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The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

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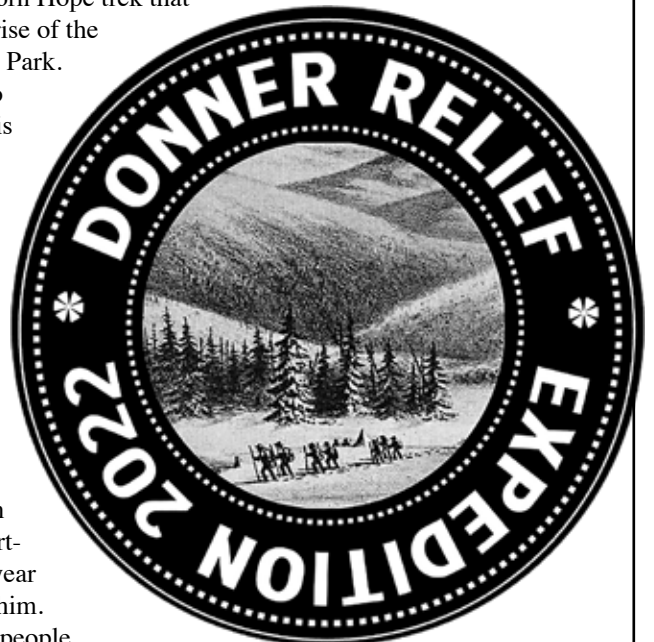


Demisemiseptcentennial The Donner Party Relief Expeditions 2022 Reprise

When we came across the first word in the title, demisemiseptcentennial, I wanted to use it and fortunately the Donner Relief Expedition of 2022 gives us the opportunity. As everyone knows, demisemiseptcentennial is the term for 175th anniversary. 2022 will be the demisemiseptcentennial of the relief parties that went into the Sierra to rescue the Donner Party. Last December you will remember that four extreme athletes did a reprise of the Forlorn Hope trek that started the Donner relief parties. Those four athletes will be doing a reprise of the relief parties' route this month from Johnson's Ranch to the Donner State Park. That trek will be the subject of next month's Heirloom. You may want to participate this month in some way, though, so keep reading. Most of this month's Heirloom is devoted to the background and the original relief parties which went right over Donner Summit on the way to save the survivors of the Donner Party and then right back over on the way back to California.

First, you're going to want to go to the December, '20 and January, '21 Heirlooms if you did not read about the reprise of the Forlorn Hope trek last December and do not know of the Donner Party's Forlorn Hope. A quick reminder: the Forlorn Hope consisted of fifteen people who left Donner Lake on December 15, 1846 in a quest to get help from California for everyone else left at the lake. It took 33 days for the group to get to Johnson's Ranch near today's Wheatland. Only seven survived. When the first person, William Eddy, reached the ranch supported by two Indians, he knocked on the door of a small cabin. Seventeen year old Harriet Ritchie answered that door and broke into tears at the site of him. Others later followed Eddy's bloody footprints back to find the other six people. The Forlorn Hope's reaching California set in motion four relief parties that went into the Sierra to rescue the rest of the surviving Donner Party. The bravery and tenacity of the Forlorn Hope and the heroism of the rescuers exhibit the very best of the human spirit and make a compelling story.

We should set a little anticipation well. Not only will next month's Heirloom cover the 2022 reprise, it will also have the story of The Tell Tale axe. That's not a Halloween horror story. Stay tuned.





ARRIVAL OF RELIEF PARTY, FEB. 18TH 1847.

19th Century print, "Arrival of the Relief Parties." There are various sources. This one comes from the Society of California Pioneers' copy of the [History of Sutter County](#)

Setting the Stage

In the history of the Donner Party December, 1846 was important. Most of the party had arrived at what would be called Donner Lake on October 31 (the rest of the party, including the Donners, was at Alder Creek, seven miles away). Some members of the party tried to get over the pass right away but failed. The snow was too much and people were dispirited and exhausted. On November 3, 13, and 22 there were more attempts to escape the coming winter as people tried to get over Donner Summit, but they all failed. It's hard going uphill at altitude sinking through the snow with each step. It's harder when you're tired, cold, desperate and have little food. The November 3rd attempt exemplifies the problems. Clearly there was an urgency to getting over the summit. Winter had arrived. Some of the party were too panicked to even make the attempt to leave camp. Some tried to get over though, perhaps wishing they'd gone over a few days earlier when there was less snow. The animals were weak. There was three feet of snow on the ground. The

animals could not pull the wagons so the oxen were packed with wagon contents. What could be left behind? There were arguments. The children had to be carried. They pushed through the snow. Charles Stanton and one of John Sutter's Indians went ahead and made it to the top of the pass breaking trail in deeper snow hoping they were on the right route to the top. The snow was chest deep at the summit but they'd made it. They returned to the rest of the party to galvanize them for the assault. Everyone was resting around a flaming dead tree. There was a measure of warmth. They would not go. Tomorrow would be soon enough. They were exhausted.

That night it snowed.

The Donner Party was trapped at the lake that would be named for them. The snow was just getting deeper and the food was running out. This was beyond what they had ever

experienced, ever heard of, or even ever dreamed of.

On December 15th fifteen members of what would be called the Forlorn Hope left Donner Lake for California. Seven survived the thirty-three day ordeal.

The news of the Forlorn Hope's arrival in California set in motion four relief parties going to Donner Lake. As news spread money was contributed by the people in California and supplies, horses and mules were purchased. People who could have easily stayed comfortably in California, with plenty of food, would endure the hardship of carrying heavy packs uphill through the snow. They would endure hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake. Meanwhile the people trapped at the lake had been reduced to eating the ox hides reduced by boiling to "a pot of glue" according to Virginia Reed (Donner Party Chronicles - DPC pg. 267) that had covered their inadequate cabins. The snow just kept falling.

Eventually four rescue parties set off to cross the mountains to Donner Lake. The first, consisting of fourteen men, left Johnson's Ranch on February 5, traveling ten miles, the "roaders often miring down horses & mules." (DPC 275) They had sixty-five miles to go and seven thousand feet in elevation to climb. Only seven would reach the lake carrying fifty pound packs and having left their pack animals when the snow got too deep.

The first relief party arrived in Summit Valley on February 18th. They'd traveled eight miles that day and five the previous. Snow was thirty feet deep on the summit but that's not really an issue because generally one can walk on snow if it's packed or traveling is done at night when the snow is frozen.. The next day they arrived at Donner Lake.

The relief party shouted as they approached the end of the lake but there was nothing but snow fields. Then a head popped up out of the snow, "Are you men from California or are you from heaven?" a woman asked Reasin "Dan" Tucker. The woman had emerged from a buried cabin. Tucker wrote, "At

sundown we reached the Cabins and found the people in great distress such as I have never witnessed there having been 12 deaths and more expected every hour the sign of us appeared to put life into their emaciated frames."

J. Quinn Thornton captured the scene in his 1847 book, Camp of Death,

"... the sufferers were seen coming up out of the snow-holes, from the cabins, which were completely covered, ... They tottered toward their deliverers, ... some wept... some laughed... Many of them had a peculiarly wild expression of the eye; all looked haggard, ghastly, and horrible. The flesh was wasted from their bodies, and the skin seemed to have dried upon their bones. Their voices were weak and sepulchral;...."

On February 22 thirty people including the rescuers left Donner Lake leaving behind thirty-two people. Two returned to the lake and 28 got to the top of the pass. The next day Patty Reed (9) and Tommy Reed (5) returned to Donner Lake with two rescuers. They were too weak to go on. Imagine their mother's choice; two of her four children could not go on. Should she continue with the other two or go back to the lake? Could the oldest two survive the journey without her? Could the youngest two survive at the lake without her? Would they be given enough food to survive? Patty said at parting, "Good bye, Momma. If I don't see you again, just do the best you can."

Virginia Reed wrote about what the trek from Donner Lake was like in Across the Plains in the Donner Party,

"At night we would go asleep with our clothes all dripping wet from dragging over the snow all day. In the morning they would be frozen stiff as a board... I only wonder that we did not freeze to death."

It took two days to get over the summit. Ada Keseburg died. Her father was back the lake and could not travel. Two months later when he was rescued as part of the fourth relief

It is probably not generally known to the people, that there is now in the California mountains in a most distressing situation, a party of emigrants from the United States, who were prevented from crossing the mountains by an early heavy fall of snow, The party consists of about sixty persons, men, women and children. They were, almost entirely out of provisions, when they reached the foot of the mountain, and but for the timely succor afforded them by Capt. J. A. Sutter, one of the most humane and liberal men in California, they must have all perished in a few days. Captain Sutter as soon as he ascertained their situation, sent five mules loaded with provisions to them. A second party was dispatched with provisions for them, but they found the mountain impassable, in consequence of the snow. We hope that our citizens will do something for the relief of these unfortunate people.

California Star January 16, 1847

A company of twenty men left here on Sunday last for the California mountains with provisions, clothing &c. for the suffering emigrants now there. The citizens of this place subscribed about fifteen hundred dollars for their relief, which was expended for such articles as the emigrants would be most likely to need. Mr Greenwood an old mountaineer went with the company as pilot. If it is possible to cross the mountains they will get to the emigrants in time to save them.

California Star February 13, 1847

party, and camped at the same spot, he reached into the snow to pull out a familiar looking piece of cloth – his daughter’s dress.

The first food cache had been destroyed by animals. John Denton died. The second cache had been destroyed by animals. There was no food. Reasin Tucker wrote that at noon “had a small divide of shoe strings roasted and ate them and then proceeded about half mile when we met two men with provisions we struck fire and feasted on our dry beef.”

The second relief party left Bear Valley for the lake. They were cold and wet.

The second relief party got underway from Johnson’s Ranch on February 23.

First, let’s digress a bit. What kind of men must the rescuers have been who heard the news that there was a party of emigrants trapped in the mountains and decided to join the various relief parties? It’s true that most were paid a few dollars a day but how much compensates for the discomfort, the danger, and the physical exhaustion? How much compensates for what they saw at Donner Lake?

It was mid-winter and presumably all of the rescuers had been comfortably ensconced for the winter. What could induce them to leave home and opt for weeks of what must have been misery, first dealing with rain at lower altitudes, then struggling through the snow sometimes sinking to their knees or thighs while carrying heavy packs? They must have sunk into the snow with each step even as they used the footsteps of the person in front. They slept sitting up on logs in the snow under blankets. They had little food. They set trees ablaze, leaving the scorched trunks to mark the route for the return journey from Donner Lake. They also left caches of

*Almost all of the rescue party members were heroes (except for a few who went along to see what they could steal. Two “rescuers” Charles Stone and Charles Cady agree that for \$500 they will take three of Tamsen Donner’s children to safety. The three girls said goodbye to their parents. Cady and Stone dropped the children off at Donner Lake and headed for Donner Summit. They ignored Starved Camp – “their packs stuffed with booty.” (DPC pg 303)

food along the route.

They should have had, as Sheriff George McKinstry wrote, “their names inscribed in letters of gold.” (DPC pg 262).

On the 27th the second relief party met the first. It was led by James Reed who had been banished from the Donner Party months before after a knifing and gone ahead to California. In the first relief party he found his wife and two oldest children. He said, “I cannot describe the death like look they all had Bread Bread Bread was the begging of every child and grown person except my wife. I gave what I dared and left for the scene of desolation” at Donner Lake. There on March 2 he found his two other children. They were alive. Mrs. Reed’s gamble had paid off.

The first relief continued on down the mountain. Some miles further on near Bear Valley, Virginia Reed said

“We camped that night and ate the bread my father had brought for us. We were out of the snow, could see the blessed earth and green grass again. How beautiful it looked. We stayed a day or so, getting the horses and mules ready to ride. No more dragging over the snow, when we were tired, so very tired, but green grass, horses to ride, and plenty to eat.” (Across the Plains in the Donner Party)

William Hook, age twelve, died of overeating.

The scene at the lake was horrific. There were butchered bodies. James Reed and Bill McCutchen washed some of those.

It took Reed three days to get back to the summit with ten more rescuees, four adults and thirteen children, to a place that would become called Starved Camp. The exhausted and emaciated emigrants had been able to make only three miles a day. Worse was coming. Reed’s diary says,

“The sky look like snow and everything indicates a storm god forbid wood being got for the night and Bows for beds of all, and night closing fast, the clouds still thick in terror terror I feel a terrible foreboding but dare not communicate my mind to any, death to all if our provisions do not come, in a day or two and a storm should fall on us, very cold, a great lamentation about the cold.” [sic] James Reed.

The storm did hit them. It was heavy, blinding, and the winds howled. People cried and prayed. The four rescuers kept the fire fed. James Reed became snow blind. The last of the provisions the rescuers had brought with them were eaten – one spoonful of flour per person.

“My dreaded Storm is now on us comme[nce]d Snowing in the first part of the night and with the snow commen[nce]d a perfect Hurricane in the night. A great crying with the children and with the parents praying crying and lamentations on acct of the cold and the dread of death from the Howling Storm the men up nearly all night making fires, some of the men began to pray several became blind I could not see even the light of the fire when it was blazing before me.” [sic] James Reed.

“Young Brine [Breen] fell into the fire and burned himself.”

The fire melted the snow forming a pit and the pit got deeper “Freesing [sic] was the cry of the mothers... to their little starving freezing children,” “night closing fast and with it the Hurricane increases.” [sic] (DPC page 300)

“the cries and prayers continue all night.” “of all the crying I never heard nothing ever equaled it,” [sic] James Reed

The fire almost completely died; only two men were able to do anything about it. “All might have perished had not Bill McCutchen kept the fire going.” (DPC Page 300)

March 6 Isaac Donner (5) died at Starved Camp in Summit Valley, after the third night of the storm while lying between his sisters seven year old Mary and ten year old Patty Reed.

By March 8 the storm had lasted for three days. No one had had any food for 24 hours. Reed, his two children and others left Starved Camp and reached what is today’s Kingvale, along the Yuba River, that night. Seven Breens, Elizabeth Graves and her four children, and Mary Donner stayed at Starved Camp. The pit got deeper.

The 2nd relief party was met by the 3rd relief near today’s Cisco Grove. The third relief included Wm. Foster and Wm. Eddy who had survived the Forlorn Hope (see the December, 20 [Heirloom](#) for Pt. I). They were on their way back to the lake to save their children.

The rescuers were clearly heroic – most of them.*

One of the rescuers particularly stands out. The third rescue party decided to continue on to Starved Camp and see whom they could rescue. Eddy and Foster at that point paid two of the other men \$50 each to accompany them on to Donner Lake. They were desperate to save their children. John Stark also continued on but without pay, “I will go without any reward beyond that derived from the consciousness of doing a good act.”

*Almost all of the rescue party members were heroes (except for a few who went along to see what they could steal. Two “rescuers” Charles Stone and Charles Cady agree that for \$500 they will take three of Tamsen Donner’s children to safety. The three girls said goodbye to their parents. Cady and Stone dropped the children off at Donner Lake and headed for Donner Summit. They ignored Starved Camp – “their packs stuffed with booty.” (DPC pg 303)

By the arrival of the Brig Francisca, 3 days from Yerba Buena, Le Moine, Master, brings to us the heart rending news of the extreme suffering of a party of emigrants who were left on the other side of the California mountain, about 60 in all, nineteen of whom started to come into the valley. Seven, only have arrived, the remainder died, and the survivors were kept alive by eating the dead bodies. Among the survivors [sic] are two young girls.

A public meeting was held at Yerba Buena, and about eight hundred dollars raised for the relief of the sufferers who still remain in the mountains! Messers Ward and Smith kindly offered the use of their Launch, and a party, under direction of Pas’d Midshipman Woodworth with the intention of disembarking at the foot of the mountain and then going on foot, with packs of provisions. is to be hoped they will succeed in reaching them with sufficient provisions to get them in.

We have but few of the particulars of the hardships which they have suffered. Such a state of things will probably never again occur, from the fact, that the road is now better known, and the emigrants will hereafter start and travel so as to cross the mountain by the 1st of October, The party which are suffering so much, lost their work cattle on the salt planes, on Hastings’s cut off, a rout [sic] which we hope no one will ever attempt again.

Californian February 13, 1847

News of the Forlorn Hope arrives in California; money was raised, and advice about Hastings’ cut off.

The rescuers then found Starved Camp, on Donner Summit somewhere in Summit Valley. The location has never been ascertained. The eleven there had been just lying there with no food for seven days. There were also dead partially cannibalized bodies.

It was a horror.

There, eleven people were in a deep snow pit formed by their fire melting the snow down perhaps twenty feet to bare ground. Steps had been cut into the walls of the pit. The survivors had been there for days and it was amazing any were alive. William Eddy, describing what they'd found said, "The picture of distress was shocking indeed." Eddy and Foster continued on to Donner Lake to save their own children. When they arrived they discovered their children were dead and had been partly eaten.

March 9 At Starved Camp Elizabeth Graves and Franklin Graves (5) died. The remaining rescuers discussed what to do and took a vote to save only two of the children in Starved Camp. That might have been all they thought they could manage. The others would have to stay behind.

John Stark could not stand that. That meant that nine people, mostly children, would die on the mountain, exposed to the elements down in a very deep hole in the snow. John Stark decided he would save all nine, "Already shouldering a backpack with provisions, blankets, and an axe, he picked up one or two of the smaller children, carried them a little ways, then went back for the others. Then he repeated the whole process again and again for miles. To galvanize morale, he laughed and told the youngsters they were so light from months of mouse-sized rations that he could carry them all simultaneously, if only his back were broad enough." Once they were

out of the snow he would eat and rest he said, but not before. He saved all nine. That is extraordinary and that is heroism. It was also heroism he never got contemporary credit for.

James Breen later said, "To his great bodily strength, and unexcelled courage, myself and others owe our lives. There was probably no other man in California at that time, who had the intelligence, determination, and what was absolutely necessary to have in that emergency." He also said,

"Were it not for him I would probably not be here today. Few men have the resolution and physical strength that he had and if he had less of either he could not have done what he did. He was what I will call a perfect man, perfect in both body and mind... All honor to your memory brave generous honest Stark..." ([Donner Party Chronicles](#) pg. 309)

On April 16 4th Relief Party approached the Donner camps and found only Lewis Keseburg alive. He had survived on human flesh and stolen from the Donners. The rescuers found the stolen money and took Keseburg to California.

All that was left after the departure of the fourth relief was for the Army to arrive in June, bury the remains and burn the cabins. Edwin Bryant ([What I Saw in California](#), 1846) accompanied the military and described the scene but since that description is revolting you may want to skip it. It's interesting though. (See the next page if you insist)

Those stories should be stirring enough that you'll be interested to follow the Donner Relief Expedition, the demisemisept-centennial (175th anniversary) of the original Donner Party's first relief, presuming weather cooperates, February 14th at Johnson's Ranch near Wheatland, and ending at the State Park at Donner Lake on the 18th.

From our Sacramento Correspondent.

NEW HELVETIA, March 13, 1847

Mr. E. P. JONES, SIR.--I sent in great haste an express via Sonoma, and had no time then to write of the result of the expedition sent out from Fort for the relief of the emigrants on the California mountains. This little party of seven deserve great credit for their exertions reached the sufferers on the 19th of February, in camp near Truckey's Lake, on the east of the mountains, and left with twenty-one persons, principally [sic] women and children; they successful [sic] in getting them all over the mountains but three of them died on this side of the mountains, one of them from over eating. Part of the company are now here under the care of Capt. Sutter. I am told that the scene of distress in camp is indescribable [sic], fourteen had already died from starvation, and not more than 12 or 15 of the thirty left, can be brought in, as they [sic] are too weak to walk. Lieut. Woodworth has gone to their assistance, but I am fearful from the appearance of the weather on the mountains the past four days, that they suffered much. It has been colder here than at any other time this season, and has been snowing incessantly [sic] on the mountains.

You will get the particulars from the express sent to Capt. Hull, I write in great haste, as we have started the Launch, and the baquero now waiting for the letters (which I send to your care) to overtake the launch by land.

Respectfully yours,

The first relief party reaches Donner Lake

[California Star](#) March 20, 1847

From What I Saw in California, Edwin Bryant, 1846 as part of the U.S. Army's coming to the Donner Party camp site at Donner Lake in the summer after the rescues.

Near the principal cabins, I saw two bodies, entire with the exception that the abdomens had been cut open and the entrails extracted. Their flesh had been either wasted by famine or evaporated by exposure to the dry atmosphere, and they presented the appearance of mummies. Strewn around the cabins were dislocated and broken bones-skulls, (in some instances sawed asunder with care for the purpose of extracting the brains,) human skeletons, in short, in every variety of mutilation. more revolting and appalling spectacle I never witnessed. The remains were, by an order of Gen. Kearny, collected and buried under the superintendence of Major Swords. They were interred in a pit which had been dug in the centre of one of the cabins for a cache. These melancholy duties to the dead being performed, the cabins, by order of Major Swords, were fired, and with every thing surrounding them connected with this horrid and melancholy tragedy, were consumed. The body of George Donner was found at his camp, about eight or ten miles distant, wrapped in a sheet. He was buried by a party of men detailed for that purpose.

October 31, 1846 Donner Party arrives Donner Lake
November 3, 1846 The Party tries for Donner Summit
Panic and despair set in.
November 13, 1846 15 people try for Donner Summit
They fail.
November 22, 1846 22 people and seven mules try for Donner
Summit. They argue and fail
December 16, 1846 The Forlorn Hope make it over Donner
Summit. 7 of the 17 will survive to reach
California in 33 days.
December 21, 1846 Charles Stanton dies near Cascade
Lake.
January 5, 1847 Four people fail trying for Donner Summit.
February 18, 1847 The First Relief arrives in Summit Valley.
Snow was 30' deep.
February 22, 1847 30 people make it to the top of the Pass.
February 26, 1847 more die on Donner Summit.
February 27, 1847 The 2nd Relief meets the 1st
Relief somewhere on Donner Summit.
March 3, 1847 The 2nd Relief gets to Donner Summit from
Donner Lake – Starved Camp.
March 5, 1847 2nd Relief is camped in Summit
Valley. A storm rages.
March 6, 1847 Isaac Donner dies at Starved Camp
March 8, 1847 James Reed takes those who will go
away from Starved Camp.
March 9, 1847 More die at Starved Camp.
March 13, 1847 The 3rd Relief arrives at Starved Camp.
11 people are lying at the bottom of the deep pit.
March 14, 1847 The 3rd Relief arrives back from Donner
Lake.
March 16, 1847 John Stark's heroism

How you can participate in the 2020 demisemiseptcentennial of the Donner relief parties:

Follow the digital tracker at <https://www.forlornhope.org>

Come to the conclusory event at Donner State Park February 18 (presuming weather is cooperative)

Follow posts on FaceBook and the website <https://www.forlornhope.org>

Follow daily reports <https://www.forlornhope.org>

Using our map, you may want to meet up with the group (bringing hot chocolate will be very much appreciated).

Imagine their disappointment

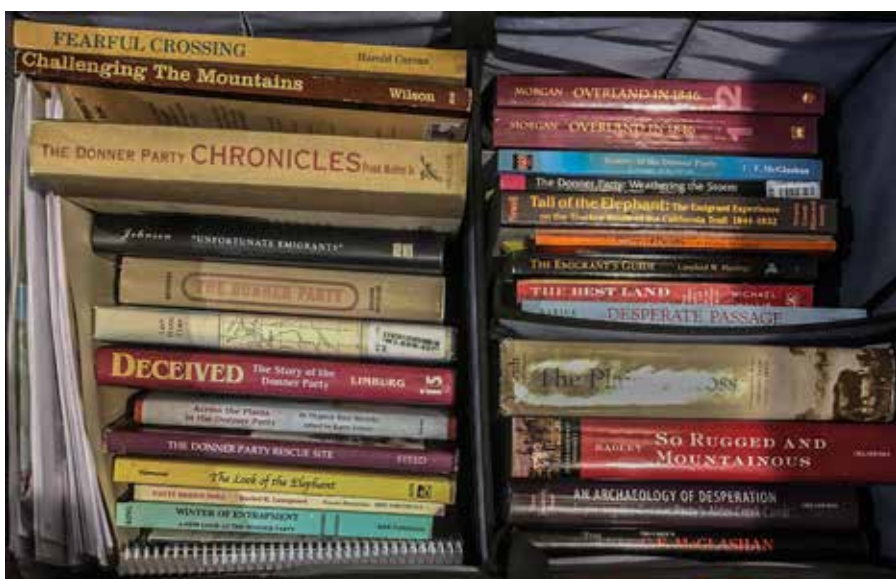
James Reed was expelled from the Donner Party after a knifing. He made his way to California ahead of the rest of the group and there met William McCutchen who had gone ahead of the party with Charles Stanton in a quest for food from Sutter's Fort. Stanton returned to the Donner Party with supplies, mules and two Indians. He had no family with the Donner Party and no reason beyond integrity to brave the Sierra again and head into the desert. He'd given his word. McCutchen did have family with the Donner Party but had fallen sick at Sutter's Fort and could not make the return journey with Stanton.

James Reed and Wm. McCutchen knew, from having met Stanton on the route over the Sierra, that the Donner Party was in dire need. On October 29, two days before the Donner Party arrived at what would be called Donner Lake, the two men headed out from Sutter's Fort with supplies. It began to storm and the higher they went in elevation the more snow they got. The snow was five feet deep with ten foot drifts at Emigrant Gap and they were forced to turn back. Imagine their disappointment; imagine their fear. What did they say to each other on the way back down the mountain? Their wives and children were somewhere on the other side of the Sierra. What were they going through?

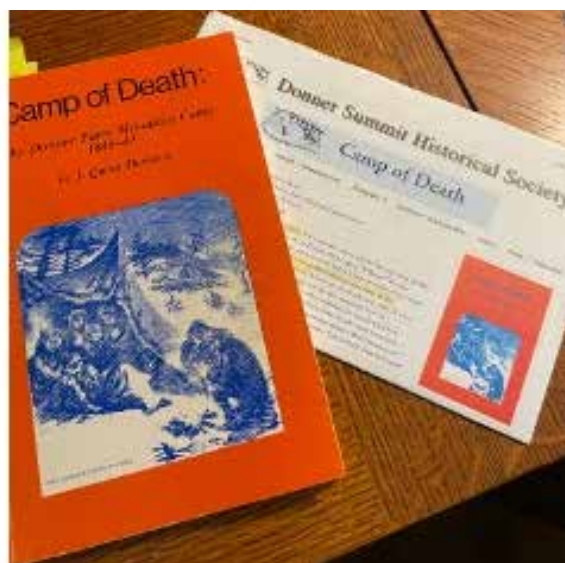
John Sutter told the men that it would be February or March before they could hope to rescue their families. Imagine their despair.

If you want to read about the relief parties that brought out the surviving members of the Donner Party take a look at *Saving the Donner Party* by Richard Kaufman. You can read a review on our March, '15 Heirloom or on the DSHS website's book review page, <http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/bookreviews/SavingtheDonnerParty.html>

For a contemporary account of the *Camp of Death* and *Forlorn Hope*, see the February, '17 Heirloom or the book review page on our DSHS website <http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/bookreviews/CampofDeath.html>



For even more further reading take a look at the book review page on our website. The reviews can help you choose the book you want to read about the Donner Party: <http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/BookReviews.html>



Some Suggestions:

Ordeal By Hunger George R. Stewart
Desperate Passage Ethan Rarick
Donner Party Chronicles. Frank Mullen
Saving the Donner Party Richard Kaufman
Deceived Peter Limburg
History of the Donner Party Charles McGlashan
Winter of Entrapment Joseph King
Indifferent Stars Above Daniel James Brown

Story Locations in this Issue

Carpenter Flat Norm's Route Soda Springs pg 15 Donner Lake pg 13 Squaw Valley

DONNER SUMMIT

Find us on 



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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Sugar Bowl weasel to illustrate the story on page 10

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

The Olympic Torch Comes to Donner Summit

The Torch of the 8th Winter Olympic Games and Donner Summit

This month, February, will see the opening of the Winter Olympics in China. Our editorial department thought it would be appropriate for Donner Summit to celebrate the Olympics by looking back to 1960, the 8th Winter Olympic games held in Squaw Valley. Squaw Valley is not on Donner Summit though, so we couldn't look back at the actual games. There was a part that included Donner Summit, though - the torch relay, without which the Olympics could not happen. That relay came right over Donner Summit.

One of the ceremonies of the Olympic Games is the carrying of the Olympic torch. To get to the 8th Winter Olympic Games in Squaw Valley the torch started in Oslo, Norway, flew to Los Angeles, was run in relays up the Central Valley and to San Francisco, and then from San Francisco to the Sierra. There, at Carpenter Flat's* Rancho Sierra, just below Emigrant Gap, the torch started the last part of its journey which was the over the snow relay: Carpenter Flat to Soda Springs, Donner Pass, Truckee, and finally to Squaw Valley.

Before we get to the story we have to get some details out of the way. There were quite a few torches kept in reserve besides the one with the starring role. The torches weighed 6 lbs. and were 19 inches long. They were carried in special harnesses strapped to skiers' backs. They were fueled by bottled propane gas. From Carpenter Flat to Soda Springs the torch followed the route of the Donner Memorial Cross-country race course and the track was cleared by weasels (motorized over the snow machines vintage WWII - we'll put a little picture on the next page). Carol Quinn, the first bearer of the torch in the over the snow relay, rode in a weasel after her torch carrying leg ended and said, it was "every bit as exciting as carrying the torch." She was one of the relay's honored skiers. The other honored skier was Donner Summit's Starr Walton. Besides the two honored skiers of the over the snow relay, skiers, at least for the leg from Truckee to Squaw Valley, were solicited by newspaper advertisement,



Norm Saylor, now, president of the DSHS and nicely retired across the street, then, local skier and manager of Donner Ski Ranch.

NEED SKIERS Approximately 20 local skiers are being asked to participate in the run between Donner Lake Lodge and Squaw Valley entrance, distance of some 20 miles. All local skiers are asked to contact the chamber of commerce if they wish to participate.

The whole route from L.A. to Squaw was 960 miles and 700 (or 600 depending on the source) runners and skiers carried the torch.

The torch's final phase began Saturday February 13 and reached Squaw Valley on the following Tuesday. There were overnight stops in Soda Springs, Donner Lake, and Truckee.

*for another mention of Carpenter Flat see the October, '21 [Heirloom](#) for Robert Fowler

Lots of newspapers carried stories about the lead up to the Olympics and even carrying the torch. Newspapers carried only very little information about the torch over Donner Summit and down to Truckee and Squaw Valley though. That was the responsibility of the local paper at the time, the Sierra Sun, but they left the future in the lurch, reporting almost nothing. Fortunately Bill Berry of the Sacramento Bee took up some of the slack. Beyond that we have to rely on the memories of participants and fortunately there are some still around.



For this part of the torch's trip the headlines highlighted Carol Quinn and Starr Walton. Carol was the lead-off and Starr took the torch into Squaw Valley to the front of Blythe Arena where she met Olympic officials.

The Sacramento Bee's Bill Berry reported in an article headlined, "Carol Quinn and Starr Walton Get Olympic Torch Roles" (Sacramento Bee 2/12/60)

"Two of the Sierra's most famous feminine skiers have been named to open and close the final phase of a historic relay which is carrying the official flame of the Olympic Winter Games toward Squaw Valley. They are Carol Weist Quinn, 26, of Gold Run, and Starr Walton, 17 of Sacramento.

Carol Quinn, 26, was the wife of Leo Quinn who was the highway maintenance supervisor at Donner Summit. Carol had three children. She had been a teenage cross-country ski racer, having beaten even men in the Donner Trail Memorial marathons a decade before.

Bill Berry said Starr Walton, 17, had the honor of being the last skier, taking the torch to the Blythe Arena because she was "the all time junior girl ski great of the Far West Ski Association and a Sacramento Bee Silver Ski champion." She also often beat the boys. For those liking trivia, Starr wore a blue ski outfit. (See page 8)

The over the snow relay of the torch was organized by Fran Cuillard, of the Highway 40 Association. There were twenty-five skiers who took the torch from

Carpenter Flat to Soda Springs in one mile legs. The torches spent the night in a van at the Soda Springs Hotel.

At Soda Springs the torch was passed from hand to hand so the whole community could take part. Then Bill Strickland, 11, "the community's youngest cross-country competitor," took the torch for a leg of the relay. Across the summit the torch was passed on to other school kids and community members. The last torch bearer of the leg across Donner Summit was Brad Board, a Sugar Bowl employee and former Snowshoe Thompson race winner. At the pass Board passed the torch to Norm Sayler, manager of the Donner Ski Ranch (page 10).



Program of the 8th Winter Olympic Games at the DSHS

Norm had started the trek down from Donner Summit to Donner Lake with Jack Lambres but soon left Lambres behind. Bill Berry described the descent as the "treacherous Donner Trail Run." Given the number of articles he wrote for the Bee he must have been pretty good, but Norm remembers that the route was, instead, down Old Highway 40, there being enough snow on the road edge for skiing.

There, a covey of skiers swooped down a slope carrying the Olympic torch. Vice President Richard M. Nixon formally opened the 11-day competition, homing pigeons and gasfilled balloons were released, and bands played. And it was all rather dull viewing for us stay-at-homes.

Things, however, are expected to pick up when we'll see some of the competitive events.

Santa Cruz Sentinel February 19, 1960

At Donner Lake Norm said, "I couldn't believe the crowd." (see the next page) The community had turned out to welcome the torch. There were speeches, an invocation, dances with costumed dancers representing the countries participating in the Olympics, music, and poetry. The torch then made its way across town to the Rocking Stone above downtown Truckee, where there were more ceremonies and the torch spent the night in Truckee. The next day it was off in relays to Squaw

Valley where Starr Walton took the thing on the final leg into the Blythe Arena.

At Donner Lake Virginia O'Bear reported for the Sierra Sun,

Donner Lake was the scene of much excitement Sunday afternoon when crowds gathered from all over the country to welcome Norman Saylor as he skied [sic] down Donner Summit with the traditional Olympic flame. After the Donner Lake torch was lighted, erected by Charles O'Bear, the Olympic torch was then passed hand to hand to the several hundred people gathered for the occasion. As I held the torch, I had a feeling of joining hands with people all over the world, hoping that everyone who held the flame realized what it stands for. Good sportsmanship, brotherhood and sharing which so many of us today neglect to do. If the flame helps to bring peace among nations and among our neighbors, we can be thankful we had the Olympics in our country.

Once the torch got into Squaw Valley it went up to Papoose Peak for the night. The next day the San Bernardino Sun (February 19, 1960) and other newspapers reported that Mrs. Andrea Mead Lawrence, a gold medalist, skied down Little Papoose Pk. with the torch and no poles. She handed the flame to speed skating gold medalist Ken Henry who skated around the rink, which was Blythe Arena, and then lit the Olympic flame.



EXCITING DAY! *now for an exciting evening—make reservations by phone!* Planning dinner at Tahoe City, Brockway or Crystal Bay? Or how about an evening of dancing and fun at Reno or "State-Line" in Nevada? Whatever you plan, you'll want to phone ahead for reservations to cut waiting time. Here are typical low rates:



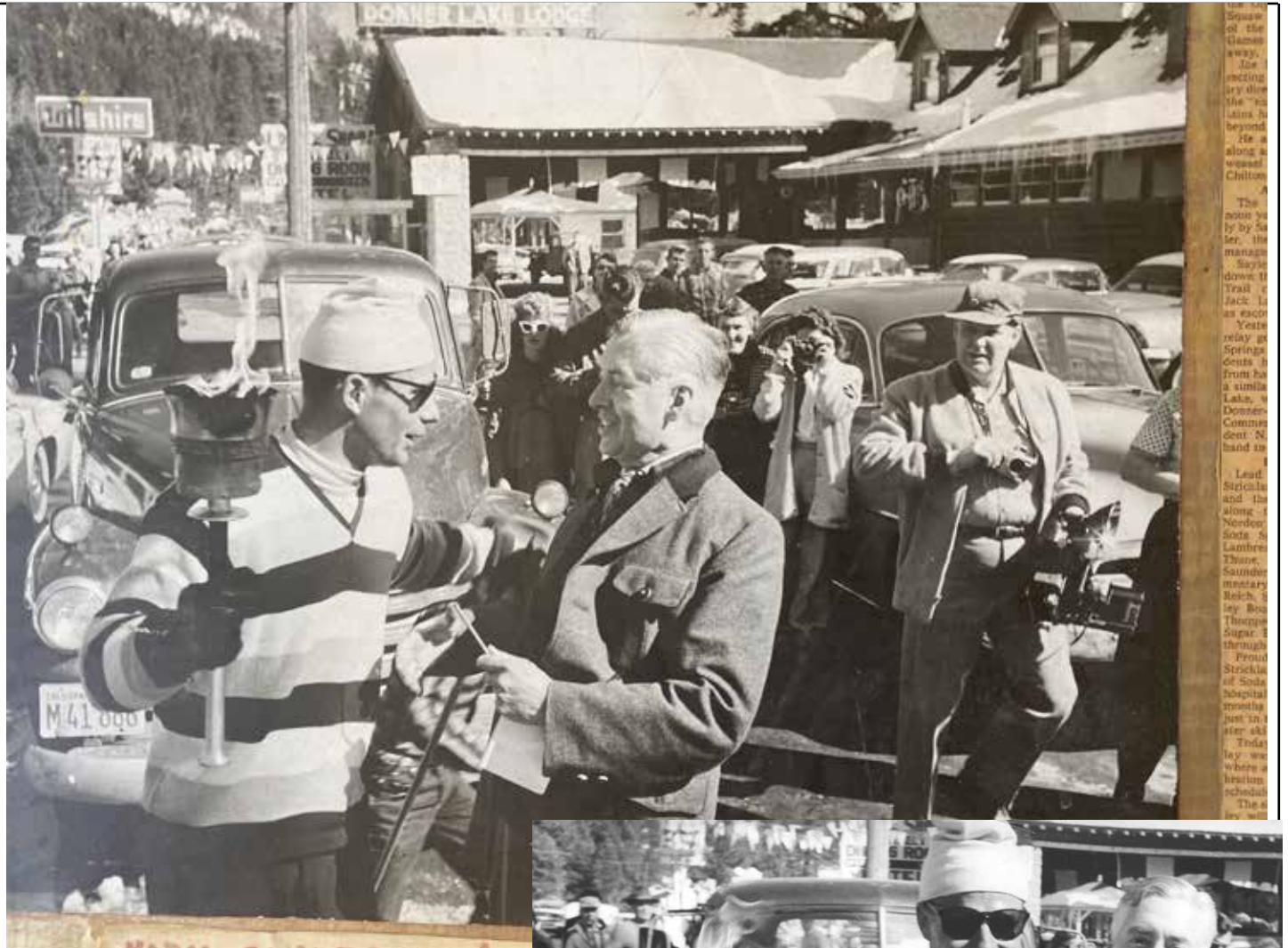
FROM SQUAW VALLEY TO:	WEEKDAYS	NIGHTS & SUNDAYS
RENO	35¢	35¢
SOUTH TAHOE	25¢	25¢
SACRAMENTO	65¢	55¢
SAN FRANCISCO	90¢	75¢

Station-to-station—first 5 minutes—plus tax. Night rates and Sunday rates for station-to-station calls apply from 6:00 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. and all day Sunday.

ad in the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympic program. Imagine - being able to make restaurant reservations by phone!!

Phoning is a low-cost way to take care of other things while you're here too—let the folks know you arrived safely, or make stop-over arrangements for your return trip home.

Pacific Telephone



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Norm Saylor and Bill Berry at Donner Lake February 15, 1960

A little Torch Adventure, 1960

FBI ENTERS CASE OF STOLEN MATERIAL SQUAW VALLEY

The Federal Bureau of Investigation moved into the case of the missing spare Olympic torches.

Pranksters early Sunday broke into an auto and stole four [or six depending on the source] spare torches, an Army walkie-talkie radio and two cameras used for filming the 400-mile [or more depending on the source] torch relay from Los Angeles. The original flame was safe. It was in a miner's lamp in a hotel room.

One of the 30-inch long torches and the two cameras were found in a snowbank near here later in the day.

The flame arrived here Tuesday, marking the end of a 9,000-mile trip from Norway, the original starting place.

Sheriff Wayne Brown of Nevada County said the FBI was called in because the theft involved U. S. government property, the walkie talkie.

He said three youths were being held for questioning by the FBI but that the "fellow who broke into the car is still on the loose." He declined to mention any name.

Pg 5 of Sierra Sun February 18, 1960

The story according to Norm Saylor,

The van was parked in Soda Springs overnight. Someone broke in and stole all of the torches. The next day all but two were found on the railroad tracks. To this day those two are still missing.

Olympic torch trouble cropped up when vandals stole six spare torches from an auto at Soda Springs, about 20 miles from here, The flame, however, was safe in a miner's lamp kept overnight in a hotel room.

Skiers brought the flame over 7,000-foot Donner Summit Sunday. It is to arrive in the Valley by skis tomorrow.

High school runners brought the flame 400 miles from Los Angeles and it transferred to skiers Saturday.

San Bernadino Sun February 1, 1960



In various places the communities were able to take part in the festivities and passed the torch around. Here Milt Avila, who ran Soda Springs Ski Area, holds one torch and an unidentified person holds another.

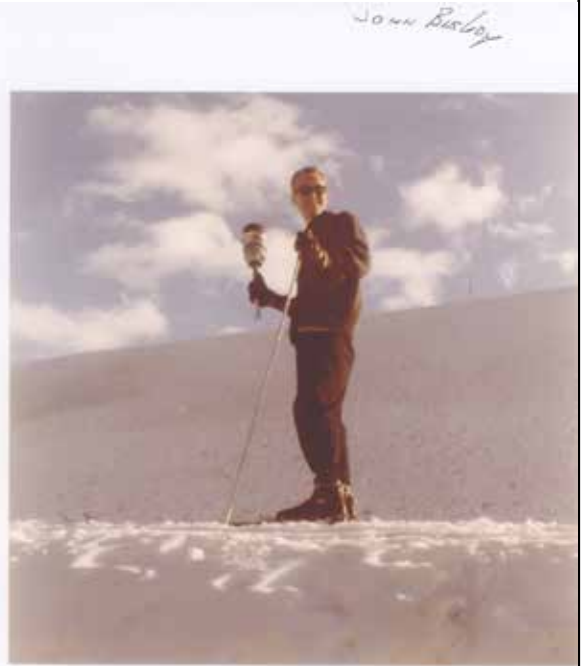
Olympic Torch To Be In Truckee On Monday, Tuesday

Local Skiers Will Transport Flame To Valley On Tuesday



Truckee, Nevada County, California Thursday, February 11, 1960 10¢ Per Copy—\$5 Per Year

AT RAINBOW MILT AVARA DISCUSSING OLY TORCH



the torch and John Bishop

The torch at Rainbow Lodge (left)

People? OLY TORCH Beacon Hill 1960



The torch at Beacon Hill Lodge where it rested overnight.

OLY TORCH 1960 Beacon Hill Lodge



Sacramento Bee
December 12, 1960

Carol Quinn And Starr Walton Get Olympic Torch Roles

By Bill Berry
McClatchy Newspapers Service

SODA SPRINGS, Nevada Co.—Two of the Sierra's most famous feminine skiers have been named to open and close the final phase of a historic relay which is carrying the



Starr Walton, left, carried the Olympic torch into Squaw Valley. That was fame in the old days. Today she is on the board of the Donner Summit Historical Society. Her parents started Donner Ski Ranch. Her uncles built the Soda Springs Hotel, Rainbow Tavern, and Nyack Lodge. She has a house on the Summit across from the DSHS.

Starr's story is on the next page.

Pictures on this page and the next come from Starr Walton's collection

Starr Walton's Story of Carrying the Torch

Starr Walton

Torch Relay

When I was selected to carry the 1960 Winter Olympic Torch into Squaw Valley the day before the Olympics were to open, I was thrilled. My good friend Babette Haeisen was going to pass it to me at the parking lot leading to the Olympic Stadium. We had had very little snow in February and the way to the stadium was with straw and snow. Babette arrived using barrel staves for skis and with the Torch and a small following. She handed me the Torch and I slid across the parking lot, Torch held high, to the Olympic Stadium where the Sacramento Bee photographer shot a photo that declared "The Olympic Torch has arrived!"

I was 18 at the time and a top Junior racer in Far West. The relay involved some 600 people starting in Los Angeles and down the summit, along old 40 to 89 and into Squaw Valley. My mother arranged for a good friend, Jack Samples, to find a blue ski suit for me to wear. There was very little fanfare or people at the event. The next day the Torch was taken by Andrea Mead Lawrence to the stadium and handed the torch to skater Kenneth Charles Henry who did a lap around the stadium before lighting the cauldron from which the Olympic Flames would burn throughout the Games.

In 2002 I was fortunate again to be a Torch Bearer in Squaw Valley for the Salt Lake Olympics Relay. I have this torch and on it is the motto of the 2002 Winter Games..Light the Fire Within....

In 2010 the 50 year celebration of the 1960 Olympic Winter Games at Squaw Valley occurred. The Torch relay was once again enacted and I was fortunate to be able to ski the Torch down Olympic Lady and give it this time to Babette.



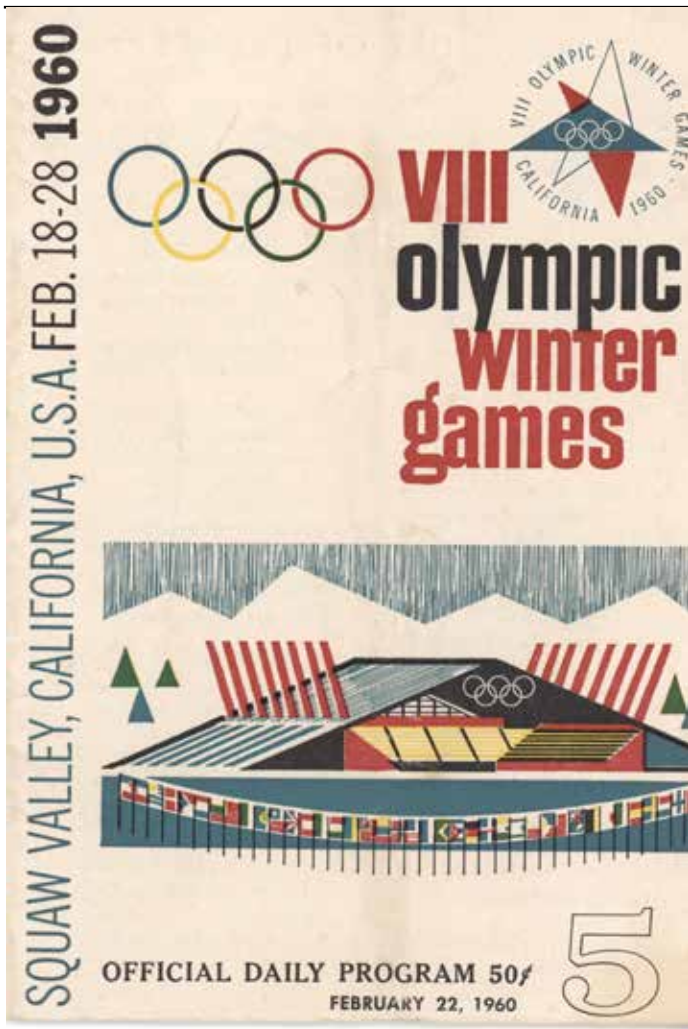
Starr Walton pressed into service again participating in the 2002 torch relay Squaw Valley to Salt Lake City.



Babette Haeisen giving Starr the torch as Starr headed into Olympic Valley in 1960

Starr skiing with 1960 Torch at Squaw for the 50 year celebration. Afterwards Starr gave the torch to Babette.

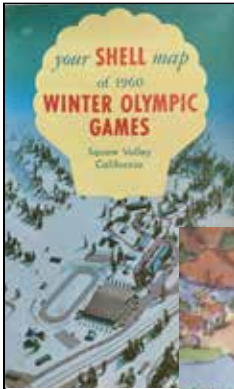




Olympic program and tickets in case you can get time to go.

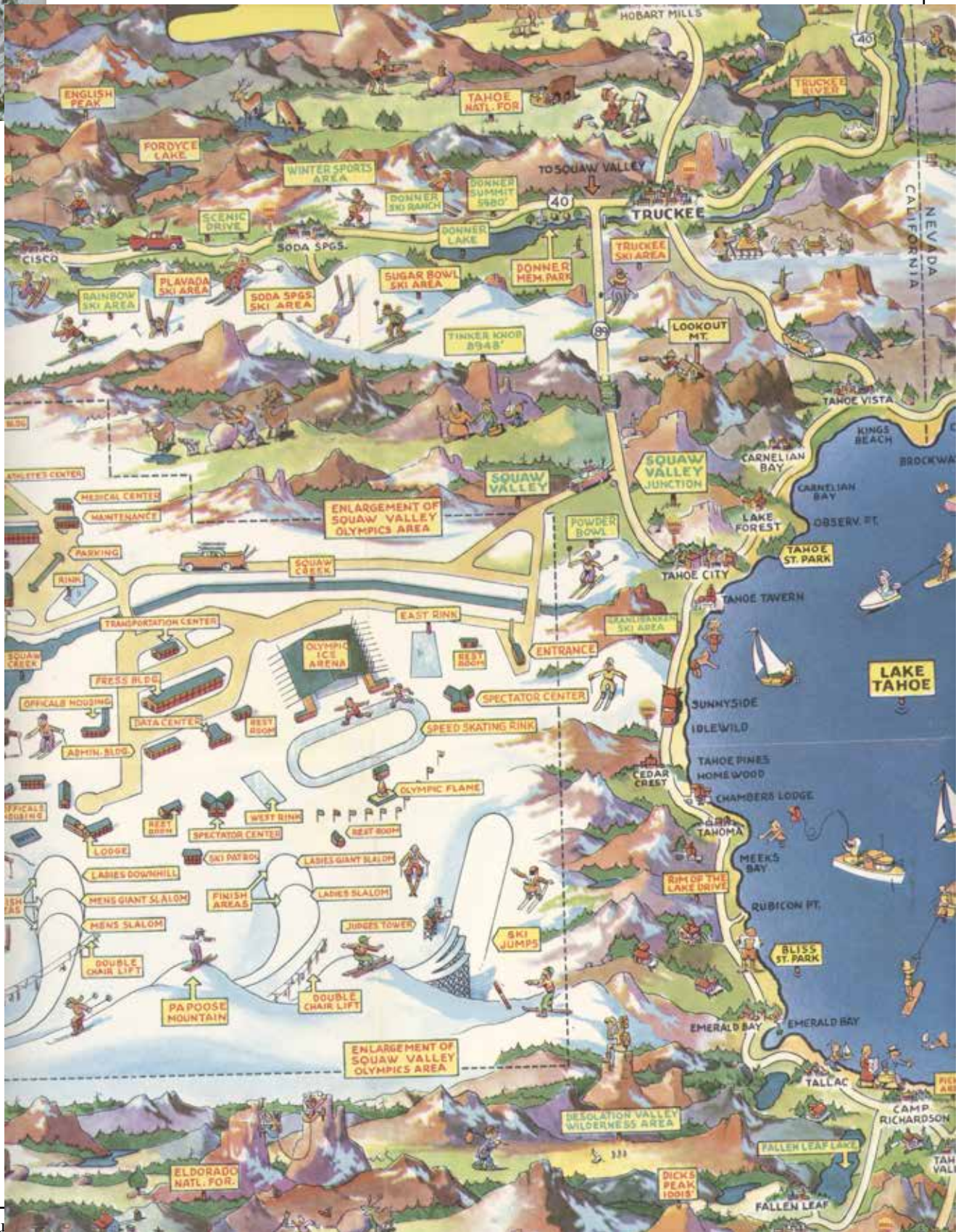


Headlines of the Sports Section of the Sacramento Bee February 13, 1960



Everyone wanted to be part of the Winter Olympics. Here, left, is a folded stylized map of the Tahoe area passed out by Shell Oil. Younger readers will be amazed to know that gas stations used to compete for motorists' business by giving out free things like maps, steak knives, plates, etc.

Below is the section of the map that contains Donner Summit and Squaw Valley. The original is in the Norm Saylor Collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society.



Book Review

By Alice Osborn

The Snow Fell Three Graves Deep: Voices from the Donner Party

by Allan Wolf

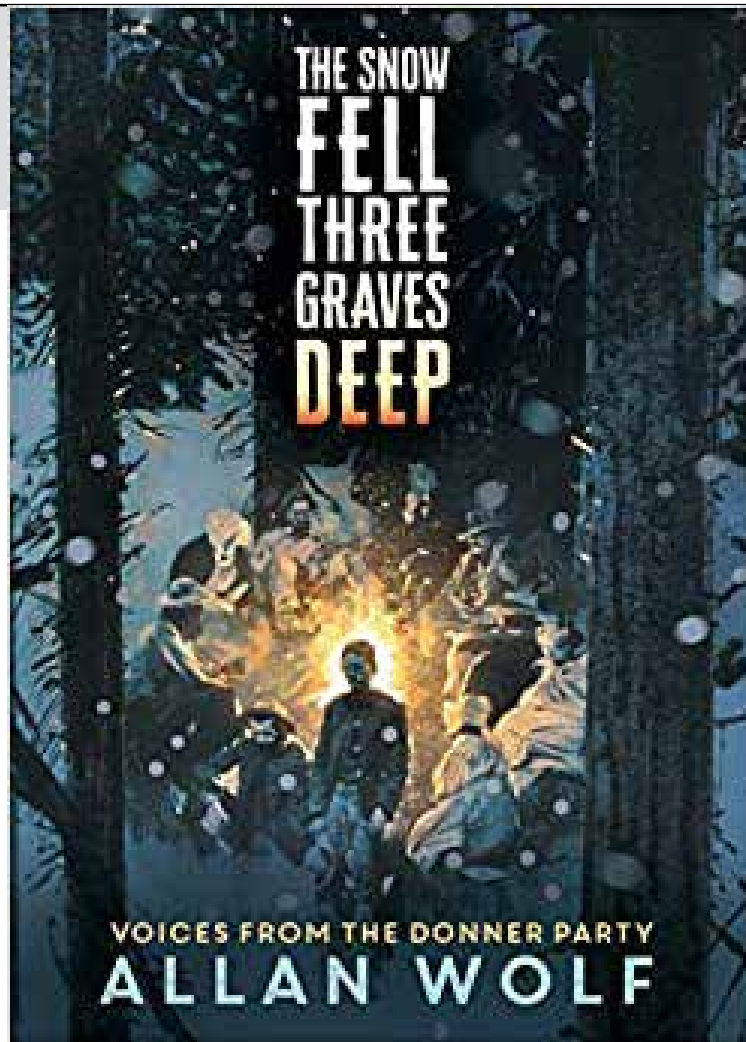
Candlewick Press (2020), Poetry

ISBN: 978-0-7636-6324-7, 399 pages, \$21.99

Snow. Starvation. Cannibalism. For 174 years, the tragic and true tale of the 81 Donner Party members, mostly teens and children, still fascinates journalists, historians, poets, and ordinary citizens, who try to imagine how they would have survived a brutal winter in the most brutal of landscapes, the Sierra Nevadas, without adequate food or supplies. Allan Wolf, author of The Snow Fell Three Graves Deep: Voices From The Donner Party, focuses his lens on eight poetic voices, three of which belong to the same family: James Reed and his two daughters, Virginia, and Patty; two from the Donner camp, Tamzene Donner and Baptiste Trudeau, a teen of mixed race; Salvador and Luis, the two ill-fated Miwok guides; and finally, the bad guy if there is a bad guy of the Donner Party, Ludwig Keseberg. Before reaching the mountains, Keseberg cast out the elderly Mr. Hardcoop, his employee, because he couldn't walk, and then tried to have James Reed, the co-leader of the Donner Party, hanged as retribution for killing John Snyder in self-defense during a road rage incident in Nevada. Keseberg is known as the "real" cannibal of the Donner Party because he allegedly enjoyed it, while the others only endured this horror in order to survive. Throughout his long life he carried this tarnished reputation and died penniless.

I give the author much credit for not portraying the enemy as Keseberg, or even the voice of Hunger (with a capital H), the chatty narrator that ties the complicated account together. Instead, the antagonist is the eponymous voice of Snow that is silent as death. "Three graves (6 feet) deep," of fresh Snow stops the Donner Party in their tracks when they first attempt to cross the pass and keeps them prisoners all winter long; Snow renders intrepid bachelor Charles Stanton and James Reed snow blind, and Snow tries its best to extinguish life-saving fire.

Besides the poetry of the multiple voices, Allan Wolf sprinkles in authentic newspaper, diary entries, and other writings, as well as original poems so that no member or rescuer of the Donner Party is left out—a formidable endeavor. He uses the metaphor of the bird's eye view literally because the Washoe Indians named Donner Lake *awegia behzing*, "the



little watchful eye" and in so doing every voice adds up to the larger collective voice and greater understanding of what these pioneers suffered.

In this meticulously researched multi-genre book we meet Native Americans Luis and Salvador, who were later slaughtered for food. In most other books about the Donner Party, these men are not given voices of their own, which Wolf rectifies. Luis repeatedly asks to know Salvador's Miwok name, and only learns it before hearing William Foster cocking his rifle at the duo. Without the Miwoks' help, all of the Donner Party members would have died, and what did the Miwok people and other tribes receive in return for their kindness? Only disease, displacement, and more disease. Two years later, the world descended upon Northern California to squeeze gold from the earth and streams, leaving 120,000 of California's 150,000 Native Americans dead by 1873.

The Snow Fell Three Graves Deep feels fresh even though the Donner Party epic has been retold countless times in fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Wolf incorporates both the omniscient view and the intimate voices of the daring and the damned. Two poignant scenes stood out for me. First, Tamzene Donner

decides to leave her three young daughters with William Eddy and his small rescue team so she can return to her dying husband and comfort him in his last days. Wolf includes a poem from Tamzene that relates how her first husband from North Carolina died alone, and how she absolutely refused for this fate to repeat itself. The second is the almost-death of eight-year-old Patty Reed. Her words become grayscale as she slowly succumbs to hypothermia, but then as her father feeds her a crumb, her words transforms from gray to black.

Bravo many times over to Allan Wolf who rendered voices from another time and place relatable and universal to the modern reader, and who gave equal time to the usually silent voices of Luis, Salvador, and Baptiste Trudeau. He shows us that the Donner Party story is not just about the gruesome aspects; it is about resilience, strength, and purpose. It is also about respecting Mother Nature, a lesson we must heed in these days of climate change. Wolf ends the book with Virginia Reed's wise words, "Never take no cutoffs. And hurry [sic] along as fast as you can."

Alice Osborne last seen in the [Heirloom](#) in a song she wrote about the Donner Party in June, 2019. Here is the bio that went with it.

Based out of Raleigh, North Carolina, Alice Osborne's Americana music is truly homegrown. Alice is a true Renaissance woman; she is an accomplished poet, writer, singer-songwriter, song writing teacher, editor, entrepreneur, history buff, baker, and more! Celtic, bluegrass, country and rock folk all influence her Americana vibe on acoustic guitar. Heroes without Capes is her most recent collection of poetry and Old Derelicts is her most recent CD featuring



crowd-pleasing originals. Previous poetry collections are *After the Steaming Stops* and *Unfinished Projects*. Alice is the recipient of a United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County 2019 Professional Development Grant, a Roads and Let's Talk About It Scholar for the NC Humanities Council, the artist-in-residence for the Western Wake Farmers' Market, and is a senior docent at the NC Museum of History. A NC Writers' Network, NC Poetry Society, and NC Songwriters Co-op board member and a Pushcart Prize nominee, she's currently working on a novel, [Searching for Paradise](#), and songs about the ill-fated Donner Party. She also plays Celtic fiddle and bluegrass banjo. Alice lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband, two children, and four birds all named after musicians. Visit Alice's website and blog at www.aliceosborn.com and check out her music at www.reverbnation.com/aliceosborn.

Eventually Alice wants to write more songs "about the Donner Party, tell their story of resilience and choices, and also play songs on guitar, fiddle, and banjo that the wagon train would have played while traveling through the Plains." That sounds like good goals.

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.



Donner Party Relief Expedition 2022

Today when people think of the 1846 Donner Party and their Sierra entrapment they think about the wrong turn two times, bad luck, bad decisions made in ignorance, dietary issues, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror-filled, unbelievable hardship, and even murder. That's a lot but there's more. The story of the Donner Party is also about tenacity, heroism, self-sacrifice, and the very best of the human spirit. The 2022 Donner Relief Expedition is a celebration of the latter list.

In December of 2020 four extreme athletes, the kind of people who think a hundred mile run is a warm up, did a reprise of the Forlorn Hope trek of 1846. The original group left Donner Lake in a quest to reach California and get help for the beleaguered Donner Party. Fifteen people crossed the summit in the middle of December. By the time they reached California only seven survived, five women and two men. That set the rescue parties in motion that resulted in saving about half of the Donner Party.

The reprise of 2020 was to honor the bravery and sacrifice of those fifteen people. The four athletes left Donner Memorial State Park and ended their trek at Johnson Ranch which is near Wheatland, California.

On February 14, 2022, the demisemiseptcentennial (175th) anniversary year, the four are again going on an expedition, this time in honor of the rescue parties who braved danger and discomfort, leaving comfortable homes in California to carry heavy packs on snowshoes to rescue strangers. They will leave Johnson Ranch taking the actual rescue parties' route to Donner Memorial State Park. The night of February 17 will see them camped at Donner Summit with a public event at Donner Ski Ranch that evening. There will be festivities at the State Park on the 18th to which the public is invited. Free tickets (attendance is limited): <https://sierrastateparks.org/sierra-speaker-series-donner-party-relief-expedition-finale/> or <https://sierrastateparks.org>

You can track the group's progress and decide what you might like to participate in by following this website:

<https://www.forlornhope.org>

The picture above is of the four athletes prior to last year's adventure. If you want to read about the background and last year's adventure take a look at the Donner Summit Historical Society's December, '20 and January, '21 [Heirlooms](#) available on the Historical Society's website, donnersummithistoricalociety.org. This year's event will be in the February and March, '22 [Heirlooms](#).

The information above is all weather dependent.



Friday, February 18:

Donner Memorial State Park

12:30 Media at the monument.

Welcome the trekkers

2:00PM

Introduction - meet the trekkers in period dress and stories of both the original trek and the 2022 reprise.

Panel Discussion

Q&A

Attendance is limited for the indoor event which starts at 2 PM in the State Park Visitors Center.

Tickets are free at either link below. Attendees at the indoor event each receive a free booklet, "Donner Party Heroism, Pathos, and the Human Spirit."

<https://sierrastateparks.org/sierra-speaker-series-donner-party-relief-expedition-finale/>

or

<https://sierrastateparks.org>

DONNER RELIEF PARTIES

HEROISM

P A T H O S

HUMAN SPIRIT

PUBLIC INVITED
FRI FEB 18 2-3 PM
DONNER MEMORIAL STATE PARK
TICKETS: sierrastateparks.org

QR codes to take you Thursday's event, top, and Friday's, bottom. You can also use this URL forlornhope.org



DONNER RELIEF PARTIES

MEET

THE HEROES

HUMAN SPIRIT

PUBLIC INVITED
THU FEB 17 6-6:30 PM
DONNER SKI RANCH

Presented by DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

DONNER PARTY RESCUERS LIVE



REASON TUCKER



CALEB GREENWOOD



JOHN STARK



JOHN PIERCE RHOADS

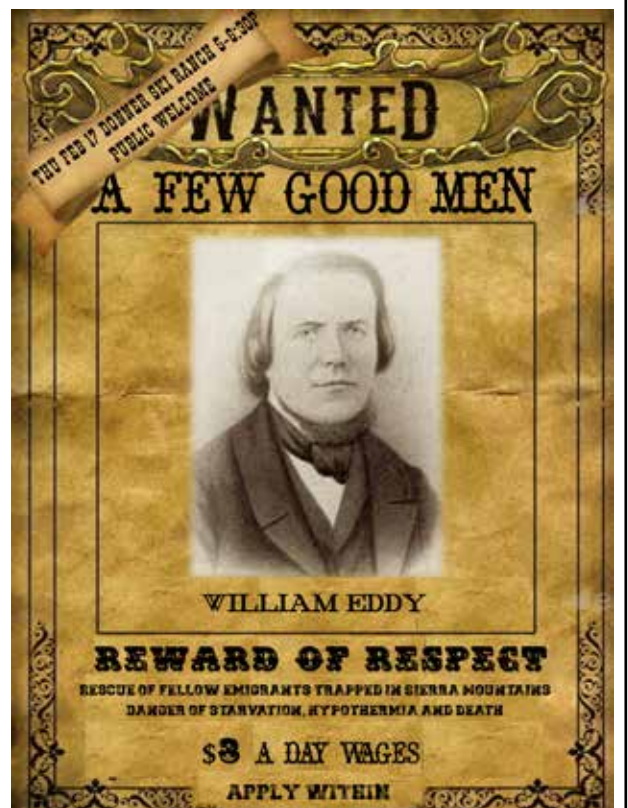
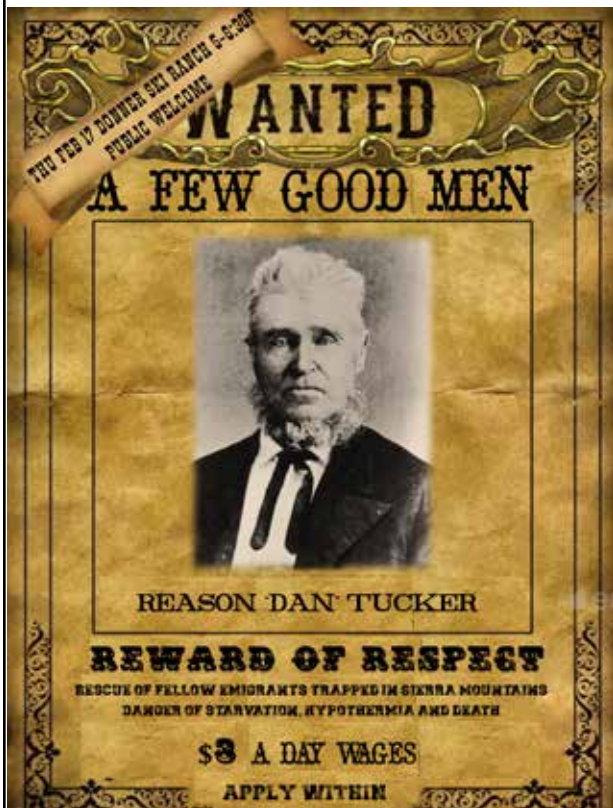
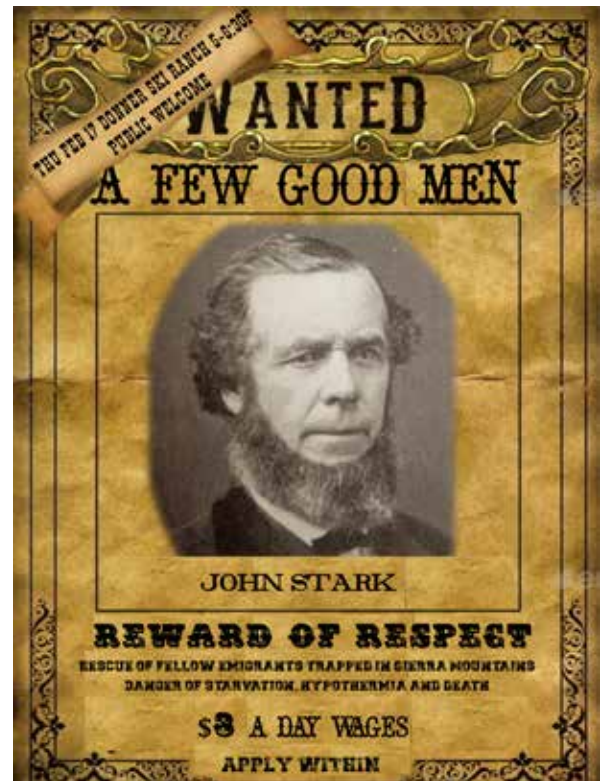
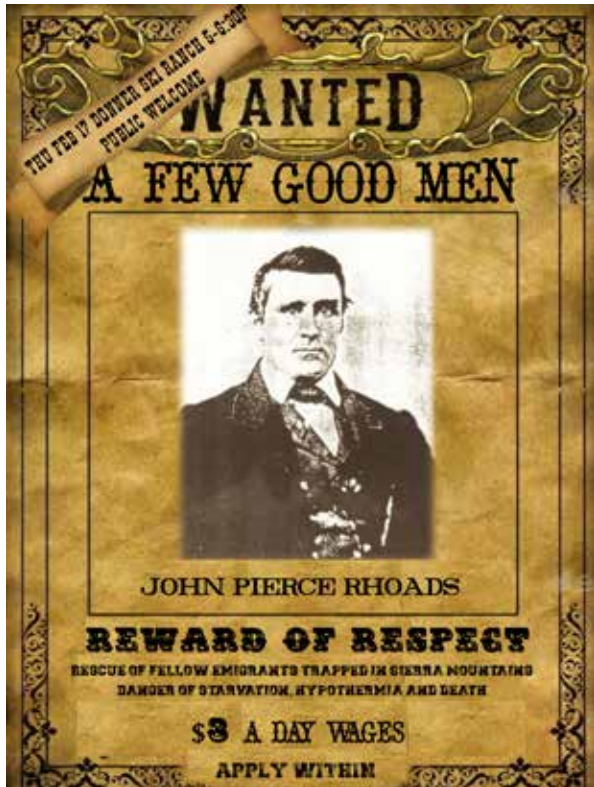
OPEN TO
THE PUBLIC



WILLIAM EDDY

THU FEB 17
5-6:30P
DONNER SKI RANCH

Thursday evening at Donner Ski Ranch and Friday at the Donner Memorial State Park the four people doing the reprise of the Donner Party Rescue Expeditions will be in period dress impersonating four of the original heroes who saved half of the Donner Party.



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>