



Donner Summit Historical Society

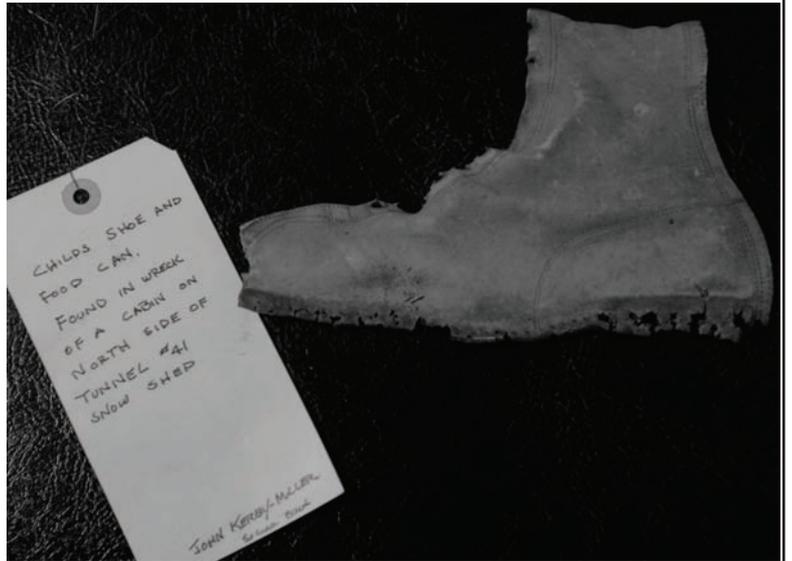
March, 2009 issue #7

Newsletter

# More Artifacts Donated

## Thank you John Kirby Miller

Avid readers of our newsletter will remember issue #2 with our first acquisitions. Here and on the next page you will see some new additions. Someday a Donner Summit History Museum will sit at the top of Donner Summit alongside Old Highway 40, the first transcontinental Highway, the Lincoln Highway overlooking the first transcontinental railroad, Donner Lake and Summit Valley. It will be a mile from the first ski lift in California and almost on top of the first rope tow in California. That's our dream. Meanwhile the story of the artifacts is on page two along with the donor.



## What do you Have?

Do you have old machinery related to Donner Summit? Do you have pictures or documents?

We'd love to look at them, accept donations or make copies (of picture and documents of course).

**Reading this immediately upon receipt? See page 7**

## This Issue:

The Story of the "new" artifacts  
Plane Crashes on Donner Summit  
The first Summit "ski lift?"  
Movie Making on the Summit

## Future Issues:

Next time: Johnny Ellis and the first subdivision on Donner Summit, the first rope tow on Donner Summit and the Dartmouth Outing Club 70 years since Sugar Bowl opened the first chair lift in California.

The story of Sugar Bowl's opening and building the first lift.  
Reminiscences on Lake Mary  
Ice making in Summit Valley

Do you have stories? Let us send a crack reporter to you so you can share your stories.

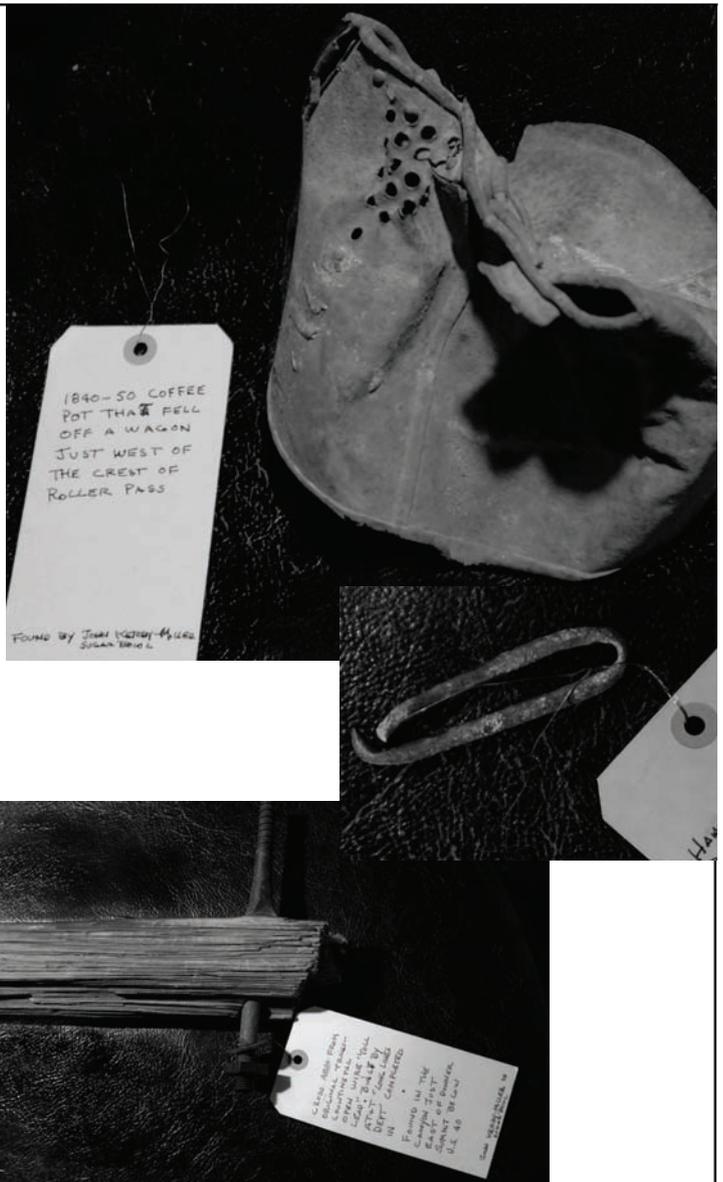
It was John Kirby Miller, who upon hearing about the Historical Society for the first time, contacted Norm Saylor to make his artifact donation. "I thought Norm was the best one, he's active, focused."

Seeing the new artifacts, shown here for the first time, in a private setting, I thought it would be interesting to talk to Mr. Miller and find out a little about him and his discoveries. He's a fascinating guy, with a million stories to tell. Some of those are being set down by Nicole Lieberman Husby at Sugar Bowl where Mr. Miller is a part-time resident.

Mr. Miller has been on the Summit for more than 50 years, apparently enjoying every minute of it. He was here for the winter blizzard of 1952 "when the snow stopped the train [the City of San Francisco]." He helped build the Marin Ski Club building in 1959. Now he has a condo in Sugar Bowl.

He's a curious guy and during his 50 + years on the Summit he's probably explored every nook and cranny. I had trouble keeping up with his exploits writing as quickly and with as many abbreviations as I could. Of course that makes deciphering hard later, but that can help enliven the stories too as I make up things to fill in the blanks (I'm kidding here – about making up things – or at least I'm mostly kidding). I only had one piece of paper by the phone too, so as it filled up I went back and wrote between the lines, in the corners, really small, anything to fit it all in. Apparently I am not sufficiently in control to stop the interview and get more paper. Then too, he was on a roll. Enough about the trials of your historical society correspondent – I'm sure you can appreciate the difficulties.

"I'm just a curious guy," says Mr. Miller and indeed he is. Just for curiosity's sake he's traveled the entire Emigrant Trail from Nebraska to California. After mentioning that he rattled off a list of spots to visit where emigrants painted their names on rocks, springs where they stopped to rest, places where there was trouble, etc. Around Donner Summit, he's done the same thing, following Charles Graydon's book, *The Trail of the First Wagons Across the Sierra Nevada*. There are lots of books written about the Emigrant Trail as well as Donner Summit. Using them he's followed the various routes of trails and roads as well as explored all over. On top of Red Mountain are the remains of a railroad lookout constructed of stone. It was used to monitor the train sheds which were made of wood. Sparks coming from engines would sometimes start fires and the lookout warned the fire crews. On part of the inside of the lookout is a painted



**John Kirby Miller's tags:**

**on page 1:** Child's shoe. Found in wreck of a cabin on north side of tunnel #41 snowshed **top this page:** 1840-50 coffee pot that fell off a wagon just west of the crest of Roller Pass. **middle this page:** hand made harness piece. found next to summit of Dutch Flat to Donner Lake wagon road

**bottom:** cross arm from original transcontinental open wire "toll lead." Build by ATT "long lines dept." Found in the canyon just east of Donner Summit below U.S. 40

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

# Summit's First "Ski Lift?"

You will remember from our last issue that Dennis Jones built the first ski lift on Donner Summit. It sat on Beacon Hill and was called an "Up Ski." It lasted only a short time because it did not work well and it was inconvenient. Skiers had to take off their skis to use the contraption.

The picture to the right may be that very "ski lift." It was described as consisting of a couple of large sleds attached to a cable that passed through a pulley at the top of the hill. As one sled went up the other went down, the upward bound sled carrying several skiers. This picture clearly fits the bill and is of the right vintage.



---

message from the 1878 about how deep the snow was. He also mentioned where an old hotel used to be along with its "dump" out the back door. Old Chinese crockery can be found there. Near Tunnel 41 there were houses with basements and there too old detritus can be found.

"I hike around, that's how I found those things...walk and look at the ground and see how things are stirred up." It was on his various exploration trips that he found the artifacts displayed here and which he donated to the historical society. The child's shoe came from the house foundations near Tunnel 41. About the coffee pot for example, "I saw it under a bush just off Roller Pass" about 14 year ago. "I was just standing there and looking at it" before it occurred to him what he was seeing. I said, "Wow, look at this..." "look at the details of that.... It's hand made, hand drilled, hand riveted." If you look closely at the details in pictures of the wagons crossing the country, you will see coffee pots like that hanging on the back corners of wagons. To add a little mystery to the coffee pot, something is rattling around inside. Is it a rock...or a gold piece? Maybe wondering is more fun than finding out.

The harness piece was found on the old Lincoln Highway just down the east side from Donner Summit.

The wooden piece, which was part of the cross arm of a telephone pole, was part of the "open wire" transcontinental telephone line which crossed Donner Summit sometime between 1900 and 1910.

"Donner Summit is so many things. I can sit you on a rock in Summit Meadow near the Indian grinding rocks and watch the sun set just as the Indians did. Or there's the original stone work of the Emigrant Trail on the north face of Donner Peak." Then there's all the work that went into the railroad. That led him to a discourse about the various iterations of the highway: Dutch Flat, Lincoln Highway, Old 40.

Towards the end Mr. Miller was getting tired and he summed things up, "You know Donner Summit; there is so much there." He's right.

**A final note:** if you have things related to Donner Summit from Cisco to the Summit, such as pictures, documents, artifacts, old machinery, etc. we'd be happy to give them a home and/or copy them so others can enjoy them as well.

# Emigrant Trail

Are you interested in the Emigrant Trail? DSAA will be holding an information meeting to discuss the establishment of an actual trail along the route from Roller Pass to Cisco. The meeting will be at the Alpine Skills Institute building, AKA Sugar Bowl Academy, at the top of Donner Summit on Old 40. It is the last building on the right just before you head down to Rainbow Bridge. The meeting will be from 10 AM to Noon on Saturday March 14. The panel discussion will be moderated by Peter Van Zant of Sierra Watch.

## Plane Crashes on Donner Summit

Over the decades since people started flying over the Sierra at least five planes have crashed on Donner Summit. The weather can be extreme over the 7,000 foot pass and the 8,000 foot peaks. Before the days of IFR (instruments were used) planes flew VFR (by visual reckoning). To help pilots there were airplane beacons. With a map pilots would fly from beacon to beacon. In the old days there were many beacons on Donner Summit. One, of course, was at Beacon Hill (now Soda Springs Ski Hill) and for which the old Beacon Hill Lodge, next to the Soda Springs Hotel, was named.

In 1922 a deHaviland bi-plane flying for the U.S. Post Office, got into trouble during a blizzard and crashed into Van Norden (see picture right). Note Castle Peak in the background. Notice the open cockpit and consider how much fun that would have been to fly over Donner Summit especially in winter. The plane was later disassembled and hauled in pieces to Reno.



On January 15, 1948 a plane crashed just at the east end of Donner Ski Ranch about 100 feet from the current condominium. It was a BT13, numbered NC62933 pictured here below right.

On April 22, 1932 a Boeing Tri-Motor crashed into Van Norden Meadow (see the next page). The pilot, Harry Huking, had crashed ten years before while flying mail. For his 1932 flight over Donner Summit, he was carrying a co-pilot, stewardess, and eight passengers. He was flying for United Airlines and going east to west. Coming over Summit Valley he was looking for the Beacon Hill beacon but he missed it in the blizzard so he turned left to head back. As he was turning the plane was caught by the power lines on the south side of the valley. The lines ripped off two engines and a wing. He could not have been far off the ground at that point so when the plane hit earth no one was injured. The plane crashed just where Sugar Bowl Creek enters the Van Norden Meadow at the southeast end.



Dana Scanlon found the pictures of the wrecked plane and decided to see what he could trace. He took the tail number and contacted Boeing. It turns out that the crash was not the end of NC230M. The plane was taken in parts to the Boeing factory in Seattle. There it was rebuilt and then went off to Alaska to fly. After its retirement



the plane went to the Boeing Museum where it can be seen today.

So, how did one fly in the old days before the advent of GPS? During the day one followed landmarks on the ground such as railroads. By night though, it was not possible to do that so pilots flew from airplane beacon (flashing light) to airplane beacon, all maintained by the U.S. Government. On Donner Summit there were beacons on Beacon Hill (Soda Springs Ski Hill), on Signal Hill (Donner Ski Ranch), etc. If one was on course each beacon could be seen clearly and one could discern which beacon was which because of the different Morse codes each flashed. If one was off course a bit one could see the beacon but not the distinctive flashes. There was also a weather station on Donner Summit maintained by the government, which is pictured here.



Here's an interesting early Summit rope tow. This is labeled 1936 Beacon Hill. Clearly this faces a different direction from what we're used to. That's Crow's Nest in the background. So this left must have come off the east face of Beacon Hill going towards Van Norden. Since Soda Springs Rd. was not plowed in those days, maybe the tow extended over the road and was removed in the summer?

# Hooray for "Donnerwood!"

Charlie Chaplin came to Donner Summit in 1924 to film his epic "The Gold Rush," considered by some critics as among his best films. Locations in and near present day Sugar Bowl Ski Resort stood in for memorable Klondike gold rush scenes.

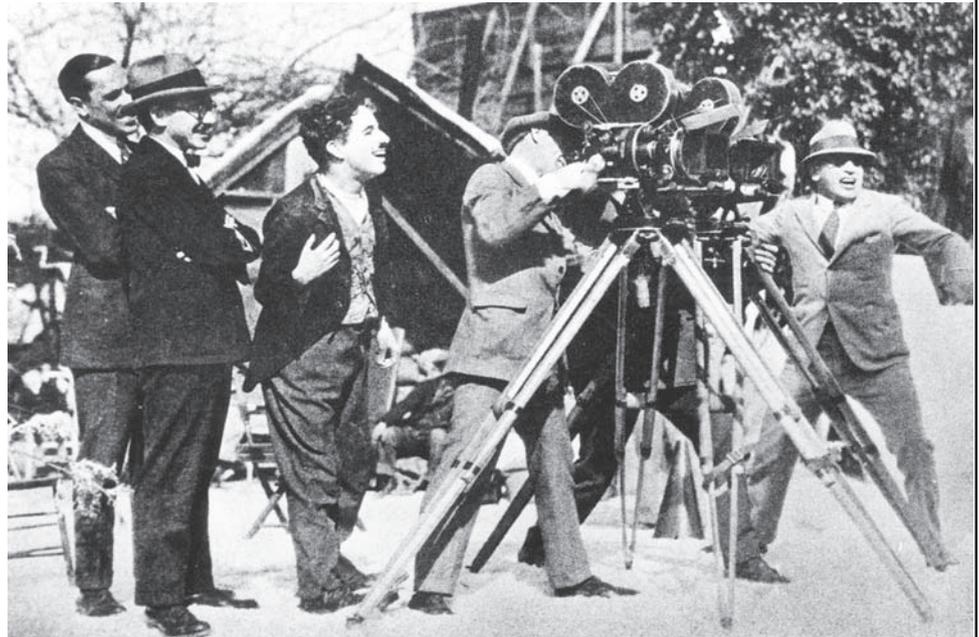
Chaplin appears to be the first big Hollywood filmmaker to discover the incomparable terrain and vistas of Donner Summit but a number of other notable films have selected this region as a great place to shoot and many of those you may have watched over the years were filmed on Donner Summit. Look for Summit scenes in "Bushwhacked" (1995 starring Daniel Stern) and "Cobb" (1994 with Tommie Lee Jones as the baseball legend Ty Cobb). A very low budget (even for him) was the Roger Corman film, "Take It To The Limit" (1999). This was Corman's first venture editing a complete film using only digital technology. Scenes from this film include a 'ferocious' bear frightening a stranded teenage couple. These scenes were shot in the rocky section immediately northeast of the condo parking lot adjacent to Donner Ski Ranch, and climbing scenes on 'School Rock' between Rainbow Bridge and the summit. Bela Valdez, owner of Alpine Skills Institute (which used to be in the present Sugar Bowl Academy Building) was the technical advisor. The creepy, suspense film "Misery" (1990,

James Caan, Kathy Bates) featured a number of dramatic snow scenes particularly a car crash over the side of the road near Rainbow Bridge. Norm Saylor, former owner of Donner Ski Ranch, was retained to load in a lot of snow as it was scarce during the time of production. More difficult than delivering the snow, confessed Saylor, was extracting the car up the mountainside.

Norm Saylor played a pivotal role in another notable film. Disney's "M.V.P. 2: Most Vertical Primate" (2001) may be the first successful film franchise to star a chimpanzee since "Tarzan" with Johnny Weismueller. The first film, M.V.

P., required chimps to play ice hockey. This second film called for a chimp with the ability to snowboard. The owner/trainer contacted Saylor at Donner Ski Ranch to see if they could train two of their chimps, Jack and Louie, to catch 'big air' and other boarder tricks. For a several days skiers and snowboarders at Donner Ski Ranch witnessed perhaps one of the most unique events hosted at Donner Ski Ranch – chimps learning to snowboard and loving it. The chimps were coddled and pampered like any superstar, perhaps more so as the owner/trainer Greg Lille and colleagues were particularly concerned about the chimps' vulnerability to the snow and cold. Apparently they loved the experience (it probably helped that one of the chimps already knew how to snow board). A highlight for Norm's four-year old granddaughter Cheyenne, was the chance to meet the primates up and close and personal.

Other films that found Donner Summit an attractive location include "Jack Frost" (1998, Michael Keaton, Kelly Preston – wife of John Travolta, who spent a month starring in the film "Phenomenon" shot in Auburn just two years before). Shot in Truckee and various locales around Lake Tahoe, some of the most demanding special snow effects with the animated snowman were staged at Sugar Bowl. "The Forlorn" (2008, Crispin Glover) a film yet to be released, highlights one of the most famous events during the ill-fated Donner Party stranding - sending some of their group out for help across the Sierra. This small independent film split cast and crew lodgings between Sugar Bowl Ski Resort and the Sierra Club Chalet. The Sierra Club facility also served as 'production central' providing all meals, wardrobe, make-up and



above: filming 1925 The Gold Rush starring Charlie Chaplin at Sugar Bowl. Picture comes from the Sugar Bowl collection.

production office space in a dorm situation. Almost all the film's locations were shot amongst the snowy pines and drifts behind the Sierra Club chalet.

And perhaps one the most memorable films to be shot recently in Donner Summit were many of the opening scenes in "True Lies" (1995, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Tom Arnold). The scenes included not-yet-Governor Schwarzenegger racing down the slopes near Donner Summit away from bad guys chasing him on skis and snowmobiles. The Gov's character eludes them successfully and jumps into a van being piloted by Tom Arnold. You can see the serpentine curves of Old Donner Pass Road around the bridge in this footage. The scenes of these two characters in the icy lake were shot in the frigid waters of Donner Lake.

These productions expend a lot of money in the local economies when they shoot on location so besides having Donner Summit immortalized on the big screen the local merchants and residents benefit financially: a win-win situation for all. In a future article we will cover some of the many commercials and other media productions drawn to the beauty and drama of Donner Summit.

For those of you reading this immediately and interested in old movies, Sugar Bowl is hosting a film festival February 27-28, 2009. At 4 PM on the 28th The Gold Rush, starring Charlie Chaplin, will be shown. Admission is free. You can get further information at [www.sugarbowl.com](http://www.sugarbowl.com) or 530-426-9000.

Beverly Lewis

## Reading this Immediately? Like old movies?

If you are reading this immediately, you may be able to get in on a **free** showing of Charlie Chaplin's The Gold Rush (picture left) at Sugar Bowl February 28, 2009 at 4 PM. Snacks and drinks will be available. Further information at [www.sugarbowl.com](http://www.sugarbowl.com) or 530-426-9000. Other films will also be shown and also for free as part of the San Francisco Film Festival. This screening is being presented by the Placer County museums.

**DONNER SPITZ INN, INC.**



**Norm Saylor**

P.O. Box 9 Norden, CA 95724

530.308.9665 (C) leave no msg  
530.426.3376 (Off/Fax)

We should let no extra space go unused. Here is a Model "T" turned into an early snowmobile. This comes from the Norm Saylor collection.

