

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society and the most historically significant square mile in California.

January, 2023 issue #173

# The Missing Axe - Pt I

We have here a history mystery which is a clever category of historical research papers. To get to our story about a found axe we have to find the Forlorn Hope's Camp of Death where the axe was lost. In those two sentences we have hooks that any discerning reader would relish. The unfortunate part of this introduction is that we can't fit the whole story into one month's Heirloom. You're going to have to wait until February for the conclusion to "The Missing Axe."

First we need a little background to this amazing story. To get the full flavor of things you need to go back to the Heirloom archives which are not only on our website but no doubt also in some binders on your coffee table. There you can find two threads to this story. One is the historical background which made December 2021 and January 2022 the demisemiseptcentennials of the Forlorn Hope and the Donner Party rescue expeditions. The second thread are the reprises of the Forlorn Hope and Donner Party rescue expeditions in those same months.

Head back to December '20, January '21, February '22, and March '22 Heirlooms. A lot of the stories, with the exception of the last chapter about the axe, are there with lots of historical and contemporary detail. So we'll spend just a little time here on background.

The historical thread:

Half of the Donner Party arrived at Donner Lake on October 31, 1846. They were too tired to conquer the pass. About half the party became trapped at the lake and the other half,



# Story Locations in this Issue

Tunnel 35 pg 19 Soda Springs Station Saloon pg 18 Forlorn Hope's Camp of Death Donner Party at Donner Lake Picture pg 13

## DONNER SUMMIT



## Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

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

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

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

\*historical society humor

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

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit

Find us on 



The four extreme athletes who researched the routes and took on the challenges of the Forlorn Hope and the Donner Relief Expeditions. Left to right: Bob Crowley, Jennifer Hemmen, Tim Twietmeyer, and Elke Reimer

including the Donners, were trapped about seven miles away at Alder Creek. Life must have been miserable. They were trapped. Snow kept falling. They were barely housed. Food was running low. It seemed there was no hope. On November 3, 13, and 22 there were attempts to escape the coming winter and get over the pass but they all failed. The November third 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, no doubt 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.

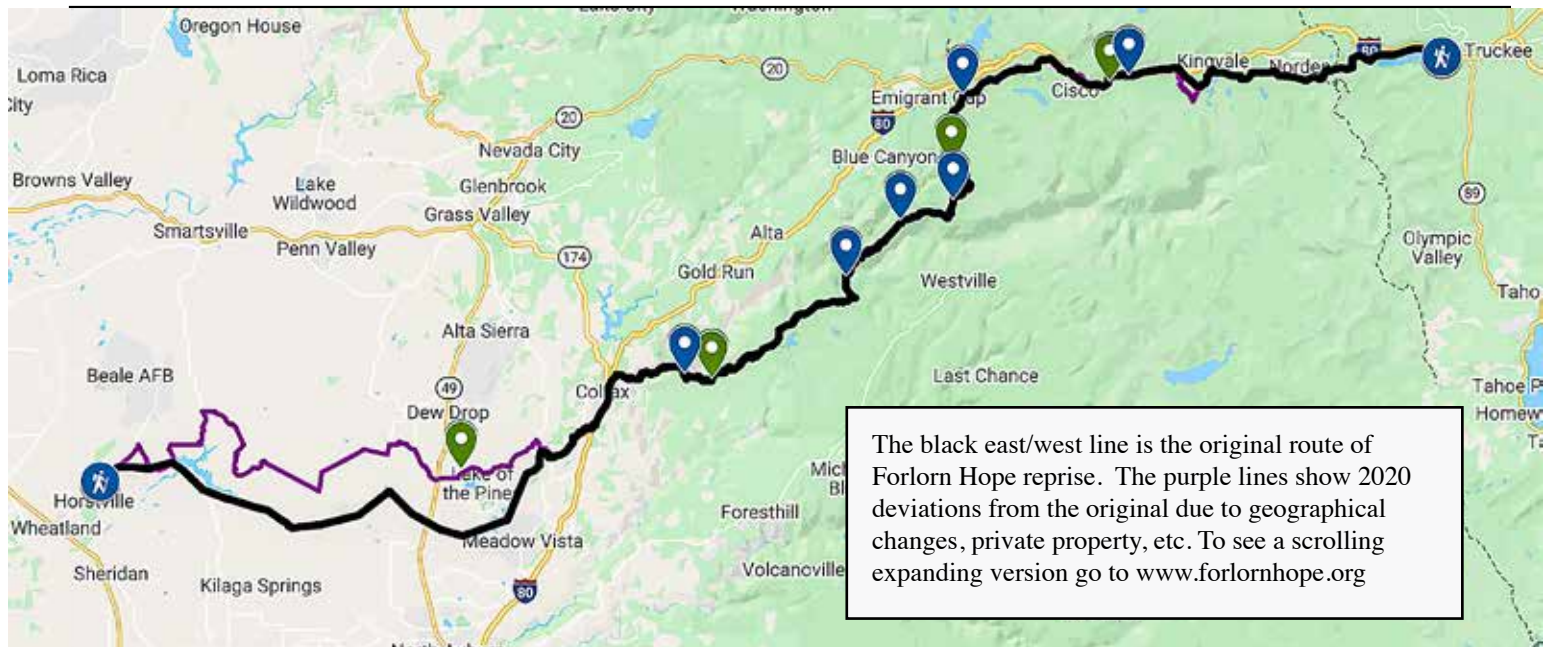
That night it snowed.

The Donner Party was trapped at the lake that would be named for them. The snow was getting deeper and the food was running out. This was beyond what they had ever experienced, ever heard of, or even ever dreamed of.

Our story focuses on December 15<sup>th</sup>. Fifteen members of what would be called the Forlorn Hope left Donner Lake for California. Seven survived the thirty-three day ordeal. When the first person, William Eddy, reached Johnson 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. He was staggering, emaciated, and near death.

Others later followed Eddy's bloody footprints back to find the other six survivors. 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. Tim Twietmeyer, to whom we'll get a little further in this story, called the Forlorn Hope trek, "...the greatest endurance trek in history..." The story of the Forlorn Hope is one of extreme hardship where extreme can't even begin to describe the extent of the suffering. This excerpt from "The Donner Party Heroism, Pathos and the Human Spirit" which you can find on our website's "Stories" page, gives you an idea of the Forlorn Hope's misery.

"If the journey of the Forlorn Hope does not sound miserable so far, just wait. On the 24<sup>th</sup> [December, 1846] the 'storm recommenced with greater fury; extinguished fires,' said William Eddy. The storm had increased so much they could not travel. As the storm raged around them they sat in a circle covered by blankets ... William Eddy suggested they all sit in a circle on a blanket. Their feet pointed in to the center of the circle and blankets



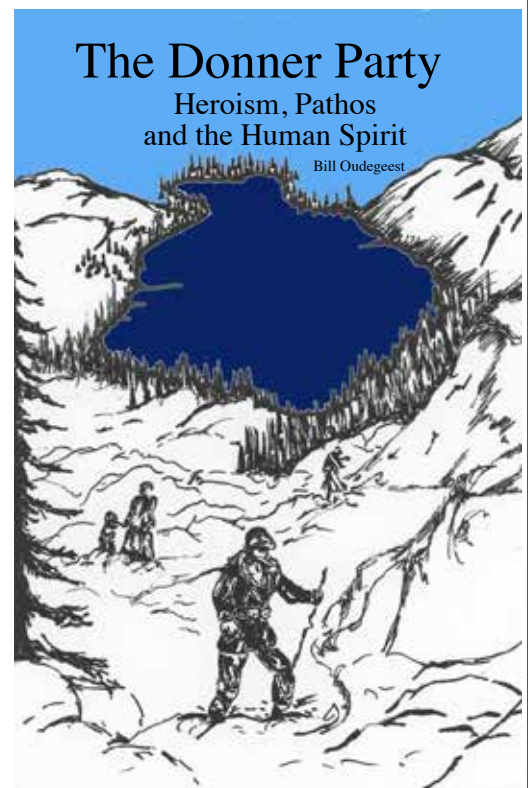
were spread over their heads. Snow and wood held the blankets down on the outside of the circle. Snow fell and closed off openings. Body heat made the cold less unbearable. The group sat that way for 36 hours while the storm raged ... How does one bear that kind of thing?"

That was only part of the misery that the group endured on the way to Harriet Ritchey bursting into tears at the sight of Wm. Eddy standing outside her door.

As news spread of the emigrants trapped in the mountains Californians donated money 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 ) that had covered their inadequate cabins. The snow just kept falling.

Think of the Donner Party and we think of the wrong turn two times, bad luck, bad decisions made in ignorance, dietary issues, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror-filled, and unbelievable hardship. That's a lot but there's more. It's also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit. Within all that there are multiple stories: the Donner Party trapped at the lake, the Forlorn Hope, and the rescue expeditions that ultimately saved about half of the Donner Party. If you want to read about the heroism, pathos, and the human spirit you can find the tract on our [donnersummithistoricalociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org) website, <http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/PDFs/DonnerPartyHeroism2022.pdf>

This is a different interpretation of the Donner Party than that which sits in the public's mind, focusing not on all the negatives, of which there were plenty, but on the inspiring stories of the Forlorn Hope and the rescue expeditions. That brings us to four extreme athletes who saw a challenge in reprising both the Forlorn Hope trek, which they did in December 2020, and the Donner Party relief expeditions' trek which they did in January of 2022. On each trip they traveled more than one hundred miles, much of it over snow following routes they'd well researched to get just an inkling of what their 19<sup>th</sup> Century forerun-



Good background to the Forlorn Hope, Donner Relief Expeditions, and the two reprises. Available at [donnersummithistoricalociety.org/stories](http://donnersummithistoricalociety.org/stories)

ners experienced.

Why would these presumably sane people today give up their warm homes for the discomfort of this journey?

First there's the adventure. Then there's the challenge. Could they successfully research the routes of the Forlorn Hope and the rescue expeditions? If they could, could they meet the attendant challenges? Climbing out of steep canyons and up almost vertical grades is hard. We can assume endorphins played a role in the adventures too. The most important factor, and what spurred even thinking about this, is that these treks are a tribute to the heroes of the Forlorn Hope and the rescue expeditions. About half the Donner Party was saved because of the Forlorn Hope's journey over the mountains. At the end of the 2021 trek the four extreme athletes left tribute cards at Johnson Ranch, one for each of the Forlorn Hope members.

It's all compelling and leads us into this month's lead story which comes out of the larger Forlorn Hope story. In order to get to the story of the axe we have to first discover the Camp of Death. That was where the Forlorn Hope spent thirty-six hours under blankets while a storm raged. That was where four members of the party died and where there was the first consumption of human flesh. It's where the axe head flew off and disappeared into the snow. It's where their life saving fire was put out. First we have to find the Camp of Death which has never been found.

A huge amount of research went into both the treks of the Forlorn Hope and the Donner Party Rescue expeditions. That research really became a labor of love. No one before had done the extensive and specific route research and the on the ground reconnaissance to discover the routes of the heroes of the Donner Party. We can only imagine the amount of research that went into divining the routes since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century protagonists had other things on their minds than leaving maps for posterity. The 2021-22 protagonists read everything they could find on the relevant aspects of the Donner Party story. Then went out time and again to search the terrain and match what is today to clues written 175 years ago. How exactly the 21<sup>st</sup> Century group discovered the original Forlorn Hope route is described in an [Heirloom](#) article, "Finding the Original Route" in the January, '21 edition available on our website.

On December 16, 2020 four extreme athletes left the Donner State Park on snowshoes with a good send-off by the well-wishers and the media. They headed along Donner Lake, up one thousand feet to Donner Pass and then down the west side of the Sierra, across lakes, down into canyons, up steep inclines, and across rivers. Five days later they arrived at Johnson Ranch near Wheatland. They'd completed a reprise of the most harrowing journey in American history, the 1846 quest of the Donner Party's Forlorn Hope to escape death and to get help for their families at the soon to be called Donner Lake.

Reading primary and secondary sources about the Donner Party of course revealed the many minor stories. One of those is about the axe head the Forlorn Hope lost. First though, we have to find the Camp of Death.

In August 2022 the Discovery Channel broadcast an episode in "Expedition Unknown" titled, "On the Trail of the Donner Party (season 10 episode 15). It's about our guys, the axe and the Camp of Death

What is it like to sleep in the snow in soggy and sodden clothing fearing what might come overnight, fearing what the weather might bring? What is it like to hike through the snow, sinking into it with each step, and to do it to exhaustion with no food or warmth at the end of the exertion? What is it like to starve slowly and be forced to eat leather shoelaces? What is it like to have a choice between death and eating human flesh? What is it like to know you have to keep going, you have to survive, not just for yourself but for the children or family members you've left behind at the lake and who are counting on you to get help? How can you possibly give up – as long as you live?

From "The Donner Party Heroism, Pathos and the Human Spirit"

# Camp of Death Pt I



## A Halloween Appropriate Adventure

The explorers doing the Forlorn Hope reprise continued to refine their proposed route almost up to snowfall in the beginning of November, 2020. During a meeting Bob Crowley idly mused that it would sure be interesting to have a cadaver dog make a visit to the site the group thought was the Camp of Death, where the Forlorn Hope sat under blankets for 36 hours while a storm raged, where four members died, and where those four were used for food. As it happens, we know Dr. John Grebenkemper and Kayle, his border collie (see our 6/18 and 12/18 [Heirlooms](#)). Dr. Grebenkemper was indeed interested in making an initial visit to the purported site and if the visit panned out, visiting again with more search dogs for validation.

Saturday October 31, was the chosen date, not because of any appropriate date significance, and so on Halloween we headed out from Emigrant Gap along a narrow winding road, through fall colors, past deer hunter camps and campers, then some miles on a dirt road and to a spot looking down on Burnett Canyon, below Sawtooth Ridge.

Trying to place the Camp of Death is problematical. There is a dearth of information: just quotes from William Eddy's lost journal and contemporaneous second-hand interviews. Our adventurers took that little and then applied it to the geography to discover the route and the location. See the [Heirloom](#) article, "Finding the Original Route" in the January, '21 edition.

The Forlorn Hope was in trouble before it even reached the Camp of Death. They'd lost Charles Stanton a few days before. He'd just sat down, leaning against a tree saying he'd be along shortly. He died there. Stanton had been over the route twice and so his loss was almost catastrophic. The Forlorn Hope was out of food, exhausted, cold, and wet. They realized they'd made a wrong turn somewhere and were lost. They did not know how much was before them to California, nor how to get there. They just knew they had to go west but there are many possibilities going west, some very problematical. That's a lot of misery but that was not all. A storm had hit.

The Forlorn Hope built a fire on the snow but it was over a creek and the fire melted through the snow and fell into the creek (or the wind blew it out – sources vary). Imagine their thoughts. Imagine the desperation. Everything was wet; there would be no more fire on top of no food. The fourteen arranged themselves in a circle, feet on the inside, and covered themselves with blankets hoping that their collective warmth would keep them alive. There they would sit, huddled together wet against the cold for thirty-six hours while the storm raged. They would soon lose their only axe which is the story we're ultimately leading to but first we have to find the Camp of Death. At least some of the Forlorn Hope were suffering from hypothermia. The site would be called the Camp of Death by later reporters.

To find possible locations of the Camp of Death there are a number of elements that have to come together in a kind of equation. Any likely spot would have to be at a creek. There



Left: steep terrain just below the Camp of Death on the way down to Burnett Canyon.

Below: Kayle, John Grebenkemper's ass't.

Below left: sign memorializing the Camp of Death

had to be a flat spot big enough for a circle of fourteen people. That can be unusual given the ruggedness of the area although snow could even things out a bit. They had to be on the lee side of a ridge for protection from the worst of the storm. There had to be tree cover.

The 2020 Forlorn Hope turned south into the American River drainage, away from the Bear River drainage where the Emigrant Trail lay. This was where the 1846 Forlorn Hope made their fateful error, another wrong turn for the Donner Party. Then the 2020 group used the geography to guide them, putting themselves into their historical counterparts' minds. If you were in the canyons, heading west for California, where would you go, what routes would make sense that would get you to landmarks talked about in 1846 interviews?

We started our walking at a high spot overlooking Burnett Canyon with Sawtooth Ridge in the background. We worked our way through the brush to near where the 2020 group thought they'd found a spot that met all the criteria. As we came through the heavy brush we came upon a sign someone had placed not long ago. See the picture below. There are no logos or identifying marks on the sign. That sign was good validation for our explorers. Here might very probably be the spot.



We explored up and down the small drainage and Kayle (above) went to work making some tentative "alerts" of possible human remains. That was encouraging. The place met the logical conditions and Kayle had alerted. That was the end of part I. Definitive proof of human remains requires other dogs to come out and confirm the "alerts." That's Part II of "Camp of Death."



Above, a panorama above the Camp of Death. Imagine the endless view covered with deep snow faced by the Forlorn Hope, cold, wet, and starving. How can it still be so far to California? Shortly the worst would be upon them.



Bob Crowley, left, John Grebenkemper top right, and Kayle, middle right at the possible location of the Camp of Death.

Right: this is a few hundred yards above where Kayle alerted to possible human remains. A forest fire a few years ago opened up the forest but you can see the density on the far ridge, Sawtooth Ridge. Scott Vosburg, in charge of the 2020 support teams is on the right.





# Camp of Death Pt II



In the last exciting episode of the "Camp of Death" we ended our Halloween search knowing that at some point we'd have to come back to confirm Kayle's findings. Naturally we assumed that winter was coming soon and access would be difficult. Then it didn't snow.

John Grebenkemper was able to easily interest a couple of dog handlers to come out and so on December 6, a relatively warm day with more moisture on the ground than had been there in October, a dozen people and four dogs, above, made up a second expedition to the possible Camp of Death. The dogs were Callie, Kayle, Amiga and Echo. Callie is a Border Queensland, Kayle is a Border Collie, and Amiga and Echo are English Field Labs.

We drove miles south of Emigrant Gap, past people cutting Christmas trees and empty campgrounds. Then there were a few miles on a dirt road followed by a half-mile in and around the brush and down a steep and rugged hill.

There is a protocol for these searches. You don't want information inadvertently passed between handlers and dogs so the new handlers were only told that Kayle has previously "alerted" in the general area. We expected to spend several hours "watching paint dry" (that's how John Grebenkemper describes the activity) as the dogs searched the area one at a time. In almost no time one dog after another "alerted" on the same locations, the same on which Kayle had alerted in October. That was exciting.

The dogs do not alert on actual remains when looking at historic sites. Bones, the longest lasting of physical remains, last at most a decade before decomposing or being destroyed by animals. The dogs are looking for scents of what's left of human remains that have been absorbed by the soil. That then brings up the question of how the dogs are trained and not distracted by animal scents. The dogs are very well trained both in behavior and finding scents. Training starts when they are very young and by 18 months to two years they are certified, but optimal abilities are not reached until they are several years old. The dogs are trained with human remains and practice is continual. For some alerts dogs get treats but that's not always the case because then the dogs might just alert to get treats.

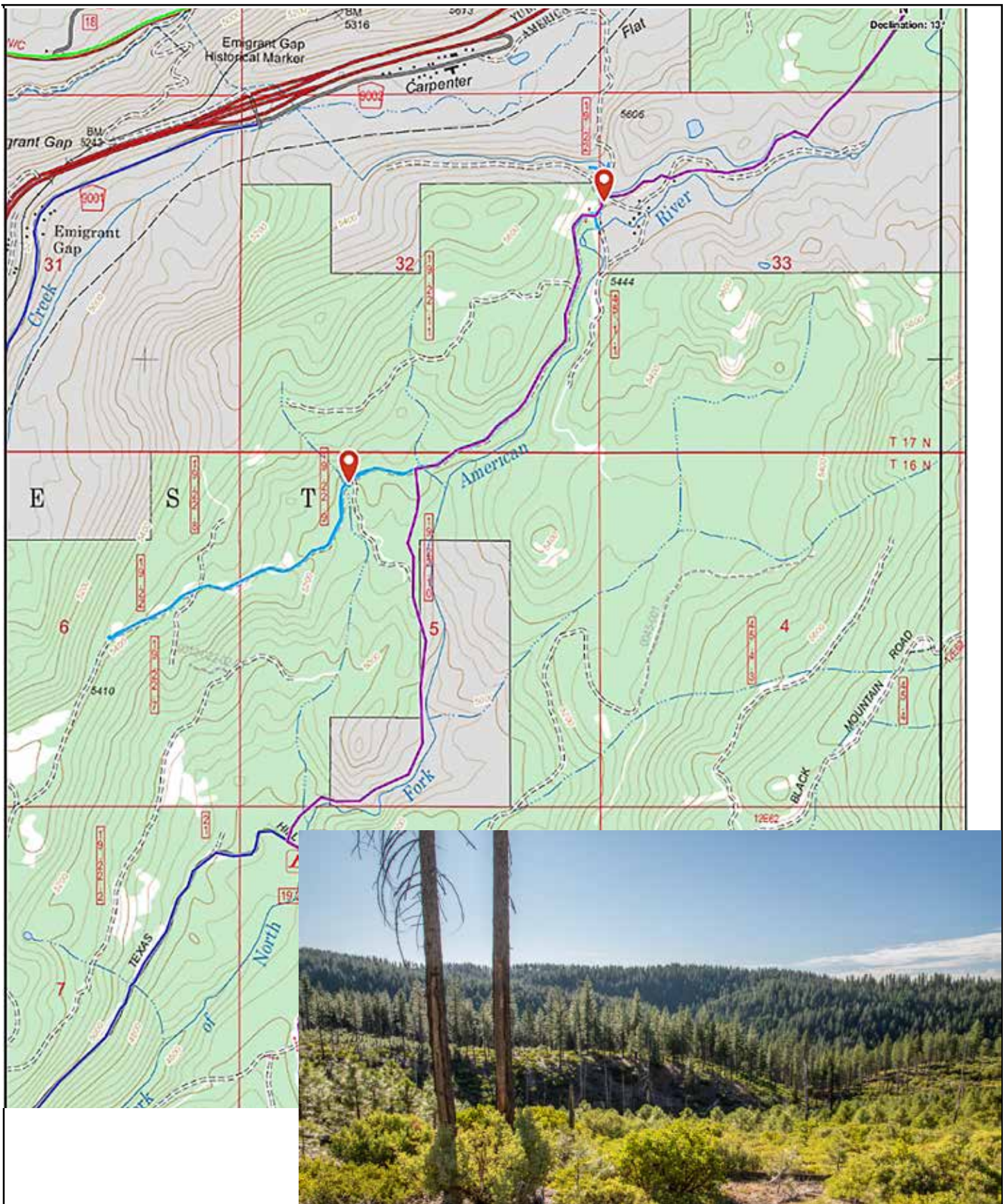
Optimal search conditions are warm and moist. Our December outing was perfect.

Now we come to the important part. Whose remains did the dogs discover? There's no proof the remains are from the Forlorn Hope. We only know they are human remains. If we agree that Tim Twietmeyer and Bob Crowley, two of the guys who did the reprising the 1846 journey, are correct about their research and that this is the campsite of the Forlorn Hope we can say that this is a good probability for the historic location. The Forlorn Hope had little with them to lose and provide as evidence so "forensic" evidence won't be found, except maybe the axe head that they lost. If this is not the historic site, then we have to wonder what happened to whom here and when. That's Part I. Maybe the Camp of Death has been found. How could the location be more definitively validated?



Above Karen Atkinson with Echo making a "focused alert" meaning it's a strong scent. Below, John Grebenkemper and Kayle who is making an alert by sitting. Different handlers use different alert behaviors.





Map produced by Art Clark based on the 2020 visit to the possible Camp of Death site. The purple line is the Forlorn Hope route. The upper way point is the possible wrong turn. The lower way point is the possible Camp of Death site. This is the Emigrant Gap exit from I-80. It is Texas Hill Rd. that you take out of Emigrant Gap. In the picture the purported Camp of Death is in the hollow in the center. Note the dense brush for today's explorers. In 1846 it was all covered by deep snow.

# From the DSHS Archives



San Francisco Chronicle  
July 10, 1910

The homeless or “unhoused” are a focus today almost everywhere. That’s not unique to today as this story shows. They were called tramps in the old days and the article shows that things were not always better in the old days.

In 1910 one of the problems the Southern Pacific had was trying to deal with the “ubiquitous tramp” and they decided there should be a “vigorous determined war” waged against the “teaming cohorts of all trampdom.” In the San Francisco Chronicle article of July 10, 1910 a superintendent of the railroad was highlighted as the fellow who “sometimes alights from his private car and sallies into the jungles to fight a few of the brawniest specimens he can find.” 1910 was a different time.

From Blue Canyon to Truckee is 43 miles by railroad and that was to be the battleground. There would be no more stealing rides on trains going through the snowsheds and walking would not be allowed either because of the danger of fire and disruption of “transcontinental traffic.”

“The smoke-grimed wooden tunnel begins at Blue Canyon and ends on the heights above Donner Lake.

“Through the heart of the Sierra the sheds stand out in bas relief against the cliffs, as a long sinuous blackened line winding tortuous to curve of cliff and canyon; and behind grim and defiant, stand the snow peaks guarding the passes of California... the completed work stands typical of the dauntless courage of its creators.” They had a way with words in the old days.

In the fight against free rides two State officers of “tried courage” and paid by the railroad were placed at the Blue Canyon portal. They apprehended vagrants and marched them up to the ticket office. Forcing the vagrants to buy tickets netted the railroad \$250.

One episode shows how the fight was conducted according to one of the officers, “I pulled out of a gondola car last night, and he called me names and was going to run me off the road, so I put him down five times with my fist as fast as he could get up, and when his partner started in to help I stood him off with a gun. When the first one had had enough I swatted the other one a few times by way of being impartial, an’ teach him not to butt in, when an officer’s doing his duty.”

Tramps who were broke were shown the county road.

One tramp going by the name of Jersey Red interviewed about his experience of trying to take a free ride said “...when I stows away on de rods [riding under the railroad cars on the rods] ... I goes to sleep... But de head braky was a foxy coon... When de train strikes a heavy grade he drops off and when I sails by on the rods, he just catches my feet an’ braces himself. I rolls down de bank and lands in the water up to my neck, while the braky waves his lantern at me, an’ shouts ‘All out for de baths.’” He tried again but “About every hundred yards some gazeeba runs me out of de sheds and chases me down to the wagon road. So I walks all de time. At Summit station I tries it again but hikes to Cisco for me pains...” Jersey Red had been eating the reporter out of his food (one loaf of bread, two pounds of beans, one pound of bacon, several large potatoes, and a couple of quarts of coffee) and on leaving said, “Well, s’long, an’d good luck fer the feed. I’m going to pub skids under me and slide down the line tonight.”

The reporter interviewed a number of men on the rails from his little cabin by the tracks. They had various reasons for riding the rails. One fellow named James Noble who’d walked all the way from Sacramento and who knew Jersey Red, said he was on the road because people everywhere

"I don't sap \*em." said McAuley. \*except they get too gay. But what's a man going to do when he asks 'em if they have money to buy tickets, and gets told It's none of his blankety blank business..." The railroad agent continued with his philosophy. The Chronicle reporter allowed the "belligerents" to tell their own stories in the interest of "tramp lore or sociological phenomena."

gave him the same nickname, Nobel Jimmy, and he “took to the road” to get away from it,. Another was on the road because of his wife. She had deserted him sixteen years before “and wasn’t much account when he married her.” Another had lost his farm in a lawsuit. The reporter said he was “undoubtedly of city alley origins” and “quite innocent of agricultural knowledge...” That section of the article ended with, “Nearly all members of the tramp guild have a strong vein of sentiment in their make-up. Some of them will relate tales of misfortune with tears in their eyes. and generally embellish the yarn with the hero taking the road for life.”

The reporter helped Noble Jimmy on his way to Reno by sharing with him the reporter’s knowledge of train operations. About 10 PM it was dark, a freight whistled its approach and stopped to change crews. The reporter got Jimmy up on top of a railroad car which was beyond all the secret places that the railroad men searched. The train started up a grade when the telegraph operator came running out and got the train to stop. Jimmy had a cold and, when everything was quiet, “one mighty wheezing roaring sneeze escaped him” just as his car was in front of the depot. Jimmy was hauled down. The “next morning he toiled up the county road, sharing the fate of the other pilgrims who walk the dusty road a thousand feet below the sheds which wind tortuous to curve of cliff and canyon in the heart of the Sierra.”

UP AMONG the serrated peaks of the Sierra, the Central Pacific Railway Company Is trying to solve the problem of the age in making suitable disposition of the ubiquitous tramp. Last year. Superintendent Sheridan decided that war - vigorous determined war should he waged against the teeming cohorts of all trampdom. And he is the man who sometimes alights from his private car and sallies into the jungles to fight a few of the brawniest specimens he can find."

Quote about the transcontinental railroad from the article above:

"A mighty monument it is to the energy and constructive genius of those giants of the early sixties. Crude were the tools -- it was the day of black powder blasting - but the completed work stands typical of the dauntless courage of its creators,"

# From the DSHS Archives

## Semi Trucks of the Old Days

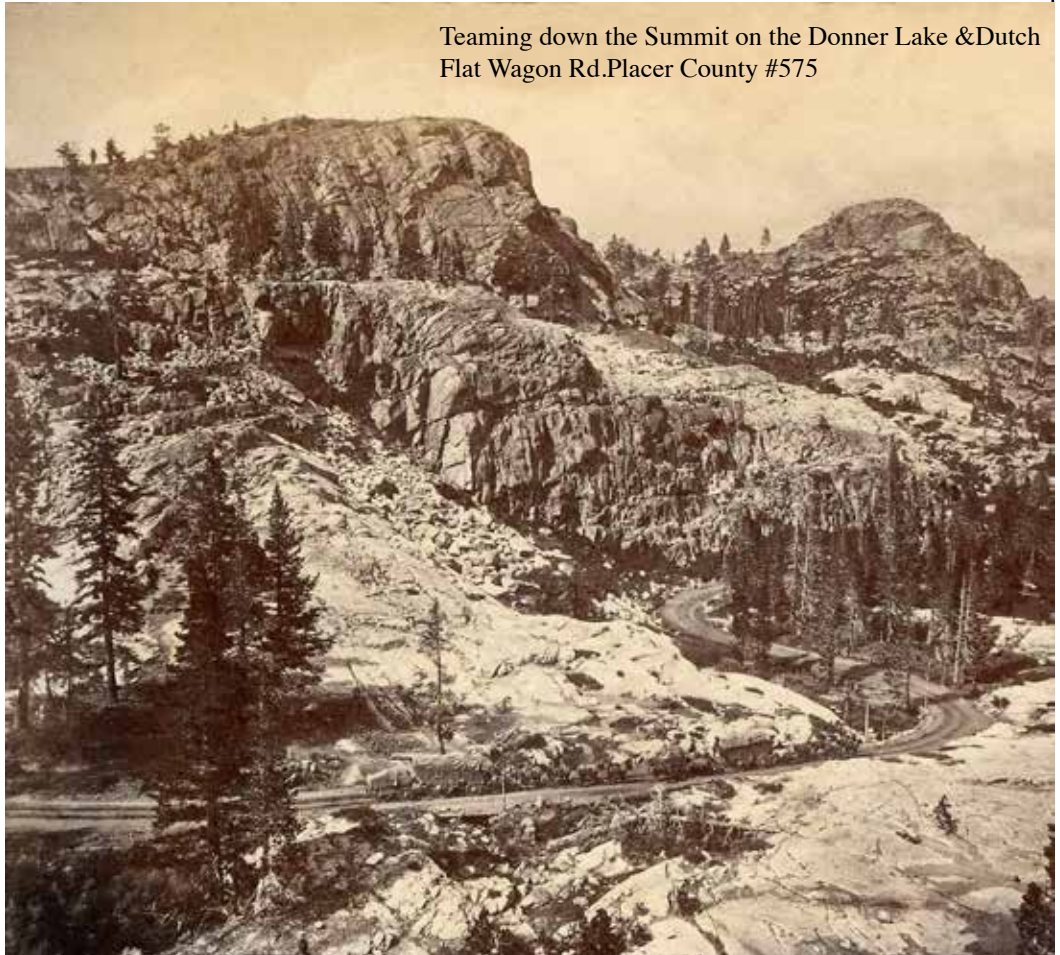
We thought we'd seen all the historical photographs of Donner Summit but apparently not.

This Lawrence and Houseworth photograph was found at the Library of Congress titled, " Teaming down the Summit on the Donner Lake and Dutch Flat Wagon Road, Placer County #785" It can also be found at various galleries on line and for sale on EBay.

If you want to go playing in the Library of Congress photograph collection look for "gems of California scenery" This one is: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a28342/> Part of Lot 3544 (908)

They have lots of other pictures - about a million in the "prints and photographs Division" and 1.3 million in the on line catalog.

Our photo enhancing department enlarged a small portion so you can see the semis of the old days crossing Donner Summit



Teaming down the Summit on the Donner Lake & Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. Placer County #575

photos enlarged and enhanced by George Lamson and PhotoShop



# Book Review

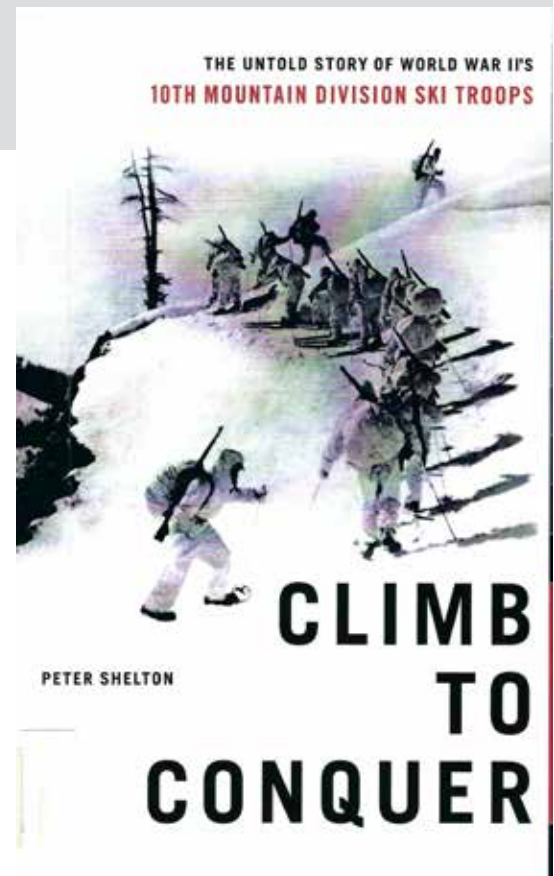
## **Climb to Conquer by Peter Shelton, Scribner, 2003**

If you have ever wondered about the history of the 10th Mountain Division that is honored on Highway 89 between Truckee and Palisades Tahoe, here is the book for you. *Climb to Conquer* by Peter Shelton provides a complete history of the Division from an idea in the mind of the founder of the National Ski Patrol to a highly decorated unit fighting in the mountains of Italy during World War II.

Not only was the 10th Mountain Division instrumental in defeating the German Army in central and northern Italy in 1945, but the members returned to start many of the major ski areas that led to the growth of the ski industry in the US. Shelton was able to interview many of the remaining veterans of the fighting to bring important details of the history into sharp relief.

In the winter of 1940, almost two years before Pearl Harbor brought America into the War, four avid skiers met in Vermont after a day of skiing on Bromley Mountain. The group included the president of the National Ski Association, a former Olympic skier, the head of the Boston Ski Club, and Charles "Minnie" Dole, who had just organized a group of volunteer skiers into the National Ski Patrol.

Aware of the recent Winter War in which Finland had bested a vastly superior Russian force by utilizing their skiing and mountaineering skills, the veteran skiers pondered the potential need for an equivalent American force. At that time, the thought was that the US might need to defend Alaska or its northern border against Germany, particularly if England fell to the Nazis and brought Canada with them.



Minnie Dole took on the responsibility for communicating with the War Department about the need for winter capable troops. There was some movement to train small groups of soldiers in skiing and mountaineering. Although the military resisted the use of civilians, Dole was insistent in his communications with the top brass. He eventually achieved a meeting with Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall who began to see the utility of well-trained winter soldiers.

In the summer of 1940, equipment was assembled and train-



ing manuals prepared, using translated Finnish, German, and Italian documents. The best, however, turned out to be the Sierra Club's Manual of Ski Mountaineering, edited by David Brower. In April of 1941, about 20 experienced skiers including Brower set off in the eastern Sierra to test a wide range of equipment thought to be suitable for eventual use by soldiers.

In November 1941, Minnie Dole received letters from the Secretary of War and General Marshall saying that the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment would be mobilized in Washington to begin training on Mount Rainier. Initially, it was felt that it would be easier to teach soldiering to skiers than to teach skiing to soldiers. Recruitment was done largely through Minnie Dole's connections with the National Ski Patrol and the skiing industry.

In late 1942, Camp Hale was opened in the Colorado Rockies at an elevation of 9,250 feet. This was to be the home of the Division until after the War in 1947. (Incidentally, Norm Sayler, President of the Donner Summit Historical Society, was among the last members of the 10th to train at Camp Hale.)

At Camp Hale, they established a team, including three experienced climbers, to develop and select suitable equipment for winter fighting. Californians David Brower, Bestor Robinson, and Raffi Bedayan

were the mountaineering equipment experts at the time.

At first, it was not known how the new Mountain Division would be employed. The fighting was mostly in North Africa and the South Pacific, regions neither cold nor mountainous. Then, in June 1943 the unit moved to Ford Ord, Cali-



fornia and began practicing amphibious landings, still with no idea about where they might be sent next.

It turned out that the military wanted to recapture two islands in the Aleutian chain that had been taken by the Japanese early in the War. The first island was well-fortified and a costly invasion was made by conventional

Army forces. The second one was the target of the 10th. It turned out that the Japanese had already evacuated the island, making the assault by the 10th somewhat anticlimactic.

After their return to the US, the division was sent to Texas for further training, suggesting to the troops that the South Pacific might be their next destination. Then, in November 1944, the Division was abruptly sent to Virginia and almost immediately boarded ships for Europe. Only the officers knew where they were going until they were at sea, when Italy was revealed as the destination. Unfortunately, much of the specialized equipment



## Camp Hale Made a National Monument

(Excerpted from the [New York Times](#), October 13, 2022)

On October 12, 2022 President Biden announced the creation of the country's newest national monument, protecting tens of thousands of acres in the mountains of Colorado from mining and development.

Standing on the grounds of Camp Hale, a World War II military installation that was used to train the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division, Mr. Biden said he was designating 53,804 acres of rugged landscape as the Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument.

"When you think about the national beauty of Colorado and the history of our nation, you find it here," the president said moments before signing the proclamation. He pointed to the area's highlights: "the Tenmile Range, soaring peaks and steep canyons, black bears, bald eagles, moose, mountain lions, wonderful pristine rivers, alpine lakes."

"Camp Hale, not far from the popular ski areas of Vail and Breckenridge, was used during World War II to train Army soldiers for battles against the Axis forces in the Italian Alps. According to the White House, the soldiers learned "winter survival techniques and to snowshoe, to climb and, most famously, to ski."

In his remarks on Wednesday, Mr. Biden cited the historic role that the site played during World War II and the importance of the land to Indigenous people in the area.





carefully selected by the team and needed for winter mountaineering was left behind in the US in a typical Army snafu.

Although the War was going badly for Hitler, he resolved to try to defend Italy as long as possible to prevent reinforcement of the Allied forces advancing in France and Belgium. The German Wehrmacht had built a defensive line across the Apennine mountain chain in central Italy. This was terrain suited for the trained skiing and mountaineering soldiers of the 10th.

The two main targets were Riva Ridge and Monte Belvedere, both well-fortified by the Germans. Making use of their mountaineering skills (relatively little skiing), the best climbers established several routes up Riva Ridge at night using fixed ropes to aid the less experienced climbers. Then on a foggy night a large group climbed in the dark, ready to attack the German positions at dawn. Completely surprised, the Germans were routed from the ridge. This was the first break though of the Winter Line. The German army retreated to a second set of mountains and established another fortified line. Again, the 10th successfully assaulted their positions, in spite of minefields and artillery bombardment.

After this assault, there was a bit of respite, during which someone uncovered a hidden wine cellar with 1000 bottles of good Italian wine to add to the festivities.

Now they had the Wehrmacht on the run, but there was a third attempt to stop the advance in the next row of hills, the last hills for the 10th to climb. It was here on Hill 513 that, while leading a patrol, Lt. Robert Dole was hit by machine gun fire and spent the next 40 months in army hospitals. He was neither a skier nor a mountaineer, coming from the flatlands of Kansas. He had joined the 10th as one of the many replacements needed to keep the unit at full strength after the losses in the early battles in the mountains of Italy. One of the men lost in these battles was John Benson, for whom the Sierra Club's Benson Hut, located on the flank of Anderson Peak just off the Pacific Crest Trail, is named.



Highway tunnels on Lake Garda saw some of the last, grim fighting in northern Italy, late April 1945. (Richard A. Rucker)



"The Pianist." David Brower in the Po River valley following the liberation of Verona. (Wilbur G. Vaughan)



General Hays wanted to continue the push north in Italy, reaching the last line of German defense, the tunnels along Lake Garda in Northern Italy. Once again, the 10th Mountain Division persevered and pushed the Germans into an intolerable position, where they were forced to surrender. This occurred just as the War in Europe was coming to a close in early May 1945.

Of course, even in May the Alps still have a significant snow cover on the upper slopes. This provided the 10th with the opportunity finally to employ their skiing abilities. Fortunately, they were able

to “liberate” a cache of German army ski equipment, making the informal holiday a resounding success. As the snow melted, the climbers in the group took advantage of the nearby Alpine peaks to practice their skills.

But the War wasn’t over. The thinking was that, as one of the last units to be deployed in Italy, the 10th should be among the first to move to the Pacific Theater. Fortunately, the atomic bombs ended the war before this happened, saving millions of lives of US soldiers and Japanese soldiers and civilians.

In the years after the War, the returning skiers and mountaineers re-entered civilian life, doing what they did best. Many of them were involved in the development of ski areas across the country, including Vail, Sun Valley, Aspen, Arapahoe Basin, Mount Bachelor, and many others in Vermont, Minnesota, Michigan, New Mexico, Washington, and Massachusetts. Others were ski and climbing instructors.

Some of the engineers built the first ski lifts and gondolas needed to open the slopes to the skiing public. Bob Dole was elected Senator, David Brower became head of the Sierra Club, and Bill Bowerman developed the waffle trainer and co-founded Nike. These were well-trained young men who were able to use their special skills to help win the War. They continued to excel in civilian life.



Skiling in Spring when melting creates unusual textures and patterns.

The Sierra Club's John Benson Hut is a stopover place for ski mountaineers. It is named for a young man who loved to ski tour very much, but lost his life in Italy with the Mountain Troops. (Photos 6, 7)



# Making History Colorful

George Lamson



Today, due to advances in computer graphics technology, there may be a solution to the color limitations of our historical black & white images. Computers are remarkably adept at manipulating photographic images. Algorithms developed for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning have been adapted to image technology to give almost magical results such as the colorization of black & white images. Algorithms are “trained” by looking at millions of color and black & white versions of photos to “learn” how to add back colors to a black & white image. The algorithms learn how to find a sky and make it blue, find a face and make it flesh colored, find a tree and make the leaves green. They develop highly sophisticated models that can do amazing transformations. Amazingly this technology is now available on desktop computers.



Soda Springs Station Saloon, today's Soda Springs, about 1900 which sat in what is now the parking lot for Soda Springs Ski Area. Note the snowsheds in the background that sat over forty miles of track. The view is looking north. You can see that Soda Springs Station was a thriving commercial hub.

George Lamson

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Tunnel 35 from 1924. This sits just above where Highway 20 joins I-80. It would be great to get a picture with Old Man Mountain and Red Mountain in the background but the geography just doesn't work.

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.

## Old Time Sunday Drive

**Next Time  
Take Scenic  
Old Hwy 40  
instead of I-80**



Historic Towns  
Interesting Scenery  
Fascinating History  
Picnic Spots  
A Slower Pace



Take a look at our guide to Old Highway 40: turn by turn instructions from Rocklin to Truckee, broken into four legs and including pictures and history. Available on line on the brochure page of [donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://donnersummithistoricalsociety.org), at the DSHS (at the blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs, or the visitors' centers in Truckee and Auburn.



And while you are at it, check out the 20 Mile Museum - interpretive signs from Nyack to below Donner Summit on Old 40. Information at [www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

# Donner Summit Historical Society

[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

## Membership

I/we would like to join the Donner Summit Historical Society and share in the Summit's rich history

- new membership
- Renewing membership
- Individual Membership \$40
- Family Membership \$60
- Friend \$100
- Sponsor \$250
- Patron \$500
- Patron \$500
- Benefactor \$1000

The Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail this card with your check payable to the DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society P.O. 1 Norden, CA 95724

**You can also go to our website and use PayPal or a credit card.**

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>