



Donner Summit Historical Society

Newsletter

November, 2008 Issue #3

## Snowfall --- 66 Feet! The Winter of 1951-52

### Editor's Note:

In this our third issue, we decided to do something different. We decided to fill most of the newsletter with pictures from the terrible winter of 1951-52. The short text will tell you about the snow, road clearing, where this particularly collection of pictures originated, and the City of San Francisco train that was stuck for many days in the snow. We'll talk about snowblowers in our next issue since there wasn't room in this issue. Separately you can read about the first house in Kingvale. then a little local history and finally about two of the historical society's new associates.

Our website has a few new pictures, the story of the Stanfords in three parts, and a story about Lola Montez for whom two Summit lakes are named.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

### The Winter of 51-52

The winter of 1951-52 was one of the worst snowfall years ever with over 800 inches of snow during the season or almost 70 feet! The snowpack reached 20.57 feet at its deepest point at the Central Sierra Snow Lab in Soda Springs (see the graph on the next page). So much snow fell during one storm in January, 12.8 feet, that The City of San Francisco train was stuck near the current Highway 20 turn off from Highway 80 for six days. Clearing the trans-Sierra highway, Old 40, was a monumental job because of all the snow of course but also because of the consistency of Sierra snow, which many call Sierra Cement for good reason.

Work to clear the highway started at many points using rotaries, snowplows, hand shoveling and clearing, and bulldozers. On this page you can see some of the hand work on Donner Summit (top picture) and men

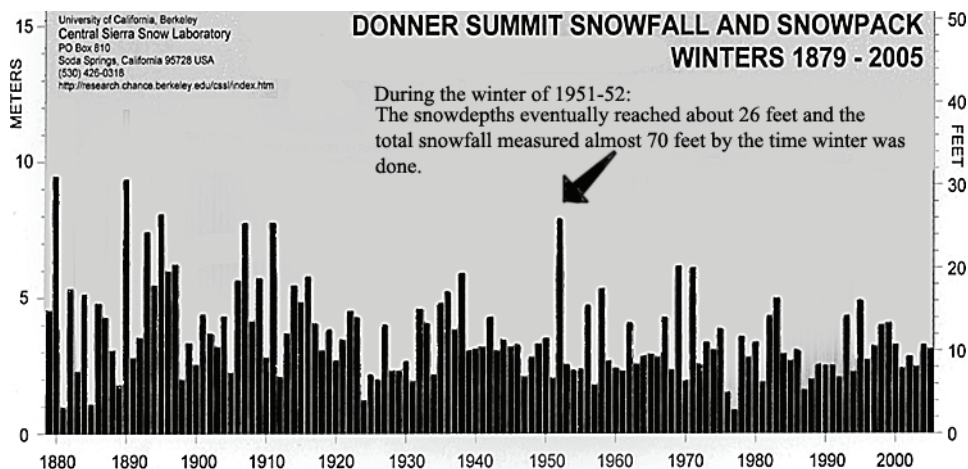


looking down into the pit where the snowblower is working (bottom picture page 1 - also on Donner Summit). On this page, 2, you can see a buried snowblower and a tanker truck being rescued, both on Donner Summit.

At Baxter crews moved towards Emigrant Gap. From Emigrant Gap crews moved west using fuel from the railroad supplies. Other crews cleared east and west from Yuba Gap again using fuel in the railroad supplies. The highway maintenance station at Donner Summit had plows going east and west as well also using the railroad supplies. The final staging area for highway clearing was at Truckee. It took 28 days to clear Old 40. One of the last sections to be opened was the Emigrant Gap/ Blue Canyon section where the packed snows were twenty feet deep. Donner Summit was likewise hard to open. Snow was higher than the electrical lines and in some places there was so much snow there was no place to blow the snow.

The great snowfall was more than just inconvenient but it provided the opportunity for the people in the various isolated communities to work together. Communities inventoried their supplies and people helped each other out. There are many stories of compassion and heroism.

There were also sad stories one of which was made into a movie. A young couple were married in Reno and went to San Francisco for the honeymoon. Coming back to Reno they were caught by the storm and disappeared. Later in the Spring highway foreman Leal Quinn was driving Old 40 down from Donner Summit. He thought he saw a partially covered automobile emerging from the melting snow about 200 yards down from the Summit. Emergency people were called. The couple was still in the car.



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The Division of Highways realized as a result of the great storm that better snow clearing equipment was needed. Lots of the clearing of the 1951 snowfall was done by hand labor. Workers stood atop the high drifts and shoveled snow down to the snowblowers (see page 1 and below). Where the snow was too icy workers sawed the snow up and then pushed it down (again see page 1). Tractors were also used to push the snow to the blowers. Better machinery would be more efficient and allow the road to be opened sooner or kept open longer.



Into the breach here came the “father of the modern snow blowers,” Harry Hammond of the Division of Highways. After the winter of 51-52 he began changing all the snow blowers. The old “snow-goes” were replaced by machines with higher horsepower and V-12 engines. He also bought machines with two engines: one for the augers and one for driving. They moved from auger machines with multiple augers to reel or ribbon type machines with only one auger – the machines we see today. You will have to wait until the next issue to see some of the old snowblowers.



Clearly the guys working to clear the snow in the old days were tougher than we are today.

The blower in the top picture on this page is at the top of Donner Summit on Old 40 looking towards Donner Lake. The bottom picture on page 1 with the guys shoveling down to the blower is down old 40 at "Big Shot" where the lone house now stands.

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## The story of this picture collection

Norm Saylor attended the annual Cisco get-together to talk and show off some of the Donner Summit history he has. When he was done Hank Goodrich of Kingvale came up to him and invited Norm to his house. When Hank opened up a drawer, Norm said he “almost wet [my] pants.” There were many dozens of old black and white snapshots from the winter of 1951-52. They were lying wrinkled and folded, curled and bent, but they were good pictures as you can see here.

“Take them with you.... And help them out,” said Hank. Norm did.

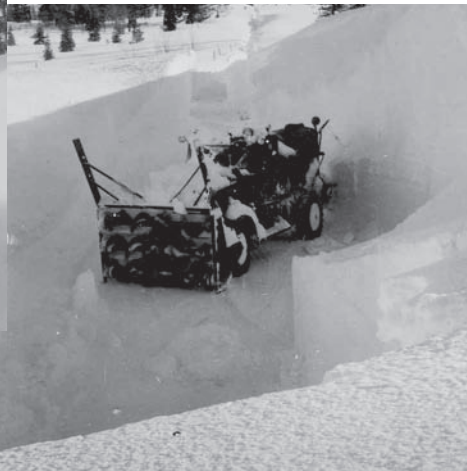
There is a moral here. You may have old pictures, tickets, documents, brochures etc. They are not worthless and we are willing to take them off your hands and then share them with others via our web pages and newsletters. Contact us at [info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org).



# January, 1952

100 MPH winds, whiteouts, snowplow crews steering by feel, 25 foot drifts, 16 feet of snow piled at the roadsides, Highway 40 abandoned and closed for 26 days, heart attack, avalanche, broken axles, clogged machines, abandoned plows..... the storms of January, 1952. The worst ever?

A day by day account appears in a new book by the Lincoln Highway Assoc. The book is the latest in their series of books mapping the old Lincoln Highway. It's called, The Lincoln Highway California. Contact the Patrice Press, of Tooele UT at [books@patricepress.com](mailto:books@patricepress.com). When you get your book go to Appendix A, page 64.





On this page you see a sign above and enlarged at right, "Make this a 4 Lane Highway Write your congressman Sponsored by the Reno Chamber of Commerce."

Of course that didn't happen until the early 60's.

In Lou La Bonte's restaurant in Auburn you can see a picture of the whole sign.



facing page top an old car on Old 40, a bulldozer clearing the road, middle left the highway superintendent's car, middle right a snowblower.

Bottom left is a car parked before a sign for the Rancho Sierra Inn which was at Laing Rd. just below Nyack. They had a rope tow there from 1940's to 1960's. At the bottom right is the Ranch Sierra Inn with snow being shoveled off the roof.



## City of San Francisco

On January 13, 1952 the Southern Pacific's City of San Francisco was making its way across the Sierra in a snow storm. There was no reason to expect that it would have trouble since trains had been crossing the Sierra for decades and in the most troublesome spots there were snow sheds. 12.8 feet of snow fell from January 10-17 and the fifteen car train, pulled by three engines, became stuck. 90 MPH winds howled around the train piling the drifting snow 20-30 feet high. After 30 hours the diesel fuel ran out and so did the power. Avalanche was a real danger. As the passengers huddled in the train they worried that an avalanche could sweep them and the train down the mountain.

Rescue was on the way however. A train with dog sleds was making its way along cleared tracks. U.S. Army weasels (amphibious tracked WWII vehicles) were also making their way to the beleaguered train. Nurses and doctors waited at rescue points. A Coast Guard helicopter dropped supplies.

When the storm broke rescuers were able to reach the train where all 222 passengers had survived for three days. People left the train and were taken to Nyack. The train remained stuck another three days before it was finally freed from the "Sierra Cement" by crews with shovels. Two rescue workers died in the rescue.



We need help collecting the information for our various communities. As an example, here is our first thanks to Lois Shane, of Kingvale

# School's Out It's Time to Go to Kingvale!

**(Kingvale: 1930s & 1940s)**



Virginia Pritchard and Bobbie Butler are two representatives of the families that started a tradition in the 1930s of gathering children, relatives, and pets, and heading for Kingvale to spend the summer. The wide open spaces, the river and the mountains provided a wonderful playground for children to swim, fish, hike, ride horses, play games, and just roam, with a maximum of freedom and a minimum of supervision. What more could a child ask for!

Virginia Pritchard began coming to Kingvale in 1931 when her father, George Locklin, hired several unemployed Portuguese workers to build a cabin for the family in Kingvale [pictured above here - ed]. Virginia's mother felt that in the Depression a cabin was a much safer place to put one's assets than in a bank. This cabin is of stone, which was a familiar building material for the Portuguese workers back in their home country. The cabin beams, roofing, window frames and doors were made from snow shed timbers and railroad ties discarded by the railroad. At first there were not many families. Virginia's parents built the 3rd cabin in Kingvale. While the cabin was being built the family "camped out" in an army tent placed on a wooden frame which her father had built. They cooked over a 2-burner stove, used lanterns, and their storage was a box rigged up to hold food. There was no electricity or running water. However, they did have milk delivered behind a large rock across Old Highway 40..

Bobbie Butler began coming to Kingvale around 1937 when her grandparents, the Gomes, had a cabin built and her grandmother and aunt began bringing her to Kingvale each summer. Bobbie remembers hearing about the end of World War II on Sally Becker's car radio--the only radio in the area. World War II had quite an effect on Kingvale. With gas rationing, many "regulars" were unable to make the "long" trip to Kingvale. Bobbie's family was fortunate, however. They were farmers and had access to extra gas rations. Bobbie also remembers that the grocery store at Hampshire Rocks, located across from the current campground on what is now I-80, had things not available at stores in Marysville. That's probably because it had "old" inventory and this was before people worried about how dated products were.



Pictured above: Kingvale Park Coffee Shop, gas and Greyhound bus station.

Kingvale, originally named Kingvale Park, was the “wood lot” included in Owen King’s 1867 homestead deed. It was intended to provide summer grazing for livestock. Virginia Pritchard remembers that sheep were still herded up Old Highway 40 when she first came to Kingvale in the 1930s. Early each summer several herds of sheep and their shepherders would move slowly up the road on their way east to summer grazing. This was a great treat for Kingvale kids who followed the sheep a mile or so up the road before returning to their other summer activities.

Among these activities was enjoying the South Yuba River while the Van Norden Dam was still in place. The river flowed all summer and several deep pools provided great swimming and diving opportunities within Kingvale. One handsome youth could make the girls swoon with his gorgeous swan dive off “The Rock.” “The Beach” was where children and their parents spent hours each day enjoying the sun and water. Virginia’s mother was one of the very few women who actually wore a real bathing suit out in public and went swimming in the river. Before the bridge was built, PG&E had a trolley across the river in order to service power lines on the other side. This trolley would hold about 3 Kingvale kids—one of whom would have to use the hand-over-hand technique to pull the trolley across the river on its cable. It was also possible to use small boats on the river. Jim Brennan, Sr. who married into the King family, usually brought a couple of horses to Kingvale each summer. Virginia remembers that she was one of the children privileged to ride them. The area around the Van Norden Dam provided good fishing and the Kingvale kids took advantage of that also. And, of course, the fun was not restricted to summer. Virginia Pritchard remembers coming to Kingvale to ski in winter on homemade skis.

Just west of the Kingvale cabins on Old Highway 40 was a little café run by Mrs. Pizzoli. She sold sandwiches and gas to travelers and the Kingvale kids could get candy there. Bread and milk was also available. For a time you could have your mail delivered there —probably an incentive to get you to come in and make a purchase. Bobbie Butler remembers a few small cabins behind the café, which could be rented. She also remembers attending Mass in the basement of Beacon Hill Lodge and buying a soda, at least once, from the bar at Donner Summit Lodge.

All of the fun was not restricted to the children of Kingvale, however. On weekends the working fathers would come up and opportunities for social affairs abounded. The 4th of July was a cause for much celebration. Jim Brennan, Sr. had a whole sheep butchered and roasted in a deep pit heated with huge logs. This all-day event took place in the meadow where the Cassidy cabin now stands. Numerous fireworks displays were put on by different groups of families and friends. Card parties were common in Kingvale. In fact, parties of all kinds were common. Many families had evening campfires around which family and neighbors would gather to sing and entertain each other, or to just enjoy each other’s company. It was common for the women, in particular, to make regular visits to neighbors--all dressed up, wearing a hat. Many cabins had guest books to record these visits. A few still remain. The fall brought deer hunting which many of the men, in particular, participated in. This event created opportunities for good stories for the evening campfire.

A ski club built an open-air platform with a juke box for dancing, next to the café. The hope was that this social opportunity would lure would-be skiers to the area. The Tamarack Ski Club House was built on the property now owned by the Cassidys, but did not remain standing for long, and the ski club found a new location.

Perhaps unique to Old Kingvale, is the number of cabins which have remained in the same families from the early days of the 1930s and 1940s. There are many long-time friendships which began in those carefree summer days.

Written by Lois B. Shane (Kingvale)

From an Interview with Virginia Pritchard and Bobbie Butler (September, 2008)

## Historical Society Needs

Participate in the historical society and help save Donner Summit history for the future:

We need

1. someone to convert 8mm movies to DVD and a device to view 8mm films
2. publicity person
3. fundraiser
4. grant writer
5. online store operator
6. coordinator of local community information, contacts, and research - to follow leads to information.
7. pictures of the Kit Kat Club in Kingvale and the Crest Garage and Lodge in Soda Springs
8. office work and cataloger





Soda Springs - General View



Soda Springs - The Hotel

## Local History

Here is a little news from Donner Summit from the old days. Thanks to Norm Saylor, Jan Fonesca of Dutch Flat and Steve Grimm for sharing four copies of a little Dutch Flat newspaper from Dec. 1940 and Jan. 1941

Army Air Corps Builds Ski Lodge - This new building had accommodations for 30 officers from Sacramento Air Depot, Hamilton and March Fields; located between Norden and the Summit Highway Maintenance Station. Details of the ski school program were not disclosed by Army authorities.

An Ad for Rainbow advertised a J-Bar Ski Tow 1320 feet long. Hotel rates started at \$2 per person. Hannes Schroll directed the ski school.

Soda Springs Hotel, renovated from cellar to garret can now house 200 guests. The hotel advertised "..... take Southern Pacific right to the door." At the movies you could see "Knut Rockne; All American" with Pat O'Brien and "The Gay Caballero" with Caesar Romero.

Of course all these activities were made possible by the year round Highway 40. A precursor to "Old Forty" was the Lincoln Highway. Built ten years before Route 66. It didn't have a song so it has been forgotten by the public, except for historians and an organized Lincoln Highway Association which is working on preserving sections of this first transcontinental highway. [The Lincoln Highway Association has an extensive website and materials we'll be getting in future issues: <http://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/> ed.]

The Lincoln Highway is remembered in a booklet loaned to me by the Oldenburgs of Serene Lakes, a reprint of a 1916 booklet giving instructions and tips for traveling from New York to San Francisco. First proposed by Earl Fisher, the Lincoln Highway Association was founded in 1913 to promote a "Coast to Coast Highway - open to lawful traffic ... without toll charges." This was before federal and state highway funds. So it was executives from Packard, Prestolite, Hudson, Goodyear, Willys, and Portland Cement who put the route together, following many of the old trails made by the British, Federal and Confederate troops, Pony Express, emigrants and 49'ers.

It was estimated that the cost of the 3331 mile journey would not exceed \$5 a day per passenger. As to time - "The usual pleasure party, with easy driving can make the trip in 20 to 30 days, driving approximately 10 hours per day. This estimate means that approximately 18 mph must be made, as an average. There was no mention of stops between Donner Lake and Emigrant Gap.

Margie Powell



# Historical Society Associates

## David Africa

After graduation from UCSB (B.A. history) David taught junior high school for one year. He joined Harper and Row Publishers as a college textbook representative and later became a field editor calling on professors at Cal and Stanford. In 1969 he became a manufacturer's representative in the college bookstore market in school supplies. For the past twenty nine years David has been an independent contractor in the bookstore industry representing clothing and backpack companies.

David has always had a sincere and passionate interest in history. It's about all he ever reads.

"Being part of DSHS is very exciting to me, and I am anxious to see how far we can take [it]."

## Beverly Lewis

Beverly Lewis has served as the Director of the Placer-Lake Tahoe Film Office for five years. Under the auspices of the Placer County Office of Economic Development and the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, she is tasked with setting up and running the County's first film office dedicated to attracting and supporting commercial, film, and television production in the area.

Among the films she has shepherded through the county are "XXX", "Rocky & Bullwinkle", "Almost Famous", "Dragonfly", "The Deep End", a Sundance Award winner, and numerous independent productions, TV, commercial and still photo shoots.

A native of Northern California, Beverly received her Masters degree in Production from UCLA's School of Film and

Television. She received her BA in Anthropology from California State University, Hayward.

Beverly serves on the Executive Board of the Film Liaisons in California Statewide (FLICS) as Secretary-Treasurer. FLICS is a non-profit membership organization for film commissioners around the state. The organization focuses on marketing and retaining film production in the state as well as educational legislative activities and professional development for film commissioners.

Prior to her film commission work, Beverly produced and directed a number of award winning PBS documentaries and has worked on commercials, independent films and music videos. She has conducted documentary seminars, moderated entertainment law workshops, and has served on state arts and humanities grant review committees, various state and organizational panels and workshops, and screenwriting competitions. Beverly is a member of the International Documentary Association.



The two pictures here are of Truckee during the winter of 1951-52

# Where Is It?



Here is our second "Where is It?" Our first was in the last issue made smaller below left. It was taken in front of what is today the API at the top of Old 40.

Where is the picture at left taken? Look in the next issue for the answer



## Census of 1870

So what was happening on Donner Summit in 1870?

Dwellings 29  
families 29  
white males 104  
white females 9  
colored males 26 (at least 24 were Chinese)  
foreign born 78  
Insane 0

59 worked as railroad laborers  
3 were cooks  
10 worked in the sawmills  
4 were lumbermen

there were also: ice packers, teamsters, carpenters, swampers, railroad foremen, blacksmiths, hotel keepers, barkeepers, real estate owners (2) night watchmen, bookkeepers, miner (1) saw mill owners (2), farmer (of what?) waiter (1), stage drivers (1) steward (1) and a millwright.

They came from everywhere: all over the U.S., Cina, Denmark, Norway, England, Russia, Ireland, and Finland.

## Next Time

Our next issue will mostly be devoted to Rainbow Bridge, its construction and renovation. There will be a number of pictures, something about movie making on Donner Summit, Donner Summit in 1924, a snowmobile from 1917, the first school bus on Donner Summit, and something about old snowblowers.

Our next issue will be out at the end of November.

## Ads &.....

If you would like to place an ad in the historical society newsletter that will reach a select audience, contact us at [info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org).

If you would like to place a letter to the editor in our newsletter, if you have an article or if you just have comments, contact us at the email above.