

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

November, 2021 issue #159

Winter 1951-52

When President Rutherford B. Hayes first used the telephone he said, "That's an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one ...?" Western Union, whose business prejudiced it a bit about the topic, agreed saying in an internal memo, That invention is practically worthless. It will never amount to anything.

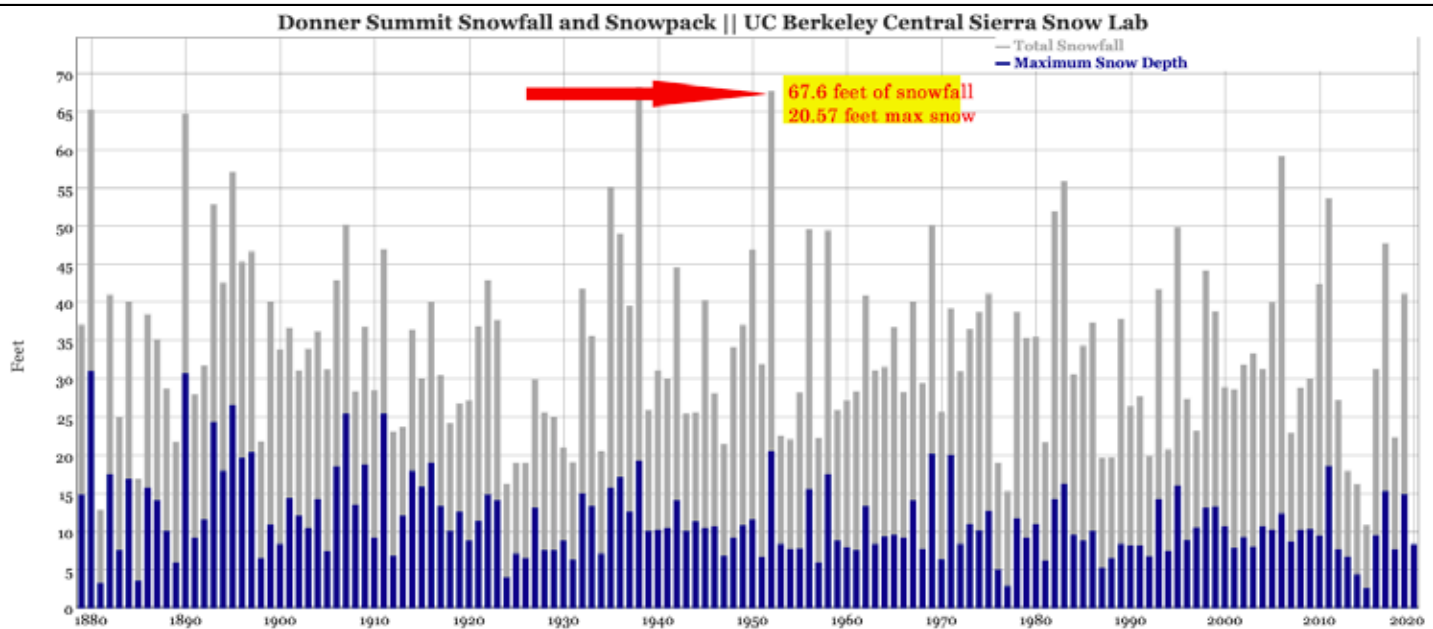
Those kinds of predictions are fun to read about, especially when it's experts uttering them and there are lots: automobiles are a fad; heavier than air travel "is unpractical and insignificant, if not utterly impossible;" rail travel at high speed is impossible because passengers will die of asphyxia, not being able to breathe; television won't last because people will get tired of staring at plywood boxes; etc. Closer to the Heirloom there were people who didn't think trains could ever surmount the Sierra because of lack of traction and power uphill.* Some of the bad predictions have dire consequences like those who thought the Maginot Line would keep Germans out of France or the generals who fought the last battles throwing calvary and troops against tanks and machine guns.

What does that have to do with the Heirloom and its mandate to present Donner



Donner Summit 3/24/1952

*https://www.boredpanda.com/bad-future-predictions-timeline-history/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic



Central Sierra Snowlab in Soda Springs Ca. compilation of snowfall and snow depth data. Here we've highlighted the winter of 1951-52. For context, an average of thirty four feet of snow falls annually on Donner Summit.

Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We've now passed 150 issues of the [Heirloom](#): thousands of pages, thousands of pictures, and hundreds of subjects. You've probably begun to realize that you cannot keep all the history in your head. Even if you remember it all, retrieval is difficult.

Fortunately John Albert Index invented the index* and one of the choices we made back at the birth of the DSHS was to index all our [Heirloom](#) articles and pictures. We've diligently kept up the indices so that they are many pages long, full of alphabetized titles and subjects. Go to our website and to any of the [Heirloom](#) pages (one for each year) and you'll find links to the [Heirloom](#) indices.

One of the strengths of the DSHS is the incomparable historical photograph collection of Norm Sayler, our president. The collection is thousands of pictures and again the sheer number makes finding anything in particular, difficult. Avoid the long URL by going to our website and clicking on the "photographs" link and then to the "historic photo collection link." A third link, to the Flickr URL will take you to those thousands of searchable historical photographs of Donner Summit. Have fun.

*historical society humor

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 Sayler collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society

Summit history to our very discerning readers? Starting off a talk about snowsheds or snow removal by quoting Theodore Judah is always good for a chuckle and grabbing the group's attention. Judah was chief engineer of the Central Pacific and was brilliant in laying out the Sierra crossing. He was not so brilliant when he said snow is not a problem on Donner Summit, "No trouble need be anticipated," he said. He'd closely examined Donner Summit to develop his evidence.(see the February, '15 Heirloom).

Snow can be a problem. Just ask the Donners. Donner Summit gets an average of thirty-four feet of snow each winter but some winters that's just mild. The chart on the previous page was compiled by the Central Sierra Snow Lab in Soda Springs (on Donner Summit). As you can see by the arrow, thirty-four feet is nothing compared to heavy winters. In this issue of the Heirloom we explore some of the winter of 1951-52 when sixty-seven feet of snow fell and the maximum depth (snow melts, compacts and sublimates – goes from frozen state into the air – all winter long) of snow was almost twenty-one feet. That twenty-one feet doesn't tell the whole story though, because the winds can build drifts a couple of times that. See the picture on page one.

About a squashed car:

"When it was finally dug out it looked like it had been through a big press."

California Highways and Public Works
January-February, 1952
George F. Hellesoe,
Division of Highways maintenance engineer.

the neighborhood of Hawaii. The snow those Pineapple Expresses drop is so moisture-laden that it compacts when it hits the ground and is affectionately called "Sierra Cement" by the locals. It's a lot like real cement and accomplished snow shovelers get really quite "buffed" shoveling it around. In fact, decades ago large hand saws (see page 9) were used to saw apart the "cement." Sometimes "as the drifts consolidated, explosives (see page 6) were required to fracture and dislodge the snow."

On Donner Summit the people have to deal with the repercussions. That's the top of the mountain. As the storms continue East they have little moisture, having dropped it all in California, which is why Nevada is so dry.

This Heirloom issue is about the extreme winter of 1951-52 for which we have a lot of sources: lots of pictures in Norm Saylor's incomparable collection, pictures (including a whole box labeled "1952") from others like Hank Goodrich of Rainbow, a scrapbook from the Placer County archives, Life Magazine, an issue of California Highways and Public Works (January-February, 1952), an issue of Classic Trains Magazine, an appendix article in The Lincoln Highway California, newspapers, and miscellaneous other sources.

The Sierra Mountains were turned into a "white hell" with thousands marooned, all transportation paralyzed and damage mounting with each new frigid blast."

Unidentified newspaper article
Placer County Archives scrapbook.

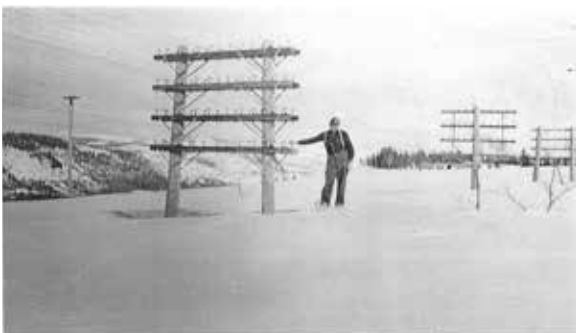
"Thirty-foot drifts – almost as high as a three-story building clogged the rights of way and the temptation must have been strong to let the thing lie until spring."

California Highways and Public Works
January-February, 1952

The San Francisco Chronicle ran an editorial on January 19, 1952, "The blizzards breed 'em tough, and life above the snow line is hazardous. When a mountain man's pickup truck stalls, or his weasel or Snowcat breaks down, he is thrown back onto his own hind legs, so to speak; back where the '49ers were, or the Indians before them, in a man-against nature conflict." The Chronicle then suggested that the first day of spring "be set aside to honor these 'valiant crews'."



Pacific Telephone and the National Guard in Soda Springs, 1952. The photograph above was sent to the DSHS by Ron Rettig of the Truckee Donner Historical Society. He found it at NationalGeographic.com who got it from Pacific Telephone. The Soda Springs Hotel is in the background.



PGE worker Blue Canyon



Colfax Record, January, 18, 1952. This is Donner Summit lodge "with 45-foot snow drifts piled up to the eaves."

The winter of 1951-52 was looking more extreme as calendar pages dropped from the calendar. According to the appendix article [Lincoln Highway California](#), "Snow Bound Rescue," it snowed as early as October and by January it had snowed all but five days since mid-November. The end of December brought blizzard conditions and snow drifts of thirty to fifty feet. Highway 40 was closed for four days over New Year's. On January 11 the highway was closed again due to "howling winds" and zero visibility. Division of Highway crews continued working.

The next day, January 12, emergency vehicles were being allowed through but no one else. A tree went through the windshield of one snow plow. A fuel pump problem put another out of commission just as they were desperately needed. When the augers hit rocks or other hard items the shear pins break. Operators then have to get out, dig and pry the compacted snow from the inside of the auger box and put in new shear pins. Pins were breaking at the rate of ten an hour. And then problems got worse.

The most consequential storm of the 1951-52 winter came in on January 10, 1952. The [California Highways and Public Works](#) magazine and newspapers called it the "greatest snowstorm in more than fifty years." It stopped the highways; it stopped the railroad and eventually put a halt to all transcontinental traffic on the highways and railroad. Avalanches threatened and swept down the slopes magnifying snowfall. "Howling winds sweeping at velocities of 75 to 100 miles per hour drove freshly fallen snow into mountainous drifts, isolated many mountain communities for days, and set the stage for many courageous and dramatic rescue efforts..." There was so much snow that highway crews, usually tasked with clearing the roads, were instead "directed to bringing relief to as many snowbound communities as possible in the shortest time..." For more about snow removal in 1952 see the November, '19 [Heirloom](#).

Following on its heels came a new storm adding "fresh fury to the four-day siege of record-breaking weather." (unidentified newspaper article in a scrapbook in the Placer Co. Archives)

Even in San Francisco it was a big deal with 80 mile an hour winds snapping trees, collapsing signboards and downing power lines. In San Francisco alone damage was estimated at one million dollars and "climbing hourly." Rains made 2,500 people homeless in the East Bay. (ibid)

It was not just the falling snow that hampered efforts. There were snowslides. Between Tahoe City and Truckee there was snow seventeen feet deep. It formed a "solid barrier, against which rotary plows made agonizingly slow progress." (ibid)

"Under average conditions, sufficient plow equipment is assigned to U.S. 40 to handle the notoriously heavy fall of snow expected in the Donner Summit area. The storm which broke into full fury January 11th was not, however, an average storm, and as drifting and low visibility prevailed on all roads in the mountain area..." Equipment remained on the job until "broken beyond immediate repair or overwhelmed in impassable drifts..." Eventually all efforts ground to a stop. Crews focused on digging themselves out and maintaining communication. Keeping the roads open was impossible. Then the City of San Francisco Streamliner was trapped at Yuba Gap. Road crews were spurred to "superhuman efforts".

Eventually the storm abated and the [Sacramento Bee](#) reported, "Motor vehicles are proceeding over the Sierra on Highways 40 and 50 for the first time in nearly a month." "The clouds [had] dropped eight feet of snow on the Sierra in less than a week... the storm king threw some 100 miles an hour gales at the highway crews, making the task of clearing the highways an impossibility."



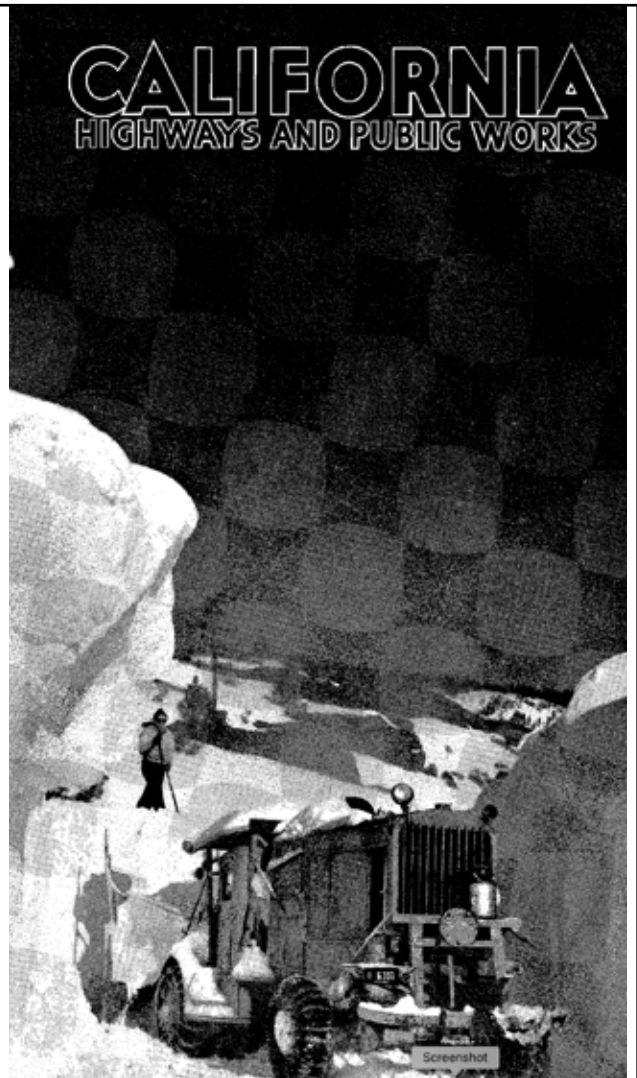
[Colfax Record](#) January 18, 1952. Traffic on Highway 40

Snow Depths

Listed below are a few of the recorded snow depths at Norden for December and January:

December 25, 1951..... 57 inches
 January 1, 1952..... 121 inches
 January 10, 1952..... 118 inches
 January 17, 1952..... 218 inches

During the period January 10th to January 17th a snowfall of 138 inches was recorded.



BLOCKADE

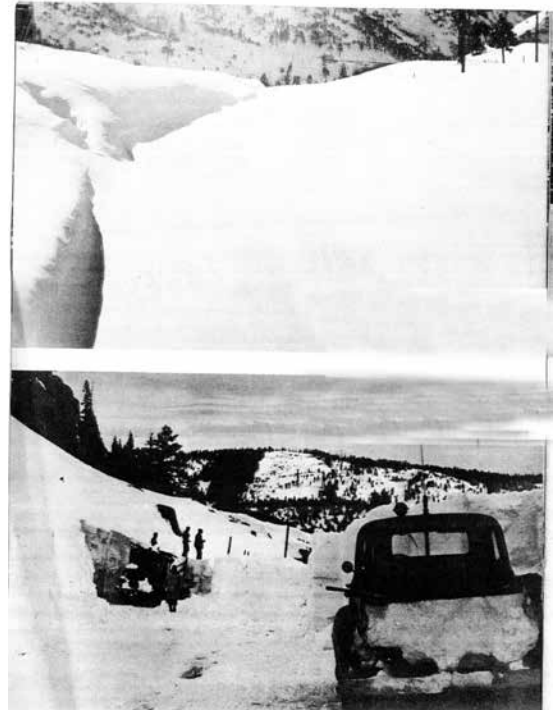
ALL CENTRAL TRANSCONTINENTAL ROUTES
 CUT OFF FOR WEEKS THE WINTER OF 51-52



LOOKING WEST AT BAXTER, CALIF. STALLED TR.



Ones on Donner Pass ran over mounds into the hole, blocking when the big drifts in the places are clear down up. Jan. 20, 1952.



From California Division of Highways and Public Works
 January/February, 1952

A Pot Pouri of newspaper descriptions from headlines and subheadlines of various newspapers:

Blizzards, snow smothered region, stranded greyhound bus, drifting snows closing highways. Trains rerouted by storms. Storm Smashed 50-year record. Poles down, power off as winds lash county. Snow traps Streamliner in Sierras, all traffic tied up closing of highways. 70-mile winds sweep Pacific coastal areas. Storm blasts coast as LA floods. Kids Hail Snowfall. Winter Doesn't Start Until Saturday, Nation Counts 252 Dead in Latest Series of Snowstorms. Snow depths at 16 feet at higher levels with more coming. 35 Tamalpais high school students snowbound for a week. Highway Crews Battle Blizzards. Ice Blasts Deep US to Florida, stationary storm "dumped rain in prodigious amounts. Record Yosemite snow

These headlines were because, "the weather bureau said... a fat storm which had been moving northeast suddenly lost its momentum and stood still..."

Those were just a few headlines pulled from everywhere over the early winter months. Then we get to the Donner Summit neighborhood.

SAN FRANCISCO: The Pacific Gas and Electric Co. had a warning today for skiers. Vice President D. D. Smalley said the mountain snow is so high that many electric power lines are covered. He advised skiers to stay on supervised ski runs and to avoid coming within seven feet of power lines. Three to six feet of new snow was added to the Sierra Nevada blanket during the week. The weatherman predicted clear skies and warm weather for the weekend. Highway crews expected to have Highways 40 and 50 cleared.

Madera Tribune 3/21/52



San Francisco Examiner, 3/19/52

WORST SNOW STORM IN 62 YEARS



The first helicopter to ever land in Colfax arrived here Tuesday afternoon. It landed in front of the Southern Pacific Depot. In charge of the Coast Guard helicopter was Lt. J. T. Hyman with Lt. R. W. Smith, as co-pilot. Other members of the crew were Aviationman First Class Dale Cushman and Chief J. A. Accomo.
Photo by Ralph Kaufman for Colfax Record.

Colfax Record

☆ EASTERN PLACER'S HOME NEWSPAPER ☆

44TH YEAR—NO. 10 COLFAX, CALIFORNIA, FRIDAY, JANUARY 18, 1962 6 PAGES 2 SECTIONS 5 CENTS

PICTURES OF STORM AND RESCUE WORK IN THIS EDITION

The Record is indebted to the Oakland Tribune and the Auburn Journal for pictures of the storm and rescue work which appear in this issue. Our sincere thanks to Fredrick J. Montague, assistant city editor of the Tribune and to Bill Cassidy, publisher of the Journal. We also thank Ralph Kaufman of the Colfax Charge for taking the helicopter pictures which appear on this page.

Kaufman's films were rushed to Henry Colander at the Placer Sheriff's office in Auburn, Tuesday afternoon where he developed them and then shipped the few films by CityJournal to Placer that night. The Placer Photo Engraving Co. made the cuts and they were back in Oakland Thursday morning.

We hope to have more pictures of the storm in our next issue.



PASSENGERS ARE SHOWN EVACUATING THE streamer, City of San Francisco, Wednesday on the



Here is a view of the Coast Guard helicopter which came up from San Francisco as it was getting ready to land on the railroad right of way near the local S. P. Depot. Ralph Kaufman took the picture for the Colfax Record.

STORY OF RESCUE OF PASSENGERS

A cheer rose from the crowd of several hundred people waiting at the local Southern Pacific depot, at 10 o'clock Wednesday night when the rescue train arrived here with the 195 passengers who had been snowbound on the City of San Francisco, near Crystal Lake for four days and three nights. The rescue train had left San

THE STORM STORY

The worst storm since the winter of 1893-94 has raged in the mountain area during the past week or more. While in Colfax, the snowfall only totaled 28 1/2 inches for the storm which began on Sunday, January 6th, in the mountain area east of Colfax, a heavy fall of snow fell during this period of time.

State Highway 40, which was closed on Friday night, January 11th, still remains closed as this newspaper goes to press Thursday evening. Railroad traffic has been halted since Sunday morning when a rotary snow plow turned over killing an engineer R. B. Raymond of Sacramento.

On Monday a total of 206 inches of snow was recorded at Norden by the Southern Pacific Company, the largest

WEATHER

Frequent rain, and occasional squall, tonight and Wednesday, rain heavy at times. The high temperature yesterday was 49, the low 41. The reading at 1 p. m. today was 50.

MADERA DAILY NEWS-TRIBUNE

Madera County's Only Daily Newspaper—Founded in 1892—Published Evenings Except Sunday

NEWSPAPER DIVISION GEN LIBRAI
UNIVERSITY OF CALIF.
BERKELEY 4, CALIF.
7-12-51

STORM SMASHES 50-YEAR RECORD

Applicants For Agent's Post Are Interviewed

Two applicants for the post of Madera county purchasing agent were interviewed by the board of supervisors this morning, and a third was scheduled to appear before the board at 2 p. m. today. It was not stated whether other applicants were to be interviewed.

Lay Deaths To Prison Break Try

SAN QUENTIN, Calif. (U.P.)—The governor of an integral district who declared

Trains Are Re-routed By Storm

Eleven Southern Pacific transcontinental trains were scheduled through Madera today except for San Francisco, beginning at 4 p. m. and continuing through the night, a Madera spokesman for the railroad said today.

The trains, delayed because of ice in Northern California, are being routed to the southern S.P. route through Merle and Hamilton, the spokesman said.

The Southern Pacific and Western Pacific transcontinental trains will go through Madera today afternoon, during the emergency, the spokesman said.



SLIDING EARTH UPROOTS HOMES at Hayward, Cal., as storm deluge California with the greatest amount of rain since 1890. Graded hills behind these houses began to

Poles Down, Power Off As Winds Lash County

By United Press

The worst storm in 50 years tore into California and Nevada today, turning the Sierra mountains into a "White Hell" with thousands unroofed, all transportation paralyzed and damage mounting with each new blast.

In Madera county, one of the strongest winds "in several years" blew over five power poles, and weakened a number of trees and caused minor damage throughout the valley area. The Sierra Nevada blizzard cut off electric power between Fish Camp and Wawona, Pacific Gas and Electric company officials said.

"Practically unintercepted" power service was maintained in the valley in spite of the collapsed poles, they added.

United Press reported that strong winds throughout the San

Snow Traps Streamliner In Sierras

SAN FRANCISCO—(U.P.)—(Ug) sliding, ski teams and wood set tracks battled up, both

The next page is a nice collection of what it looked like during the winter of 1951-52. There's a buried truck and another buried truck on the east side of Donner Pass on Highway 40. The "chains" sign is down at Laing's just east of Emigrant Gap on Highway 40. Workers sawing the compressed snow (Sierra Cement) with ice saws. A snowblower clearing Highway 40.

Winter



1952

Sampling of headlines and sub-headlines in various newspapers in 1952

(1/3/52) In many areas all existing records have been surpassed... 218 inches at Norden... Powder Snow at All Resort Areas, More Coming New Storm Smashes All Records

Sierra Towns Dig Out from Under Record Snow Oakland Tribune 1/17/52t

1/24/52 Record Breaking Snowpack averaging 15 to 20 feet or more

2/21/52 Donner Summit Snow Pack at 251 Inches (21 feet – “the greatest snow depth at this date since it [the weather bureau] began keeping records”).

3/12/52 The snow survey showed that snowpack in watershed ranges from 160 to 330 per cent of normal as of March 1.

3/21/52 The snow depth is the highest in many areas since 1911... "Snow depths now are at an all time record in almost all areas. The mark of 305 inches at Donner Summit in 1911 has been surpassed by the 308 inches now on the ground."

3/20/52 Snow at Donner Pass Now Totals 308 inches – “the greatest depth ever recorded. The U.S. Weather Bureau said it was still snowing... the old record was 305 inches set in 1941.” 3/12/52

3/20/52 Storms Add More Snow To Record Pack

(3/21/52 Mountain Area Battling Record Pileup of snow The worst accumulation of snow in 60 years. More than 1,500 persons were marooned. Supplies were running low, Major transcontinental highways were blocked – and more snow was falling.

(3/26/52 The depth on the pass over the summit of the Sierra Nevada was 25 feet – the greatest in history.

Everything was affected: The Placer Herald (5/23/52) even headlined "Record-Breaking Snow Delay Sierra Fishing" because of covered lakes and blocked roads.

Those were the headlines in newspapers across California and into that came the City of San Francisco Streamliner.

In the Sierra, one of the largest snowfalls of record brought 36 inches of new snow to Norden in 24 hours, making the total there 161 inches. Some 27 inches of new snow was measured at Truckee and 31 inches at Immigrant [sic] Gap and Highway 40 was closed.

Madera Tribune 1/12/52

The City of San Francisco Streamliner Trapped

“An ancient pass traps a modern Donner Party”

Life Magazine 1/28/52

“It started as a routine trip.” *Sacramento Bee* (1/20/52) but coming was the worst blizzard in fifteen years. Working to keep priority trains rolling Southern Pacific ran rotary plows that opened the rails. A slide on Sunday, January 13th at Yuba Gap closed the westbound tracks stopping the City of San Francisco’s westbound travel trapping 226 passengers and crew, fifteen cars and three locomotives. Drifts were 8-12 feet deep and a blizzard was raging. The engineer tried to back the train from the slide but it was stuck.

The day before, the previous day’s Streamliner had been stalled on the westbound tracks by a snow slide ten miles from Norden and had to be dragged back to the summit and put on the east bound tracks to go west.

Southern Pacific sent rotaries to the rescue and tried to pull the train free from behind. The rotary got close, using snowshed covered eastbound tracks to go west but the men had to dig the last two car lengths in through the snow to get to the rear of the Streamliner. The rotary broke and derailed closing the track. Another rotary plow came in clearing snow to the front of the train. At that point the rotary, which had no coupler with which to pull the train, had to go back to Emigrant Gap to clear the track for a locomotive to come and pull the City of San Francisco out going west. While the rotary went back to Emigrant Gap an avalanche covered the just cleared track. The blizzard continued during the rescue attempts. Winds, up to 100 mph howled. That first evening, the 13th, temperatures dropped to 22 degrees and snow depth was 206 inches (17 feet). Another crew tried from the front but the train would not budge.

“It felt as though we were buried alive.”

Harry Poise
Piedmont CA

Then a heavier storm came in with 100 mph winds blowing snow to cover the highway over the tops of fourteen foot tall snow



Location of stranded Streamliner *Life Magazine*

poles (for marking pavement edges). It was a white-out. Plows were buried in snow on the highway.

Donner Pass was closed on the 14th and the closure would last 26 days ("Snowbound Rescue" article in [Lincoln Highway California](#)). More rotary plows were sent in for the rescue of the train but were hit broadside by avalanche and stalled in place. The rotary that had gone back to Emigrant Gap to make room for a rescue locomotive, headed back to the train clearing the tracks. Another avalanche blocked it.

A caboose with 35 men arrived at the Streamliner. They started digging. Rotary plows starting moving snow from both ends of the stoppage. An avalanche killed one of the rotary engineers. There were then four of the railroad's rotary plows buried or out of service.

For the passengers inside it was an adventure. Morale was low to begin with but improved even as conditions deteriorated. Soon water was gone and with it the heat. Pipes froze, toilets were useless, and the electricity went out as the batteries ran low. Then the food had to be rationed. Nevertheless the passengers rallied. They sang, joked (reflecting on the nearby trapped rotary snowplows "that's a helluva place for a rotary meeting!"), and had an impromptu talent show. It turned out there was a lot of "undiscovered talent" among the group although "there wasn't a dancer among the whole group." (Harry Loynd, Detroit MI) They even set up their own government which made rules like no smoking or drinking in the crowded club car and dining cars. Many people gave up better positions to women and children in the "chair cars."

Southern Pacific contacted the army in San Francisco asking for the loan of three "weasels", some doctors, medical

For the finest streamliners East



Try the swift City of San Francisco streamliner—fastest thing on wheels to Chicago. Extra fare:
Or the scenic San Francisco Overland with through Pullmans to New York, Salt Lake City, Denver, Kansas City and St. Louis:



Garfield 1-1571
or
Templebar 2-4121

[San Francisco Chronicle](#) 5/4/52

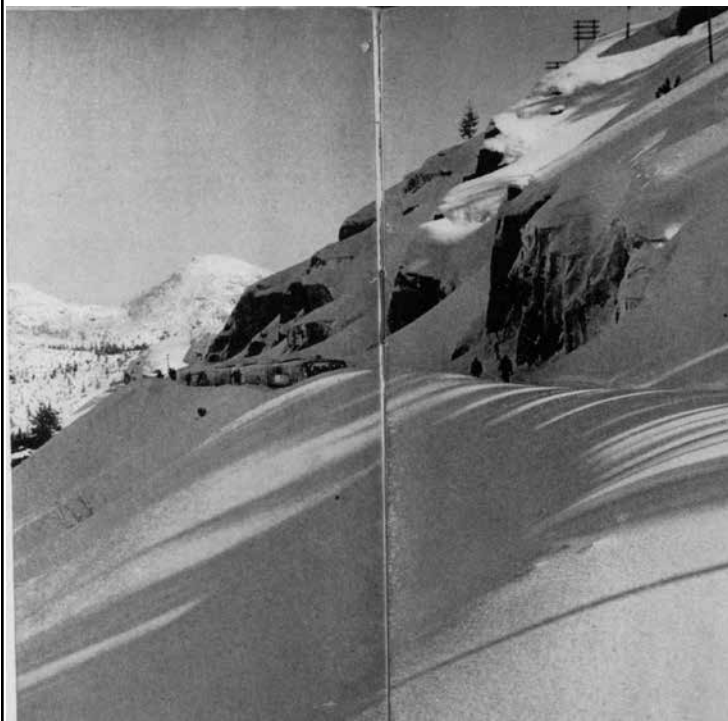
supplies, food, and fuel. An extra rotary was found to clear track to the stalled train so the army personnel and equipment could get close. The rotary ran out of fuel and water. The weasels were unloaded but quickly got bogged down in the new-fallen snow. Even down at the lower elevations the drifts were ten feet deep.

Thirteen volunteer skiers from Soda Springs's Donner Summit Ski Club, had also been recruited by Southern Pacific and arrived at the train with four hundred pounds of food and medical supplies. One of the skiers noted that the snow was fourteen feet deep when they arrived at the Streamliner and only the top third of the train could be seen. He walked through the train. There was no heat or light. Older people were bundled up and "younger folks were in the club car, taking it more or less like a lark. They were singing when I got back there."

A portable generator arrived from Crystal Lake (near today's Eagle Lakes exit from I-80).

Passengers wrapped themselves, huddling like refugees wrapped in extra clothing, bedding, upholstery and even window drapes for warmth. The second night according to [Life Magazine](#) there was singing (favorite songs: "I've Been Working on the Railroad" and "White Christmas"), poker games, a \$100 pool, and "extemporaneous campaigning by Republican women delegates heading to the National Committee meeting in San Francisco. They handed out lots of elephant pins and thought they'd converted everyone to one of Eisenhower, Taft, or Warren.

Col. Brugger, who was interviewed aboard the train by





Relief from the storm came on Wednesday the 16th and another rotary approached. A Coast Guard helicopter approached the stalled train with supplies and a doctor but high winds prevented landing. Supplies were dropped. The National Guard dropped parts for a broken snowplow.

On the 16th the men digging out the train stomped and compacted a thousand foot trail from the train to Highway 40. The road to Nyack had been gouged out by a lone state highway plow. (See page 15)

The highway opened in the late afternoon and people were led down, some wearing pillow cases with eyeholes for protection from the storm, and driven to Nyack in sixteen automobiles and trucks. Eight people were on stretchers. At the Nyack Lodge (today no longer there since the coming of the freeway) there was heat, food, encouragement and the ability to send telegrams. One passenger, J.C. Molder from Massachusetts, said "This is like escaping from an ice box. I hope I never have to go through something like this again."

"I've bundled with men I've never met before and never will again."
 Republican National Committee woman.
Time Magazine
 January 28, 1952

A special train of eight sleepers and two dining cars was brought up for the Sierra refugees. It arrived in Oakland Thursday, the 17th, at 3:41 AtM

There was one winner of the pool who got \$100 of which he kept \$10, gave \$10 to the kitchen crew and then the rest to the workers who had shoveled to keep the vents and exits open.

Later Thursday three hundred Southern Pacific workers along with bulldozer and a large crane arrived at the stranded

some reporters who'd skied in, said conditions were "pitiful, with no light, no heat, and no running water."

The generator generated carbon monoxide, making thirty passengers sick and porters had to break down the doors and windows of three compartments to rescue passengers who had passed out. Wood in the cars was used for firewood.

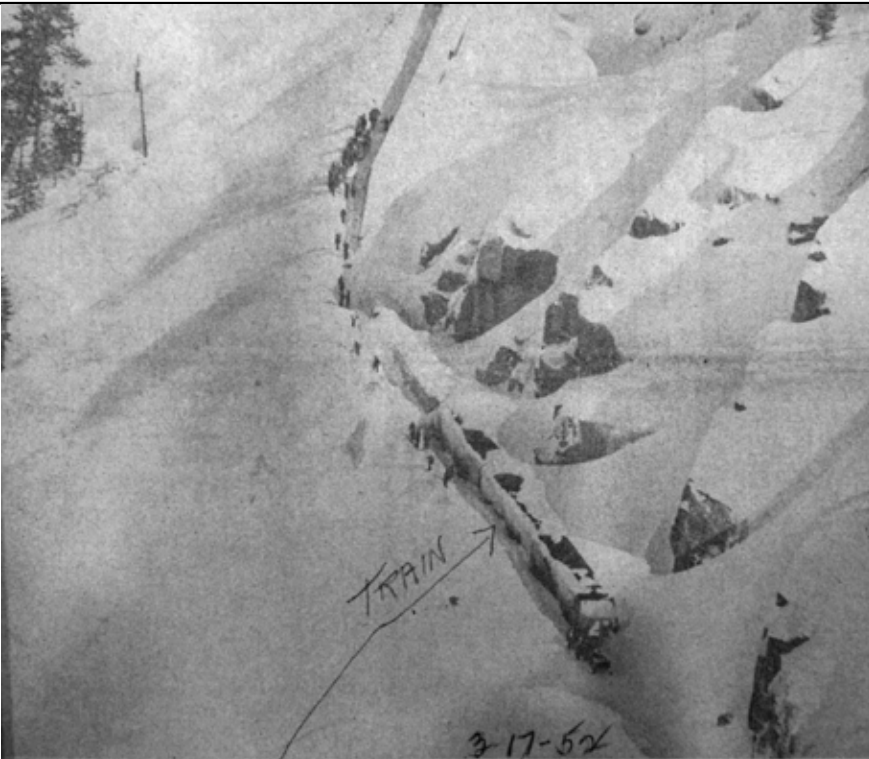
Imagine the smell of people kept too long in confined spaces with near zero degrees outside. It was cold and dark. Windows had to be left open for ventilation adding to the cold.

It was rugged. It was very rugged. It was cold and conditions were pretty miserable, said one passenger.

A relief train with supplies headed west from Reno. Another rotary headed out from Norden but ice sent it off the tracks. Supplies were moved from the relief train to dog sleds coming from Norden.

On Tuesday the 15th PGE crews on weasels brought in seven hundred pounds of food. The military weasels still could not operate.

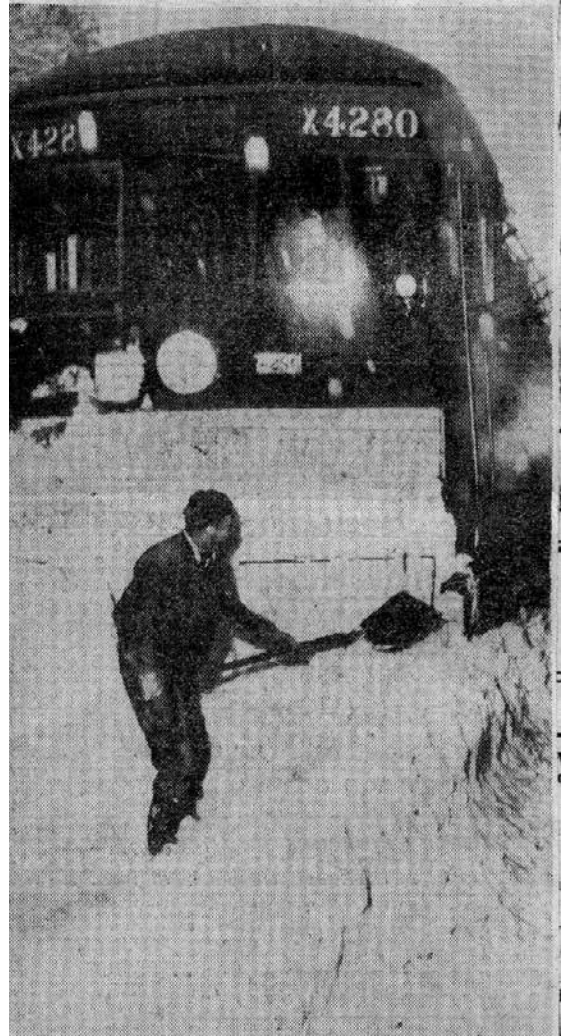




Streamliner to dig it and the trapped rotaries. Workers dug for thirty hours straight to free the Streamliner. Once the train and equipment were extracted it all went off for repair and Southern Pacific went to work on tunnel and snowshed entrances. In some places dynamite had to be used on the "Sierra Cement."

Then another blizzard struck. Normal operations did not resume until the 18th.

Upon arrival in Oakland the "long cold journey" came to an end "the greatest rescue operation in the history of the towering High Sierras" and a mardi gras spirit filled the air. Passengers overflowed with "laughter, singing, drinking, and general good fellowship." (from an unidentified newspaper in Placer County Archives scrapbook).



One vignette from California Highways...

"Tales of heroism, ingenuity and backbreaking labor are common among the State's highway men. One of the brightest is the story of the events that preceded release of the stormbound passengers of the Southern Pacific's City of San Francisco streamliner on January 18th."

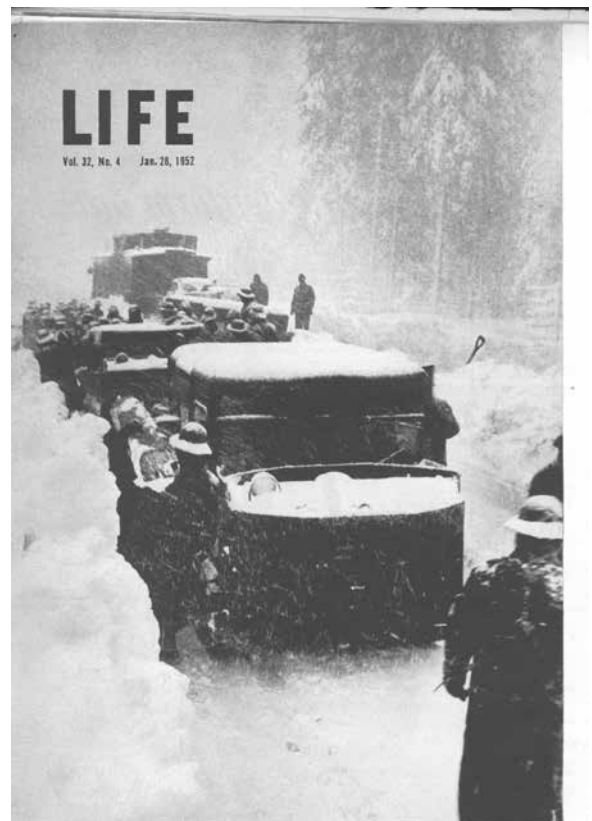
January 14 two men were stranded in push plows when the lead plow [or rotary – the story is inconsistent] of a little convoy "wandered off the edge of the highway... under conditions of zero visibility." The foreman at Yuba Gap's maintenance station fought blizzard conditions to get to the men. At midnight, having worked to free the plow all the men were exhausted, cold and hungry and so spent the night in a little lodge near Putts Lake (just a bit west from Emigrant Gap and Nyack). The next day "from daylight until 4 p.m. they labored with shovels to clear 135 feet of roadway" to get the machine back on the road. While they worked the road behind them, back to Emigrant Gap "had plugged." The windshield wiper failed.

"With weather conditions and the mechanical failure blinding the plow crew, Snider [the Yuba Gap foreman] used his intimate knowledge of the highway alignment to direct the convoy home via two-way radio to the rotary from his place in the following express truck.

The rotary reached Yuba Gap at 4a.m... a fresh crew took over..."



From Life Magazine (1/28/52). Above, passengers walking out from the train and down to Highway 40 for the five mile trip to Nyack Lodge. Left, the road gouged out of the snow enabling vehicles to get to Nyack. Below, U.S. Army Weasels.



People weret dropping like flies when the gas filled the Pullmans. I could see them from the cars I was in... One of the weirdest things was to have the crewmen come around every little while and shine flashlights in your face to see whether you were alive or unconscious.”

Mrs. F.H. Lee of Chicago

Ski

at

SODA SPRINGS

Ride Side-by-Side enjoy the NEW DOUBLE CHAIR LIFT

The SMOOTHEST _____ most COMFORTABLE _____ and SAFEST RIDE!

LEARN to Ski at the
BUD ZORICH SKI SCHOOL

Group and Private Lessons Daily

BUD ZORICH
Director
EDDIE COPPEL
Head Inst.

Eat At The
SNOWFLAKE

Good Food
Reasonable
Prices

"Added FREE Parking Area!"

NIGHT SKIING



Soda Springs Ski Corporation



BEACON HILL LODGE



SNOW SWIM SKI

BEACON HILL
Lodge
SODA SPRINGS

U.S. 40

All Year SWIMMING
WARM FILTERED WATER
CLEAR ENOUGH TO DRINK

Wintertime
Summertime
SWIMMING POOL

Relax ON TOP OF THE WORLD



- NEW dormitory accommodations;
- NEW complete ski shop;
- NEW rope tow to beacon;
- NEW beginners hill;
- NEW ski trails

DONNER SKI RANCH

ON DONNER SUMMIT
CAFETERIA - COCKTAILS
-AR- SKI SCHOOL
POST OFFICE
SODA SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

Book Review

Reviewed by Tom Burns

SNOW: A Scientific and Cultural Exploration

By Giles Whittell, ATRIA Books (Simon and Schuster) 2019

Snow is a fascinating and important subject, especially to those of us who enjoy it, who earn a living from it, or who drink the water it provides and stores for us. Giles Whittell is a life-long snowhound, who has traveled to many, if not most, of the important snow areas of the world. His wry, English humor leavens the topic and combines accessible scientific information with delightful stories of all aspects of this wonderful gift of nature.

The book is packed with data that will interest the most scientific-minded reader. How is snow formed? How many snowflakes can fall in an hour? Where does the most snow fall? How old is the oldest snow? What is the biggest snow storm ever? Was the Earth ever a snowball? And was it ever completely snow free?

But there are also delightful stories to illustrate the importance and the significance of snow in all areas of the world. Snow is not only a polar phenomenon, but also exists at or near the equator under the right conditions. Snow is obviously temperature related, but it also requires other conditions, including humidity, altitude, and wind. Whittell's journeys take him to all parts of the world in search of the elusive conditions for perfect snow.

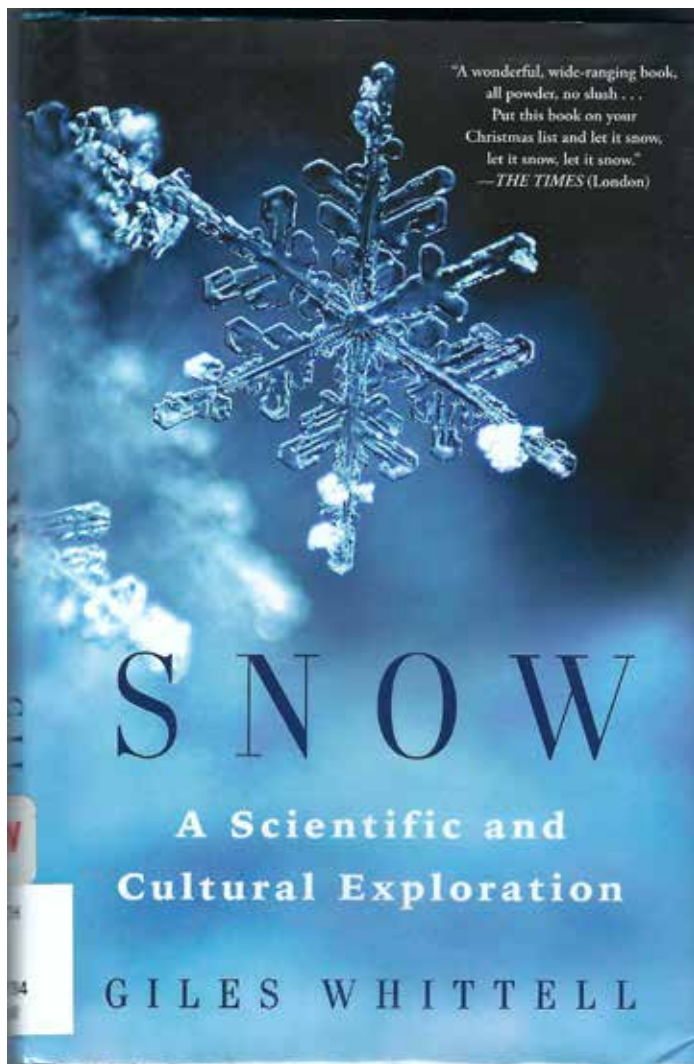
Whittell's primary interest is finding snow to ski on, but in his search, he also finds the facts needed to understand this important part of earth's water cycle. Sun evaporates ocean water (leaving the salt behind), wind carries it over land, altitude cools it, and snow results. This occurs not only in the cold parts of the Earth like Canada, Scandinavia, Russia, and Argentina, but also in mountains in the Himalayas, in Africa, in Colombia, as well as in many more conventional places known to skiers. In 2021 it even snowed in the flatlands of east Texas, and in the deep South.

It may be a surprise to learn that the northern tip of the Japanese island of Honshu has some of the world's most severe winter storms, with accumulations in excess of 30 meters (about 100 feet). In the US, the Weather Service reports that the snowiest area where people actually live year-round is Alta, Utah. Soda Springs, California comes in second with average annual snowfall in excess of 34 feet. When we complain about our telephone lines being buried, think about having three times as much snow!

Whittell relates his snow search to many literature and artistic sources. His mother read an excerpt from Laura Ingalls Wilder about snow in the Upper Midwest to him as an eight-year-old when his family was living in Nigeria. He says, "It fixed in my mind the idea of snow as a thing of beauty." He quotes numerous authors who wrote eloquently about snow, including Thoreau, Mann, Christie, Stevens, and, of course, Tintin in Tibet.

Artists who painted snow also figure in his stories. He shows how variations in climate, which led to variations in snowfall in Europe, influenced painters over the years. Breughel painted snow in the 16th Century, in the middle of the Little Ice Age. Then snow disappeared from art as the climate warmed. It wasn't until the weather cooled again in Europe in the 19th Century that artists again began to paint snow scenes. The exhibition *Impressionists in Winter*, featuring painters like Monet, Pissarro, Signac, and Renoir, shows that they began to see snow as a fit subject for art once again.

Movies also play a role in the story of snow. He mentions Stanley Kubrick's opening scene in *Dr. Strangelove*, showing an



ice-covered Russian island in the Bering Sea and then goes on to discuss research done on the island that has discovered an extinct species of small dogs that may have been used to pull sleds, possibly as part of an exodus from Asia to North America. But from Donner Summit perspective, an important movie is *The Spy Who Loved Me*, a James Bond movie that opens with a spectacular stunt performed by Squaw Valley resident Rick Sylvester.

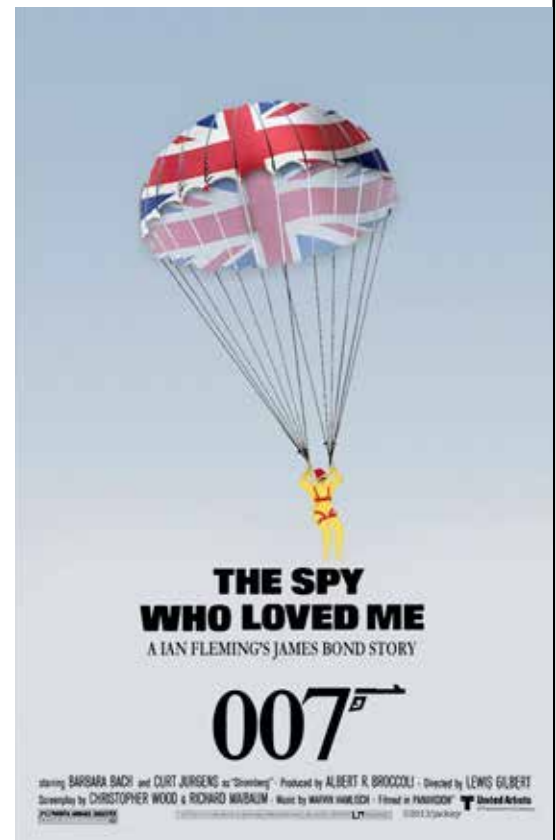
Squaw Valley and the Sierra Nevada get good coverage. Whittell recognizes the importance of the Sierra watershed to the economic health of California. And he recognizes the importance of Squaw Valley to the economic growth of the snow business. Alex Cushing was a visionary and a salesman par excellence. He enlisted Walt Disney to orchestrate the 1960 Olympics, which after a rocky (literally) start turned out to be a great success when the atmospheric river showed up at just the right time.

It is interesting to note that the book spends 6 pages on Alex Cushing's development of Squaw Valley and the 1960 Olympics and 12 pages on Rick Sylvester's classic jump. The jump took place at Mount Asgard on Baffin Island in Canada near Greenland. Sylvester knew that this location would be skiable and offer a lengthy parachute drop. Fortunately, the first take was a success. The movie opens with James Bond in bed with a Russian spy. He gets a call, jumps up, and skis off, chased by other spies, before heading straight off the cliff. The scene ends when the parachute opens to show the British Union Jack. The book dutifully mentions the Donner Party as a cautionary tale, but segues gracefully into the story of *The City of San Francisco* streamliner that got caught in the snow in January 1952 and was stranded for four days. The outcome was better than for the Donner Party because people had learned how to deal with the snow. That knowledge continues to improve today.

The book covers many of the major snow events of recent years, like the Snowmageddon he experienced in February 2010 in Washington, D.C. As Whittell writes, "for once I was in the right place at the right time." Everything shut down and store shelves were stripped of food and other supplies as people prepared for a long indoor stay. Only the Supreme Court continued to function, because they had provided 4-wheel drive SUVs to all of the Justices and their drivers. From personal experience, the one place you don't want to be in a snowstorm is in a city in the South, like Washington, Baltimore, Atlanta, Houston, or Dallas. They wait for the snow to melt, which usually doesn't take very long, not having any equipment to deal with it. Not only is this book full of information for lovers of snow, it is also a fun read and should be in every Donner Summit Library. Have you ever wondered:

- Are all snowflakes unique?
- Do they all have six branches?
- How many flakes are needed for a snowperson?
- How many snowflakes fall on Earth in a year?
- Is southern hemisphere snow different from northern?
- How do you build a snow cave?
- What is the fastest anyone has traveled on skis?
- What makes snow so slippery?
- What is the adiabatic lapse rate and why does it matter?
- How can you predict an avalanche?
- How do you survive an avalanche?
- How many people depend on snow for water?
- Where is the world's oldest snow?
- When will the last snowflake fall?

Read the Book for the Answers



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.

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>