

# Opportunity

Since you are an Heirloom reader it's not too much a stretch to think that you are interested in local history. As it happens, we have an opportunity for you – that any history buff would love.

The Donner Summit Historical Society's museum at the blinking light in downtown Soda Springs is embarking on an interior renovation to make the interior attractive to visit:

- Identify and label artifacts
- reduce what's on display with the idea of rotating exhibits
- open it up so people can move around easily
- ADA compliance.
- tell good stories.

The main theme is The Most Historically Significant Square Mile in California with exhibits to illustrate that and other good stories. Visit the new MOTH (Museum of Truckee History) at the east end of the railway station in Truckee to get an idea of where we're going.

First, we need to remove everything from the DSHS and catalog things as we go. Some things are junk and need to be dispensed with. Other things will be coming back and a third category will be staying in storage. We have a shipping container in Soda Springs in which we'll build shelves and will be our artifact storage facility.

Once the building is empty we're going to insulate, put in a working heating system, replace the flooring, and put in new front doors. Other work can happen as time goes by. Currently there is no ceiling insulation, the front doors are rusting through, the flooring is decrepit, and the heat hardly heats. It's also jam packed, nothing is labeled or interpreted, there's too much, and it's overwhelming. It doesn't tell any good stories.

Once things are fixed up and exhibits are ready, the new Donner Summit Historical Society will be ready for visits.

This is an ambition undertaking and we need help. You could get your hands "dirty" helping to put together a warm, welcoming, attractive museum telling many good stories.

If this is the kind of thing you'd like to do, please let me know:

Bill Oudegeest [bill@donnersummithhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:bill@donnersummithhistoricalsociety.org) 209 606 6859

What are some of the kinds of things need doing?

- Moving things to storage
- Moving things to the junk pile
- Cataloging things as they go
- Photography items going to storage for the data base
- Keeping things organized in the storage container
- Deciding on what's to be display
- Making and labeling exhibits
- Details Details Details

We need boxes to move things like books and photo albums  
Anyone know any good haulers and movers in the area?

On the next page I'll include a picture of the new MOTH in Truckee and a picture of the the DSHS interior taken the other day.



One interior view of the Donner Summit Historical Society



One interior view of the new Museum of Truckee History

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

May, 2022 issue #165



## May on Donner Summit

May must have been an exciting month in the years before Highway 40 was open in winters. It was the month when eastern Sierra winter isolation would be over with the coming of the first automobiles.

A lot of snow falls on Donner Summit every winter.\* That snow can close the roads today even with the advent of large snow removal machines. Before 1932 Highway 40 over Donner Summit was closed each winter. That stopped all except train traffic (onto which ambitious automobilists would put their cars for transport over the Sierra). The closed highway isolated the eastern Sierra from the rest of the State and so the merchants of Truckee and Lake Tahoe looked for ways to shorten their isolation and get tourists moving again each spring. They wanted an open highway. Automobile manufacturers pushed for early crossings of the summit because they could then have “bragging rights” showing how strong their cars were. Then too, there were the “autoists” who were all guys wanting to prove their virility. They wanted to push the limits of their machines and themselves. They competed to be the first over the summit each spring.

Going through old newspapers looking for “Donner Summit” is a difficult job because there is a flood of articles about road openings, conditions of roads, predictions for openings, hazardous trips, etc. That flood shows how important road opening was to people. There are also articles about endurance runs because the Sierra was a good place to test out the abilities and stamina of men and drivers. Snow was an added challenge. So there were articles about the first automobiles over the summit each year and there was the Tahoe Tavern Silver Cup, awarded annually to the first automobile. A really good story about the first automobile of 1911 can, of course, be found in the [Heirloom](#) (see the Foote Expedition in the June, '19 and July, '14 [Heirlooms](#)).

As we at the [Heirloom](#) go about our regular editorial work we come across things that we categorize and put off for later. This issue is about some of those things. They’ve been accumulating since we last addressed the issue of opening the roads (May, '20). That may seem repetitive, but these are different and the story, so different from what we experience today, is a good one.

cont'd to page 3

\*an average of 34 feet



San Francisco Call May 5, 1895. Mr. Magee was the automobile editor of the newspaper.

Special Bonus Article - autos coming to the Panama Pacific Exposition in 1915

## Summit Road Now Open Many Automobiles Have Crossed

The road over the summit is now open and in first class condition for automobile traffic. During the past two weeks the Chamber of Commerce have had a number of men working on the road at different times together with teams donated by James McIvar, for the purpose of breaking the road. Thursday E. M. Baxter State Highway Commissioner put a large crew of men to work on the road and they will have the new road on this side of the subway open tomorrow night for automobile traffic. He was looking for men to go to work for him Wednesday night and as a result Thursday morning about twenty men left for the mountainside to shovel snow, besides the few already at work. At least 150 machines have passed through Truckee on their way to Lake Tahoe from the east during the past week, and prior to that time, a great deal larger number have shipped over the summit, both going to the [Panama Pacific] exposition as well as coming from the exposition. The Truckee route will prove to be the popular one to the tourist traveler who will come up the Truckee river from Reno then from Truckee go around Lake Tahoe over the State Highway and thence through Placerville to the exposition. This is the route that has been boosted in practically all of the different eastern papers and magazines.

Truckee Republican, June 10, 1915

## Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

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

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

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

\*historical society humor

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Find us on 

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



### Summit of Sierra Lures Motorists

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



Were people really that crazy?

So here in May, 2022, we have stories from Mays past about some of those annual firsts, difficulties crossing the Summit, and clearing the roads along with a collage of headlines.

Even though winter has been over for some months by the time May rolls around, there is still plenty of snow on Donner Summit. The following vignettes show how difficult crossing the summit was before snowmelt.

In 1913 a Buick won the Tahoe Tavern Silver Cup for being the first automobile over the summit and down to Tahoe Tavern at Tahoe City. It was the second win for a Buick proving "that the Buick can give as good an account of itself on top of 15 or 20 feet of snow on as on the dry ground." The 1913 winners ran into rain on snow above Emigrant Gap and so stopped to camp. Once the rain stopped "soft snow made progress slow." Upon coming to a snow drift they would drive slowly moving forward just a few inches. Then they'd back up and fill the resulting grooves with snow. They could drive on the packed snow. Sometimes the drifts on the roads were too much so they took off through the forests "fording streams, dodging rocks and fallen trees and forcing the little car over places where a burro would refuse to go..." One day they made only five miles. "It was impossible to imagine a harder test on a care."

At the summit the drivers found the openings in the snowsheds that allowed travelers to cross the tracks boarded up

with fifteen foot snow drifts at both the entrance and exit. The manager of the Summit Hotel told them it was possible to cross the tracks if they went up to the next tunnel and crossed over the snowsheds on a ledge of rocks there, then go down the rocks and snow to the road.

It was hard work. One end of a ledge looked almost perpendicular and the question was how to get down. They eventually "slid down this snow field to the road." "In some places it was so steep that the car had the appearance of standing on end." The road along Donner Lake was very good, though, and from Truckee to Tahoe Tavern they covered 15 miles in 40 minutes.

Parenthetically the Truckee Republican noted on May 28, 1914 that an auto trying to be the first to cross ran into trouble at the new underpass which replaced having to drive through the snowsheds. "The running board of the machine had to be cut off on both sides of the machine to allow it to go through the subway under the snowsheds at the summit."

That newspaper also said, "The business men in town started out bright and early this morning in automobiles, equipped with picks, shovels, ropes, and all necessary paraphernalia for breaking roads through the snow, to break the road across the summit. Practically every business man in town was represented and it is thought that by tonight the road will be passable. This is the first organized effort that has been made to open the road, and a great deal of credit is due to the business men for the way they are taking hold of this matter."

It should be noted here that the automobilist who had to sacrifice his running boards said that the road would be open in two weeks. Apparently the business men could not wait.

A 1920 May trip required horses to pull the automobiles over the snow. One of the autotists said, "the distinction of being first over the summit does not compensate for the difficulties encountered, and he will never try it again."

In 1912 the winners, at one point, took two days to go five miles.

The San Francisco Chronicle (May 27, 1923) reported that the highway over the summit would probably be opening on June 1. This was earlier than nature would have projected because there were several crews of "men shoveling a trench five feet wide through the heavy drifts of snow... Some of the drifts are thirty feet deep and 1500 feet in length."

Truckee merchants had contributed \$500 to the effort, Donner Lake Co. \$50, Summit Hotel \$25, Cisco Hotel \$15, etc. The trench was to expose more snow to the sun and warm air so that melting could be hastened.

In 1916 the highway department was apparently having trouble opening the road and their chief engineer suggested that if they only had a harrow they could open the road more quickly. A harrow is an agricultural implement not usually thought of in the context of snow removal. The Chamber of Commerce okayed the purchase, the State got the harrow, and the tool broke up the snow letting the "sun and wind do the rest by melting it." "Truckee is watching for the arrival of the first automobile" said the Sacramento Union (May 11, 1916).

In 1915 the snow was not melting fast enough and the Sacra-

THE SAN FRANCISCO CALL, SUNDAY, MAY 18, 1913.

## BUICK CAPTURES LAKE TAHOE TROPHY

### Snowdrifts Fail to Stop Progress of Little Car

*Scenes of the path over which Claud McGee and Fred Cross drove the Buick car to Lake Tahoe.*

fording streams, dodging rocks and fallen trees and forcing the little car over places where a burro would almost refuse to go. In one place, where a big pine tree had fallen across the road, we followed a creek bed for half a mile or more before we were able to find a way through the rocks and trees to get back on the road again. Saturday night the speedometer showed five miles for the day's run, and we were still eight miles from the summit. Everything was covered with snow, there being very few bare spots on the road, and as it was threatening to rain again, we decided to stop for only a short rest and then push on over the deep snow as fast as possible.

"We crossed the summit Sunday morning at 7:30, and as our car started on the down grade to Donner lake we congratulated ourselves on our troubles being over. They were not, however. When we arrived at the opening in the snowdrift below the summit we found it boarded up. We also found a solid bank of snow about 15 feet deep, an

of men at work shoveling out the worst drifts near the summit, and the road should be open to touring parties in about three weeks.

"Preparations are being made to resume work on the state road around Emerald bay, and the unfinished mile and a half will be completed about June 15. The completion of this road will enable the autoist to reach Lake Tahoe by Auburn, Emigrant Gap and Truckee and return via Tallac and Placerville.

"We feel that a good part of our success in negotiating the many miles of snow is due to our Goodyear no-slip-cut tires. After we struck the first snow we never had more than 20 pounds air pressure in them, and in the worst places they were run absolutely flat, and in spite of this hard treatment and abuse they did not give us one minute's trouble and show very little, if any, effects of their hard trip. The Diamond Monarch oil also rendered excellent service. There were hours at a time that our car was on a heavy pull on the low gear, and it was certainly a severe test on every moving part, and the mere fact that we did not

San Francisco Call May 18, 1913

mento Union (May 15, 1921) said motorists were shipping their cars from Colfax to Truckee.

1920 saw snow shovelers working from both ends of the snowdrifts from the Summit Hotel to an old sawmill a mile down Summit Canyon. The snow was reported to be two to ten feet deep. Colfax, Loomis, Roseville, Newcastle, and Truckee were all contributing shovelers. (Sacramento Union May 20, 1920)

**Truckee Summit  
Will Open June 1**  
Trench Being Shoveled  
Through Drifts.

**BUICK AGAIN FIRST  
TO GET INTO  
TAHOE**

Climbs Over Snowsheds and  
Reaches Lake---Shanks  
Arrives in City.

By W. H. B. FOWLER.

**BUICK CARS THE  
FIRST ACROSS  
SIERRAS**

**Hazardous Undertak-  
ing of Plucky Driver  
Is Described**

**Have Difficult Trip  
in Crossing Summit**

**Deep Snows Are  
Blocking Autoists**

The danger to be contended with in getting over the summit and down the steep, rocky grade to Donner Lake is in itself a test which will try any driver... To attempt the passage with 12 or 14 inches of snow on the ground is almost suicidal.

Oakland Tribune May 29, 1912

**TAHOE VICTOR DUE  
TO ARRIVE HERE  
TODAY**  
Plucky Buick Pilot Returning  
After Completing Dan-  
gerous Trip.  
WEINSTOCK-NICHOLS CO.  
TO SELL NEW ACCESSORY

**FIFTY MEN TO  
SHOVEL SNOW**  
Party of Workers Will Spend  
Two Days Opening Road  
to Truckee.

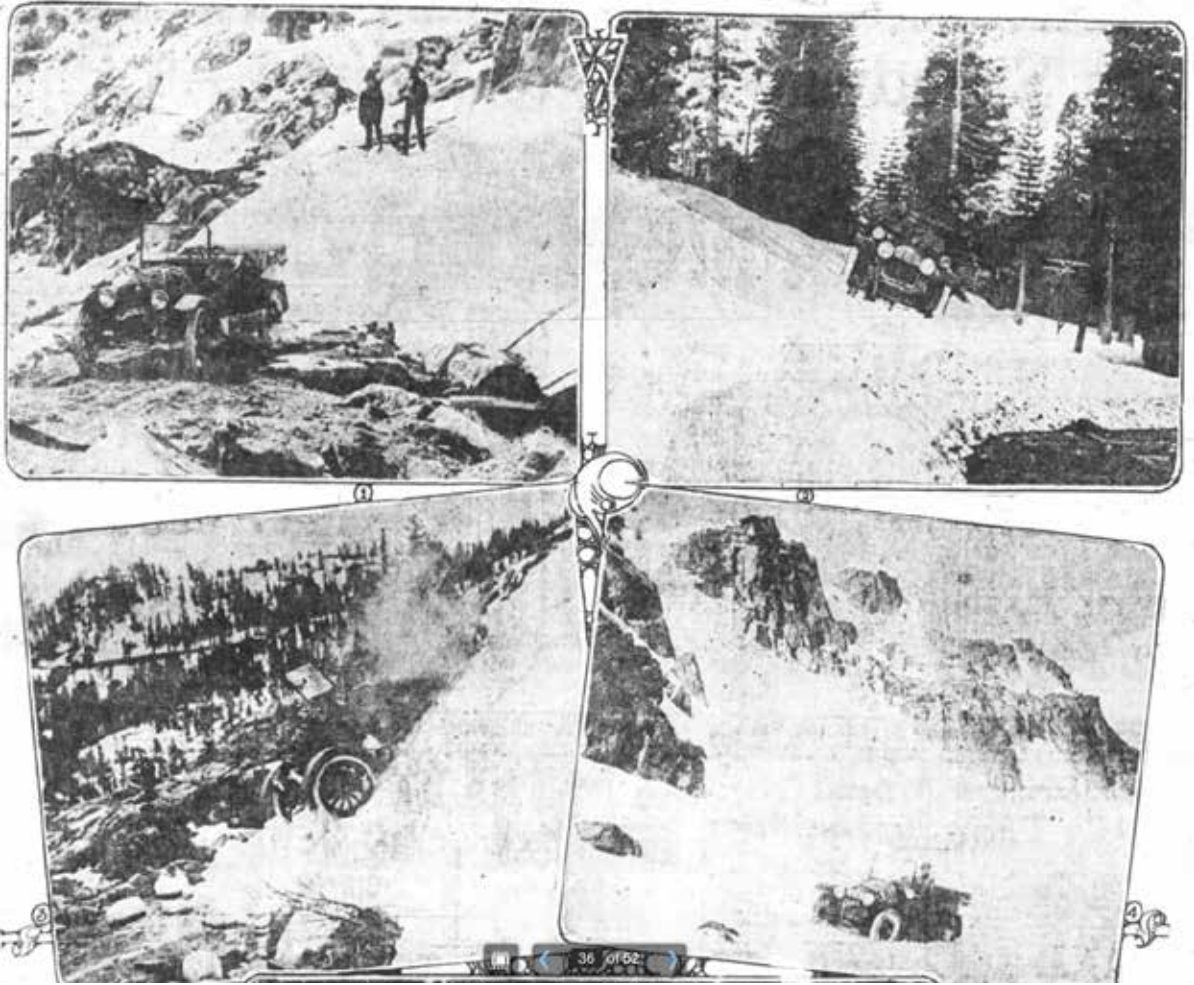
**Citizens of Truckee  
Open Summit Road**  
State Highway Engineer Baxter  
Will Clear Off Snow  
in Few Days.

**DRIVE AUTO OVER  
TRUCKEE SUMMIT**  
San Francisco Autoists Win  
Cup Given by Hotel Fourth  
Time.

"...we were told by people who were familiar with road conditions at this season of the year that it was absolutely impossible for an automobile to cross the summit for at least a month."  
San Francisco Call May 18, 1913



## Auburn-Colfax-Tahoe Road Will Be Open for Travel by June 15



Oakland Tribune  
May 30, 1915

Again in 1915 the winning auto for being the first to cross the Sierra to Tahoe Tavern was a Buick. Fred Gross and C. A. McGee of the Howard Auto Company won for the fourth year in a row. Above is a collage of pictures of their trip.

1915 was a record breaking year both for the number of drivers (6) and the bad weather. There was more snow on the summit than there had been in previous years but McGee and Gross had experience in "snow fighting." The first snow field they encountered after Towle's was two miles long. Then the rain and snow started and kept falling for four days. The rain soaked through the snow and melted it from the bottom making it unstable. Problems could not be seen and so the first inkling of trouble would be the car sinking to the running boards in the snow. From Cisco to Soda Springs the snow was two to four feet deep. That didn't cause too much trouble but the real problems started at the Soda Springs grade, "our real work began." The drifts were high and uneven. One half of the road was covered steeply and the other with little snow due to nearby trees intercepting the snow. "There were times when practically the weight of the entire machine would rest on one wheel, and it would seem that something must give way."

"From the Summit Hotel over the summit to the subway under the snow sheds was just one big drift after another. We had expected a great deal of trouble between the snow sheds and Donner Lake, and we were very glad to discover that there was less snow on this side of the mountains than in the previous years."

From the bottom of the grade below Donner Summit at Donner Lake to Tahoe Tavern the roads were "a regular boulevard" so much improvement work had been done.

Again in 1915 the State engineer Baxter would have snow shoveling crews out shoveling snow drifts as soon as the snow started to melt.

Oakland Tribune May 30, 1915



# Fake News in the Old Days Too

One of the top stories over the past few years has been “Fake News.” Here we have a story, which we've been putting off for awhile, showing that "fake news" is not a new phenomenon, people in the past were just like us, that things don't change, and that the [Heirloom](#), therefore, is current.

First a little background then further commentary at the end. As soon as there were automobiles there were drivers or “autoists” who wanted to test their capabilities and those of their new machines. There were endurance runs, records were set, and there were races, all of which were reported in the newspapers. There were also articles touting the conditions of roads and for Donner Summit, regular articles annually about when the roads would open for the season - like the story on page 1. The ultimate test of automotive and driver stamina was the transcontinental trek. How fast could one drive from San Francisco to New York or vice versa? There were even rules so that records could be compared.

We've covered some of those trips. See the [Heirlooms](#) for June, '14 and book reviews: [Coast to Coast by Automobile](#) (October, '12) or [Record Setting Trips](#) (July, '15), and [A reliable Car and a Woman Who Knows It](#), February, '15). We've even covered George Wyman who did the first motorized crossing of the U.S. on a motor bicycle (1903) June, '14) and [Grace and Grit](#) about women motorcyclists crossing the country (September, '15). The first try at a cross-country trip was by Alexander Winton in 1901 (the [Heirloom](#), June, '14). He got over the Sierra via Donner Summit and got stuck in the desert sands of Nevada. The first successful cross-country trips did not go over Donner Summit but Donner Summit did become a preferred route.

People were setting records and there was lots of publicity. Other people were content just to push themselves. For example, there were 150 transcontinental travelers per year in 1913 and by 1923 there were between 20 and 25,000 cars per year. Just to put it into perspective the [Guide to the Lincoln Highway](#) said, it would take 19 days to cross the country traveling 10 hours per day at 18 mph in 1913. Imagine crossing Nevada in summer at 18 mph.

Here is an article about a fellow setting a record crossing the country and using the snowsheds to do it. Just reading the headline grabs your interest.

## “Ghost Car” Flits Across Continent Like a Phantom

Robert Hammond Tells New Yorkers of Remarkable  
Record-Breaking Trip from San Francisco Via  
The Snowsheds of the “Truckee, Arizona”

“Robert Hammond and his ‘ghost car,’ in which he claims he hurtled through the climate from San Francisco to New York in eight days, evidently have set New York city by the ears.

“Hammond, according to advises received last night from New York, told the Gothamites that he left the hotel St. Francis at 12:01 o'clock on the morning of May 17; that an American Automobile Association official checked him out; that a crow saw him off, that he sailed through the Sierra snowsheds of the Southern Pacific Company in an hour and a half, emerging just before he reached Truckee, 'Arizona.'

“Aside from the fact that the Truckee and the snowsheds are in California, several hundred miles from Arizona, and a few other mis-statements, Hammond's story is correct. He has at least arrived in New York.

“Officials of the A.A.A. and of the California Automobile Association deny any knowledge of Hammond or his car, And two, Hammond's story of driving through the snowsheds does not hang together. Even ignoring his contempt for geography, Southern Pacific official declares such a stunt a physical impossibility. They say they have no record of any automobile passing through

the sheds. A thorough investigation of Hammond's claim that he passed through the sheds is under way, as such a thing is against all rules of the company.

"Still, Hammond and his 'ghost car' seemed to have arrived at New York city on May 18."

San Francisco Chronicle May 26, 1916

### Further commentary.

Using the snowsheds was forbidden by the Southern Pacific but it was done. George Wyman did (see above) and so did Thomas Stevens who was the first to cross the Sierra by bicycle, then the first to cross the country by bicycle and finally the first to go around the world by bicycle (1885 – Heirloom March, '15 – Around the World by Bicycle). A family used the snowsheds to bike across the Sierra too during a railroad strike (see the September, '17 Heirloom). So that part of the story is possible. Today there is a gate at Tunnel 6 preventing people from driving into the tunnel and the snowsheds because a few years ago some moron (technical term) drove through Tunnels 6, 7, 8, ... etc. and the snowsheds. He got to Coldstream Canyon where he tried to cross the tracks. He got stuck and stopped Amtrak. The gate went in the next day.

Today we have fake news and we maybe think that it's a new phenomenon. Here Mr. Hammond is purveying fake news, and using Donner Summit as a prop. We also have people today claiming to be decorated veterans to get admiration.

What happened to Mr. Hammond has been lost to history but it would be fun to know where Mr. Hammond ended up. Perhaps a reader out there has a subscription to Ancestry.com.

## Miscellaneous

In an article in the Truckee Republican dated November 11, 1908 and titled "Some Pretty Good Time," the author describes early auto travel over Donner Summit.

Up until this time, 1908, no one had ever "attempted the Summit pass and consequent road from this slope of the Sierra without the aid of horses to pull them up the steep grades leading to the Summit. Not only did the driver of the Packard, a fellow named Doyle, not use horses, he also set some kind of record time, "nothing yet having near equalled it.

Mr. Doyle had been using his car in Truckee all summer, "over the hills and vales and roads that were no roads at all, and taken in the scenery..." At the end of the summer he needed to get the car to San Francisco for a new paint job and overhall so it would be ready for 1909. Maintenance was more difficult in those days.

He and his party left Truckee and reached the Summit 45 minutes later. 55 minutes later they'd arrived at Emigrant Gap which equaled "train time." It was another six hours to Roseville where everyone had dinner. An hour or so later they came into Sacramento where they spent the night. The author called the feat "a remarkable time."

Just following that article there was an ad to rent a four-room furnished house in Truckee, "known as the Stewart house," for \$10 per month. The rental came with free water and prospective renters could inquire at the Arcade Saloon.

# Donner Summit in the Newspapers

Some months ago, in preparation for the restoration of Summit Valley to close to its natural condition, before civilization intruded, an historian, Judith Marvin, arrived to do an archeological survey of the valley. She and her colleagues used the PGE archeological survey of 1976 and then added their own research both on site and from newspapers and other sources. They found lots of historical and pre-historical sites because there has been a lot of activity in Summit Valley over time.

As part of their research, Judith Martin sat down with the DSHS and we traded information. During the trading Judith highlighted some of the things she'd found while doing newspaper research. That sounded like fun and so our research department took some of Judith's clues and came up with the actual articles she'd highlighted. That's the subject here – just a miscellany of things found during newspaper searching in the early Twentieth Century.

We should warn you – don't do this at home – if you go searching for "Donner Summit" even during only one year to limit what you find, you will be overwhelmed mostly with road conditions articles. Try to select other topics.

First up from Biggs News June 21, 1935 is a travelogue which gets to Donner Summit.

"Then commences one of the most pleasant grades you have ever encountered. Wide open turns and ever upward, your car goes up on high with sheer granite cliffs about you. Stop at the Emigrant [Donner Summit] Bridge and view the sight below.

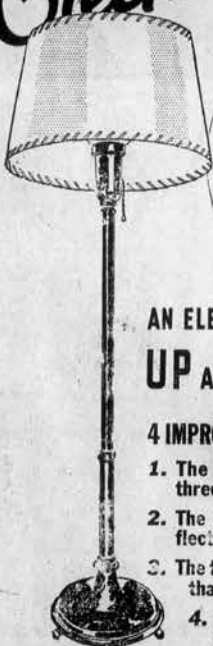
"Through the gap carved from rock and you have crossed the summit. With ease and pleasure, which once pioneers suffered untold tragedy to cross over. Down through Norden, there Lake Van Norden, head of the P. G. and E water supply of the Spaulding-Drumm division. That is the Ski hill over across the Lake toward the Sun, where we skied and tobogganned last winter at Soda Springs. The Lake was froze over then. Soda Springs Hotel pops out of the woods. Stop and rest. Meals are of the best here, and their bar is one of the finest "on the hill". [sic]

"Big easy chairs in the lobby, with a fire place crackling at the end. Its cool enough for a fire, even now-at Soda Springs. [sic]

"Long shadows reach down the canyons or moonlight makes the hill tops silvery as you continue toward home [sic]

"Herstle Jones Rainbow Tavern and Trout Farm is 7 miles west just below the cataracts of the Yuba River. He's putting on a 22 room addition, spending \$10,000 for the enjoyment of his public. Cisco and its river and camping spots, ... [sic]

THE LATEST  
*Electric Wonder*



HIGH  
MEDIUM  
LOW

AN ELECTRIC LAMP YOU TURN  
**UP AND TURN DOWN!**

4 IMPROVEMENTS IN THIS NEW LAMP

1. The three-filament bulb and three-way switch.
2. The oval glass diffuser and reflector.
3. The full height standard not less than sixty-three inches high.
4. The wide bottom shade also open wide at the top.

HERE is such a sensible and handy kind of lamp. For example: You and your family may be sitting in the living room talking or listening to the radio. No one is using the eyes for any seeing task. This lamp is turned low—saves light. Afterwhile everyone is reading. There is not quite enough light. This lamp is turned up to medium intensity—just the right light for reading normal print. Then the lamp can be turned up once more. This brighter intensity of light is needed when mother starts mending or darning, especially with dark thread on dark cloth. That is a hard visual task and is one common reason why so many mothers wear glasses. There are many beautiful models of lamp standards and shade styles of this newer and finer lamp. See them today.

Good lighting is one of the least expensive things you buy – and one of the most important. A few cents a day on your electric bill may be the difference between good eyesight and bad.

238,346 of our customers living at the same location as last year are saving money by using 1/2 Price Electricity. Why not you?

SEE YOUR DEALER OR  
**P.G. and E.**  
PACIFIC GAS AND ELECTRIC COMPANY  
Owned · Operated · Managed by Californians 126-635



"Here is a delightful trip for a day a week-end or a week. Fishing, hiking riding, trails, lakes, streams, rugged peaks, desert country, quaint towns, modern hotels and camping places, good clean air, and cool, everything one could ask for." [sic]

In the next column was the PGE ad on the previous page advertising the "Electric Wonder." It's interesting to see what we take for granted has moved way past what was highlighted as a "wonder."

The Grass Valley Morning Union (January 15, 1927 reported on a coming hotel:

### "\$40,000 Hotel to Be Built at Lake in High Sierra

"ARBUCKLE, Jan. 14.-D. H. Jones and J. O. Jones, former residents and business men but now owners of Soda Springs Station properties near Donner summit, state they have started construction on a \$40,000 hotel on the Victory Highway, two miles from the summit.

"It will be the only hotel on the summit, they have found the erection necessary due to the winter sports vacationists and movie companies, who find the snows of the Sierra just right for filming snow scenes.

"It was within two miles of Soda Springs that many of the actual snow scenes of Charles Chaplin's 'Gold Rush' was taken. Lake Van Norden is directly opposite of the station and hotel."

The Sacramento Bee (December 10, 1927) reported the opening of the hotel later that year:

### NEW HOTEL OPENS AT SODA SPRINGS NORDEN (Placer Co.),

"Dec. 10 The formal opening of the new \$40,000 Soda Springs Hotel one mile south of this place, will be celebrated to-night.

"The hotel designed as an all-season resort, featuring Summer and Winter sports, is on the Auburn-Truckee Highway almost at the foot of the new highway connecting with the Donner Memorial Bridge, It will be served by its own railroad station at Soda Springs, only a stone's throw distant.

"The hotel overlooks Lake Van Norden. It was

## HOTEL SODA SPRINGS

"Where Winter and Summer Sports Meet"

In the High Sierra, on the Victory highway U. S. Route 40 . Summitt of Auburn-Truckee Paved Highway . open the year 'round. Its Cool . its delightful . by the beautiful Lake Van Norden . Close to fishing and hunting spots . horseback riding . hiking . swim or ski . easy to reach Donner . Tahoe . Reno . Yosemite . two hours from Sacramento .

A hotel that is modern . steam heated . ventilated . running water . hot and cold . baths adjoining every room . large hospitable lobby . huge fireplace .

Large dining room . excellent meals . club room . yes, a modern hotel . and rates that are reasonable . and you can come as you are .

HOTEL SODA SPRINGS,  
Soda Springs . California

Phone or write for reservation

Biggs News July 29, 1932

built by the Jones Brothers. A banquet room, dancing and entertainment are features of the program."

Movies having been mentioned on Donner Summit and that brings us to the Sacramento Bee on March 23, 1928. The article headlined,

### Lake Van Norden Sports Planned Movie Studio Is Projected for Valley near Truckee

The Summit had just gotten eighteen inches of new snow making a total of sixty-one inches on the ground. Winter sports were coming on the following Sunday at Van Norden. Along with the sports that were coming, two representatives of the "Motion Picture Location Managers' Association of Los Angeles" were coming "to inspect possibilities for a branch studio in the Summit Valley."

The article went on to say that forty or fifty people were expected to engage in "all sort of sports" and that "motion picture news reel companies" had been invited. There would even be a dog team from near Truckee on hand.

A fellow named W. L. Maynard of Truckee had organized the affair, "It is not generally known, even among

the location men," Maynard said, "that the Summit has wonderful possibilities for a variety of shots."

"Many of the motion picture men think of the Summit as two sides of a hill. The Summit is a beautiful valley. Lake Van Norden is at the western end of this valley. In Winter this lake is frozen over and snow covered. It allows wonderful opportunities for long shots where snow expanses are needed without stumps or trees..."

"Soda Springs is at the lower end of this valley, along the lake. The Norden station and old Summit station and the old town of Donner are also in this valley. It would take years to exhaust the possibilities of obtaining new and different shots."

Clearly Mr. Maynard had good taste and he went on to talk about erecting a large building for inside work when the weather was too inclement outside. The Acme Company was due in a couple of days to get shots for a "Chinese and Siberian film."

That sounded promising but apparently the "representatives of the "Motion Picture Location Managers' Association of Los Angeles" didn't have the same taste as Mr. Maynard and no movie making facility was built on Donner Summit, and so Donner Summit avoided wide-spread international fame.

Nevertheless, Dennis Jones' Beacon Hill (Soda Springs Ski Area- see the February, '09 Heirloom) became the place to be for skiing. Jones cleared the first run of trees in 1929 calling that run the "Forked Tree Run." It was forty feet wide. He opened a ski shop and rented ski equipment, built the first ski lift which didn't work very well, then the first summit rope tow and a little ski lodge. Movie stars arrived to ski and the area was called the "St. Moritz of America." The San Francisco Chronicle called it "the winter colony of San Francisco socialites." You'll really have to download the February, '09 Heirloom from our website; it's a good story about the "Remarkable Dennis Jones."

The Sacramento Bee (February 10, 1935) reported that the Sierra Club "Is to Build Home." It would "facilitate participation in Winter sports by members of the organization."

Of course the summit was being used for winter sports long before the Sierra Club decided to build. The Sacramento Bee reported on June 18, 1932 that (go to the next column):

Sacramento Bee December 22, 1930

## "Winter Sports Will Be Held At Many Locations In The High Sierra"

"Unusual Condition of Heavy Remaining Snow Blanket Permits Skiing for June And July." It would be a "winter frolic in mid-Summer". For Donner Summit there would be a "Sugar Bowl" Tourney" on July 4 held by the Auburn Ski Club. Sugar Bowl, the ski area was still seven years away. Roy Mikkelsen who was a member of the "American Olympic Winter sports team" and famous ski jumper, would be there to jump. His jump at the Olympics was the best by an American. Besides jumping, there would also be competitions cross country and slalom and maybe downhill.

"California's combination of snow and sunshine will provide a delightful combination for a comfortable Fourth of July outing," said Lane Calder, president of the Auburn Ski Club.

The newspaper did run a warning,  
**WATCH SUNBURN.**

"California's sunshine, however, makes it necessary to use extreme precaution against sunburn on such trips, as the ultra-violet rays of the sun are intensified by the glare of the snow. Two hours' exposure in the snow are sufficient to produce the most painful sunburn on the unprotected skin. This form of sunburn in the Alps is known as 'snowburn.'"

A different kind of sport arrived on Donner Summit reported

### SKI-GLIDING IS SNOW SPORT IN HIGH SIERRA

"Scotty" Allan's Dog Team Launches Craft At Soda Springs

By WAYNE R. NEELICK. SODA SPRINGS (Special Col. Dec. 22)—Ski-gliding today is accepted as a new sport as the result of experiments conducted here yesterday with a glider on the snow above Lake Van Norden. This new sport was introduced to the Sierra—and to the world—yesterday when the snow-glider, "Scotty" Allan, was whirled into the air by "Scotty" Allan's famed malamute racing team.

The flights of the glider necessarily were short. There is plenty of snow at Soda Springs for snow sports but not enough to launch the glider from the higher hills. The takeoff was on a gentle slope, some of which is actually a part of the lake bed when Lake Van Norden is at its Spring level.

Movie Men Present. But yesterday's flights are but the forerunner of a new "multi-faceted" sport. Now that it has been demonstrated that a glider, equipped with a ski landing gear, can take off and soar above the plain, "Willie" Maynard, originator of the sport, expects a number of glider clubs to be formed.

Official recognition was given ski-gliding as a new sport and spectacle by eight snowed-out comedians and by four photographic service syndicates. Sound apparatus was used by several of the snowed-out comedians.

First Snow Flight. In addition to the glider flight being the first time, as set down by the California Ski Association officials, that a glider made a takeoff in snow it is the first time that a dog team has been used to elevate a glider.

"Scotty" Allan, noted musher, hitched his racing team of malamutes to the low-line and whipped the glider into the air over the snow-filled lake bed several times. Experiments with man-power on the low-line was also successful. Twice the craft was elevated by members of the Auburn Ski Club pulling the low-line.

Gallery On Hand. The day was devoted to fixing the glider for the photographers. A gallery of some 100 spectators was on hand, coming principally from Auburn, Truckee, Reno and Tahoe City.

More snow sports are planned at Soda Springs. A program has been arranged for January 3rd and 4th at Tahoe City. In addition to the glider it is hoped to have ski-jumping, slalom and Vermont cutler stunts at Tahoe.

Head by In Places.

### First Sierra Ski-Glider Flight Is Success

A ski-glider was launched from the snow yesterday at Soda Springs. A malamute team, driven by "Scotty" Allan, noted Alaskan musher, whipped the craft into the air. It is shown here just after the take-off, soaring over the disappearing dog team. Below, Wilbur Maynard, superintendent of snow sports for the Southern Pacific Company, is shown shaking hands with Edgar B. Lafferty of San Francisco, glider pilot.



### WAGE VIOLATOR IS FOUND GUILTY Man Who Shaved Speaker Cannon Dies In Woodland

Tahoe Lumber Man Is Convicted On Three Counts; Two May Be Suspended

TAMHO CITY (Lake Tahoe), Dec. 22—Roy E. Andrus, operator of the Lorraine Lumber Company, was found guilty Saturday on three counts of violations of the state labor laws. On the first count, failure to maintain semi-monthly paydays, Andrus was sentenced to pay a \$50 fine or serve a twenty-day jail sentence. If Andrus meets the terms of Justice George H. Egan the sentence on the second and third counts will be suspended. The second count, his failure to post notice of semi-monthly paydays, brought a fine of \$50 or twenty days. Suspension was ordered if Andrus abides by the law in the future.

WOODLAND (Yuba Co.), Dec. 22. A. M. Kiper, aged 64, a veteran Woodland barber, died suddenly at his home here Saturday afternoon.

Kiper conducted a barber shop here for the last twenty-two years. He was a native of Holland, but came to the United States when 4 years old. He first resided in Indiana and Illinois and while there became familiar with and the favorite barber of Uncle Joe Cannon, once the dominant speaker of the House of Representatives. He later lived eight years in California, and then came to Woodland and opened a barber shop here twenty-two years ago. He has no children.

SONOMA MAN IS

by the Sacramento Bee (December 22, 1930) when Scotty Allan used his dog team to launch a glider on Van Norden. (Here you should take a look at our February, '18 Heirloom to read about Scotty Allan.)

The Bee said that ski-gliding was now an accepted new sport "as the result of experiments conducted here yesterday with a glider on the slopes above Lake Van Norden." That was a bold statement since the "new sport was introduced to the Sierra-and to the world - "yesterday."

Scotty Allan's famed Malamute dog team had "whipped" Maude Maynard into the air. The event was a "forerunner of a new 'mile high' sport." Wilbur Maynard, who initiated the new sport, thought that glider clubs would be formed to participate. Wilbur was superintendent of snow sports for the Southern Pacific Railroad which was pushing winter sports in order to get more passengers. So his enthusiasm is maybe understandable.

Eight new-reel companies and four photograph service syndicates had been in attendance to lend credibility and publicity to the "new sport."

The Malamutes having proved that dogs could pull gliders into the air off the snow, then gave way to members of the Auburn Ski Club who demonstrated the same. So dogs were not necessary for the new sport.

And then we get to some heroism on Donner Summit reported in an Auburn Journal (November 2, 1930) article headlined,

### John Vanderbilt Awarded Carnegie Medal For Heroism

If you've been following Donner Summit history you know the stories of heroism from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. There was the Forlorn Hope (see our December, '20 Heirloom and the booklet "The Donner Party and Donner Summit Heroism, Pathos, and the Human Spirit" on our website) and the rescuers of the Donner Party (see our February, '22 Heirloom). So we have our heroes for the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Moving to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was a Donner Summit heroism story that made news across the country, "John Vanderbilt Awarded Carnegie Medal for Heroism."

On November 27, 1938 Vanderbilt and two friends were ice skating on Lake Van Norden. James Myers and friends were ice skating on the other side. On seeing Vanderbilt, Myers skated towards him but broke through the ice mid-way across. Vanderbilt and his friends tied their sweaters together to make a rope and Vanderbilt made his way towards Myers to throw him the "rope". Vanderbilt also broke through the ice.

## John Vanderbilt Awarded Carnegie Medal For Heroism

Award Granted In Recognition Of Valiant  
Attempt To Save Life Of  
James B. Myers

MEDAL SENT TO PARENTS

Attention Of Carnegie Commission Called  
To Courageous Act By  
S. M. Barooshian

Auburn Journal November 2, 1939

Oscar Jones was called from the Soda Springs Hotel and he and a number of guests tried over and over to get ropes and planks to the two men but Vanderbilt and Myers were too exhausted to help themselves, their hands too frozen to grip the thrown ropes. Two of the would-be rescuers also broke through the ice and had to be rescued.

Vanderbilt's heroism gained the attention of the Carnegie Commission which investigated and awarded the medal post-

## TWO SPORTSMEN DROWN IN LAKE

Pair Crash Through Ice While  
Skating; Two Others Have  
Narrow Escape

AUBURN, Nov. 28.—(P)—Death

Modesto Bee November 28, 1938



humously to Vanderbilt's father.

## Tiny House with the biggest foundation in the world –

Here, apparently, is another first for Donner Summit. A couple of papers carried articles about the building of the Donner Summit Weather Bureau.

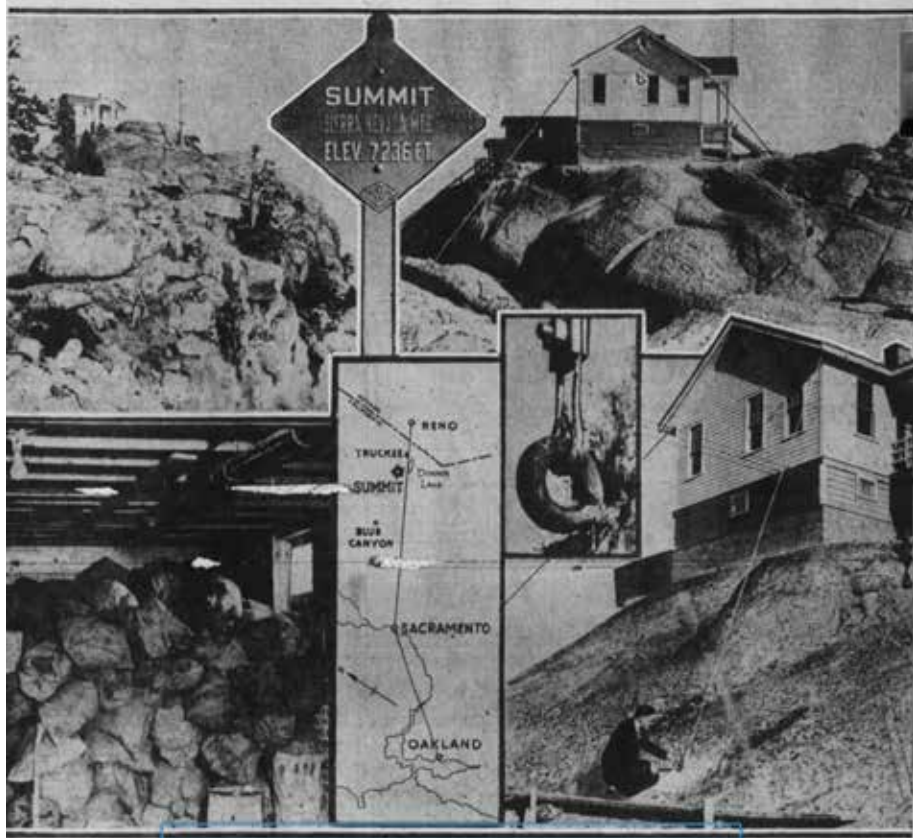
The Oakland Tribune (December 3, 1929) included pictures and a story about the weather station on Donner Summit atop a "300-foot solid granite boulder" "overlooking placid Donner lake." [sic]. It can be "buffeted by 60-mile-an-hour gales and battered by raging blizzards" but during six long months of Sierra winter two observers "cling to their lookout, giving hourly airway weather reports." Although this sounds like it was already occurring, the article was prospective. The weather station had just been finished. The Station was established by Uncle Sam to "guide mail and transport planes over the Sierra" on the transcontinental air route.

Building the little building was a challenge as materials had to be passed "hand to hand up steep, winding trails from the road-way to the rocky station site hundreds of feet above." Then the workers had to anchor the building to the boulder underneath. Steel rods were driven into the granite. Then steel guy wires were run from the building to the granite to keep the "cyclonic winds" from blowing it away.

For the weather observers in the station the work was not just to be reporting weather conditions on the Summit to Oakland and Reno so pilots would know whether to attempt the crossing. The work was also having to survive the "dreary winter" and haul everything needed to live up to the station. Water had to be brought from a spring two miles away in jugs. That seems questionable because Lake Angela is nowhere near that far away. The observers could be snowed in for weeks and their only connection to the outside world was their teletype machine. "Bathing water must be pumped into a cistern from a stagnant pool. Provisions have to be put in before winter and snows block the road." (Highway 40 will be plowed in winter starting in 1932.)

The article noted that an annual snowfall of 35 feet is common.

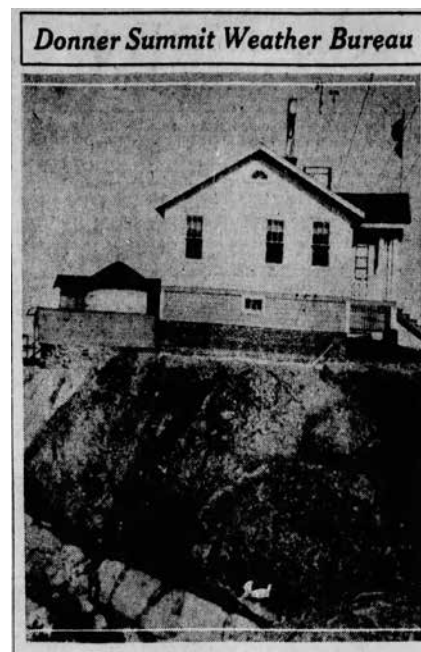
It turns out that the railroad had a lookout on a boulder adjacent to the weather station and it "was blown off the rock last winter." The author noted that was a cheerful thought to keep



Oakland Tribune December 3, 1929

the observers occupied in winter. At the time of the writing the Government had not yet found observers for the weather station. Their first candidate took four days of instruction and had four nights to think about "how securely the house was built." He resigned. The guy wires made him nervous.

Read about the first transcontinental air route and airmail flying over "The Hump" as Donner Summit was called in the July, '20 Heirloom with some also in the July, '11 Heirloom.



Sacramento Bee December 11, 1929



You can visit the foundation remains of the Donner Summit weather station pictured above in a photograph by George Lamson.

At the top of the pass at the Lamson-Cashion Donner Summit Hub, cross Donner Pass Rd. to the north side and scramble up the rocks. You'll see steel stantions embedded in the granite that used to hold a rope for the observers to get to the knoll above where the weather station sat (above). There are lots of bits of foundation and a wonderful view.



Sacramento Bee  
June 18, 1932

In our newspaper search precipitated by Judith Marvin, there was one more article, above, from the Sacramento Bee (June 18, 1932).

SUMMER and Winter sports are meeting on common ground in the High Sierra. This unusual picture was taken Sunday at Lake Van Norden, between Soda Springs and Norden near the summit of the Auburn-Truckee Highway. A group is canoeing and swimming in Lake Van Norden, while Dennis Jones, noted Sierra skier, is watching them on skis from a snowbank extending to the brim of the lake. Those in the "Summer sport" group are Dick and Bobbie Jones of Sacramento and Miss Helen Davidson of Jacksonville, Fla.



# From the DSHS Archives

What travel was like on Old 40 before the freeway – long lines behind slow moving vehicles. Our DSHS photo laboratory scanned the picture below at high resolution to see the truck was at the head of the parade but the photograph is not clear enough. Please note that this is the DSHS photo library not the DSHS special effects laboratory which could have enhanced things more by adding whatever graphics we wanted and even the license plate number of the last car in the parade. We adhere strongly to our commitment to high quality journalism though, and so our special effects lab sees little work.



The picture above was sent in to the DSHS by Pam Vaughn. It followed a scrapbook of pictures mostly in and around the Donner Summit weather station, taken in the early 1940's (see the March, '20 [Heirloom](#)). This one, the one below, and a few more turned up and Pam sent them off to us. What's in Your Closet? Send along what you find - see page 2.



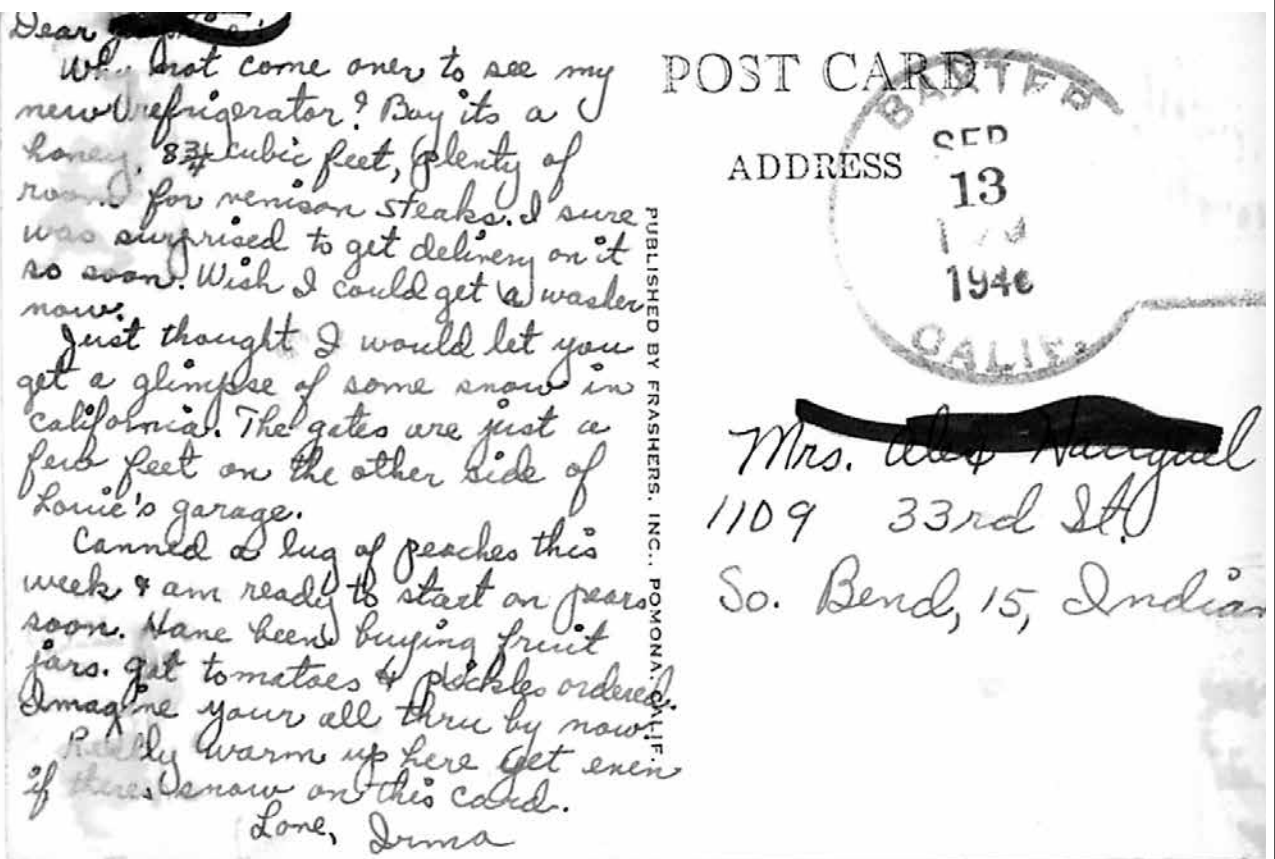
Hello,  
My dad, Willard Milligan, worked at the weather station atop Donner Summit around 1939-41. He left these photos which I thought you should have. You featured him & my mom in

one of your newsletter stories recently. Thanks for being there to take care of these!  
Pam (Milligan) Vaughan





Here's a postcard from 1946 showing how much times have changed. Above is the front showing the control gates at Baxter that closed Highway 40 when snow machines couldn't keep up with snowfall. Below is the back. Irma touts her new refrigerator which is a "honey" having all of 8 3/4 cubic feet. Now that she has a refrigerator she wants a washer. She's just canned a lot of peaches and is aiming to pears and other things. Keeping a house going in those days was harder than today.



# Book Review

## Rufus Porter's Curious World Art and Invention in America 1815-1860

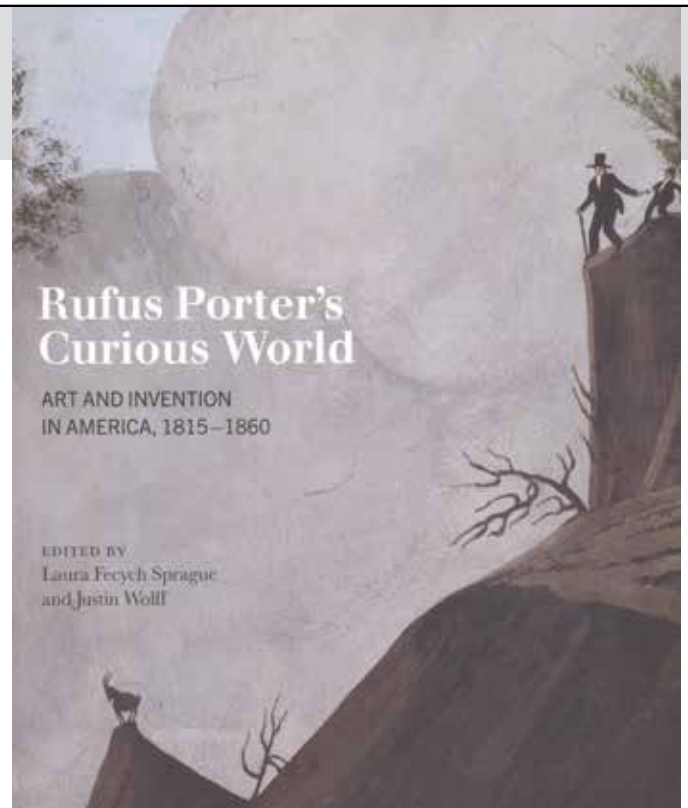
Edited by Laura Sprague and Justin Wolff 2019 137 pages  
large format

In the April, '22 [Heirloom](#) we reviewed [Rufus Porter Yankee Pioneer](#) and made Mr. Porter the subject of the issue's main article. In doing the research of the remarkable Mr. Porter we came across a more general book, [Rufus Porter's Curious World - Art and Invention in America 1815-1860](#). Since Porter was an interesting guy and because we've written about the 19<sup>th</sup> Century being an "Age of Wonder" in the [Heirloom](#) (see the June, '16 [Heirloom](#) for one reference, for example) to which Mr. Porter contributed, we thought this would be a good follow up.

This is an attractive book, suitable for coffee tables. It was the catalog for a show at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in 2019 and 2020. Since it was a catalog for an exhibition, it is full of beautiful pictures, reproductions, and ephemera having to do with Rufus Porter or the state of 19<sup>th</sup> Century invention and art in America. [Rufus Porter Yankee Pioneer](#) focused on art analysis and telling the story of Porter's life, but [Curious World](#) is a better book because it does a better job fitting Porter into the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the last couple of paragraphs the editors put Porter into perspective,

He possessed almost heroic amounts of gumption,... He contributed to the American art, culture, and technology, a heady amalgam of curiosity, inventiveness, and spatial imagination. Porter is a figure of our time, when technological innovation and hype come in swarming torrents of news. He would have felt at home in our digital world, where networks have expanded into astonishing cultural, social, and technological dimensions. In fact, it is tempting to argue that Porter's legacy is embodied by some of today's most pioneering personas, particularly the inventors and venture capitalists... Elon Musk's Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) is the latest Aerial Navigation Company, and his Tesla automobiles and Hyperloop... are the latest revolutionary transportation systems.

...He was a designer-a creative arts and problem-solving mechanic - more akin to R. Buckminster Fuller... Porter's legacy lies in his connectedness. He was plugged into the most modern ideas of his own era, and his spirit is hitched to our own. Today's technologists, engineers and artists, espe-



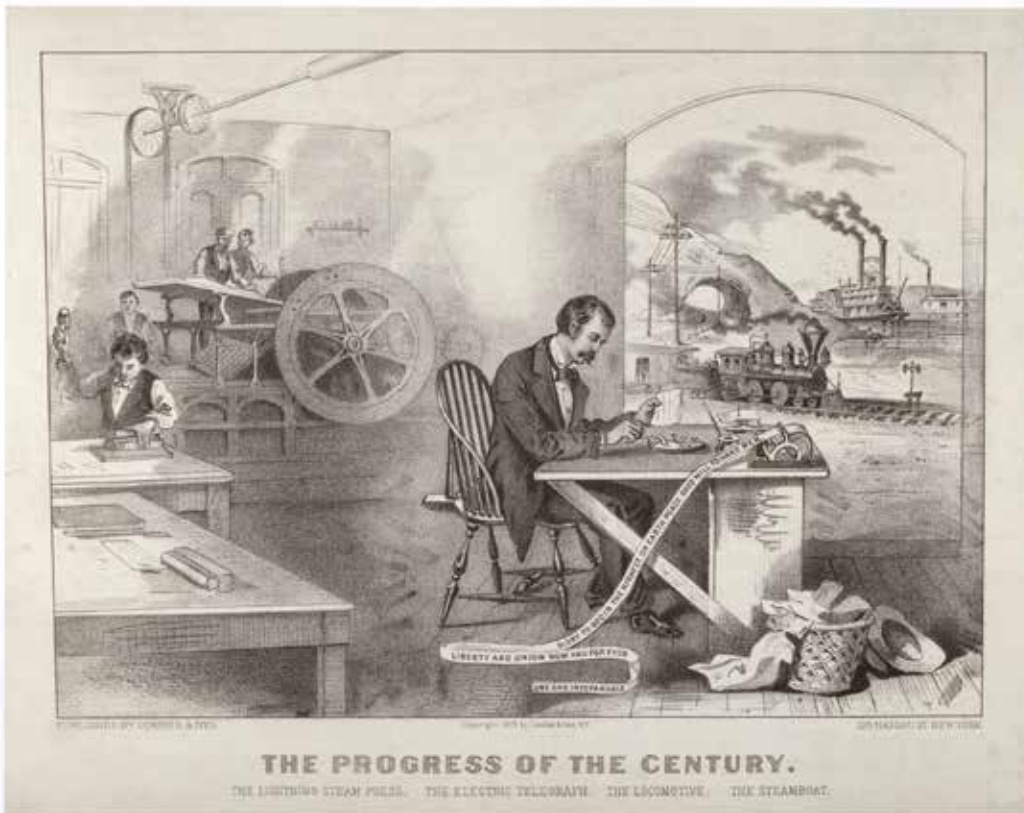
cially those working between disciplines, should remember Rufus Porter. (Pg 116)

That follows a whole book connecting Porter's art, publishing, and inventing to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's art, publishing and inventing. Even though the average person has not heard of Rufus Porter like she has of other famous 19<sup>th</sup> Century personalities, the reader sees that indeed, we "should remember Rufus Porter." The pictures tell part of the story as the reader sees Porter's art, inventions, and publications juxtaposed to other 19<sup>th</sup> Century art, inventions, and publications.

The story is also told through the text and there are plenty of good quotes, "Throughout his dynamic and creative life, Rufus Porter mirrored the development of the new republic; traits found in one are often reflected in the other. His entrepreneurial spirit and pursuit of innovation and technology became hallmarks of American society in the antebellum age... Porter contributed to the forces that transformed the country from a rural society to a modern industrial nation." (Pg 6)

The purpose of the Bowdoin College exhibition was to bring Rufus to life "by examining his myriad of interests in painting, inventing, and publishing..." [Rufus Porter's Curious World](#) does that. It's a fascinating story.

Since we covered Rufus Porter both in the article and book review last month, there is no need to again write about the same details of Porter's life. Suffice it to say there is a good general introduction in Chapter I to Mr. Porter with a better description of Porter's general background inspiration

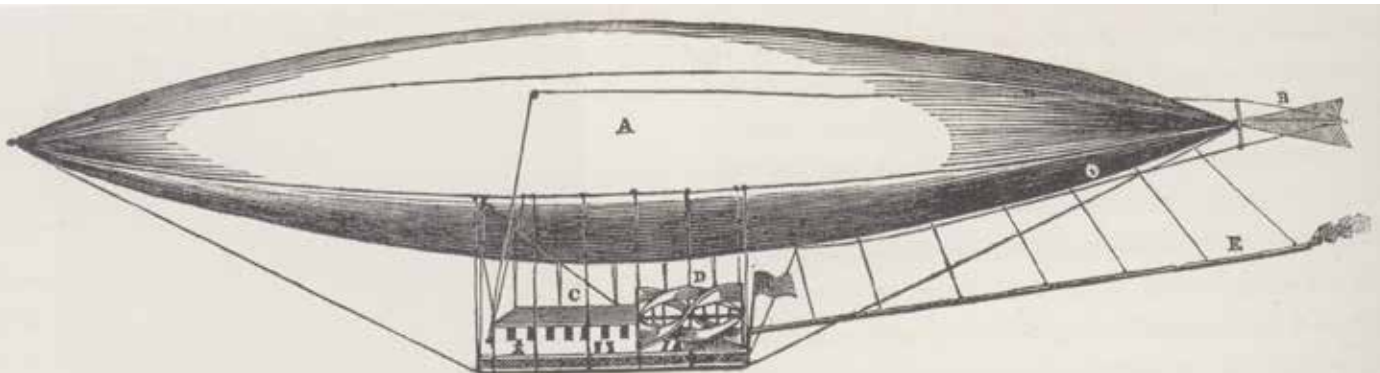


The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was an Age of Wonder as described by the various inventions in this print.

and motivation, schooling, and relatives. One big formative experience, according to the authors, was the probable effect of moving to vibrant and rapidly growing Portland, Maine where he first took up painting, met the Maine art scene and was introduced to the Maine Charitable Mechanic Association and so came into contact with artists and inventors.

The next two chapters, of the three total, show Porter in context - how he fit in the then current trends in art, invention, and innovation, how his portraits and paintings fit the then current aesthetic, and how his inventions were related to other inventions of the time. Whereas last month's book, [Rufus Porter Yankee Pioneer](#), spent so much time on the art [Rufus Porter's Curious World](#) addresses the art but spends more time on the inventor, mechanic, and ideas man.

The most interesting example of Porter's innovations is his traveling balloon (below). The idea of flight had interested Porter since he was a young child and so he was following his own ideas as he worked to build a flying machine. There were others, though, also interested following the first balloon launch in Paris in 1783. Some even flew including one in San Francisco which became the first controlled flight in the United States - but that's a different story. So whereas you might look at pictures of Porter's flying machine models and snicker, it was not that far-fetched and so we can understand how some people invested in his ventures and some even bought tickets to California which Porter thought his machine could reach in three days. We must remember too, that manned balloons were used during the Civil War.



Explanation.—A, the body of the balloon; B, helm, or rudder; C, cabin; D, spiral fan-wheel; E, funnel, or smoke pipe.



too, that manned balloons were used during the Civil War. So taking passengers shows foresight rather than a crackpot personality.

Porter was brilliant as the "Yankee Da-Vinci" as Time Magazine called him in 1970, but as his son said, also "improvident." He never had the success of one invention like other inventors of the time such as Robert Fulton (steam engine) or Samuel Morse (telegraph). Some of Porter's ideas didn't catch on. He sold cheaply or gave away others such as Scientific American, which he founded, for \$800. He sold a revolving repeating rifle invention to Samuel Colt for \$100. But Porter was driven to improve things and in some ways was ahead of his time – like aerial navigation and the elevated railway.

Although improving things in whatever field he was working at the time was his passion, he was never able or interested in turning his passion and ideas into riches that one would think his ideas and intelligence should have followed and deserved. Hence he remains almost unknown to the general public.

## A curated\* set of quotes in appreciation of Rufus Porter

"Porter promoted the ideals of the American Enlightenment – the belief that the natural sciences and reason triumphed over faith and superstition. A practical knowledge in the arts and sciences was essential in order to advance mechanical and technological improvements." Pg 11

"A genuine polymath, Rufus Porter" pg i

"Yankee DaVinci" Time Magazine 9/7-70

"One of Porter's great legacies is his role in the democratization of art in early America." Pg 76

mechanical Johnny Appleseed, sowing the seeds of new and ingenious ideas...  
"and scattering them far afield in broadsides, books, and newspapers." Pg 82

"Porter's great passion was the promotion of innovation and technology." pg 9

"In his remarkable life, Porter was dynamic, optimistic, and arguably brilliant. He believed he could contribute to a developing American republic - and encourage his fellow citizens to participate too. With mastery and confidence, he set a high standard as a painter of miniature portraits and panoramic landscape murals. In his quest to disseminate useful knowledge, he published compelling books and newspapers, leaving a legacy at Scientific American that continue to this day. His mechanized traveling balloon - his grandest invention – came tantalizingly close to realization. In each of his varied fields of endeavor, Porter helped propel nineteenth-century America toward the modern age." Pg 47

\*modern jargon for picking a good set



An example of Porter's mural art work painted on walls like we use wall paper today



Example of Porter's portrait work. This was the style in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

## Note:

You have noticed our monthly book reviews. You might want to do some reading of your own. Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Saylor has a large collection of books for perusing, buying, or checking out. You might even want to do a review for us.

## Aerial Navigation

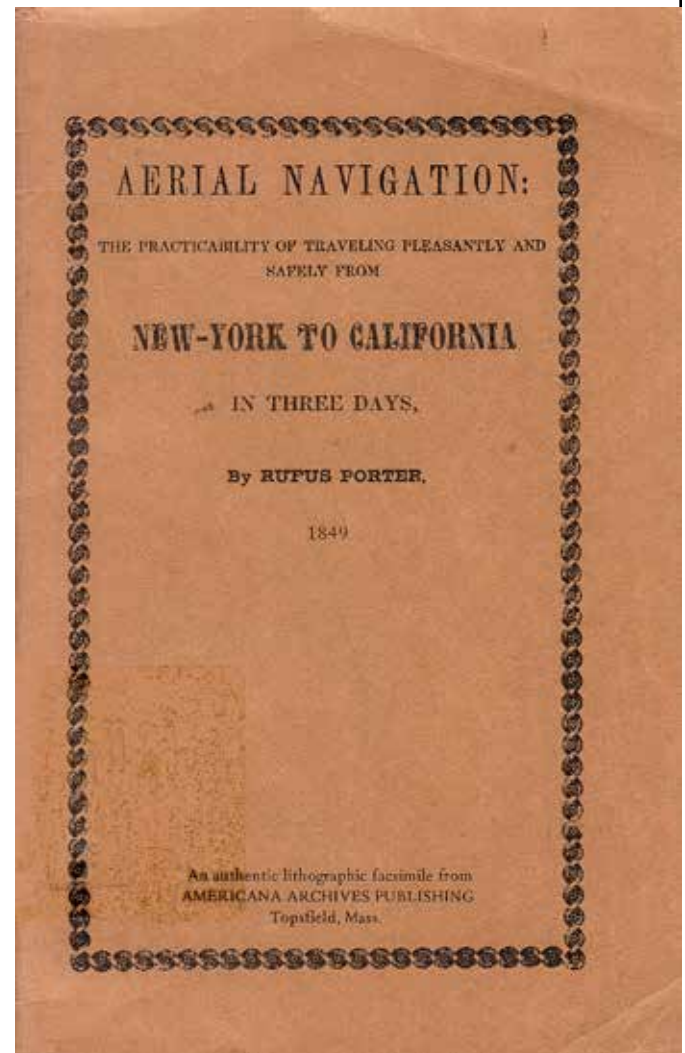
### The Practicability of Traveling Pleasantly and Safely from New-York to California Rufus Porter, 1849

Rufus Porter's most ambitious invention was his aerial locomotive. He built some versions of his "aerial locomotive" but never was able to go as far as carrying paying passengers to California in three days. Here is the cover for his idea followed by a picture of the locomotive, the title page and a stock certificate in case you'd like to invest.

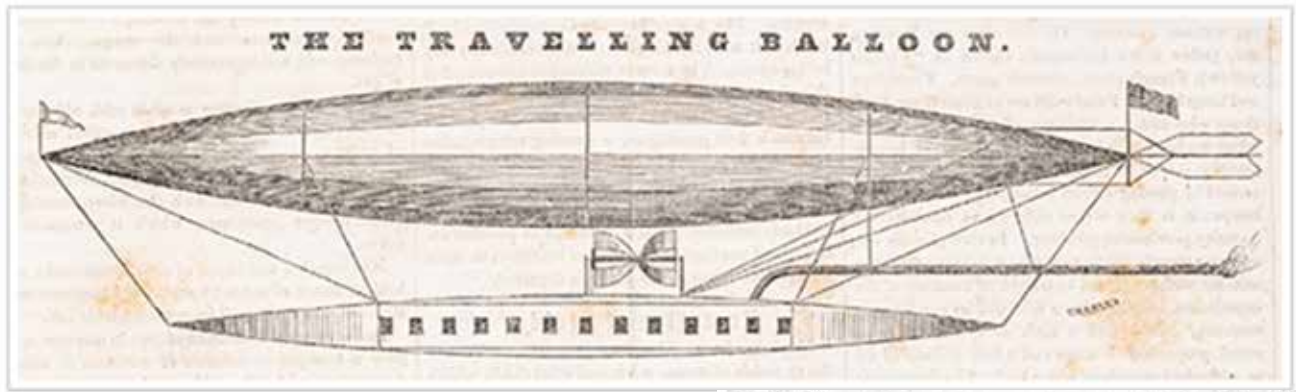
Porter's booklet, The Practicality of Traveling Pleasantly and Safely from New-York to California in Three Days described an 800' steam powered dirigible with comfortable accommodations for 100 traveling at 100 mph costing passengers to California \$200 a trip. There is a lot of specific detail in the booklet describing not just the workings but the science behind the technology. Porter said that in a few short months there would be aerial machines flying and the "the proud nations of Europe [will stare and wonder] at the soaring enterprise of the independent citizens of the United States." (Rufus Porter's Curious World.)

Had Porter been able to live up to his promise passengers would have flown across the country and probably over Donner Summit.

There were others playing with dirigible flight as this report from Scientific American (July 31, 1869) shows about an







event in San Francisco. It has nothing to do with Donner Summit but it shows the 19<sup>th</sup> Century being an "Age of Wonder" and invention. The description sounds like Porter's locomotive of twenty years before.

"In a large hall near San Francisco a small steam balloon has lately been tried with so much success as to excite enthusiasm among the stockholders and make them think that the great problem of aerial navigation has been solved. We are assured that the first packet of a regular line of aerial steamships will start from California for New York within a very few weeks. We should be glad if there were any reasonable basis for this expectation but we find none whatever. Substantially the same forms of balloon and machinery have before been tried always with apparent success on the small scale in still air always with failure when subjected to atmospheric currents. Experience shows that the attachment of wings tails and wheels to balloons tends more to impede than to assist their progress."

It's ironic to see the Scientific American cast aspersions on the dirigible since Porter is the one who founded the magazine.

"Aerial navigation will never be reduced to a regular commercial system until some one shows us how to dispense with the unwieldy gas balloon and replace it with an effective method of generating the requisite buoyant power. The subject is one of great importance and worthy of diligent study on the part of all inventors. Glorious fame and princely fortune await the successful discoverer. We copy from the San Francisco Times the following account of the recently tried Aerial Carriage

"The carriage which is merely a large working model is a balloon shaped like a cigar both ends coming to a point. It is 37 feet long 11 feet from top to bottom and 8 feet in width These are the

Stock certificate for Rufus Porter's Aerial Navigation Company.

**AERIAL NAVIGATION:**  
THE PRACTICABILITY OF TRAVELING PLEASANTLY AND SAFELY FROM  
**NEW-YORK TO CALIFORNIA**  
IN THREE DAYS,  
FULLY DEMONSTRATED:  
WITH A FULL DESCRIPTION OF A PERFECT AERIAL LOCOMOTIVE,  
WITH ESTIMATES OF CAPACITY, SPEED, AND COST OF CONSTRUCTION  
By **RUFUS PORTER,**  
ORIGINAL EDITOR OF THE NEW-YORK MECHANIC, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN AND SCIENTIFIC MECHANIC.  
NEW-YORK:  
PUBLISHED BY H. SMITH.  
138 Fulton-Street, Sun Buildings; room 40.  
JOHN HALL, PRINTER, 229 WATER-STREET.  
1849.

**AERIAL NAVIGATION COMPANY.**

June 17, 1852

**\$5.** **No. 674**

WHEREAS I, Rufus Porter, of the city and county of Washington, and District of Columbia, have invented an apparatus denominated an Aeropot, for the purpose of aerial navigation, and have caused the same to be constructed; and whereas the said Aeropot is now on hand and ready for use, and is capable of carrying one hundred and fifty persons, safely, at the rate of ninety miles per hour; and whereas

*William Markoe of Delafield, county of Waukesha and State of Wisconsin* has expressed a desire of obtaining an interest in said aeropot: Now this I do hereby witness, That for and in consideration of the sum of Five Dollars, to me in hand paid, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, I have assigned and transferred, and do hereby assign and transfer, to the said *William Markoe* one undivided three-hundredth part of the said first aeropot that shall be constructed, and also one undivided three-hundredth part of the said second aeropot, (that is, the first that shall be constructed 700 feet in length,) the said assignee above named, or the holder hereof, to be entitled to one three-thousandth part of all benefits and emoluments that may arise or accrue from the said large aeropot for twenty years from the time the said aeropot shall have been put in operation. And I hereby covenant with the said assignee, that I will proceed forthwith and construct said two aeropots, according to my proposition and prospectus, published in the "National Intelligencer" of the 16th of March, 1852; and to keep the said large aeropot in repair for twenty years. And the master, clerks, and managers of said aeropot are hereby authorized to pay to the holders of this Indenture, on the first Monday of each month, during twenty years, one three-thousandth part of the earnings of said aeropot which shall have accrued during the month preceding.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal, on this 17<sup>th</sup> day of June, 1852.

Witnesses: *B. J. Hubron*  
*C. S. Peter*

*Rufus Porter*

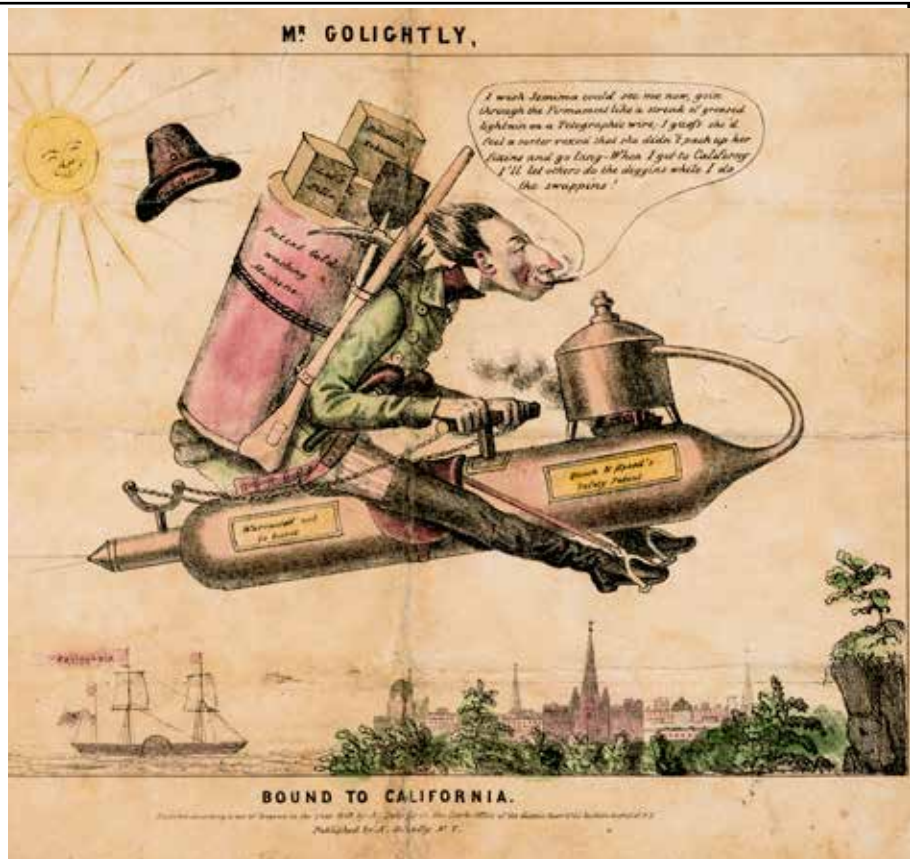


measurements at the center of the balloon from which point it gradually tapers off toward either end. ... To the frame at the hind part of the carriage is attached a rudder or steering gear which is exactly the shape of the paper used in pin darts four planes at right angles. This when raised or lowered elevates or depresses the head of the carriage when in motion and when turned from side to side guides the carriage as a rudder does a boat. At the center and bottom of the balloon is an indentation or space left in the material of which it is built in which the engine and machinery are placed on framework

"The engine and boiler are very diminutive but they do their work handsomely. The boiler and furnace altogether only a little over a foot long four inches wide and five or six inches in height Steam is generated by spirit lamps. The cylinder is two inches in diameter and has a 3 in stroke. The crank connects by means of cog wheels with tumbling rods which lead out to the propellers one on either side of the carriage. The propellers are each two bladed four feet in diameter and are placed in the framework of the wings. The boiler is made to carry eighty pounds of steam. When not inflated the carriage weighs eighty four pounds. The balloon has a capacity of 1,360 feet of gas. When inflated and ready for a flight it is calculated to have the carriage weigh from four to ten pounds

"An engineer's private trial trip was first made in the presence of the constructing engineers several of the shareholders of the Aerial Steam Navigation Company a number of the employees and residents in the neighborhood. The morning was beautiful and still scarcely a breath of air stirring. The conditions were favorable to success. The gasometer was fully inflated and the model was floated out of the building. In six minutes steam was got up the rudder set to give a slight curve to the course of the vessel and the valves opened. With the first turn of the propellers she rose slowly into the air gradually increasing her speed until the rate of five miles an hour was attained. The position of the rudder caused her to describe a great circle around which she passed twice occupying about five minutes each time. Lines had been fastened to both bow and stern which were held by two men who followed her track and had sufficient ado to keep up with her at a dog trot.

"...The total distance traversed was a little over a mile. The appearance of the vessel in the air was really beautiful. As seen in the building she looks cumbrous and awkward.



Nineteenth Century satire of flying to California during the Gold Rush produced in response to Porter's idea to transport gold seekers to California in three days.

The change of appearance as she is circling gracefully through the air is equal to that of a ship when first seen in the water. The moment of opening the steam valve was one of suspense as the vessel rose and forged slowly ahead the suspense was scarcely dissipated but in a very few seconds her speed increased in obedience to the rudder she commenced to swing round the curve the men at the guys broke into a trot and cheer upon cheer rose from the little group of anxious spectators.

"The public exhibition was attended by some slight accidents but elicited much enthusiasm from the audience which had assembled in a hall where the trial was made. The wind was so violent and irregular without that it was considered unsafe to risk the model beyond the shelter. The carriage mounted near to the roof with a firmness and steadiness equal to the movements of an ocean steamer on smooth water. The crowd cheered long and loud and many fairly danced with delight at the success. The trip back and forth across the hall performed several times with success. Within a few weeks the first large vessel will be completed by the Aerial Steam Navigation Company one calculated to carry four persons and the principles involved in its construction will then be fully tested ..."

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



You never know what you will find when you go walking on Donner Summit. At various times, starting with Peter Weddell (go to our [Heirloom](#) indices for many references in the [Heirloom](#)) in the 1920's.



To the left is another marker of the Emigrant Trail. That's what they used to look like. Decades later the tree above is working to claim the marker, a bit more slowly than Venus Fly Traps work, but it's being absorbed nevertheless. So you really have to look hard to be sure you don't miss anything. The one above is on the Emigrant Trail/Lincoln Highway below the climbing rocks and just above where the old bridge on the Lincoln Highway washed away.

This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, "Odds & Ends" of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes\* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we've been collecting them. Now they're making appearances in the [Heirloom](#).

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

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



**DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
Donner Summit Historical Society.org

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

\_\_\_\_\_

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



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