

Donner Summit Historical Society

July, 2010 issue #23

Newsletter

Red Mountain



Strictly speaking Red Mountain is not part of the Donner Summit BUT many consider Donner Summit as a wider concept than just what's at the pass. In that sense Red Mountain is part of the wider Summit. Even if Red Mountain is not on the Summit proper it is so interesting that we can't ignore it. If the Donner Summit Historical Society does not talk about it then no one probably will. There is no Red Mountain Historical Society or Cisco Grove Historical Society.

You have seen Red Mountain as you travel I-80. It sits on the north side of the freeway just west of Cisco at the Eagle Lakes exit. There are lots of antennae on the top and it is indeed red. The stage road from Cisco to Meadow Lake went up Red Mountain and that's still the access today from the back of the Indian Springs OHV staging area, across the road and west from the Indian Springs campground. Saying there is a road up is true and important to say to validate our journalistic integrity but our historical society travel staff does not recommend it's use by motorized vehicles. Walking/hiking is the method of choice unless you don't mind getting stuck and having to back down hill around rocks you barely missed going up. For the first mile or more there are no opportunities to turn around. In this issue we report on how to get to the top and why you'd want to, the fire trains, and its days as a fire lookout for the railroad to protect the snowsheds. Above is a panorama which in it's original form is a few feet long showing what can be seen from the top in the 19th century. The dark line is snowsheds on the railroad. Below is what can be seen from still existing stone fire lookout. In the bottom picture you can see I-80 on the right and Lake Spaulding further right.

Go on th page 3



Take the Scenic Route

Travel Scenic Highway 40 to the Summit and Beyond

The Historical Society has a number of projects it's working on. We're getting the museum ready for the Heritage Tour (see page 10), preparing for our second annual Summit Pioneer Awards program (see page 11), the 20 Mile Museum, general research and story collecting, fund raising, managing our growing data base of "members," and beginning the cataloging of our archived materials.

There is one more project we have been talking about and which now has actually begun, delineating the Old 40 Scenic Route. People speed along the interstate but along almost the whole way is another route, more scenic, more historical, and more interesting for people who would like a slower pace.

Travelers taking the slow road go past lakes, interesting bucolic communities, historical sites, and have the opportunity to visit interesting shops and restaurants.

We have divided the trip from Rocklin to Truckee into four "legs:" Rocklin to Auburn's old downtown; Auburn to Colfax; Colfax to Baxter; and Cisco Grove to Truckee. Along the way we have developed a text with turn by turn instructions, along with a map, names of local museums, and hints for a good time. We did have to limit what we said because of space limitations, fitting everything onto an 11 X25 map folded sheet of paper. This will be available on our website and printed versions should appear in museums and local businesses along the route. Meanwhile here are some pictures so you can preview your own trip up Old Highway 40.



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



Pictured page 2 top down: Auburn courthouse, Loomis City Hall, bovine in Colfax, old house between Loomis and Newcastle, Lincoln Highway Donner Summit, stoic Native American in Colfax.

Page three top down: Forest Souvenir stand at Cisco, old church at Secret Town, remains of a gas station at Weimar, "chimney" at Rainbow, Dutch Flat Hotel, China Wall, stone house at Big Bend, ruins at Cisco Grove.

Talk About Old!

Some of our readers are not just interested in history. They are interested in the outdoors as well.

Red Mountain, or Signal Peak, just North of I-80 and a little east of the Eagle Lakes exit has spectacular views. The views are unobstructed for 360 degrees. I had thought it would make a nice hike so I could see what was up there and see what could be seen from up there. Wow!

Getting there is an issue. There is a road that leads out of the Indian Creek OHV staging area that is on the north side of the Eagle Lakes Rd. (There is a campground on the south side of the road.) Make the right hand turn and go a few hundred yards until you see the signs for Signal Peak OHV pointing up the right hand road. If you are thinking about

driving it make sure you REALLY like four wheelin' and have a raised body, oversized tires, a jack, good driving skills, rescue equipment, equipment for signal fires..... I'm kidding, kind of, but it is a rough road.



I knew I didn't want to try the beginning in my Jeep and discovered further on that I was very glad I hadn't because I would not have been able to turn around. I'd decided to hike the route with an assistant from the historical society's extensive research department. Stay tuned for historical relevance.

The road is very steep and gets steeper. In the first mile and a quarter it rises 900 feet. That's where my assistant bailed

out. In total the route is only three and a quarter miles long but it rises 2100 feet. I had no idea it was that steep. To prevent yourself from being surprised, check the elevation of summits for which you are heading. Up up and up it went. The last few hundred yards are the hardest. Those last yards are like climbing stairs that shift under you. Take a step up and loose rock slide you back down a half a step.

If you are up to challenging hikes though, the walk is a good one if you don't make it too late in the year. Wildflowers, butterflies, streams, and meadows are all nice additions to the gorgeous views. Later in the season the dirt is very dry and the hike very dusty and hot. Wear boots that support you since there is a lot of loose rock. Bring water. Take your time.

On top it's spectacular and here we come to the history relevance.

First the top of the mountain is REALLY historic. Sixty five million years ago, according to [Assembling California](#) which is an excellent book about California geology, the mountain was sitting out in the Pacific Ocean as an island. Subsequent plate tectonics slammed it into California eventually making it a peak in the Sierra (elevation 7841 feet).

More recently historic, the reason for the climb, is that the railroad discovered the peak overlooked almost all of their trackage from Nyack to Donner Summit. They build a stone house and installed a lookout to keep an eye on the snowsheds. Steam engines ejected sparks which could burn down the sheds which they did regularly. The lookout had a telephone (some wire and poles are still in existence) and could notify Cisco which would then notify the fire fighters. The telephone was installed on Red Mountain only a year after it had been invented. The fire fighters were the crews of special fire trains that were always kept ready with full heads of steam to travel to the fires.

The building is a two room affair as seen on page two. Below is what the building looked like when it was a fire lookout. The wooden building was living quarters. I'd been told that lookouts had written their names on the walls but unless there were still lookouts in 2005 or 1999 or any of the other recent dates and unless the lookout had lots of friends, the many names now written on the walls do not come from the train personnel.

The Fire Lookout



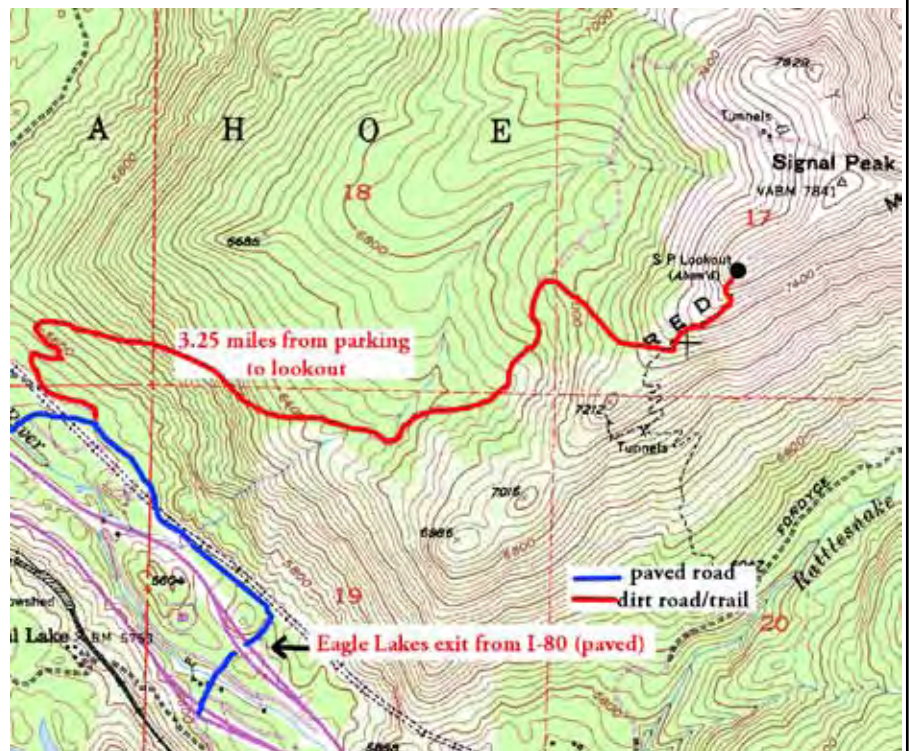
The building of the railroad across the Sierra was fraught with difficulties but even when it was done the difficulties had not ended. The Sierra Summit has huge snowfalls with Donner Summit receiving an average of about thirty five feet of snow in a year. (See the Sierra Snow lab graph of snowfall on Donner Summit on pg 2 of our Nov. '08 issue. You can use our article and picture indices to find all kinds of useful things. The indices are on our website on the newsletter page) To deal with the huge snow falls which then would build up on mountainsides and cause avalanches, the railroad built wooden snow sheds that protected the tracks.

Steam engines and wooden snow sheds don't go together very well. Sparks often set the snow sheds

on fire so the railroad had a number of special trains and train crews on call to fight snow shed fires. To respond quickly to fires the railroad also maintained a fire lookout on Red Mountain just above Cisco Grove. Red Mountain is 7841 feet high and two thousand feet above Cisco. From the vantage point on the top not only does one have a magnificent 360 degree view, but one has a good view of many miles of railroad tracks and snow sheds. According to the USFS and the Buck Rock Fdtn (which preserves fire lookouts) the Red Mtn. Lookout was the first in the country built specifically to look for fires. Later fire lookouts would be built in National Forests all over the country to watch for forest fires.

Imagine living in the cold stone building (replacing the original in 1909) at the top of Red Mountain. The only access was by a three mile mule trip. All food, water, and firewood had to be hauled up. It was cold in spring and fall, and hot in summer (the post was not manned in winter). It must have been very boring waiting for the fires. It was also dangerous. According to the USFS the last person manning the post was killed by lightning while using the phone. The post was abandoned once steam trains gave way to diesel engines.

cont'd on the next page



The first phone was installed at Red Mountain with the line going down to Cisco where a telegrapher could pass on details. That phone was installed in 1877 only one year after the telephone was invented. Talk about early adopting!

See the accompanying article if you want to make a trip to Red Mountain. The current stone building was built in 1909. The USFS also has a nice display at the Big Bend ranger station.

If you don't want to make the trip but want to see more: http://cpr.org/Museum/Sierra_Grade_8-2003/Red_Mountain/

Yesterday's Headlines

BLAZING SNOWSHEDS ILLUMINE THE SIERRAS

Southern Pacific Property Valued at Thousands of Dollars Ruthlessly Destroyed by Incendiaries.

SACRAMENTO, Oct. 4.— A terrific fire raged in the Sierra Nevada Mountains this morning, and when it had spent its fury a mile and one-sixth of sheds were but charred and smoking embers over a mile of steel rails were bent and twisted by the fierce heat. Two passenger trains, one eastbound and the other west, were stalled, and the road was practically under blockade all day. There is no question as to the origin of the fire. It was plainly the work of an incendiary. The Placer County officials are at work on the case, aided by the shrewdest of the Southern Pacific detectives, and no means will be spared to apprehend the miscreants. Almost every year the railroad company suffers from fires in the snowsheds and are generally of a serious character. There are long stretches in the mountains where the sheds are absolutely needed to protect the track from avalanches of snow that, were it not for the sheds, would roll down upon it. The rotary snowplows invented as a substitute for the snowsheds do not avail in these steep passes in the high Sierras, and the railroad company has been obliged to maintain the long system of sheds in the face of the fact that it costs an enormous sum yearly to preserve and rebuild them. Naturally, constructed of pine and subjected to the drying process of the rainless summers in the high altitude of the mountains, the sheds become very inflammable and it takes but an application of the incendiary's torch to convert them into a sinuous serpent of fire. Profiting by its costly experience, the railroad company has established fire trains at the Summit and Blue Canyon, in which steam is kept constantly and a crew of firemen ready night and day to respond at a moment's call. For the fire train every piece of rolling stock must turn aside at the nearest switch. No train thunders through the hills at such speed and the work of the crew is as exciting as it is perilous.



To complete the system of precautionary measures a lookout station is located on the crest of Red Mountain, near Cisco. Here a man and his wife live, and here every ten minutes of the twenty-four hours, one or the other, with field glass in hand, sweep the entire stretch of snowsheds from Blue Canyon to the Summit. Besides these lookouts fire watchmen traverse the sheds constantly. A telephone line runs through the sheds, up to Red Mountain and down again to the fire train. When the Red Mountain sentinel sees a fire, or is informed of one through the telephone, he sends a message to the fire trains to rush to the fire.

10/5/1899 San Francisco Call Bulletin

Last night at 9 o'clock the Red Mountain sentinel sent in word to railroad headquarters that the telephone line had evidently been cut or broken somewhere in the sheds. The Western Union Telegraph wires, which are enclosed in a cable running under the roof of the sheds, about 2 a. m. refused to work, and it was at once realized that the cable had been cut. About this time the Red Mountain lookout saw a fire on the shed line near Butte Bridge. The agent

at Cisco wired to Sacramento that the sheds were on fire. Division Superintendent Wright dispatched the fire train at Blue Canyon to the scene. When the fire-fighters arrived they discovered the incendiary character of the blaze. The sheds run along continuously until they come to butte near a bridge which is 430 feet long. There the shed system stops, to be resumed when the bridge is crossed. Yet at both ends of the bridge the fires had been started, and though a stretch of Iron 430 feet long intervened, the sheds on both sides were madly aflame. A strong south wind was blowing at the time, and passengers describe the scene as magnificent. The flames illuminated the heavens and placed the towering pines of the surrounding hills in bold relief against the reddened sky. Up to a late hour to-night no arrests have been reported here in connection with the fire.

A short time ago the lookout at Red Mountain detected some men in the act of setting fire to the pine forests on the other side of the American River. Although a search was made for them the men could not be caught. The loss of the railroad company by the present fire will probably reach \$75,000. It will be necessary to rebuild the sheds before the heavy snows set in and a large force of men will at once set to work. The track is rapidly rebuilt and new rails laid, and trains will soon be running on schedule time.

10/5/1899 San Francisco Call Bulletin

Fire train in action



SUMMERING AT CISCO '89

Trout Fishing Near the Summit or the Sierras. Hundreds of people from the valleys are now camped along the various streams near the summit of the Sierra Nevada mountains or stopping in the hotels in the neighborhood. In the stream and lakes near Cisco the trout fishing has been excellent until within the past two weeks, when the speckled beauties in the Yuba commenced to get shy, on account of the number of sportsmen who were on the stream continually. R. A. Campbell's hotel, at Cisco, has been well filled all the season and the guests have enjoyed first-class sport...

On the north, across the south fork of the Yuba river, Red Mountain rises to an altitude of 8,000 feet. Directly on the top of this mountain is located a square house, where two employees of the Southern Pacific Company keep constant watch, day and night, over the long line of snow-sheds that cover the road from the Summit to Emigrant Gap. The look-out station is connected by telephone with the telegraph office at Cisco, and as soon as a fire breaks out it is at once located and water trains start from Emigrant Gap and the Summit to extinguish the fires. The view from the look-out station is something grand.

Sacramento Daily Union Aug. 8, 1889

There is talk of erecting a large and costly hotel on the south fork of the Yuba, about a mile and a half from Cisco, near the New Hampshire Rocks. The site is one of the most delightful and picturesque in the Sierra Nevadas, and the investment could hardly fail to prove a paying one. The site is owned by Mr. Campbell, but it is understood that the hotel is to be erected by a syndicate of Chicago capitalists. The drive from the hotel at Cisco to the New Hampshire Rocks, over the old Donner Lake stage road, is a delightful one, the scenery being unsurpassed in beauty. Mr. Campbell has been at Cisco for fifteen years, and has done much towards keeping the lakes and streams stocked with fish. Last year he put 50,000 trout in the south fork of the Yuba, ... He has placed black bass in Lake Fenner, Kiele Lake, Crystal Lake and Lake valley. He has a beautiful lake near the top of the Black Buttes, called Lake Campbell, and this he has stocked with trout. The Fish Commissioners cannot do a better thing than to place a large number of voting trout in Mr. Campbell's hands for stocking, the streams in that vicinity, as he knows just where to place them to secure the best results.

8/8/1889 Sacramento Daily Union

More Stories that May of May Not Be True on Donner Summit

Who were Bill & Dorothy Ryan?

In 1955 the Soda Springs post office was in Rowton's Service Station, at the blinking light; it was run by Art Couillard. The Norden post office was at the Norden store. In both post offices there were two wanted posters in the stacks of posters that post offices accumulate. The posters "wanted" a couple of bank embezzlers from Greensboro N.C.

Bill and Dorothy Ryan had moved into a house right across from the Soda Springs Hotel. He had a wonderful Wyoming cowboy twang and a beautiful authentic cowboy outfit with a large Stetson hat. The hat is very important, that Stetson hat. Bill would come into the Hotel bar and announced, "I just sold a big ranch...." Then he'd say, "I'm buying 'wall to wall'" and he would stand everyone to drinks. His wife was always well dressed – very flamboyant.

One day Norm was leaving the Soda Springs ski hill heading for the intersection of Old 40 and Soda Springs Rd. It was snowing hard. He saw two cars coming fast from east to west on Old 40. Bill Ryan stepped off a snow bank just as both cars pulled up in front of him. Two men jumped out of each car with guns. Bill looked up and put his hands in the air.

"You got me," he said

His demise came about because he and Dorothy had been gambling in Reno. He'd thrown the dice playing at craps and his gun fell on the floor. That triggered the investigation.

It was snowing hard and Bill was wearing a big coat and hat. Norm came up and asked, "What are you doing with my buddy Bill?"

One of who turned out to be F.B.I. agents, told Norm, "This is no business of yours."

Bill said, "Wait, this is my buddy Norm." He reached up and gave Norm the Stetson hat.

The agents then went off to arrest Dorothy as well. Both Ryans went to prison and were not heard from again on Donner Summit. They left behind some things in the Soda Springs Hotel: rifles, pistols, saddles, and other things. The things were divvied up by locals.

Freeze

Bob Bouvia was the bartender and hotel clerk in the Soda Springs Hotel in the 1950's. Norm Saylor was sitting at the bar enjoying life. Bob had just checked a man into the hotel. A short time later the man came down after settling in and said his MG car had no anti-freeze.

"Do you think it will freeze?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Bob said. "You'd better drain it."

The man disappeared for about an hour. He returned all covered with snow and slush carrying something under his arm.

"You've been out there a long time," Norm said.

The man nodded and as he came closer the people in the bar could see what he was carrying: his radiator – so it wouldn't freeze.

[editor's aside - why was Norm always around to capture these stories?]

Lake Angela Empty?!

Imagine the consternation of railroad workers one winter in the 1930's when they discovered they could not fill the water tank at Donner Summit. The water tank of course supplied water for the steam engines. The water came from Lake Angela. Also worrisome was that there was no water to protect the snow sheds from fire. Snow sheds were vulnerable to fires since embers sometimes escaped from the smoke stacks of steam engines.

Of course if the steam engines couldn't be filled then there were no steam engines to cause fires – at least on the way down from the Summit.

Could Lake Angela have emptied? Could it have frozen completely?

Railroad workers went up to look. The snow covered lake looked like it normally did in winter. What was wrong?

Some cogitating followed. The lake top was frozen and had sealed the water underneath completely so that there was back suction. As water went to the tank it pulled the lake level down. With the airtight ice seal the retreating water created a vacuum which created enough negative pressure to prevent the flow of water.

One can imagine that when the railroad workers cracked through the ice to check its depth there was a big hissing sound as air was sucked in to remove the vacuum.

More cogitating followed and the result was the three pictures seen here from the Jim Schull collection. The railroad workers built a battering ram. The frame winched up a weight that then was allowed to fall and batter a hole in the ice. Then air could enter as water went down hill. This works much like your gas can. If you only open the large opening to pour gas you can't get all the gas out. You must also open the smaller opening to allow the entry of air.

With the coming of diesel engines the water was not so important and so a little piece of historical ingenuity was lost – until this issue of your newsletter.

This story and the pictures come from Jimmy Schull, long time Summit resident who passed away recently.



Come take a ride on the Heritage Trail!



Our first Letter to the Editor

The pony at SS Hotel was named Coco , belonged to the daughter Nina, and was in the basement for one long winter in the 70's, not 60's. I was working there the day day the fire dept. hoisted him out of the basemen, it was a big PR story for the hotel at the time. I remember Coco chasing me while I was skiing in Van Norden, Nina buying him ham sandwiches from the Cheesestore to feed him and us [the waitresses]giving him champagne from a bucket on New Years Eve in the basement of SS Hotel.

Nancy Latimer
Serene Lakes

THE HERITAGE TRAIL
Placer County Museums Tour



**August
7th & 8th
10am - 4pm**

**18 Museums
from
Roseville
to Tahoe!**

Museum
Admittance Free
530-889-6500



theheritagetrail.blogspot.com

Sugar Bowl Lake Mary Evenings

Each Saturday evening until the end of August (except 8/14), Sugar Bowl will again be putting on evening entertainments at its Lake Mary facility.

The Lake Mary facility is on the shores of Lake Mary. Good buffet dinner is served and entertainment around the campfire follows.

Reservations are recommended.

Each evening will benefit a local non-profit:

7/10 Truckee Donner Historical Society

7/17 Truckee Donner Land Trust

7/24 Kid Zone

7/31 Sugar Bowl Academy

8/7 Arts for the Schools

8/21 Pacific Crest Trail Association

8/28 Donner Summit Historical Society

Menus and other information at:

<http://www.sugarbowl.com/summer-dining>

D.S.H.S. 2nd Annual

Donner Summit Historical Society

Summit Pioneer Awards Aug. 14 2 PM

honoring:

The Auburn Ski Club

Without the Auburn Ski Club there would be no modern Donner Summit.



Dick Buek

Was he the "madman" of Donner Summit?!



Hannes Schroll

"Austrian skimeister"
Daredevil
Champion skier
Visionary & Sugar Bowl founder



Refreshments 11-4 P.M.

Downtown Soda Springs at the blinking light