

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

October, 2021 issue #158



## Robert Fowler and Donner Summit

The Heirloom covers all aspects of Donner Summit history. We've run stories on the many successful and some unsuccessful crossings of Donner Summit as well as a myriad of Donner Summit activities. There were even stories about going under Donner Summit, one by Alexii Von Schmidt and the other by the railroad, both of which never got underway – yet. Given that we've published 157 issues of stories over the years we're having to cast around for something new to satisfy our very discerning and particular readers' curiosity. (That we're looking for something new in an esteemed historical periodical is an interesting irony but I digress.)

Here we have a story of an attempt at Donner Summit, over Donner Summit, by someone of an adventurous persuasion.

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw revolutionary technological changes. Electricity came into homes changing home life. Electricity lit up the streets changing social lives. The electric motor, in innumerable iterations, made life easier and electricity changed entertainment. The gasoline engine changed the economy. There were social changes and political changes. Medical advances increased life expectancy. Society was changed by the automobile and the airplane was a wonder. Those, and more, were all big changes but two of those attracted the public's collective attention and imagination more than the others. The coming of the automobile attracted the public's participation as the wonder when it first rode down America's streets and then in the public's wider attention. There followed endurance trials and races that attracted huge numbers. Newspapers carried automotive columns exploring the various aspects of automobiles: travel opportunities, new products, race results, new models, who had done what, etc. Americans became car-crazy and it too changed the social structure and freed Americans to travel. The airplane did the same thing to wider audiences. People were fascinated by the new machines and the daredevils who flew them. They would come from miles around to see the barnstormers who would fly into town and do aerial exhibitions. It's hard to imagine now, but in the early days of flight people might gather by the thousands to witness the aeroplane. It's into this context we have to look at this story.

### FOWLER STARTS TRANSCONTI- NENTAL FLIGHT

LEFT SAN FRANCISCO THIS AFTER-  
NOON IN AN ATTEMPT TO REACH  
NEW YORK

Hanford Sentinel Sept. 14, 1911  
formatted as originally formatted

Robert Fowler was the adventurous individual and he aimed at being the first to fly over Donner Summit to get over the Sierra and then fly across the continent. Automobiles had been crossing the continent for years, why not an aeroplane? It was not just adventure that called him; there was a prize attached.

# Story Locations in this Issue

Carpenter Flat/Meadow pg. 6-7 pictures pg. 15 Donner Lake Camp pg. 10 Donner Summit Lodge pg. 11 Norden pg. 11



## 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 Saylor, 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

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

“A deafening cheer which rose simultaneously from the throats of the throng continued until the rasping whir of the biplane’s big propellers faded away in the air 300 feet from the earth.”

San Francisco Chronicle, September 12, 1911  
upon Robert Fowler's leaving San Francisco.

Fowler graduated from the Wright Flying School and crossed the continent by air in 1912. He took the first motion pictures of the Panama Canal by air in 1913. He participated in the 1915 Panama Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco flying a flying boat carrying tourists. He built an airplane factory in San Francisco and by the end of World War I he had turned out 275 aircraft. He was also a California boy, having come from Gilroy. For more about Mr. Fowler, generally, see the book review on page 12, The Life and Times of Robert Fowler.

Fowler’s cross-country attempt in 1911 was a big deal. He must have had quite a support system because he had four biplanes, a staff of “mechanicians,” and a special train to follow him with staff, parts, and equipment. The extra planes meant he could crash a few times and survive mechanical breakdowns (Hanford Sentinel 9/14/11). There is nothing said, though, about body part replacements.

For our story, we’ll start on September 11, 1911 as Fowler took off from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in pursuit of Wm. Randolph Hearst’s \$50,000 prize to be the first to fly across the country within 30 days before October, 1911. The City of San Francisco was also offering a \$10,000 prize to Fowler if he was successful. Fowler intended to make the trip across the country in 26 days following the tracks of the railroad. Since the railroad goes over Donner Summit, that meant Mr. Fowler would fly over Donner Summit. Since we can’t find anyone else who had flown over the summit we can assume Fowler would be first. There weren’t many with planes in 1911.

Newspaper articles drew thousands of people to “Bid the daring aviator good luck in his attempt to set a new world’s record

cross country flight.” What kinds of events today draw the same kinds of crowds? The Hanford Daily Sentinel (9/14/11) reported the AP news feed of Sept. 11 saying that the biplane left the ground and flew around Nob Hill and then headed north. The Weekly Colusa Sun (9/14/11) colorfully reported the “cheers of thousands [were] billowing up as Fowler sped over the city at 45 miles per hour. He waved to the “fighting mass of cruisers” in the Bay and “hummed steadily over the trail first worn by the Argonauts of ‘49.” A half hour later he returned flying past the Ferry Building, crossed the Bay, and was over Berkeley at 500 feet. There the residents cheered Fowler as he passed overhead. At 2:10 the AP reported Fowler making a good speed which we’d expect, but then a few minutes later that good speed was described as “about thirty mile per hour.” He reached Sacramento having covered ninety miles in an hour and a half which meant he averaged about 60 miles an hour. There he “swept over the dome of the State capitol” (Weekly Colusa Sun 9/14/11) and was greeted by “the roar of thousands massed at Agricultural Park.” He made a daring spiral and landed. Fowler’s support staff worked on his engine and Fowler walked over to the Capitol to say hello to the governor. Then it was on to Roseville, Loomis, Newcastle and Auburn where he landed because it was getting dark.

Here we have a small aside having to do with the popularity of flying. While Sacramento’s under sheriff and chief jailer were on the roof of the jail watching Fowler, one of the prisoners took the opportunity to escape by “aviating” “down four stories to the basement” in the elevator. He’d been a trustee. There is no word about recapture (San Francisco Call 9/13/11).

San Francisco Examiner September 11, 1911

Fowler took off the next morning and had rudder trouble at Gold Run. He couldn't turn and couldn't go up or down. He spiraled down and crashed. The repairs were apparently extensive taking many days and giving Fowler's competition in the transcontinental effort an advantage. James Ward had left New York for California aiming to win Hearst's prize instead of Fowler. Ward was having weather problems so if Fowler could get his plane going he could still earn the \$50,000. So now there is suspense – who would be first?

The San Jose Mercury News reported the September 13<sup>th</sup> AP news feed saying Fowler badly wrecked at Alta because of rudder and “refractory engine” trouble, crashing into two trees that broke his wings and propellers on Sept. 13. A new plane was being sent to him. The “dauntless birdman” was also injured, having been thrown from the plane and against the engine. Apparently there were spectators following his flight and a score rushed to Fowler's aid.

Afterwards Fowler, “undismayed at the abrupt manner in which his aerial journey... was cut short” was working with mechanics to rebuild his damaged machine. They planned to move to Colfax to continue work and there the Gun Club invited Fowler to become their guest. His arrival in Colfax must have been a great occasion because people were arranging excursions from neighboring towns to come and see Fowler's trial flights that would happen after the flying machine was fixed (Sacramento Union 9/14/11). Fowler had estimated that it would only be a few days before he was ready to continue.

Repairs at Colfax took almost two weeks though. There were complications and it was nice his mother showed up. The newspapers continued with daily reports about Fowler: the arrival of parts, Fowler's health, progress of repairs, etc.

Then the headlines screamed on at least some front pages what

you see below, center.

One man was dead and another hovered between life and death with two broken legs. A third was missing. The fire had broken out at 3 A.M. on the third floor of the Mountain View Hotel in Colfax. A considerable part of Colfax was destroyed along with the hotel before the fire ran into the brick wall of the Newman Grocery. From the hotel the fire spread

to the saloon, the meat market and then crossed the street to the bakery and a vacant store. Almost the whole town fought the fire and “in [the] front ranks was Robert G. Fowler.” Even the Southern Pacific raced a fire train from Blue Canyon to come to fight the fire and “aided, greatly in subduing the flames.”

Henry Hurst was standing in front of the hotel when the fire broke out. He saw smoke pouring from the windows and so rushed into the building to rouse sleepers. When people did not respond to his knocks he broke down their doors and pulled them from their beds. After rousing everyone he ran for the stairs but they were enveloped in flames. He ran down the dense smoke-filled corridor to the front

of the building and then plunged out the window to the sidewalk below. He broke both legs and was rushed to Auburn.

Robert Fowler had been awakened by his mother who had come to support her son in the transcontinental attempt. “No one fought [the fire] more bravely” than Robert Fowler. That was the 18<sup>th</sup>.

Meanwhile Fowler was still awaiting the arrival of a new rudder. In his trans-Sierra attempt he planned to follow the Yuba River and the old emigrant road to Soda Springs “keeping to the left of the snowsheds” steering “for Castle peak”. Fowler had two men at the summit “observing wind conditions and

## “FOWLER CAUGHT IN HOTEL FIRE Colfax Volunteers Battle With Big Blaze

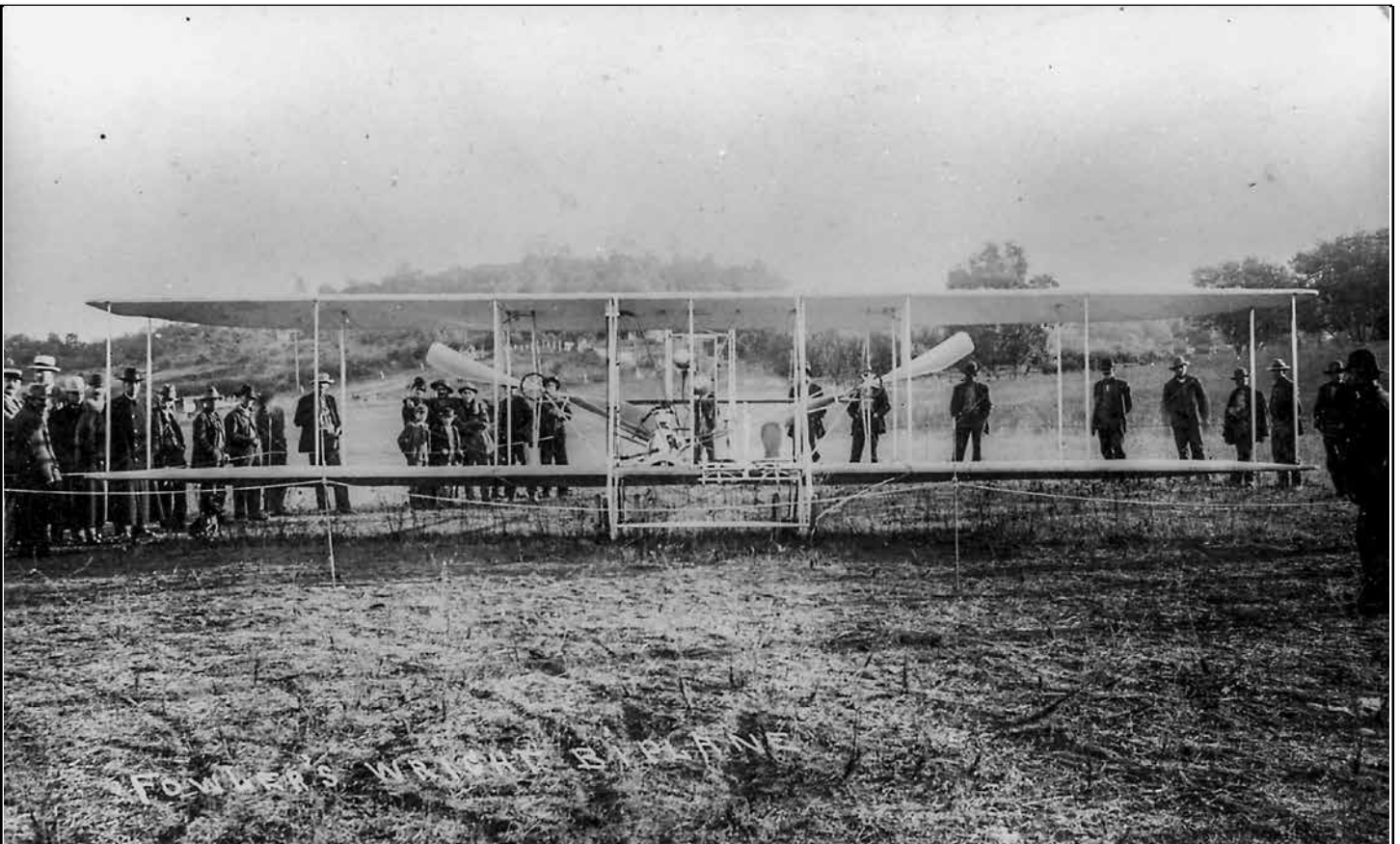
### Rescuer of Sleepers Hurt

Both Legs Broken by Plunging  
25 Feet to Escape Dense  
Smoke

ONE MAN KILLED AND  
ANOTHER IS MISSING

Aviator Aids in Rescue Work  
While Awaiting Time  
To Start Flight.

San Francisco Call  
September 18, 1911



"Fowler Wright BiPlane from the Jim Wiggins Collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society. Jim has no idea why his father had this picture in his album. Jim's father arrived on Donner Summit a decade or more after Mr. Fowler's flights to help build the Fordyce Dam.

reporting back via telegraph."

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of September The San Francisco Call's headlines reported that "Winds Baffle Fowler as he Bucks Sierra Engine Fails in the Rarified Atmosphere of Higher Altitudes". Attempting to cross Donner Pass Fowler had to turn back to Colfax and announced he'd try again with a larger motor. The headwinds were just too strong. "A rampart of mountains shouldered up through the mists this morning and beat back Aviator Robert G. Fowler." It was his first attempt since the crash on September 11. In other attempts Fowler had gotten as far as Blue Canyon on one flight and Cisco on another before having to turn around, his engine not strong enough to battle the winds to the Summit. The newspaper said the winds "slapped his air craft about like waves toying with a channel boat." There were "outlaw gusts" that "nosed the invader about the sky until his biplane bucked like a cayuse [A Native American from Washington or Oregon]." Fowler tried flying above the winds but the air was too thin and the plane would not "bite." The mountains had won, pending a new engine.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> it looked like Robert Fowler might finally conquer the summit. He'd repaired and tested everything over and over. He even used a wrist machine to strengthen his wrist muscles "against the jar of the levers." It was the same

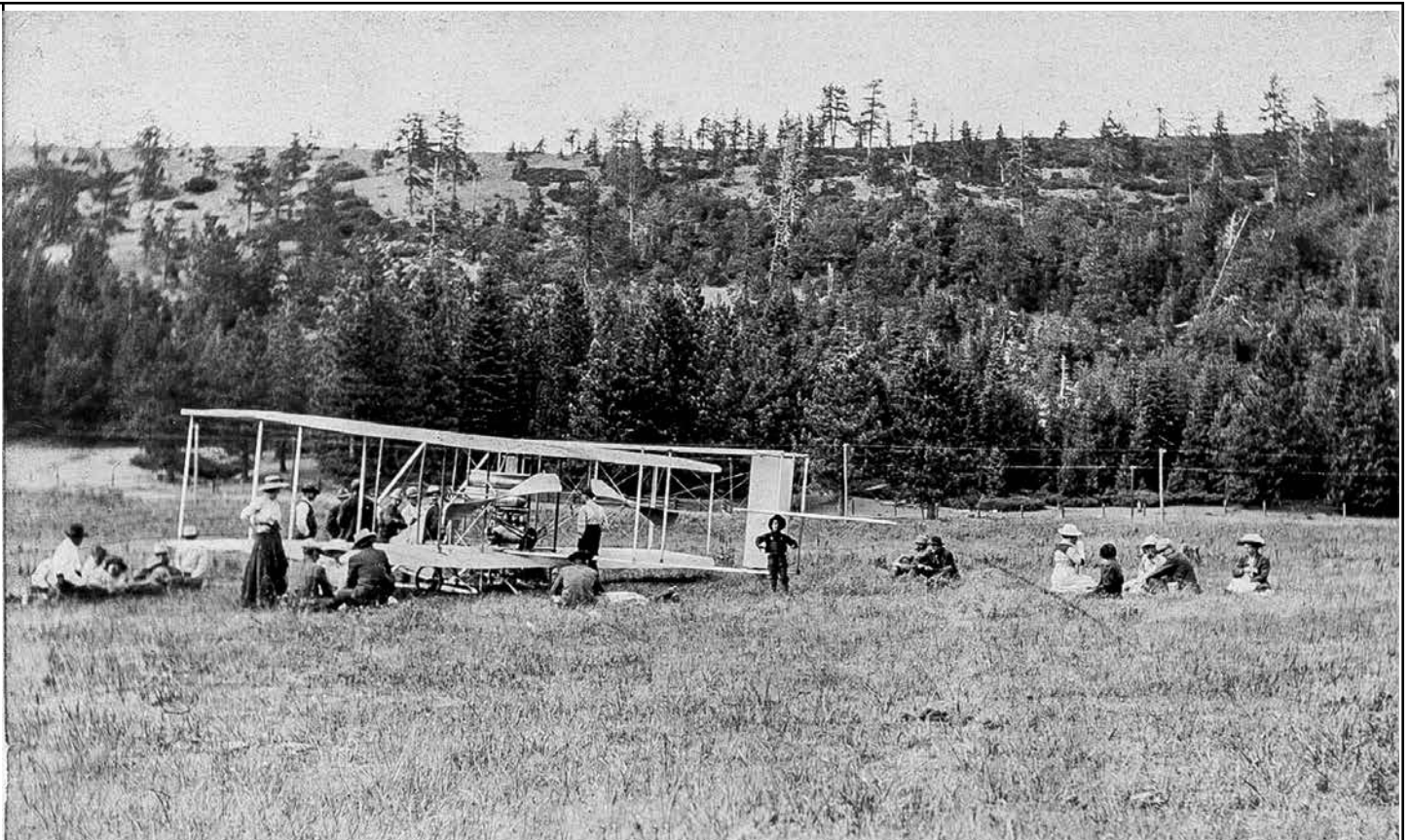
model wrist machine used by Gentleman Jim Corbett (early 20<sup>th</sup> Century champion boxer - isn't trivia nice? And note that kind of detail the Heirloom includes at no extra price). There had been some test flights as far as Emigrant Gap and everything "worked perfectly." He was ready to go the next morning. Weather was predicted to be "clear and calm" (San Francisco Call 9/27/11).

**BAD WINDS KEEP FOWLER ON EARTH**  
Hesitates to Tackle Sierra With Strong Breeze blowing  
Across Summit

The San Francisco Call reported on September 28 that strong winds prevented Fowler from continuing his transcontinental flight. This was his fourth attempt to get over the summit. Telegraph reports from the summit kept reporting strong winds and since there was almost no smooth ground for emergency landings, there was too much chance of wrecking. It was getting cold too. The plane was covered with frost in the morning and they had to use hot water to thaw out the water pump.

Fowler tried again the next day. When reports from the summit said the winds were down and it was perfect weather, Fowler raced to Carpenter Flat, below Emigrant Gap (the Laing exit from I-80 just east of Emigrant Gap), where





"Fowler Wright BiPlane from the Jim Wiggins Collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society. Jim has no idea why his father had this picture in his album. The father arrived on Donner Summit a decade or more after Mr. Fowler's flights.

his "mechanicians" were tuning the airplane. Fowler was off into the perfect weather and small breeze that was just enough to provide lift for the machine's takeoff. It was the best weather locals could remember ever in this season. He struck out for Red Mountain but then turned around gliding to a landing in the meadow. He landed "like a little potato bug," Fowler said. The engine had been missing and a new magneto was needed. Another delay.

On October 1, 1911 The San Francisco Examiner reported that "Fowler Abandons Trial to Soar Over Sierra. His Wright biplane just was not equal to the task. The "mechanicians had tried everything they could to get the engines to work well enough at the high altitude but there just was no way in 1911.

So Robert Fowler couldn't get over the Sierra. The technology of the time was just not good enough. It would be several more years before airplane design would enable the Sierra Crossing. Fowler though, went to Los Angeles and flew across the continent from there, winning Hearst's prize. During that flight he was the first to land the first airplane in Arizona. There is a statue in Yuma celebrating the October 25, 1911 event. Fowler went on to fly across the Isthmus of Panama, participate in more flying shows, help introduce aerial photography and fly passengers after WWI, among other aeronautical things.

The first flight across the continent was in 1911 but that went the easy way from New York to Los Angeles. Trans-continental flights in those days were not non-stop but rather a succession of short hops.

As to who was first to cross the Sierra in an aeroplane, we have to guess it was one of the early air mail pilots (see our July, '11, July, '20 Heirlooms)

Here's a little aside discovered while pursuing Robert Fowler. "Bud" Mars studied what had happened to Robert Fowler and planned to use what he learned to enable his attempt to cross the Sierra on Thanksgiving Day, 1911. He thought the reason for Fowler's failure was that the air was so thin at the "great heights over Donner Summit in the rarified atmosphere" that there was nothing left to mix with the gas. Hence Fowler was almost "powerless in the high altitudes." So Mars planned to leave Sacramento's Agricultural Park in the early afternoon, fly to Downieville to replenish his gas, and then proceed to cross the Sierra about twenty miles south of Beckwith Pass. After four and a half hours he planned to land in Reno. Beckwith Pass is about 2,000 feet lower than Donner Pass.

Following that flight, Mars was aiming to cross the continent to show that the northern route across the U.S. was feasible (Sacramento Daily Union November 16, 1911.

Naturally our research staff followed up the Daily Union article to see how Mr. Mars fared in his cross-country trip. Diligent searching eventually came up with a Grass Valley Morning Union article (December 8, 1911) saying that Mr. Mars was still planning on “Crossing the almost unsurmountable Sierras, a feat which baffled Aviator ‘Bob’ Fowler.” That was a week after Thanksgiving. Before tackling the mountains, Mars wanted to do some test flights around Grass Valley and Nevada City. The apparent purpose of the article was to raise money for Mars’ flight. Apparently, Mars had a manager who organized his many flying feats and the manager had written the Chamber of Commerce soliciting funds. Given that there are no news accounts of Mars conquering the “almost unsurmountable Sierra” we initially guessed that the Chamber was not enthusiastic about the project.

Then we came across the Placer Herald’s December 16, 1911 article. It said the Southern Pacific Co. was going to sell round trip tickets between Auburn and Sacramento, December 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, good for returning on the 18<sup>th</sup>, for one-third fare. The tickets would be sold on account of the Aviation Meet to be held in Sacramento on Sunday, when Bud Mars, a “nervy aviator” would try to get up into the air 11,000 feet high.

On December 17 the story got better. The Sacramento Union reported that JC McAuliffe, who was an aviator, was pretending to be “Bud” Mars. He was exposed when the real “Bud” Mars showed up in San Francisco. At that point McAuliffe insisted there were two “Mars.” The air meet advertised in the Placer Herald, turned out to be a failure when the winds proved to be too powerful. That might tell us why “Mr. Mars” did not cross the Sierra and then the continent. One might wonder about how much money he did collect as the fake Mars. The same day the presumably real Mars was in Stockton doing a flying exhibition (Stockton Independent 12/17/11).

While all that’s interesting, it’s not Donner Summit and really has no place in the Heirloom.

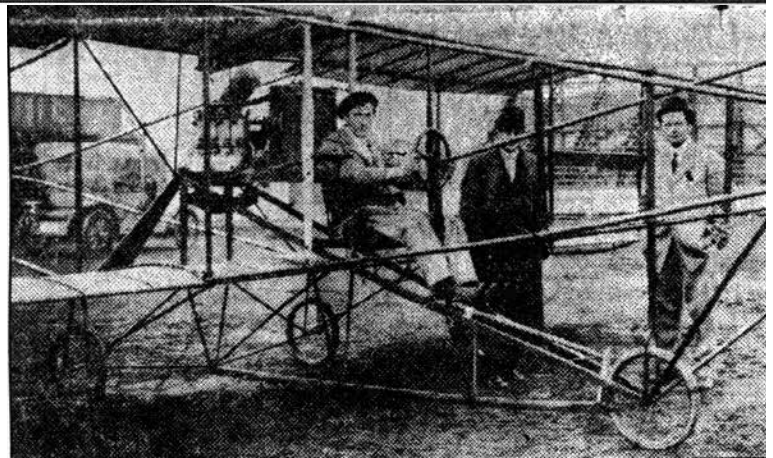


Fowler in his aeroplane

Fowler at Carpenter's Flat



Fowler flying at Auburn



Fowler in his aeroplane



# FOWLER CAUGHT IN HOTEL FIRE

## Colfax Volunteers Battle With Big Blaze



Robert C. Fowler, the aviator, and his mother, Mrs. Thomas Fowler, by whom he was aroused from sleep to fight flames.

### RESCUER OF SLEEPERS HURT

Both Legs Broken by Plunging  
25 Feet to Escape Dense  
Smoke

ONE MAN KILLED AND  
ANOTHER IS MISSING

Aviator Aids in Rescue Work  
While Awaiting Time to  
Start Flight

COLFAX, Sept. 17.—One man is dead, another hovers between life and death with both legs broken as a consequence of his heroism, and a third is missing, as a result of fire, probably of incendiary origin, that broke out here at 3 o'clock this morning on the third floor of the Mountainview hotel.

Considerable part of the town was destroyed before the fire burned itself out against the brick walls of the Newman grocery. The loss is about \$20,000.

The blaze was conquered finally by a brigade of volunteers composed of practically the entire population.

Robert Fowler and his mother  
San Francisco Call September 18, 1911

### \$20,000 Fire in Colfax.

Colfax.—One man is dead, another hovers between life and death with both legs broken as a consequence of his heroism, and a third is missing, as results of fire, probably of incendiary origin, that broke out here at 3 o'clock Sunday morning on the third floor of the Mountain View Hotel. A considerable part of the town was destroyed before the fire burned itself out against the brick walls of the Newman grocery. The loss is about \$20,000.

Truckee Republican 9/23/1911

# ADVICE INSTRUCTS FOWLER ON AIR CURRENTS OVER SUMMIT

Mrs. Will Keenan Has Talk on  
Aerial Navigation With  
Aviator Fowler at Alta.  
Surprised Birdman With  
Her Knowledge

Mr. and Mrs. Will Keenan of Truckee, who have been visiting friends in Gold Run for the past week, left Wednesday in their auto for Sacramento, where they will make their home, says a Gold Run correspondent to the Bee.

In Mrs. Keenan Superior California will very likely have the honor within the next year of presenting to the world a Native Daughter as a candidate for aviation honors.

While the desire to navigate the air is in its embryonic state, at the present time, it is sure to develop rapidly and within a year will have blossomed into a real attempt at aerial navigation.

Mrs. Keenan had quite a talk with aviator Fowler at Alta. She gave him many valuable pointers regarding the air currents near the summit and surprised the birdman with her pointed questions respecting aeroplanes and with the amount of knowledge she displayed in its mechanism.

Mrs. Keenan has for the past four years been most enthusiastic over motoring. During that time she has covered close to 10,000 miles and nobody has been at the wheel but herself.

This little woman is well qualified to attempt the more difficult art of piloting an air craft. She is cool under trying circumstances; daring but not to a point of recklessness and has a knowledge of mechanics that very few women can boast of. Besides, she is independently wealthy and can gratify her desire when it happens to suit her fancy.

Truckee Republican September 23, 1911



# Beauty in a Box

I don't know how I stumbled across this which we found while searching for Donner Summit related stories in Frank Leslie's Nineteenth Century illustrated weekly. It was during a search for something that would satisfy readers' curiosity. I also don't remember how I decided to read it because it would seem to have nothing to do with Donner Summit.

Then as I got into the story I realized that the protagonist crossed Donner Summit on the transcontinental railroad. There's nothing about that but the way she got to be on the train over Donner Summit is a funny story. The article, or versions of it was carried in several newspapers in the Midwest and in New York state and one in California ([The Sentinel](#) in Red Bluff). We've shortened the story a bit in the retelling.

The train from Virginia City pulled in to the station in Reno and there baggage was switched from the Virginia and Truckee railroad to the Central Pacific. Among the baggage arriving was a wooden box 16 inches high, 32 inches long, and 22 inches wide.

There was no one there to claim the box and so it was thrown into the baggage room. The baggage master stood it up and rolled it into storage. It was first weighed at 132 pounds.

The box was next rolled carelessly into a corner but as the baggage master turned to leave it he heard a faint moan and then another. He looked more closely and found two holes drilled on one side and two more at each end.

The baggage master opened the box and a young insensible Chinese woman fell out. She had been banged up and even put upside down on her trip to the corner of the baggage room. Cool air soon revived her and the room's door was left open to allow more air to enter. At that point a Chinese man arrived and when the woman saw him "her face became wreathed in smiles, and she stepped forward as if to throw herself in his arms." He stepped back.

An interpreter was sent for and her story was told. She was not yet eighteen and had been brought to America from China the year before. She came to Virginia City and fell in love with Ah-Kim. He tried to purchase her freedom but did not have the necessary \$300. The escape plan was to put the young woman in the box on the train and send her to Auburn. There one of her uncles owned a store. Ah-Kim was the Chinese man the young woman had tried to approach. He had wanted to send the box all the way to Auburn but did not realize he had to check it on beyond the end of the Virginia and Truckee railroad.

Ah-Kim and Ah-Youm (the young woman) were put in the smoking car of the westbound overland and there the story ends in the mid-west and New York.

This first version came from [Indianapolis News](#) (June 21, 1878) and various other papers as well as [Frank Leslie's Boys' and Girls' Weekly](#) (October 16, 1880)

In Red Bluff, the [Sentinel](#) published an entirely different story just a bit earlier on June 15, 1878. That comes next.

A great excitement has been caused among the Chinese here by a remarkable case of kidnapping. About two weeks ago a Chinawoman was stolen from Carson [City] and brought to Virginia City. The Carson Mongolians got upon the track but those of Virginia were determined not to lose their prize. Accordingly, last evening, they boxed up the woman preparatory to shipping her out of the country. The box was taken by an expressman from Ham Wing's wash-house on the divide, and reached the depot so late that there was not time to check it through to its destination, Auburn, California, so it was checked to the Virginia and Truckee Railroad agent at Reno. The agent at that place discovered that the package was considerably overweight and while talking to the Chinaman who had charge of the same, heard groans emanating from the box. An officer was sent for and the box opened, when the Chinawoman was discovered in an almost dying condition. She was taken from the box and the Chinaman accompanying her arrested.

One might think that the stories are about two different incidents but the dates are only a week apart and how many Chinese women got boxed up in Virginia City and rescued in Reno?

In the first article we have a romantic story and would like to know more. Did they get to Auburn? Did the uncle greet them? Did the couple live happily ever after or did Virginia City gangsters track them down?

The second leaves even more for wonder. Who stole her from Carson City and why? Why was she sent in a box to Auburn? Who was the Chinese guy accompanying her? What happened to her?

Further searching turned up the [Placer Argus](#) for June 15

which said the story was “another phase of Mongolian devilry.” A woman was kidnapped at Virginia City or Carson and put into a closely nailed box just like merchandise. The box was shipped by special freight and prepaid to Reno. At Reno the box was placed wrong side up and “the poor creature inside, who was uncomfortably cramped, and in all probability nearly suffocated, was heard groaning.” This occasioned the box to be opened and “the unfortunate Chinawoman was liberated.”

The young woman and the man with her, who was on the train, “were taken back to the place when they came.” The box went on to Auburn where it was measured at 17 1/2” deep, 22” wide, and 29” long. The woman had had a few crackers with her. The article ends with “What may we not expect to hear next?”

# From the DSHS Archives



The postcard above, front, and to the right, was mailed from Gelatte (Donner Lake's west end) but the date has been obscured by the placement of the stamp.

There are Donner Pk. and the snowsheds in the background. The resort, Donner Lake Camp, sat about where the west end beach is today.

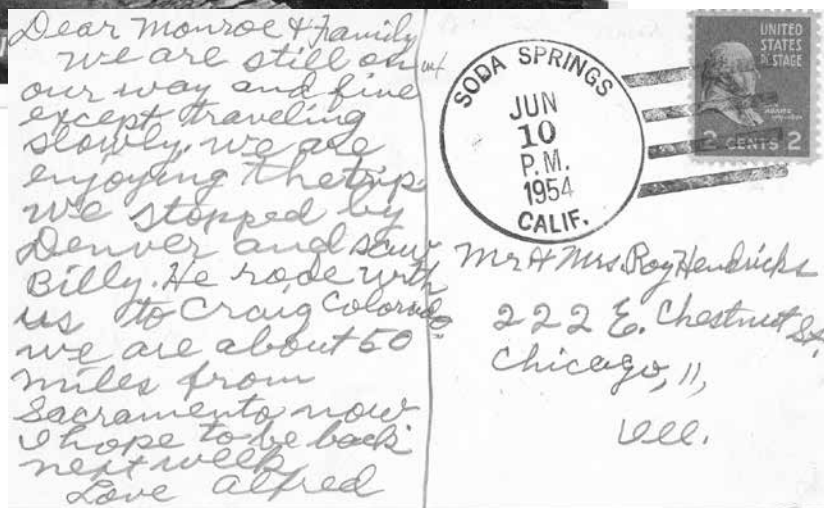


# From the DSHS Archives



NITE DONNER SUMMIT

Donner Summit Lodge, June, 1954



The railroad was big industry on Donner Summit. Here are the Norden snowsheds on the left and the worker housing on the right. Most of the sheds and all of the housing are now gone due to automation. Today no railroad workers are needed full-time on the summit.

Date uncertain.



# Book Review

## **Life and Times of Robert G. Fowler**

1999 Maria Burden 156 pages

Robert Fowler is a forgotten air pioneer – but very worth remembering. Here we violate our rule that books have to have some relationship to Donner Summit. That’s why you subscribe. Robert Fowler only almost came to Donner Summit but he did get part way over Donner Summit so our rule has not been violated egregiously.

Fowler was born in 1883 in San Francisco. He received his first automobile at age 18 and became a mechanic, as all automobilists had to be in those days, and participated in distance races. All early automobilists wanted to test themselves and their machines. Fowler set the record for the San Francisco to Los Angeles run at 14 hours.

He once beat Barney Oldfield, a famous racer, in 1904 and followed with fascination the Wright Brothers. By 1910 his focus had shifted to aeroplanes from automobiles.

At the same time William Randolph Hearst offered \$50,000 to the first person to fly across the country in one airplane within thirty days and by October, 1911. The contest would help increase circulation for his newspapers.

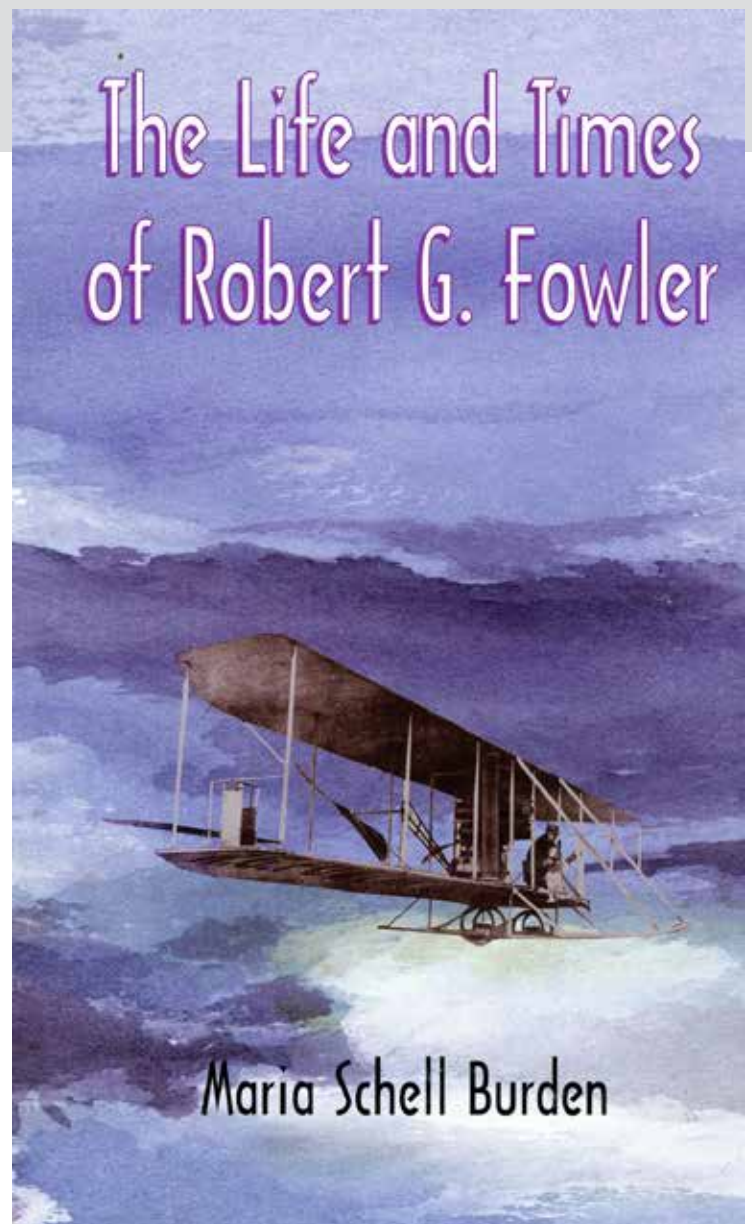
Fowler convinced the Cole Motor Co. president to advance \$7,500 so Fowler could buy the “most reliable aircraft of it’s [sic] time.” It would be named the Cole Flyer and as Fowler used it to win Hearst’s prize the auto company would reap a lot of publicity. Fowler was the first official entrant. His route was to be San Francisco to New York, right over the Sierra and Donner Summit. The Wright Brothers tried to convince him to take the southern route and avoid the Sierra but Fowler was adamant. Fowler planned to follow the railroad using it as his “iron compass.” Being over the railroad would make getting replacement parts, assistance, and fuel easier.

As part of the preparation Fowler traveled the railroad route from Colfax to Reno scouting out emergency landing sites.

On September 11, 1911 a large crowd gathered in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park to see Fowler take off. He arrived in Auburn just at dark having averaged 54 mph. The next day he left Auburn for the summit after waiting in vain for the weather report. It was “blowing a gale at the summit” the report said when it arrived shortly after Fowler’s departure. He passed Applegate, Colfax, Cape Horn and Alta and then developed mechanical problems and crashed. “The Cole Flyer was demolished.” The plane was taken to Colfax for eleven days of repairs.

On September 23 he left Colfax and headed again for the summit but the winds were too strong. He could make no progress so it was back to Colfax. He changed motors for a more powerful one.

The next day he was off again and got to Cisco at 1:42 but his motor quit. He made it back to Carpenter’s Meadow below Emigrant Gap where he set the plane down.





Winds, rain, ice, cold weather, and snow kept him grounded until September 28. Then there was mechanical trouble which was fixed. There was more mechanical trouble. Then there was snow. There was not enough time to make Hearst's deadline so Fowler gave up the Sierra crossing.

Fowler next tried to do the transcontinental crossing from Los Angeles. He had various mishaps, which have nothing to do with Donner Summit so we won't report those here. He worked his way across the country doing exhibition flying finishing the journey in Florida on February 8. He was the second person to fly across the country.

The book goes on to talk about Fowler being the first to fly non-stop across the Isthmus of Panama. He then did public presentations, built airplanes in New York, founded the Fowler Airplane Corporation in San Francisco, got a government contract to sell airplanes to the military during WWI, had his factory destroyed by fire, sold and serviced airplanes, divorced, got married again, sold autos, and died in 1966. What a guy.

## **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.

# DESTRUCTION OF THE CASCADE BRIDGE

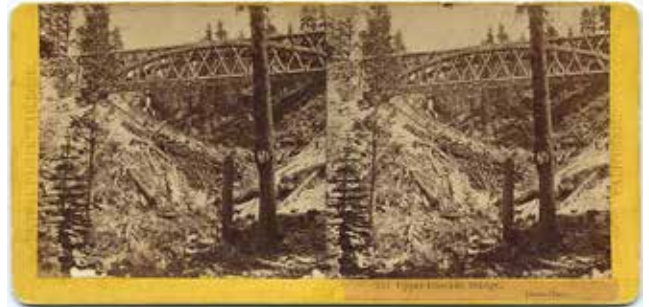
Trains Delayed in Consequences and All  
Freight is Cancelled

Fire was always a worry for the railroad. To quickly stop fires there was a lookout on Red Mountain. The view from there of almost the entire expanse of snowsheds leading up the west side of the summit is amazing. When the lookouts saw smoke they phoned Cisco on the first telephone in California. Cisco telegraphed the fire trains, the boilers of which were kept at full pressure and the fire trains would rush off to the fires.

Snowsheds, installed because snow is a problem on Donner Summit, sat and baked all summer making them tinder dry. Forest fires or sparks from the locomotive smoke stacks could set hundreds of yards of snow sheds ablaze. Fire could get so hot they twisted the rails. When the fires raged the transcontinental railroad was shut down.

Fires were reported regularly in the press of the time. The Sacramento Daily Union carried one such report on September 17, 1889 a month after the fire started.

A big forest fire had been started where a “camping party” had let a fire get away from them. It spread rapidly in the surrounding timber and then took a half mile of snowsheds, “totally destroying them.” The week before the report, but talking about the same



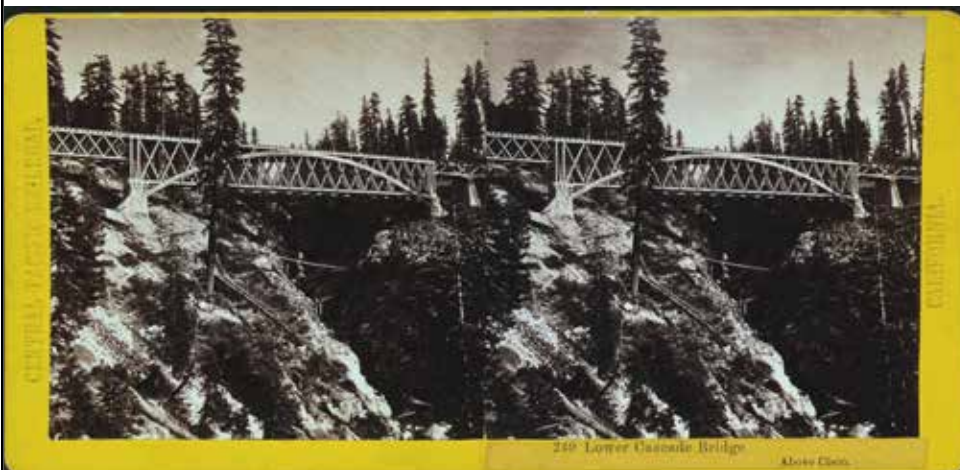
Above Alfred A. Hart #251 and Left #249 Cascade Bridge twenty years or so before the fire.

fire, three fire trains were on duty but despite their efforts the fire “entered upon the domain of the railroad company” and the Cascade bridge caught fire and was destroyed and a mile of snowsheds went with the bridge. The destruction of the bridge brought railroad activities to a halt.

When the fire was finally out “a large force of track-layers were put to work relaying the damaged track...” “The bridge, however, could not be replaced so easily as it was 400 feet long and over 10 feet high.” A road had to be built around where the former bridge

had stood and “About 250 Chinamen were put to work on this latter job.” The Union said “Five hundred men are at work on it and are making rapid progress.”

Meanwhile all freight traffic was stopped and, this is unclear in the article, passenger traffic continued with passengers transferring across the break in track.



Cascade Bridge today, right, by George Lamson - all steel construction.





# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Everywhere you go on Donner Summit there is something from the old days.

Here are two examples of Lincoln Highway rock work. The top is from Cisco Grove and the bottom is from Big Bend.

As you travel I-80 going east and get to the Eagle Lakes exit, look along the roadway, right, for other examples.



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.

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