telephone line (July, '15 [Heirloom](#)), but then there's not much to say. There is another first that has also not gotten its due: the first transcontinental air route (see the July, '11 and December, '16 [Heirlooms](#) for the route and arrows, and the August, '17, September, '18, and March, '20 [Heirlooms](#) for the weather station that was part of the air route.) The reason we've not spent much space on this significant first is that the planes flew overhead and not much happened on Donner Summit. Then our research team ran into a 1923 article in the [Oakland Tribune](#) about a flight over the "Hump*" in winter. The air-mail service had only been flying for three years at the time.

The headline and sub headlines presage a good story – see above (from the [Oakland Tribune](#)). The article has a "spoiler" in the second paragraph but we'll keep the suspense up to the end for you, our dear readers. It's a small thing we can do.

February 26 was bright and beautiful. Clare Vance was the mail plane pilot and he was taking a run to Reno to meet the Overland Limited mail train where he would transfer his 300 lbs. of mail. The plane was in good shape with a new Liberty motor and when he took off it was full of gas, "the ship went away into the 'upstairs' in perfect resounding rhythm of the incomparable Liberty."

To get to Reno Vance had to fly over the "Sierra Hump" at about 16,000 feet. At other times of year 12,000 feet was the altitude. It's a dangerous place where there are any unusual atmospheric conditions. In winter it's even more dangerous because there is only a very slim chance that a pilot can "land his ship, crack up or crash or get away with his life." The extra four thousand feet of altitude added to the safety margin.

*an apparently affectionate term for Donner Summit from the old days.

Story Locations in this Issue

picture pge 17

plane crash pge 3

picture pge 7

pictures, generally, pges 10, 11, 12

DONNER SUMMIT



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

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit

Find us on 

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



Vance ran into trouble, “in the bosom of the thousand and one terrors of the Hump.” Looking down on "The Hump" from flying altitude, “there is terror indescribable that assails the senses and makes the passenger draw down into the cockpit [there was no passenger with Vance on this trip, however – just the pilot]. One is torn between the dangers and beauty of the pictures along the top of the ranges, including the magnificent body of water, Lake Tahoe, encompassed by high, jagged mountains and peaks and timber-covered slopes.’

Despite the weather being “bright and beautiful” at Marina Field in San Francisco, Vance was immediately struck with “cyclonic gales that rocked” his ship. He tried different altitudes but nothing worked. It had taken him double the usual amount of time to go from San Francisco to Sacramento because he was fighting a sixty-mile an hour headwind. The new motor was “whanging its song in defiance.” The headwind increased to 90 miles an hour.

Colfax was usually a “pocket hellhole...even in fair weather. His ground speed was reduced to 15 miles an hour. The motor labored, the propeller bit into the oncoming gales. The wires [keeping the wings together] howled in frenzied accompaniment to the screeching, whistling forces of the rushing winds – wind that seemed to be preparing their victim for the sacrifice to the gods, the elements.”

He had almost reached the Hump, “just on the slopes of the mountains and the piled terrain, with masked death down there underneath.” He was at 13,000 feet. “In the space of time that it takes to look from one instrument to another an overhead down current crashed against the top of the ship and it was pressed down to 9,000 [feet] in split seconds.” Just as it seemed “certain destruction” was imminent Vance’s altimeter showed he was rising with the “same terrific velocity that smacked him down” and his ground speed

“Well, when I struck that first down blast it fairly took away my breath, and when I hit the bottom of the drop - believe me it was a whale of a one - I was thrown upwards with the speed of light to absolutely still. Then the ship began to try and slip over on its side - into a side-slip that meant a tail spin. Lordy Christmas! How I did work to keep her level. One second she would be nosing towards the ground and the next instant she was going straight up into the air like a streak.”

Harry Huking
Oakland Tribune April 15, 1923
 describing another trip over "The Hump"

Three times I experienced the feeling of going down like a plummet and the rising with the same incalculable speed...

Clare Vance
Oakland Tribune April 15, 1923

was only 15 or 20 miles.

He got over the Hump and "All the thousands of the earth's beauties unfolded before him... Over a white world he almost hung stationary [due to the headwinds], his gaze noting the far northern icebergs and their towering scintillating prismatic beauty." He saw all that as he struggled for life.

Then the wind dropped him again and pushed him "back westward from the Hump." "His extraordinary initiative, his natural superlative knowledge of the feel of the ship and his courage took him again over the Hump."

He fought for three hours, "a lifetime of danger, with death lurking..." He finally got over the Hump and "Sputter, sputter, and with a cough the motor went dead." He'd used all his gas fighting the headwinds over the Hump. "Ahead was death..."

He remembered having seen on his left one of the many lakes on "The Hump". "He nosed the silvered beauty [airplane] for that spot..." Then he noted the little telegraph office that he'd seen before on previous flights as he'd kept an eye out for emergency landing spots. "Down like a bird that had folded its wings he came with momentum as swift as light." He touched the ice field that covered the lake and the ship glided on the crust of ice. Just as he was about to stop a wheel caught and the plane flipped the propeller and nose buried in the snow.

Vance was just 300 yards from the telegraph station, which was "manned" by two young women. He dragged his mail to the station where a passing train could pick it up.

"It was the very worst experience I have ever had in the five years that I have been flying, said Pilot Vance when he arrived at Soda Springs" that evening.

"I noted that little shack where Soda Springs is situated along the snow sheds." "The two young women at the telegraph station, Soda Springs, were outside waving their hands. That was the most cheerful sign that has greeted me in all my life – human habitation and real humans in the world of sparkling white fields under the hurricane."

Vance took the train to Reno where he met the Reno field's chief mechanic. The mechanic called for help and the Reno field personnel took the train to Soda Springs, dismantled the ship, and shipped it to San Francisco.

Vance's air mail plane was #164. Let that sentence be a small clue to foreshadowing (literary term meaning something's coming so pay attention.) We would not have included that sentence if there was not a really good reason because Heirloom real estate is valuable.

Harry Huking's experience

Harry Huking had a story of a trip over the same route which he told to Clare Vance on February 2, 1923, almost a month before Vance's trip.

He'd been flying at an altitude of 13,000 feet, when suddenly he too was dropped 4,000 feet by an immense down draft. He was carried up, "again and again he was pushed down and then slammed up with speed that was almost breathless." "Then at the same time the winds came at him cross-wise and with such force that he imagined the smashing of the winds against the fuselage would press it into smithereens. At the same time the gale was crashing and moaning against the nose of the ship. The wind came with untold velocity from three different directions and apparently with the same awful smashing force." He fought the hurricanes for three hours and seven minutes.

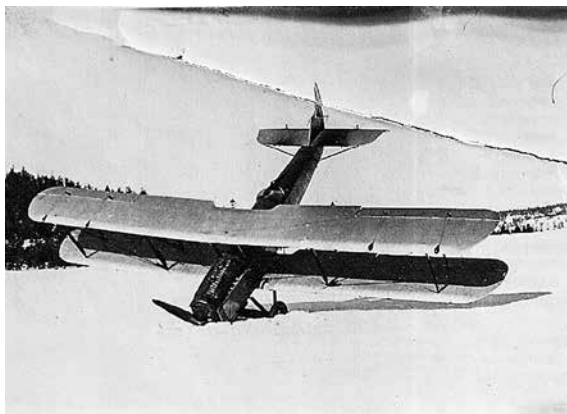
When Huking told Vance the story Vance had been skeptical. After Vance's March, 1923 flight, above, he wasn't any longer.

We've heard of Harry Huking before. He crashed a tri-motor into Summit Valley in 1932 (March, '09 [Heirloom](#).)

Wait. There's more. A few weeks after Vance's forced landing at Soda Springs, Huking took off from Reno, heading for San Francisco (March 13, 1923). Going over the "Hump." He plummeted 4,000 feet in a wink. "It was up and down, this side and then the other side, as the swirling whirlpool over the hell-hole tossed him about." (This was actually over Verdi and so should not be in this Donner Summit [Heirloom](#), but it's a good story and who else would cover it?) He fought for 45 minutes battling "for his very life." Then another mail plane appeared from the west. The two planes were only a few hundred yards apart when the one coming from San Francisco "took a sudden drop with a frightfulness of speed that made the chills creep up and down the spine." Then up went Huking's ship and two planes almost touched. For ten minutes both ships battled "to negotiate the swirls, eddies and blows... fearing collision or a straight dash to earth." Eventually they both broke out and headed for Reno.

Now let's get back to the number on Mr. Vance's airplane. Several times the number is noted in the Oakland Tribune article but it's not a relevant fact, not adding anything to the story until...

We'd finished the story and distantly remembered that in Norm Saylor's incomparable and voluminous collection of historic Donner Summit photographs (that make up the core of the DSHS collections) there are some pictures of plane crashes. One of them is of a biplane nose down on frozen Van Norden. If nothing else, that would be a good illustration. The picture was retrieved from the library. Guess what the number on the plane's fuselage is? The picture in Norm's collection is of the plane Clare Vance flew in 1923 for our story. What are the odds? Note Castle Peak in the background.



small undated photo from a Truckee Donner Historical Society photo album. The same plane?

Sierra's Humps Easy For Flyers

SACRAMENTO, Feb. 2. – Ye motorists who have made the trip over the Sierra – “over the hump” – numerous times should harken to this:

C.K. Vance, Boeing Air Transport pilot, has been “over the top” 1,700 times with the United States mail.

“Accounts of terrific downdrafts over the ‘hump’ are mostly fables,” he said. “Sometimes, when there is an east wind during the Winter months, my plane drops a few feet over the eastern slopes of the mountains. The prevailing winds, however, are west, and they cause downdrafts over the Reno Valley foothills. In neither case are we much concerned about them.

“When we are unable to get under a storm in the mountains we fly over it, provided the tops of the clouds are not too high. We have gone over storms up to 18,000 feet. The tops of the highest peaks in the Sierra are about 12,000 feet. So it would be possible to fly blind at any higher altitude, but do not think such flying advisable and have never done it. The altitude in the pass ‘Emigrant Gap,’ is about 19,000 feet.” [sic]

San Francisco Examiner
February 3, 1929

OAKLAND-RENO AIRWAY

The Donner Summit Radio range on the Oakland–Reno airway will be located 8000 feet high atop [sic] the Sierra “hump.” Airway engineers for the department of commerce have selected a site for the mountain range near the airways [sic] weather reporting station at the Summit. This range will guide flier over the Sierra on the western division [sic] of the transcontinental airway.”

Oakland Tribune
June 12, 1930

Report Truckee Road in Good Condition

Sacramento Daily Union June 20, 1915

Sacramento Daily Union
June 6 1916

Auburn-Tahoe Road Is in Good Condition

Sacramento Daily Union June 2, 1918

Car Driven Over Auburn-Truckee Road to Summit

Sacramento Daily Union June 25, 1922

TRUCKEE ROAD IS OPEN TO TRAVEL

Business Men of Mountain
Have Put Highway in Good
Condition.

Sacramento Daily Union June 9, 1915

TRUCKEE HIGHWAY OPEN TO TRAVEL

Route Cleared of Snow Ready
for Expected Traffic
Next Sunday.

Will Open Road Over Summit on June 17

Sacramento Daily Union June 5, 1917

Snow Shovelers Open Summit Road

Sacramento Daily Union June 5, 1920

The Road Is Open

In last month's [Heirloom](#) we focused on the Lincoln Highway, the new underpass (1914), and "the Fun They Must Have Had". The latter was a long ad in the [Truckee Republican](#) exhorting volunteers to come and shovel snow to help open the Lincoln Highway. It said enthusiasm was running high over "the prospects of a trip to the high Sierra" to shovel 30 foot snow drifts. That's easy to imagine. "It will be an enjoyable outing... You will enjoy every minute of the time." Although you'd have to pay for your own transportation on the train, food and sleeping accommodations would be taken care of. That was a 1920 ad and makes today's reader realize how really good the old days were. There was also a 1921 headline in last month's [Heirloom](#) advertising that the "Annual Snow Shoveling Carnival" was coming soon. Presumably 1921's snow shovelers would have as much fun as 1920's since it was a "carnival."

These were clever responses to the annual focus of when the roads would open over the Sierra. Except for the train, Truckee was snowbound in winter and business was down. The merchants were all pressing for early road openings. It was not just the businessmen of Truckee who were interested in the open road. Reno and Lake Tahoe people were interested too as were merchants in Auburn who wanted the traffic. So those in charge had snow shoveling bees, ran drives to gather ashes to spread on the snow, dug trenches to increase the surface area for melting, hired diggers, dug into the drifts from both directions, and did public relations.

The public relations came in a couple of kinds. An article in the [Sacramento Union](#) (June 2, 1918), expounded on how good the roads were, "The Lincoln highway [sic] over the summit of the Sierras [sic] is not only open to automobile traffic but is in splendid condition clear through. The two mudholes that remained in the snow region a week ago have been repaired and the traveler now has a comfortable trip through." The road had been "graveled" the previous year and the snow had packed that all down leaving "a splendid boulevard from Truckee to the tavern [Tahoe Tavern in Tahoe City]" as well as up to the summit. Other repairs and permanent improvements were also being done. From Auburn to Colfax some "automobilists" declared the road "to be better than the paved highway from Auburn to Sacramento and above Colfax the road was better than it ever had been. Those kinds of testimonials were no doubt guaranteed to bring out the drivers. Of course there had to be notices about when the annual opening the road work was finished. The [Sacramento Union](#) (June 5, 1920) reported that 25 men had cleared the last of the snow. That was announced by the secretary of the Truckee Chamber of Commerce. He'd come "direct from the scene" where the men had cut through snow "14 feet deep for a distance of 600 feet." That immediate "man on the scene" report



Summit of Sierra Lures Motorists

"Donner Lake at the summit of the Sierra above Auburn has much scenery and long historical association. A Cadillac is shown at the summit, on the way to the lake."

Oakland Tribune May 23, 1923

was no doubt even more energizing for those waiting with their automobiles to make their crossings.

There was another more common form of public relations which matched the public's fascination with the new transportation form, the automobile. There were annual reports of the first automobiles over the summit and down to Lake Tahoe. For those who did not enter that contest there were also reports of endurance runs over the mountains. For an example of these articles see the San Francisco Chronicle article here on page 9, "Buick Blazes 1917 Trail over Sierra (June 24, 1917). In a Sacramento Union article (June, 25, 1922), "Car Driven Over Auburn-Truckee Road to Summit" a Studebaker "battled its way through snow and mud... to the top of the Summit, the highest point in the Sierras." That's pretty exciting for those sitting at home not realizing that the top of the Sierra is about 5,000 feet higher than Donner Summit and some hundreds of miles south but that's public relations. The little car bucked through snow that "reached a depth of seven and eight feet." The mud was so deep in places where the snow had melted that the car went "down in the mud up to the frame." It took Mr. Ford, driving the Studebaker, a whole day to go from Soda Springs to the summit which is about three miles today and was also in 1922. Mr. Ford never even needed a block and tackle because the automobile's motor had enough power to get through the deep mud and snow drifts as high as the top of the car. Mr. Ford was the Studebaker dealer in Auburn.

[The] report gives much satisfaction to the members of the chamber of commerce which has had a force of men at work on the road for two weeks, clearing it of the snow and putting it in condition for travel. The funds for the work were subscribed by the business men of Truckee...

Fishing in the Truckee river is better than for many years according to veterans at the sport. Fly fishing is becoming good and before another week is past will be at its height. Record breaking catches have been made by David Cabona and others. Mrs. Campbell has caught several trout weighing two pounds and upwards."

Sacramento Union
June 9, 1915

It wasn't easy for drivers in those days to be first over the Sierra. The San Francisco Chronicle (June 14, 1910) chronicled Mr. J. Murray Page who took his Locomobile over Donner Summit and declared "that it was one of the toughest pieces of work he ever undertook." That of course applied to the automobile as well as Mr. Page. The road going down to Donner Lake had recently been blasted and was full of "boulders. One man was constantly in front of the Locomobile moving the rocks out of the way." Mr. Page was the Western traveling representative for Locomobile.

...the distinction of being first over the summit does not compensate for the difficulties encountered...

Erick Okleaf
Sacramento Union, May 19, 1920

It wasn't just fun and games for the annual early Sierra crossers. The Sacramento Union (May 19, 1920) reported that Eric Oakleaf "had his right leg caught between the wheel and a log while pushing the machine along and the flesh was badly torn and crushed." The driver, Alfred Bolkman, "stated that the distinction of being first over the summit does not compensate for the difficulties encountered, and he will never try it again." When he got to Reno he was told the pass was open for everyone.

It was not just "autoists" who were interested in the road conditions. A Sacramento Union newspaper article (June 5, 1917) said the roads would be open June 17. Cars had already gotten as far as Soda Springs Station but by the next week wagons would be able to get over the summit. The following week the road would be ready for automobiles. This informational little snippet arrived at the paper because Mrs. H.F. Scott had called Road Superintendent Baxter on the telephone, "she desiring the information for her husband, who is preparing to start this week with his cattle for the ranges in the Lake Tahoe region." Cattle and sheep farmers brought their herds and flocks to the high Sierra meadows in summer because it was more healthy for the animals.

The game was over in 1932 when the highway department started clearing Highway 40 in winter but don't worry. The DSHS early automobile crossing archives have lots of articles left on the subject ready for next year's Heirlooms.

You really should go into the Heirloom archives on our website and take a look at the June, '19 Heirloom for the story of Arthur Foote's 1911 trip over the Sierra and his winning of the Tahoe Tavern Silver Cup.

First to Cross the Summit

W. Wert Tong of Tahoe City claims the honor of driving the first team over the Summit this season, in company with his family and George Sales and family.

"In crossing the Yuba River they encountered much hardship the bridges being out, so it was necessary for them to construct some kind of a crossing, on the stringers of the bridge and they laid some planks. After working half a day they were able to lead their horses single across the river and draw their wagon across."

"On Summit it was very hard travel on account of so much snow, and the wagon tipped over several times." The newspaper congratulated the men on their undertaking and "sticking qualities."

A week later on June 8 the Truckee Republican reported a "Ford First Car Over Summit Highway."

E.M. Baxter, State highway commissioner for the area and his Ford were the first to cross by auto in 1916. A number of others had started the previous week but only Baxter had made it across. "He encountered bad roads but his perseverance won out and he finally landed in Truckee."

"There is considerable snow on the road between Truckee and Cisco.. and it will be well along into the month before the road will be open."

June 1, 1916
Sacramento Union



Sacramento Union June 1, 1916

Buick Blazes 1917 Trail Over Sierra Via The Yuba Pass and on to Reno

Little Four Wins Hard Fight With Snow C.A. McGee Gives Details of Bucking Snow and Opening Pathway

Mr. McGee had won a number of the Tahoe Tavern Silver Cup races for being the first autoist over the Sierra. He won in 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916 and 1917.

1917 was particularly difficult as can be seen that the crossing was at the end of June rather than the usual May. Foreshadowing the difficulty the article starts off, "The general opinion of those who are motor wise is that an automobile is practically helpless when it encounters any great amount of soft snow." A hard crust on the snow makes travel of an auto of moderate weight "little effort." C.A. McGee and M.H. Murphy of the Howard Automobile Company, accompanied by three passengers, including a motion picture camera man, set off to be the first auto over the Sierra in 1917. Since McGee had lots of experience "snow fighting" was no big deal to him and Buick cars had been winning the race since 1912 so there would be no problems. So "when the Reno Commercial Club offered a cup to the first car to open a road between San Francisco and Reno, we decided to take advantage..."

There was too much snow on their first attempt and so they garaged their car and waited until June 5 to leave a second time. They encountered snow in thirty or forty foot wide drifts a few miles from the summit. Most of those they "rushed" through. They would hit the drifts at fifteen or twenty miles per hour and break them up. They continued with that strategy almost to the summit. There they came to a large snowfield and the sun had reduced the snow to "the consistency of good thick mush, and so far as traction was concerned we might as well have had our wheels resting on thin air."

To get across the snowfield they attached boards under the axles to act as sled runners. They attached ropes to trees and then started the motor which turned a large drum on the rear wheels to take up the rope and move the car along. They got to the summit in the evening just about twenty-four hours after leaving San Francisco. The next day they were off to Loyalton and then Reno.

On their return trip, the proof that they'd opened the road was the fourteen cars that crossed the Sierra that day.

June 24, 1917
San Francisco Chronicle



Delightfully Cool

AND SO CONVENIENT

The possession of a cabinet range with its roomy, elevated oven and broiling chamber, both of which can be used with but an instant's notice, serves to *lessen the dread of summer cookery.*

Now while the summer is young, prepare for the comfort of this possession. See what inducements are being made on these ranges. Secure one and have ahead of you

THE JOY OF SUMMER COOKERY.

Call or Telephone

"Pacific Service" is Always "At Your Service"

Pacific Gas & Electric Company

1100 K Street, Sacramento.

"Have you bought YOUR Liberty Bond?"

Sacramento Union June 5, 1917

From the DSHS Archives

Here we have a collection of photographs from the DSHS archives showing motorists attempting to cross Donner Pass before the road was really ready for travel. Many of the exact locations are unknown.



Above, just below the pass on what would become the Lincoln Highway in 1913 - on the old Dutch Flat Rd.



Left, just below the underpass on the Lincoln Highway, sometime after 1914.

From the DSHS Archives



Was it worth
the effort?



Above: probably at Cisco.

From the DSHS Archives

Not snowbound, but still difficult:

Right, Lincoln Highway below the snowsheds east side of the pass.

Below, coming out of the snowsheds at the east end of Tunnel 6. Watch for trains while you negotiate the 100 or so yards in the shed before emerging on the other side. This was about 1910, some years before the underpass and the Lincoln Highway.

Below right, Just off the Lincoln Highway, and probably before the Lincoln Highway, downhill (east) from the picture below



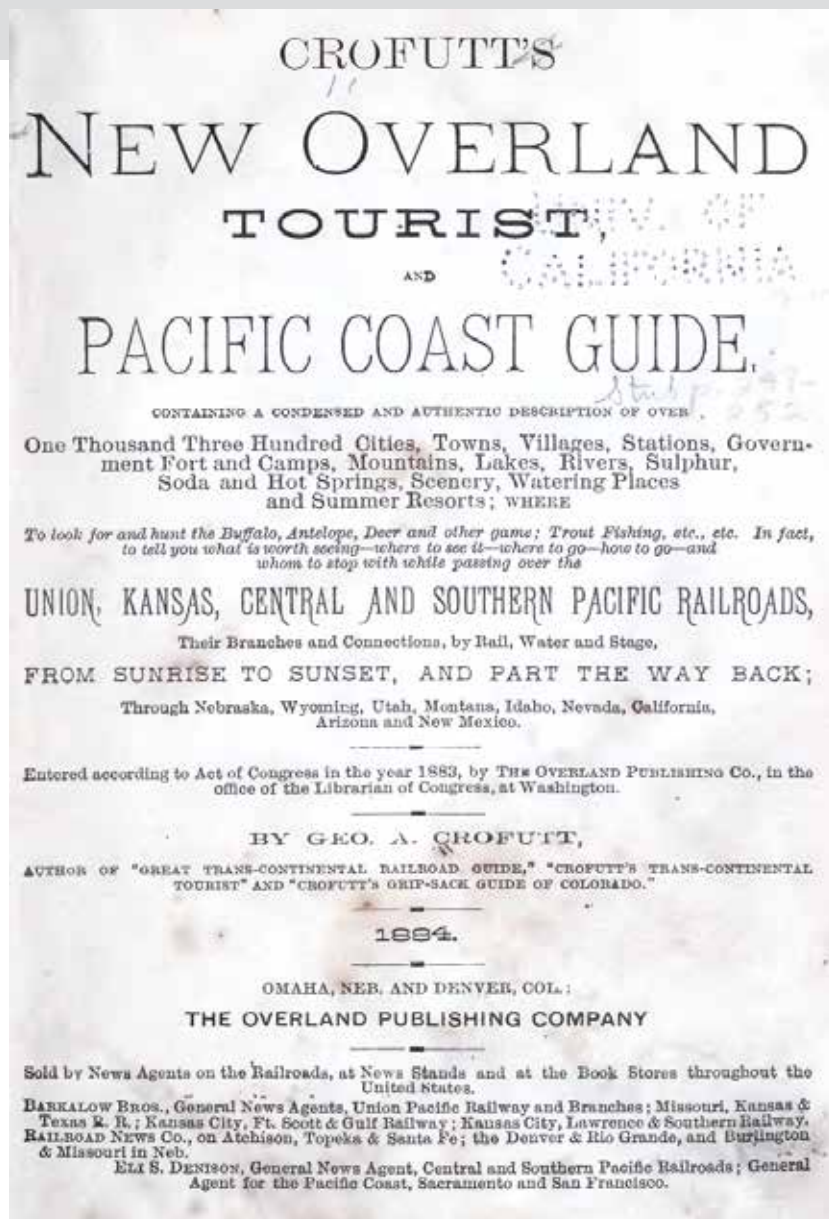
From the DSHS Archives

From Crofutt's New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide, 1879

"We are on the dividing ridges which separate the head-waters of several mountain rivers, which, by different and tortuous courses, find at last the same common receptacle for their snow fed waters - the Sacramento River. Close to our right, far down in that fir-clad gorge, the waters of the South Yuba leap and dance along, amid dense and gloomy forests, and over almost countless rapids, cascades and waterfalls. This stream heads against and far up the Summit, one branch crossing the road at the next station, Cascade. After passing Cisco, the head waters of Bear River can be seen lying between the Divide and the Yuba, which winds away beyond, out of sight, behind another mountain ridge. Farther on still, and we find the American River on our left. These streams reach the same ending the Sacramento River but are far apart, here they mingle with that stream. There is no grander scenery in the Sierras, of towering mountains, deep gorges, lofty precipices, sparkling waterfalls and crystal lakes, than abound within an easy distance of this place. The tourist can find scenes of the deepest interest and grandest beauty; the scholar and philosopher, objects of rare value for scientific investigation; the hunter and the angler can find an almost unlimited field for his amusement; the former in the gorges of the mountains, where the timid deer and fierce grizzly bear make their homes; the latter among the mountain lakes and streams, where the speckled trout leaps in its joyous freedom while around all, is the music of snow-fed mountain torrent and mountain breeze, and over all is the clear blue sky of a sunny clime, tempered and softened by the shadows of the everlasting hills."

THE LATE ACCIDENT ON THE RAILROAD The Meadow Lake Sun says of the terrible accident: It occurred in the tunnel about a mile above Cisco. Five blasts were to have been discharged at once; four of these had been charged, and while tapping the fifth, the powder ignited, causing an explosion of four of the charge?, while the men were standing around. Burns, the foremen, and five Chinamen were killed, all of whom were horribly mangled, and several others were badly injured. A horse and cart were blown a hundred feet into the air, and both came down in pieces.

Marysville Daily Appeal June, 1867



Book Review

Tom Burns

The Winter Army

The World War II Odyssey of the 10th Mountain Division,
America's Elite Alpine Warriors

2019 336 pages \$28

Maurice Isserman

If you have ever wondered why Highway 89 between Truckee and Squaw Valley is called the 10th Mountain Division Highway, the book, The Winter Army by Maurice Isserman will provide the answers. The book's subtitle, The World War II Odyssey of the 10th Mountain Division, America's Elite Alpine Warriors, should tell you all you need to know.

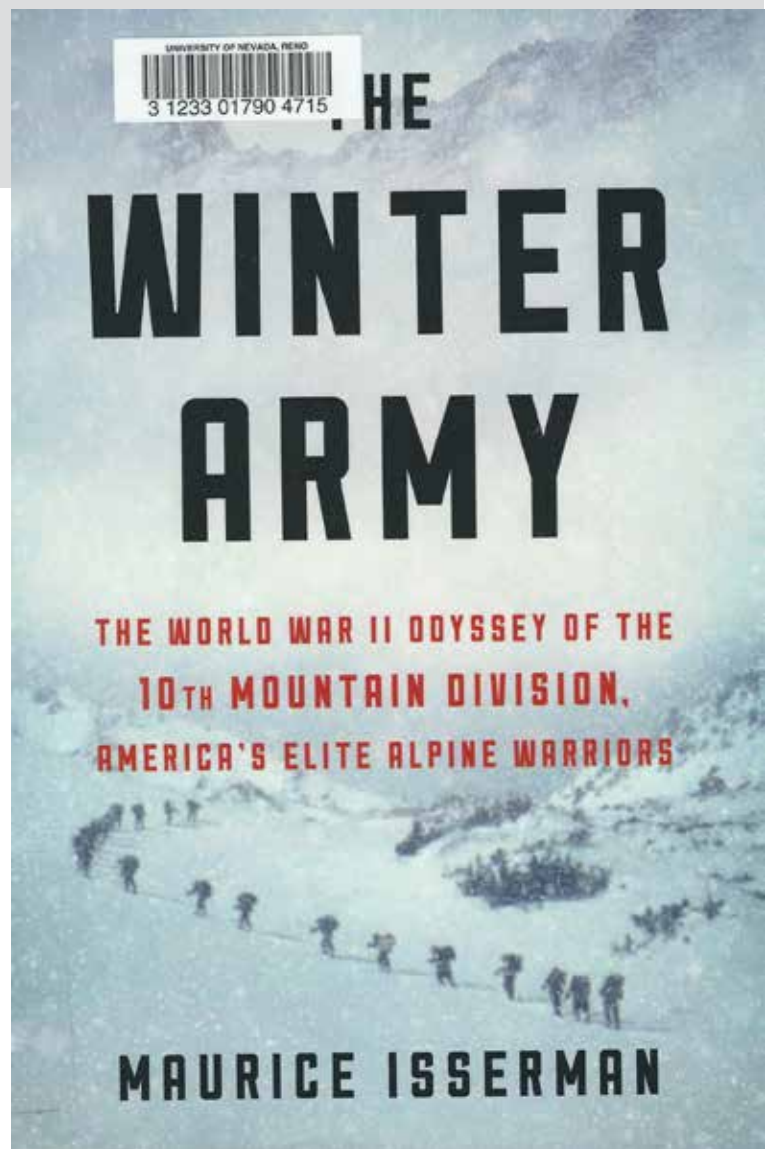
The 10th Mountain Division grew out of a chance meeting between four skiing friends in 1940 in Manchester, Vermont who worried about the lack of any military attention being paid to the possibility of a German invasion of the US via Canada. The Winter War between Russia and Finland had just demonstrated the ability of a well-trained and well-prepared smaller country to withstand the onslaught of a larger enemy in winter conditions. Although the possibility feared by the four was remote, it loomed on the horizon if England should fall to the Nazis, opening the route to Canada.

Charles Minot (Minnie) Dole, the founder of the National Ski Patrol, took on the role of stimulating interest in the establishment of a ski-based military group. Skiing was just becoming popular in the US, following the Lake Placid Olympics in 1932. The 1936 Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Germany gave the skiers an opportunity to observe the German re-building and re-arming programs first hand. Skiing in the US got a boost as the first rope tows were developed and a number of Austrian ski instructors came to the US after the Anschluss, when Germany incorporated Austria into the Third Reich.

In 1940 Minnie Dole utilized his connections to get a letter to President Roosevelt, emphasizing that "it is more reasonable to make soldiers out of skiers than skiers out of soldiers." FDR sent this along to Henry Stimson, the new Secretary of War and a member of the American Alpine Club. Things moved slowly, at the typical pace of bureaucrats, until Pearl Harbor brought war with both Japan and Germany.

There is a long section on the development of Camp Hale, in the Rockies, which became the major training ground of the 10th. Thousands of skiers, mostly from eastern colleges that had skiing programs or access to the New England mountains, signed up. There were two years of training, which involved lots of skiing and winter camping. The only activity that brought the 10th near combat was the fiasco of Kiska Island in the Aleutians, where an invading force found that the island had been abandoned by the Japanese weeks before. Finally, in early 1944, just before the D-Day invasion in Normandy, the skier-soldiers underwent an extensive winter bivouac, that tested the limits of mountain and winter warfare. This was done under extreme conditions and at altitudes in Colorado higher than almost anywhere in Europe where fighting could possibly take place. Then, in what seemed like the final blow to the mission of the 10th, the unit was transferred to Texas and the Alpine classification was removed from the name.

In November of 1944, thinking that they were headed for Burma after a hot summer in Texas, the troops were surprised to



find their trains headed east. Only a few officers knew that the destination was Italy, where Mark Clark's 5th Army was bogged down by German troops holding the Apennines, a mountain range that cuts through central Italy. Finally, the 10th Mountain Division would find a battleground suited to their training. Now the book picks up speed, with excellent descriptions and maps showing the course of battle and the skill and bravery of the soldiers. Those who enjoy following the course of major battles will appreciate the detail and clarity of the descriptions of the attacks by the 10th Mountain Division.

At the time, the war in Italy was considered a side bar to the war in Belgium, and the Battle of the Bulge garnered all the headlines. But Bill Mauldin, the famous WW II cartoonist, captured many of the critical moments in Italy, often featuring the 10th Mountain Division (see below). Skiing didn't play a big role in the assault on the Apennines, but mountain climbing did. Several times, the climbers were able to outflank and surprise the Germans holding the high ground, leading to significant gains.

Bureaucratic snafus, like failing to send skis and winter sleeping bags with the soldiers, led to unnecessary hardships, but the soldiers were well-prepared due to the rigorous training at Camp Hale in Colorado. (All this equipment was sold as surplus after the War, helping to stimulate skiing and winter camping in the post-war economy!)

The good news is that the 10th Mountain Division was successful in capturing the Apennine Range and leading the way into the Po Valley, the last redoubt of the Wehrmacht in Italy. All of this happened in April and May 1945 as the war was also winding down in Germany, with the US Army and the Russians converging on Berlin. Like other troops fighting in Europe, the 10th fully expected to be redeployed to continue the war in the Pacific, which was made unnecessary by the sudden end of the war with Japan in August 1945.

The 10th had some very good leadership, particularly Major General George P. Hays, who exhorted his troops to "Continue to move forward, always forward, always forward," which became the motto of the 10th Mountain Division. It was also salted with men who had been famous as Olympians, and some who would become famous later, like David Brower (Sierra Club) and Bob Dole (Senator and presidential candidate.)

Members of the 10th went on to found and teach skiing in many of the major ski areas, particularly in the West, like Aspen, Vail, Squaw Valley, Loveland, etc. They also became writers and editors of skiing magazines, and manufacturers of skiing and mountaineering equipment. Walter Prager coached the 1948 Olympic Ski Team and directed the Squaw Valley Ski School. Gerry Cunningham founded Gerry Manufacturing, making backpacks from his original designs, outfitting Everest expeditions and Olympic Teams and developing the Gerry pack to carry small children. Bill Bowerman coached the successful University of Oregon track team, the 1972 US Olympic Track Team, and co-founded athletic shoe manufacturer Nike, after using his wife's waffle iron to make the first successful "waffle" trainer. The outdoor lifestyle of the skiers and mountaineers in the 10th Mountain Division made them successful both in war and in peace.

(The book doesn't mention a local member of the Mountain and Cold Weather Training Command (a successor of the 10th Mountain Division), Norm Saylor, who was in the last group of soldiers to train in Camp Hale after the end of WW II before it closed, and who went on to develop Donner Ski Ranch. Stop in at the Historical Society Museum in Soda Springs to hear the rest of the story from Norm.)



"Hit th' dirt, boys!"

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.

Special Bonus History Section

It occurred to the [Heirloom](#) editorial staff after receiving Tom Burns' book review (page 14) that there was a bit more that would be of interest to [Heirloom](#) readers.

First, who were Donner Summit luminaries who were part of the 10th Mountain Division? See right for just a few.

Norm Saylor was drafted into the Army in 1955. He had been a gunnery sergeant first class in the National Guard but gave up that to come into the Army as a PFC so he could go into Camp Hale. Had he kept his sergeant first class rank he'd have been relegated to being a gunnery sergeant. He didn't want that and it wasn't Camp Hale.

To help with his entry, so Norm could get where he wanted to be, which was Colorado's Camp Hale, some friends, Dick Buek (see the May, '10 [Heirloom](#)) and Gordy Butterfield (ski instructor at Squaw Valley and whose wife was a school teacher on Donner Summit) "greased the skids" by collecting letters to influence Norm's Army placement. One letter was from one of the California U.S. senators (which one is lost to history now). Another was from the U.S. Ski Association, and there were a couple of others. Norm was a valuable commodity to the Army's ski troops because he was a Class A racer and presumably could teach skiing to the troops which is what the other accomplished skiers at Camp Hale were doing.

First there was eight weeks of basic training at Ft. Carson and then Norm was on to Camp Hale to serve with the Mountain and Cold Weather Training Command. There were 180 guys in the command which supposedly had the highest collective I.Q. of any command in the Army at the time. Besides that high I.Q. there were a number of Olympic skiers in the group such as Buddy Werner, Les Streeter, and Marvin Melville.

The Mountain and Cold Weather Command taught skiing, how to bivouac and build snow caves, and rock climbing (see the Mauldin cartoon on the previous page). A couple of Norm's "customers" one weekend were General "Hap" Arnold and his wife. Norm says that weekend his group got the best food while the other groups were all being fed the normal "K" rations.

Norm spent two winters at Camp Hale. In the fall of 1958 he was back on Donner Summit, having finished his hitch, and he was working at Donner Ski Ranch. When Norm left Camp Hale with seventeen other guys, the last guys in the camp, that was the end of Camp Hale.

The two years in the U.S. Army were the happiest of Norm's life. One reason was the many great people he met, and here the names start to roll off Norm's tongue too quickly. Second, it was the adventures, ski racing, skiing, and mountain climbing. He remembers once out with a bunch of guys climbing the back side of what is today Vail, Colorado. There was nothing there at the time. Today it's large ski resorts. The third reason, which has to do with Donner Summit, was his introduction to the many ski resort pioneers who were also at Camp Hale or on adventures away from camp such as Chuck Lewis (Copper Mountain), Ernie Blake (Taos Ski Bowl), Siggy Engle (Sun Valley), Peter Siebert (Vail), and more. From them he learned about the early ski resort business, and that he brought back to Donner Summit and Donner Ski Ranch.

Donner Summit and the 10th Mountain Division:

Bud Zorich who owned a ski shop in Soda Springs (which is now the DSHS).

Edvi Aro: Donner Summit ski instructor and one of the first ski technicians of the USFS.

Bill Klein: Donner Summit ski instructor for Clair Tappaan, Vanderford's and Sugar Bowl. He also owned the ski shop at Sugar Bowl. See the November, '09 [Heirloom](#).

Jim Winthers: started adaptive skiing on Donner Summit and is the namesake of Camp Winthers, an outdoor education camp on Donner Summit.

Gratz Powers: ski instructor Donner Summit

Behind the Scenes @ the DSHS

It Takes a Village.

Our 20 Mile Museum is a popular item among visitors and tourists. After snow melt we re-install the 50+ signs for the summer/fall seasons.

In the late fall we take most of them down and store them at Donner Ski Ranch. A few get stored at Sugar Bowl and other places too. Into the receptacles that hold the signs we place metal plugs.

Over the winter we hope that there is not too much damage by snow removal machinery to the receptacles and plugs. We hope too, that not too many plugs get lost over the summer so they will be ready in the fall.

Unfortunately plugs get lost. We can't show you any pictures of lost plugs. Some get destroyed by snow machinery and we can show you a picture of that, above. The receptacles that get mangled are usually still encased in concrete and so we don't have any pictures of those either.

The DSHS has a friend in Ed Bubnis of Serene Lakes. He has made plugs for us and then remade plugs for us twice. To the right is a box of shiny new plugs ready for summer, 2020. Above right, is what Ed is replacing. Below is another example where the snow machine not only pulled the plug out but ripped off the plate. When the machinery does even worse, we've got to dig new holes and install new aluminum receptacles.

If you are interested in the project and want to help in some way feel free to contact the editor - see page 2.



Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



There's a lot of old stuff sitting around on Donner Summit that are memories of the past. Before I-80, travel to Donner Summit and beyond was different. The traffic was on Highway 40 and was much slower than today. All along the road there were little communities with services aimed at the tourists. There were lodges, motels, restaurants, general stores, souvenir stands, and service stations. One of those communities was Cisco Grove. Although the houses are still there the commercial buildings are gone except for some foundation remnants, the stone buildings, and the chimney structure, above. The chimney sat behind the general store and was a center point of the community. People would gather there after shopping at the store or in the evenings.

With the coming of I-80 and faster more reliable automobiles, there was no one to patronize the commercial establishments along the old road. The Gould family owned the buildings at Cisco and tore them down to save on taxes. They donated a piece just between the freeway and Old 40 to Placer County which is today Gould Park.

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](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass them on 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



P.O. 1 Norden, CA 95724 530-426-3376

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

June 1, 2020

Board of Directors

Norm Sayler
Bill Oudegeest
Starr Hurley
Cheryl Paduano
Pat Malberg

Associates

Jim Hoelter
Sharon Ruffner
Art Clark
John Loll
Judy Lieb

Despite the virus, which has closed some of our activities, the DSHS keeps delivering high quality Donner Summit history to our 925 Heirloom subscribers. Others access the Heirloom via our website which we've built up to several hundred pages in addition to back issues of the Heirloom. We've also been reprinting our many history brochures. They are available on our website, at the DSHS, at the visitors' centers in Truckee, Tahoe City and Auburn, and at the Colfax Historical Society.

Last year's sesquicentennial of the transcontinental railroad was so successful that we've continued working with the Truckee Donner Historical Society and the Truckee Donner Railroad Society to publish articles in the local newspapers. History talks, this year at the State Park, are on hold pending the virus but we're ready to do some.

For some time volunteers have been digitizing Norm Sayler's incomparable collection of historic Donner Summit photographs. George Lamson has put all the digitized pictures into a database. Next we'll be purchasing some software and a couple of computers and monitors so people can access the pictures at the DSHS or online via the web. We have a few "kinks" still to work out but we're almost there. This will be an important move forward not just to give people access but to protect the collection with digital back-ups in case of tragedy. If you'd like to help with the project's implementation let us know by using the email address above.

To continue our work we need your annual help. We have rent and insurance to pay, brochures to print and we have some maintenance for our 20 Mile Museum signs. There's also our digitizing project to carry out.

Whether we do our annual Donner Party Hike event is up in the air just now. The Placer County Heritage Trail, in which we participate annually, will not be held this year due to the virus.

To renew your membership or send a donation you can go to our website or simply use the U.S. Mail (see the address above).

Thank you for your help,

Norm Sayler, President

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Donner Summit Historical Society.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

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



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



Pick up the brochure at the DSHS
or download it at:

<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>

50 interpretive signs along Old 40

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