

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

March, 2013 issue #55



# History Preserved Pt II

## The Really Old History of Summit Valley

Last month we celebrated the preservation of Summit Valley or Van Norden. It is rich recreationally, biologically, and geologically but it is the history that sets it apart. In our last issue we covered the Native American presence that is still very much in evidence and is thousands of years old. This month we'll delve into the really old history of Summit Valley, the millions of years old history, the geology. In coming months we'll cover how it got the name Van Norden, the Dutch Flat Rd through Summit Valley, Summit Valley Ice Co., etc.

### Van Norden Meadow - the Origin

#### In the beginning, jungles and crocodiles

Fifty million years ago there was no Sierra. There was no Summit Valley. There were jungles and crocodiles in the tropics of Nevada and Nevada had not yet been named. North America met the Pacific Ocean in what is now eastern California. Our Sierra, Summit Valley and Van Norden Meadow, sat under the sea.

#### Tectonics

The Pacific Ocean sits atop the Pacific Tectonic Plate which is continually in motion. It is sliding under the Continental Plate in a process called subduction (see right). That subduction melted the crust forming an immense granitic batholith of melted rock sixty square miles in size.

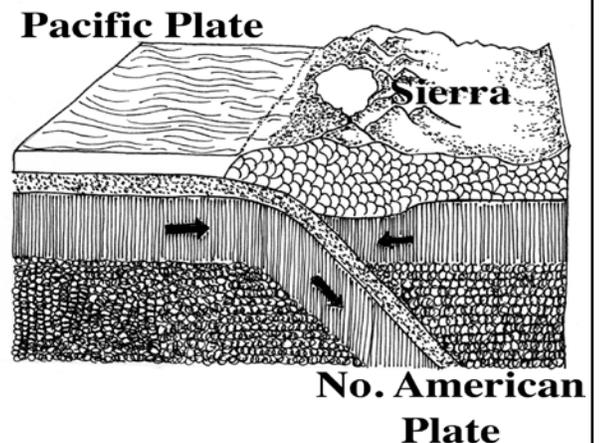
#### Volcanism

As the great batholith formed it floated on the earth's mantle and rose and solidified. That rising and the volcanic activity that came with it, formed the foundation of today's Sierra.

Fifteen to thirty million years ago what would become the Sierra and Summit Valley was covered with volcanic material up to a thousand feet thick.

#### Uplift

About five million years ago the Pacific Plate changed direction and could no longer slip by the North American Plate. A new



round of subduction began. The resulting pressure pushed up the great granite batholith with its covering of volcanic material.

As the mountains rose rain from the natural weather patterns fell and over eons eroded river channels into the sediments and volcanic rock that sat atop the batholith. The rains and erosion gave form to the new Sierra, our Sierra. Summit Valley, or Van Norden Meadow, began to form as the South Yuba River cut into it from the summits of the surrounding peaks.

## Glaciers

After millions of years the Sierra were almost complete but there was still one more episode which would form the range and the meadow into what we see today. As the Sierra rose precipitation turned to snow. Each year some snow would not melt. More snow fell compressing the snow that was there. Eventually glaciers formed, thousands of feet thick. The South Yuba glacier was 25 miles long.

The glaciers' great weight, grinding downhill, scoured peaks of the rock overlaying the batholith and carved glacial valleys, river channels, and basins. The flowing glaciers followed the existing river channels. Summit Valley, the source of the Yuba River on Donner Summit, is one such valley.

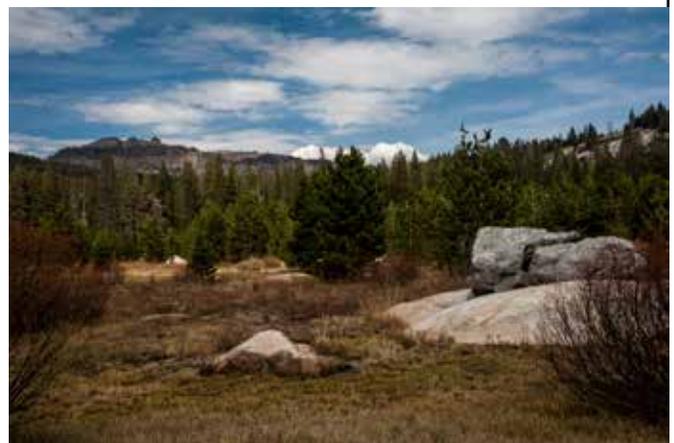
The large granite rocks scattered over Summit Valley and into which the Native American ground mortars, are called glacial erratics. They were deposited by the glaciers. Some poetically inclined observers have said that from a distance, their white forms look like sheep grazing in the meadow. Use your imagination.

With the end of the sequence of ice ages the final geologic form of the Sierra was in place but there was no life. The Summit Valley was barren. Lichen and moss arrived, covering and breaking down the rock, and depositing organic materials. Eventually top soil formed and was colonized by a succession of plants. The forests and meadows of today sit atop the volcanic conglomerate and the great Sierra batholith.

Summit Valley was ready for the arrival of man.

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Unfortunately there are not many pictures from millions of years ago so here we make do with some current pictures of glacial erratics in Summit Valley. Many of the erratics along the edge of the meadow have Native American mortars and metates worn into them. See your last issue of [The Heirloom](#).



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

# Soda Springs Station

## 1870 & 1915

This story is the result of two parts. Part I is the State survey of the Auburn to McKinney Rd. in 1915. The other is a serendipitous discovery of old photographs of Soda Springs Station in 1870 or so, that were found in the California State Library and elsewhere.

### Part I - The Maps

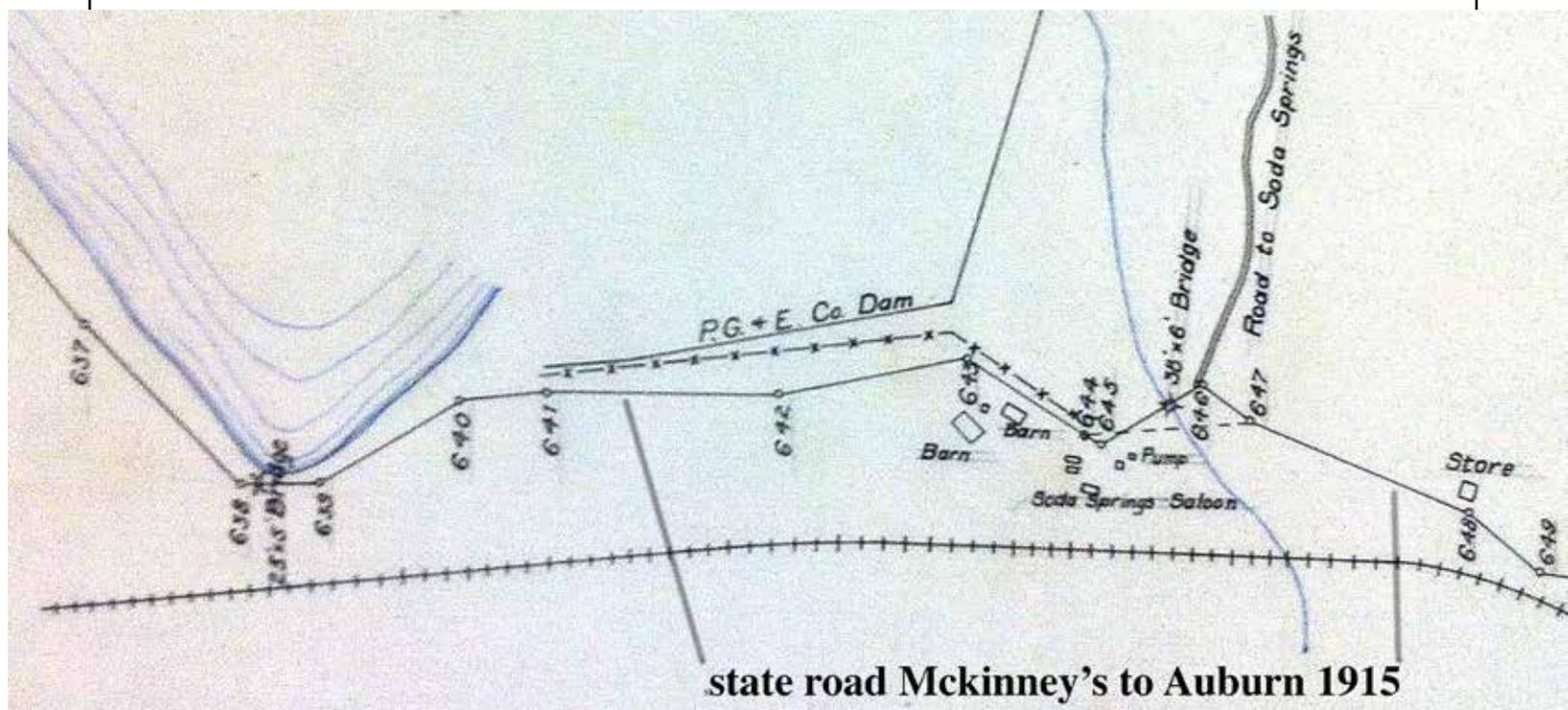
Rick Martel, who has the <http://www.historicdonnertrail.org/> website, has shared a number of things with our research department over the years. Among those was the 1915 surveyor's map of the McKinney to Auburn Rd. That road was essentially the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd from Auburn to Truckee and then it went to McKinney's, on the westshore of Lake Tahoe. The route was a stock road (animals were herded along it to summer pasture). Rick's map was of only the Donner Lake segment.

That segment of course made our research department curious about the Donner Summit segments. What exactly was on the summit in 1915? A piece of the Summit segment is below.

To begin with the Summit hosted only Native Americans and only in summer. The emigrants on the wagon trains were in a hurry to get to the good parts of California -- those that had no snow, so there were no permanent residents in Summit Valley for awhile after discovery.

Some years after the emigrants' Summit experiences, people came to the Summit to stay. An early survey in 1861 showed a lone cabin in Summit Valley at the confluence of Castle Creek and the Yuba River.

The Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. became a major transportation route particularly to help with the building of the railroad and hotels began to appear. Along with those came other settlers who kept cattle, sheep, and dairy, who ran lumber mills, at least one



orchard, and ice houses (see page 10). A few cabins dotted the area. With the railroad's completion even more people came.

With more population came more businesses, more people and more settlement.

Rick Martel's surveyor map was enticing but his copy did not cover the Summit. More unhelpfully he did not recall the exact title of the map but he did say the whole set resided at the State Archives in Sacramento. So our research team, which included Art Clark (of our Then and Now fame), made a couple of visits and eventually turned up the original surveyor's maps and his surveyor book. The map set comes out in a big roll tied with ribbon. Each sheet is four feet long and about two and a half feet wide. There are 15 sheets to get from Auburn to McKinney's. The maps do not have much detail (see the example on the previous page and below) and the book that goes with it is gibberish (see right).

Fortunately Art Clark knew something of surveying and was able to decipher the numbers and text in the surveyor's book.

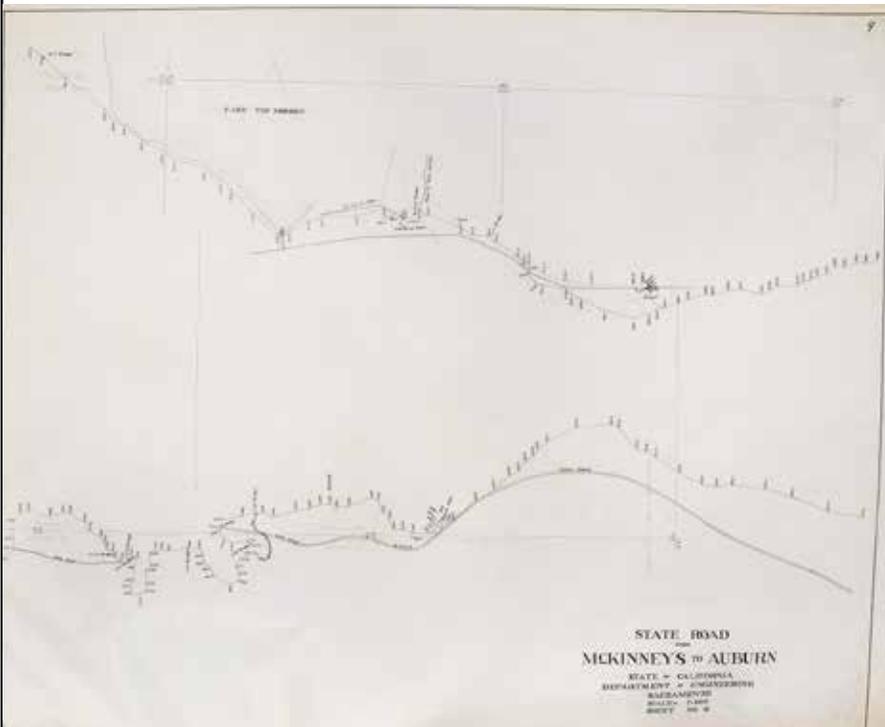
583	1656 + 31	(376) 377	S 75° 10' W S 73° 22' W	576° W
584	1658 + 43	212	S 78° 16' W S 76° 34' W	579° 30' W
585	1660 + 13	170	S 68° 10' W S 66° 28' W	569° W
586	1661 + 59	(145) 146	S 84° 19' W S 82° 37' W	585° 30' W
587	1662 + 80	121	N 62° 21' W N 64° 03' W	N 61° 45' W
588	1664 + 72	(191) 192	S 84° 21' W S 82° 39' W	586° W
589	1668 1644 + 45	373	S 69° 02' W S 67° 42' W	569° 15' W
Sept 22nd				
590		106	N 71° 00' W	N 71° 00' W

The intriguing part was the drawings of buildings in Soda Springs (see the previous page).

Wouldn't it be fun to plot out the buildings' locations and see what is there now? That became a goal, so keep reading.

Surveyors in those days got to walk through pristine wilderness, at least on Donner Summit. But the work must have been tedious. They started at one point they knew and then measured distance in chains (one chain = 66 feet for surveyors) and directions referring to a north/south line and how many degrees away from it the desired direction was. So N45°E is Northeast. On your compass, that's 45°. So far so good. But S45°E is southeast, which is 135° on your compass. So for all headings between East and South (like S45°E), subtract the number from 180 to get the compass heading. Between South and West (like S18°W), just add the number to 180, or 198°. Between West and North (like N18°W, subtract the number from 360, or 342°. To be authentic you can't use a calculator.

Of course, this is ignoring the difference between true north and magnetic north for the sake of discussion.

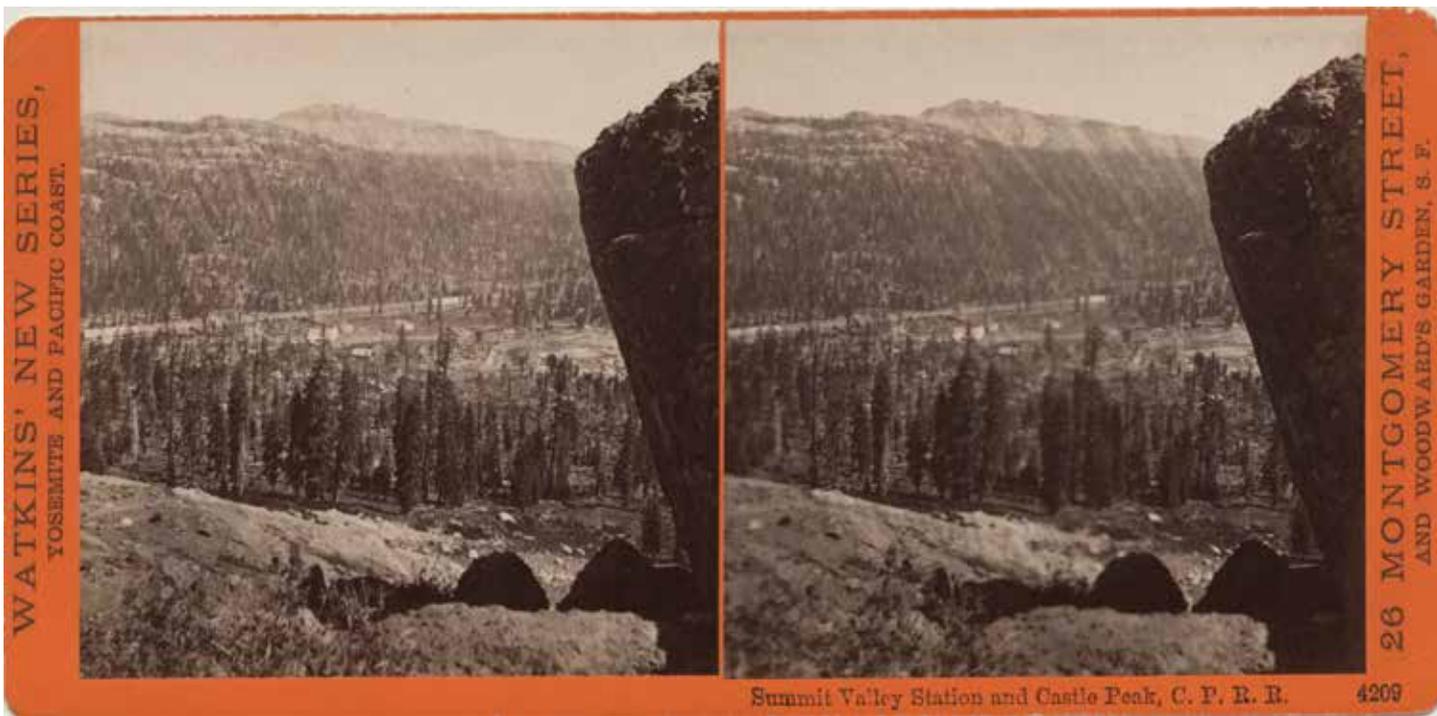


Surveyors ended up plotting for example, 200 feet northwest. They went to the spot and then sighted the next. The numbers went into the surveyor's book and then on to the map. You can see above part of a page of the surveyor's book. On the next page is Art Clark's translation and you can see the numbers for the way points on the maps.

Art traced the surveyor's route from the underpass next to the China Wall all the way to modern Soda Springs. The underpass is noted on the 1915 maps.

## Part II - the photographs

At the same time a trip to the State library in Sacramento was helpful. In their catalog I found listings for many stereopticon slides (like the top of page 5) of Donner Summit. The librarian didn't want to split up their collection by pulling out single slides so she gave me probably a hundred slides



This may all look like gibberish, but should give an idea of what's in the survey notes.

Since not all corners of buildings were ID'd, I took a best-guess at the others. Now if we had blueprints for the hotel, this would be child's play.

The verbiage is word-for-word from the notes, including the abbreviations.

Art Clark

- 597 1681+05 S49° 30'W
- From 597a C/L Road – Shed to Saloon
- b to S. W. Cor. Barn 50' deep
- c to N. W. Cor. Barn 50' deep
- d South Side RR Sheds
- e to NE Cor Summit Hotel Porch 10 ft.
- f to SE Cor Summit Hotel Porch 10 ft.
- g C/L RR Tool Shed 20 ft wide 11 ft high 14 wide
- 8 ft through
- h NW Cor Saloon
- 598 1682+34 S3° 20'W
- a to E Cor of main Bldg
- b to SE Cor Kitchen
- c to SE Cor Woodshed
- d to SW Cor 8' Porch Saloon
- e SW Cor Wood Shed
- 599 1683+23 S17° 50'E
- 600 1684+03 S36° 40'W
- 601 1684+72 N86° 30'W
- 602 1686+73 N47° W
- a S.W. Cor Main Bldg
- b N W Cor Main Bldg
- c N W Cor Toilet 10x12
- d South Side RR Sheds
- 603 1687+42 S70° 10'W

first printed in the late 1860's and early 1870's. That was a good afternoon.

The search turned up old photographs of Soda Springs probably taken by Alfred A. Hart but taken over by Carleton Watkins when he became the CPRR photographer. There were also some by Carleton Watkins.

At some point we'll publish a lot of photographs of Summit Valley. In this issue we're focusing on Soda Springs Station, what is today known as Soda Springs. In those days, though, Soda Springs was nine miles down the Soda Springs Rd. where there was a hotel and soda springs. That's also a story or stories for another time.

Our Soda Springs today consists of a few second and primary homes and a few businesses. When Highway 40 went through the town it was a bustling affair sporting hotels, gas stations, bars, restaurants, and lodges. In the old days, before 40, there was not much.

Take a close look at the photo above and the larger version on the next page. There is Soda Springs Station circa 1870. This photograph turned up two things. The first is the buildings in the distance. The 1866 Government survey says that Tinker's Hotel (the same fellow who's name is on Tinker's Knob) was in Soda Springs. We may now have a photograph of the building.

The second thing was a big surprise. Look to the right of the building a way. There is a dam. Since there is no lake or evidence of a lake it must be under construction. Previous thinking, which relied on P G & E records the Division of Dam Safety in Sacramento, said that the Van Norden dam was built in 1900 (which was also a mistake since the P G & E dam was built in 1890). Now we know there was a dam there much earlier.

What was the dam used for? An 1874 newspaper article says it



SUMMIT VALLEY. CASTLE PEAK AND SNOW SHEDS  
C.P.R.R. WATKINS' NEW SERIES  
607 Montgomery Pl., S. F. No. 107

was an unused ice pond dam. That does not seem likely given what we know about the ice industry on the Summit (you'll have to wait for that story). Maybe the dam was built as part of the railroad building to water engines or to keep dust down on the Dutch Flat Rd.? Maybe it had something to do with logging? We just don't know and searches of the newspapers of the day turn up nothing.

Also in the pile of stereopticon files were two photographs of Soda Springs Station buildings circa 1870. You can see those close up on the next page and in Art Clark's "Then and Now" on page 8. This is something we'd never expected to see. But thankfully the railroad wanted a record of its building. This was good publicity to help get investors, it was good public relations, and it helped get Congressional approval for laws the CPRR wanted. Thankfully the photographers, primarily Alfred A. Hart, saw fit to take pictures of many other things as well. And then the State thankfully gathered up examples for me to see.

Having the photographs then led Art Clark to develop a "Then and Now" of Soda Springs Station (page 8). It was not easy to get however. Art went out time and again trying to match the old pictures to current locations but things have changed a bit. Eventually he did it as you can see.

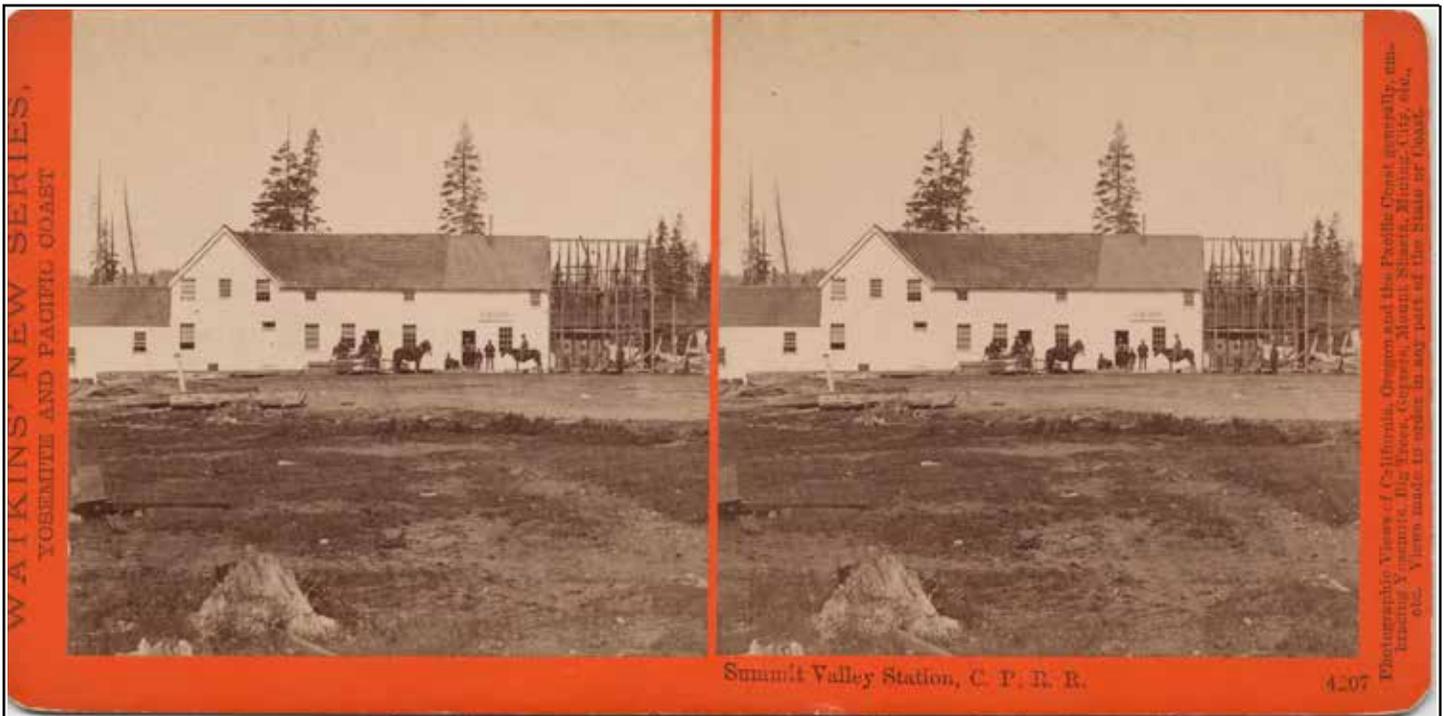
### Part III - coming soon

This success then fired up another challenge to Art. Find us the location of the Summit Hotel which has been lost for years. The search went on for weeks. Just as snow began to fall, Art was successful again. We found the hotel site, the imprint of timbers, lots of square nails and broken crockery. We also found more Native American grinding rocks. But that's all another story, "Art Clark finds the Summit Hotel." Stay tuned. Don't let your subscription lapse.

Above: the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road and an early dam on what will in a few decades be called Lake Van Norden.

Photo location 39° 18.942'N 120° 23.378'W

The photos on page 7 and the top of page 8 are "Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California



## How Did They Take Those Photographs?

Watkins Mammoth Photograph #1117 - Summit Valley, Castle Peak and Snow Sheds (photograph on page 6).

Carleton Watkins made a number of trips reshooting some scenes and making new ones after losing many of his original negatives. This view was shot sometime after 1874 and was 18x22 inches. He also shot a similar but smaller stereo scene. The camera location was on top of what is now the Soda Springs Ski Area.

I wonder who carried the cameras up the hill? "This was no simple task," says Weston Naef in Carleton Watkins: The Complete Mammoth Photographs. "Watkins went to the site hauling a 75-lb. camera, equipped with a 35-lb. lens and a tripod. In addition, the processing materials had to be taken to the site, including the liquids and the glass sheet "which weighed five or six pounds. All of this was enclosed in a wooden box on wheels, a traveling dark room."

"He had to hold the sheet of glass in one hand while pouring albumin-collodion evenly across the plate, making sure to cover the entire surface, then add a layer of silver chloride and then take it to the camera, where it was exposed to the light."

The railroad dominates the scene, crossing through the center on its way to the summit. Also visible is the (presumably) Tinker's Hotel.

Art Clark

The collodion wet plate process that replaced the daguerreotype in the 1850's was difficult. The plates had to be coated and then exposed and developed within fifteen minutes. Chemicals are dissolved in alcohol and ether. The mixture is then poured on a glass plate. The plate then goes into silver nitrate and then into the camera for exposing using a light proof holder. Exposure times vary from 20 seconds to 5 minutes. Learning exposure times in different conditions was completely trial and error. Given the involved process photographers had to become experienced so exposures would be correct the first time. Plates must be developed immediately after exposure by pouring on, and then rinsing off, a chemical. The process produced a glass negative which was more easily printed from than previous techniques using paper (or daguerreotypes which could not be reprinted). This was good for photographers who could make unlimited numbers of prints from their collodion negatives which is what the railroad photographers on Donner Summit did. That was good for us, giving us access to remarkable historical images easily.

The collodion process produced very fine detail and the process was inexpensive.

# Then & Now with Art Clark

## Soda Springs Station ca 1867



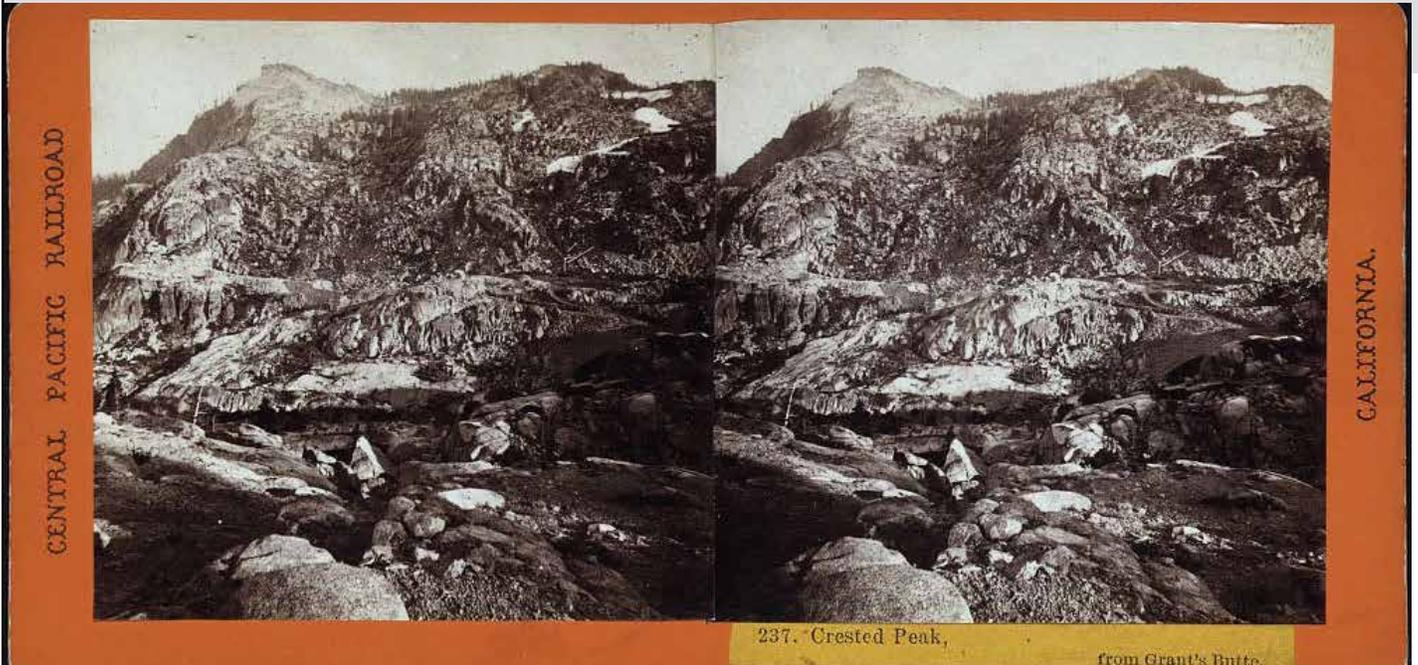
Carleton Watkins 4208 Summit Valley Station

Located on the south side of the railroad, this location once sported a hotel, saloon and work sheds for the CPRR. The South Yuba River flows past, and the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road crossed the river here. Another road headed south toward what is now Serene Lakes and beyond. Peeking just above the trees on the right side is Castle Peak.

Today, it's just a parking lot, but your imagination should let you envision a bustling little community with trains, wagons, and livestock going past. Photo location 39° 19.273'N 120° 22.703'W



# Then & Now with Art Clark

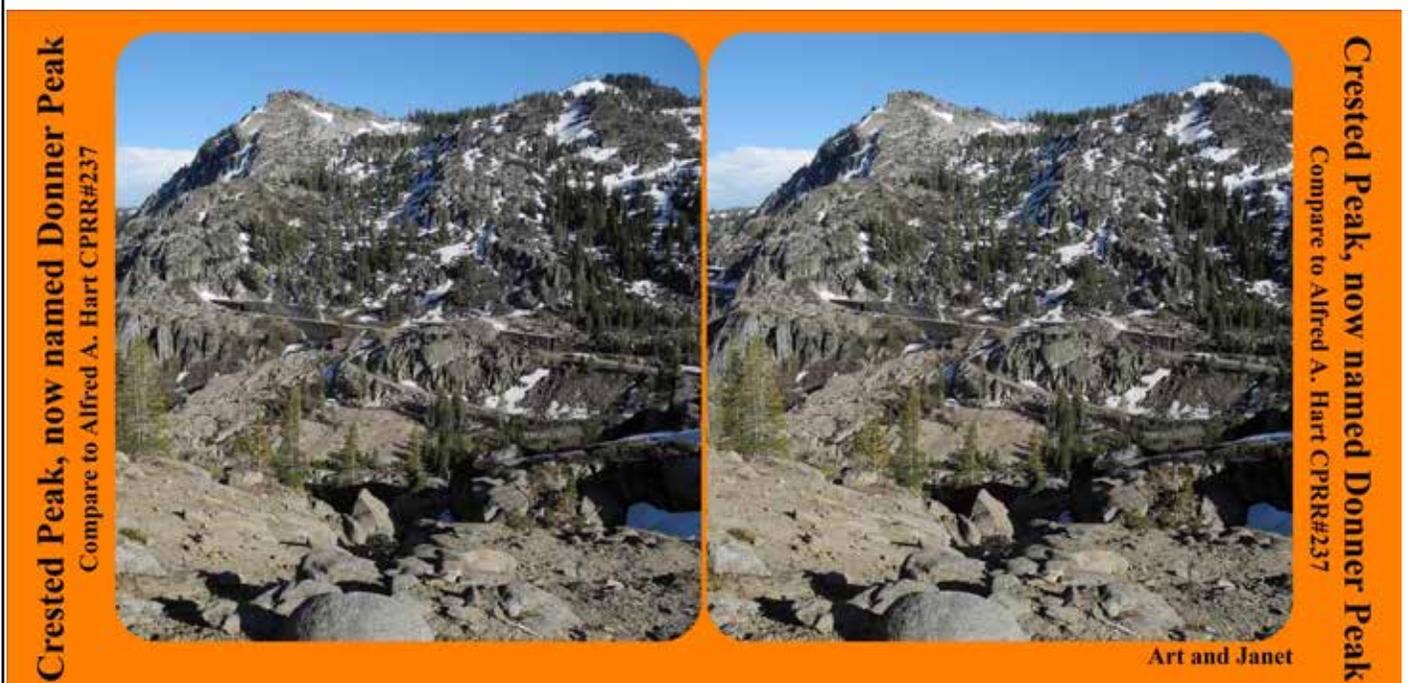


Alfred A Hart #237 - Crested Peak from Grant's Butte.

What's in a name? Both of these names are no longer used. Crested Peak is now Donner Peak, and Grant's Butte is Mount Stephens. Knowing that, this scene should have been easy to find. The triangular rock in the middle foreground looks very distinctive and should stand out. Just find it and the round foreground rocks and Voila! Except that I couldn't find the triangle. Back home, looking at the scene in a stereo viewer revealed that the triangle was actually quite a bit lower and further away. Another trip up there and I had the triangle. Now the problem was lighting. It was fall, I was there at noon, and the sun wasn't high enough to light it up. Fast forward to June. Walk up, and there it is. What was so hard about that?

Did Hart pick the time of day and season just to capture the triangle on film? Probably not, but it provided an adventure for me. Thanks, Alfred.

Photo location 39° 19.145' N 120° 19.442' W



# From the DSHS Archives



To the left is an Alfred A. Hart photograph of the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. just below the Summit. You can still find this section of the road.

The wagon on the left is possibly the photographic wagon of Alfred A. Hart, the CPRR's railroad photographer until 1869.

Note the building at the curve in the background.

## Thundering Tunnel Blasts – Narrow Escape.

The Grass Valley Union of Wednesday has the following:

Our fellow townsman, Dr. S. M. Harris, had an adventure on Monday morning near the summit tunnel of the Pacific Railroad Company, that was not only exciting, but exceedingly dangerous. He was returning from Virginia City, having taken one of the Pioneer Company's coaches for Cisco. There were three coach-loads of passengers, but the Doctor had taken a seat in the last one, which was some half hour or more later in time than the other two. This coach came up the grade of the stage road, just at the eastern end of the summit tunnel, about two o'clock in the morning, and the road being steep and slippery with snow, most of the passengers were walking— some in advance and others in the rear of the coach, among the latter the Doctor. When opposite the mouth of the tunnel, and but a short distance from it, a crowd of Chinamen, some twenty or thirty in number, were seen rushing out of the tunnel and uttering loud cries wholly unintelligible to Caucasian ears, but a white man among them quickly called to the driver, "For God's sake to whip up his team" The admonition had hardly been given before there came a heavy report, a quick flush of light, and then a shower' of stone. Fortunately none but the smaller stones struck any of the passengers. but one, weighing from ten to twenty pounds, struck within two feet of the Doctor. He was called upon to seek shelter, as his position was the most dangerous, when he threw himself beside a projecting rock, which only covered part of his body, when still other blasts went off, to the number of seven, dropping the stones around him in showers, but fortunately none of the larger ones hit him. After a slight interval he raised from his position, but was scarcely upon his feet before another blast sent the stones in his direction. The same white man (who was the foreman of the working gang of Chinamen) hallooed to him to "lay low as there were five more shots to go off" but the Doctor having had all of that kind of fun that he could appreciate, concluded to run the gauntlet and get out of range, which he did in safety.

Daily Alta California November, 16 1867 - the Summit Tunnel, or Tunnel 6 was finished in 1868 after two years of work.

# From the DSHS Archives

## TUNNELS OF THE PACIFIC RAILROAD.

A Paper read before the Society Jan. 5, 1870, by John Gilliss, Civil Engineer, Member of the Society.

Snowshoes. — We started with Canadian snowshoes, but soon abandoned them for the Norwegian, each a strip of light wood ten to twelve feet long, four inches wide, and an inch and a quarter thick in the centre ; they taper in thickness towards the end, are turned up in front, and grooved on the bottom.

There is a broad strap in the middle to put the foot under, and a balancing-pole to steady, push, and brake with. The latter will be seen all-important, as a speed of twenty-five to thirty miles an hour is often attained on a steep hill side. During several winters the mails were carried across the mountains by a Norwegian named Thompson, on these shoes. It is said he made sometimes forty or fifty miles a day on them.



Summit Hotel about 1920

**Another Snow Blockade.**  
SUMMIT, March 19th.—The storm commenced here on the morning of the 13th, and is still raging furiously. No freight trains have passed over the road since the 15th, and there is no prospect of any getting through for several days. The Summit Hotel and railroad office are completely covered with snow—have been burning lights day and night for the last four days. It is by far the most severe storm ever known on the mountains. Last night Conductor Rawland's snow plow, with ten engines, left Truckee for this place, and is now stuck fast in the snow three miles west of Truckee. Snow slides are hourly expected between here and Emigrant Gap.

Sacramento Daily Record Union March, 20, 1882

## ROAD TO LAKE TAHOE IS OPEN FOR AUTOS

### Highway Can Be Traversed By Any Machine

[Special Dispatch to The Call]

SACRAMENTO, June 30 - The road from Sacramento to Lake Tahoe is now open to automobiles. A message today from Manager Gowling of the Summit hotel says the road over the summit is not clear and that the highway can be traversed by any kind of a machine. Several automobiles have crossed the Sierra, but all had to travel in snow.

San Francisco Call July 1, 1911

# Book Review - Waiting for the Cars

This is a fun book and if you like the early railroads and the Transcontinental in particular, it's wonderful. But those are not the only ones who will like this book.

Those who like old-time stereopticons (see the viewer below), or stereo views, will also enjoy the book as well as those who just like western history.

This book is not the kind you'd read straight through, although you can. More fun is to leave the book on the coffee table and pick it up from time to time to page through the pictures and read little bits.

The title comes from a child's comment in 1867 as he was looking at a stereo view of Bloomer's Cut on the transcontinental railroad. He held the viewer to his eyes for so long that he was asked what he was doing. He was "waiting for the [railroad] cars" to come down the track. Imagine what he'd think today of an Imax movie? That's a digression though.

The book is a collection of stereopticon slides by Alfred A. Hart of the CPRR (transcontinental railroad) in the mid-1860's. He was the official photographer and he chronicled the construction.

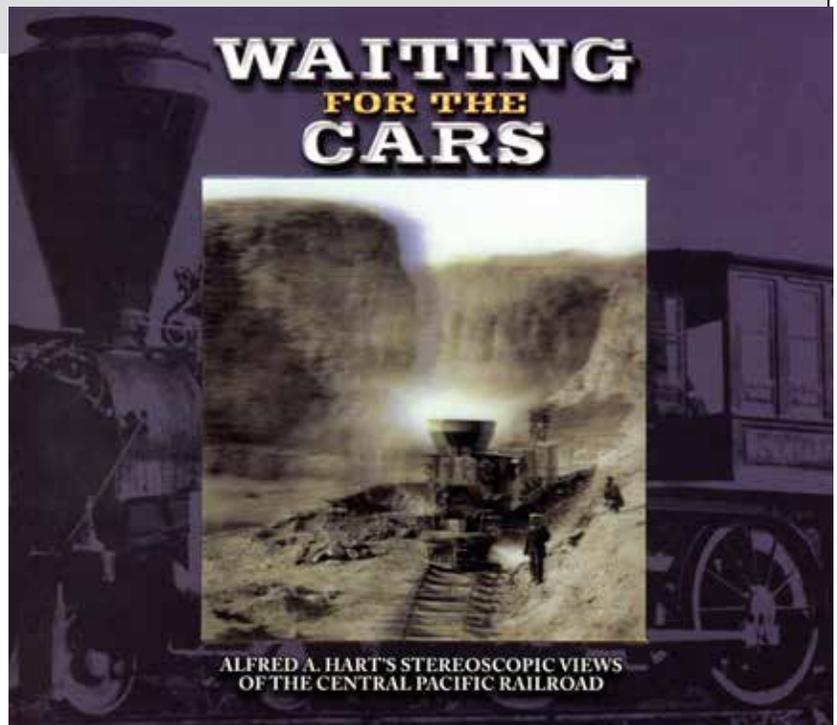
The collection starts in Sacramento at the beginning of the book and ends at Promontory Point in Utah. Each view is a two page spread. The left page has the original slide and describes it. The descriptions then expand with details, facts and stories. The right page of each spread has a stereo view so you can see the image as 19th century viewers would have. To see the 3d image you don the red/blue glasses that come with the book.

The stories are fun reading. There is the story of the snowshed walker who came across a tiger. There are train wreck stories, fire stories, the story of the drunk who stole a box car and went on an "exhilarating downhill run," and the story of how the locomotive Sacramento was taken by wagon from Gold Run to Donner Summit to work as a hoisting engine. There are interesting details of track layout and construction methods, the origin of town names, Chinese workers, locomotives, and facts like it took 20 cords of wood to run a train from Rocklin to the Summit which is 83 miles.

For those interested in Donner Summit, which is why you are reading The Heirloom, there are a lot of slides of Donner Summit.

The book comes with a website, [www.waitingforthecars.com](http://www.waitingforthecars.com) that includes pictures not in the book, If you click on "see other media" you can take a trip into Tunnel 6 and then spin the camera's view up, down and 360 degrees around.

The book is available from [www.waitingforthecars.com](http://www.waitingforthecars.com) which comes from the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City.



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Membership 2012

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

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME(S) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ New Membership

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\_\_\_\_ Individual Membership - \$30

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

\_\_\_\_ Family Membership - \$50

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

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

# Suggestions Needed

You will remember from our last issue that we are aiming at putting up 4 20 Mile Museum signs in Summit Valley.

We need sponsors for the signs although the Land Trust has agreed to sponsor one.

Please help us decide which 4 we should do.

- Summit Hotel
- Native American grinding rocks
- sheep pens and shepherd's shack
- Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.
- Summit Valley Ice Co.
- Van Norden and Van Norden Dam
- Other?

# HJALMAR HVAM

# SAF-SKI

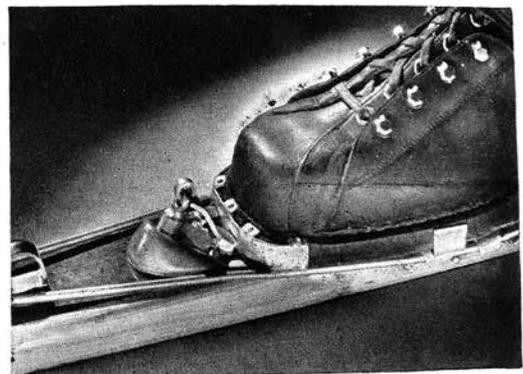
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NOVEMBER, 1945

Western Skiing ads 1945-1947

# Query

Does anyone know how Estelle Lake in Apline Meadows got its name? If so, please contact Fern Elufson: [fernelufson@sbcglobal.net](mailto:fernelufson@sbcglobal.net)

# More 20 Mile Museum Signs

As you know from our last issue we will be installing about four 20 Mile Museum signs in Summit Valley.

As you can see from page 13 we are asking for help choosing those signs. Just as that announcement "hit the stands" in our last issue, we had two volunteers to sponsor signs. Milli Martin, whose uncle and aunt owned the Norden store from the 30's to the 70's sent in a check to sponsor the Sheep pens/sheep industry sign and Ernie Malamud and Ollivia Diaz, who were instrumental in helping to keep Clair Tappaan open, stepped up for the Native Americans in Summit Valley. Those two signs are being put together. The Truckee Donner Land Trust also volunteered to sponsor a sign but have no preference for which one.

Here you can see rough copies of the Native American Mortars and the Sheep.

You can participate too. Do you want to sponsor a sign?

Do you have suggestions for the other two? We are considering Van Norden Dam., the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd., Summit Hotel, and the Summit Valley Ice Co.

Separately we are working on a McIver Dairy sign for down in Truckee at the dairy site with Julie Brisbin's 4-5th grade class. That sign is sponsored by the Truckee Rotary.

Next month, two more.

## Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass

### Summit Valley Native American Mortars

#### History

For thousands of years Native Americans from what is now Nevada called Summit Valley their summer home. They came to hunt, fish, gather food, and trade with Native Americans from what is now California. We can see evidence of their presence in the dozens of bedrock mortar sites around the edges of the meadow and some in the interior.

Sierra granite is one of the hardest rocks on earth. As you discover the sites and explore the mortars, imagine the time it must have taken, only grinding during summers, to develop the mortars in the rock. Over the centuries groups of women and girls passed on one generation's wisdom to another in the same places, summer after summer, century after century. In many places there are many mortars in groups and one can imagine busy communal kitchens with many women grinding seeds. In other places there are only single mortars. Why? Were they different clans? Were the single grinding rock users outcasts?

Nearby are thousands of basalt stone chips (two lower pictures to the right) which are not native to the immediate area. We can imagine men and boys knapping rocks into useful tools, awl and spear points. The chips are leftovers. The basalt was carried from miles away, possible from Devil's Peak. At the knapping sites lessons too were imparted and learned summer after summer, generation after generation, and the basalt flakes grew in number. Now they litter areas of open ground.

There are also metates (large grinding surfaces - see the bottom picture with the mano used for grinding on top), cupules (small depressions with perhaps mystical significance (see left), and a few petroglyphs.

The Martis culture (2000 B.C or earlier to 600 A.D.) lived all around the valley for thousands of years grinding seeds and hunting. The Kings Beach culture (A.D. 1000-1850) was a fishing culture and occupied only a small portion of the valley much later.

Two sites to find: mortar on top of single rock. 39° 19.285 120° 22.320 150 yards south from here, low rock with five mortars and a metate. 656 yards from here SE at 39° 19.148N, 120° 22.342W (feel the east end of the rock for the rectangular metate).

#### Petroglyphs Nearby

To see Native American petroglyphs, head east on Old 40 to the turn just below the Rainbow Bridge. You will see a 20 Mile Museum sign for the petroglyphs and be able to explore that facet of Native American presence on Donner Summit.

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pictures courtesy of the Donner Summit Historical Society

This 20 Mile Museum sign has been sponsored by Dr. Ernest Malamud and Olivia Diaz

## Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass

### Summit Valley Sheep Pens

#### History

"The sound of the bells when it was quiet (no trains), was magical to hear."

The tinkle of bells on the lead sheep was once a common sound in Summit Valley late in the summer and fall.

Lake Van Norden filled with water with each winter's snowfall. As summer progressed P.G. & E. let water out to even out the flow to the Drum Forebay Power Plant down the Yuba River. As the water flowed out the grass grew. Just as the grass had grown the Basque sheepherders arrived with their flocks and set up camp.

The sheepherders had started their journeys in the Central Valley in the spring and then worked their way up the canyons to the Sierra Summit meadows, including Summit Valley. Here the sheep fattened on the new grass in preparation for the rest of their journey on the railroad.

Summit Valley, and Soda Springs, was for decades one of the top sheep shipping centers in the United States and sheep continued to move to Summit pastures into the 1970's. When Interstate 80 was built it included an underpass for sheep so they could get to the meadows under and north of Castle Peak.

#### A Good Story

In 1946 8 year old Milli Martin opened the door of the Norden Store to see the most beautiful dog in the world. He'd been left behind by the sheepherders. Millie's aunt coached her to convince her father to keep the dog and so Skippy became part of the family for 12 years. He never lost his herding instinct. Once, early on during a family vacation, he spotted some cattle and raced away soon herding them into a tight circle. He was on a leash after that whenever there was livestock around.

#### Things to do right here

Take a walk among the wildflowers. Walk along the water's edge and see how many bird species you can spot. Follow the Yuba River to its source above Sugar Bowl. Walk over to the sheepherder's cabin and see what accommodations were like (directly across the meadow from here). Imagine the time when Basque sheepherders' wagons dotted the valley floor and sheep grazed the meadow.

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This 20 Mile Museum sign is in memory of Herb and Lena Frederick (Milli's uncle and aunt who ran the Norden Store for decades.

# Sierra Club's Peter Grubb Hut



Peter Grubb Hut on a spectacular, but tragic, day in early January 2004. A major storm had just cleared, allowing the survivor of an avalanche to leave the hut and initiate a search for his companion who had been killed two days earlier. That's Basin Peak, just north of Castle Peak, in the background.

The Peter Grubb Hut was built by friends and family of Peter Grubb and other Sierra Club volunteers during the summers of 1938-39. It was the second Club hut in the Donner/Tahoe area, following construction of a shelter at White Rock Lake, which fell into disrepair and was dismantled in the early 1950s. The Grubb Hut was a memorial to the recent graduate of Galileo High School in San Francisco, who died unexpectedly at age 18 during a cycling trip through Europe in October 1937, apparently of sunstroke. He had been planning to study briefly in Munich after the tour and then enroll at the University of California, Berkeley.

Peter was active in Boy Scouts as well as being an accomplished flutist; but his primary interests turned toward mountaineering in his teens. He joined the Sierra Club Rock Climbing Section, becoming chair of the schedules committee while still in high school. During winter weekends he was one of several who managed the Club's Clair Tappaan

Lodge in Norden. Within two months of his death, a fund had been established to build the hut, and a location had been selected northwest of Castle Peak.

The hut was built in two stages. The smaller east room was constructed in 1938, and it served as a separate emergency shelter for nearly 40 years until it partially collapsed and was better integrated into the full structure upon reconstruction. The east room was originally supported by two large logs oriented east-west, which were carved for seats on the interior side. The larger main building was erected in 1939 using mortar and local granite for the first level and wood rafters and roof above. Many parties still find the east room to be cozier and easier to heat; but solar electric lighting added about 10 years ago to the main building has balanced use.

The hut hosts more than 1000 overnight visitors during a typical winter season; this makes it the most popular of the four huts currently managed from Clair Tappaan Lodge. It is a frequent destination for summer hikers; winter day use has dropped in recent years as more people use snowshoes and either stop at Castle Pass or head east and up to Castle Peak.

A historical evaluation requested by the U.S. Forest Service and commissioned by the Sierra Club concluded in 2010 that "The cabin was a significant element in an



Stovepipe, peak of hut roof, skis, and poles at Peter Grubb Hut in March 1952. Photo courtesy of Ernie Malamud.



important development in western history, the development of recreational winter sports.” The California Office of Historic Preservation echoed, “The ski huts were critical to developing skiing and other snow-centered recreational industries in the Sierra Nevada region.”

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Peter Grubb Hut — a remarkable stand given the harsh conditions under which it survives.

A news item from shortly after its construction quotes a winter visitor “on the twenty feet of deep snow that engulfed the Peter Grubb meadow and hut” and how his group had to “hunt around and around with a pole until they located the shelter.” There have been other heavy winters since. A third layer of cedar shingle was added to the roof in 1989, before a 50th birthday party attended by several dozen hut fans.

About 10 years ago the Sierra Club began considering what would be needed to make the hut last another 50 years and be more attractive to winter visitors without impacting its rustic appeal. The original outhouse was replaced in 2002-03 with a two-level structure that has an entrance directly from the ground for summer access and an elevated half for winter use. A ‘mud room’ addition has been designed for the hut itself; but before that is started, the existing loft and roof need to be strengthened. The Club is actively seeking a structural engineer (independent contractor) to assist with design and building permits toward this end. Readers who are interested or who can provide referrals should contact the author.

The Sierra Club’s original plan was for a series of huts in the European style so that winter travelers could go from Donner Summit hut-by-hut to Echo Summit. Although the first two were built north of Donner (and White Rock Lake was lost), interest revives from time to time in adding a new hut that would allow travel from Donner Summit to Little Truckee Summit or Sierraville. Toward the south a string was started with Benson, Bradley, and Ludlow Huts; but establishment of Desolation Wilderness blocked that progression in the 1960s. The original Bradley was swallowed by Granite Chief Wilderness in 1984 and had to be ‘relocated’ to Upper Pole Creek, where it and Benson are linked by a few adventurous parties each year.

Visiting a hut during winter is not for the faint-hearted; even Peter Grubb, a 5-mile round trip from the SnoPark at Donner Summit, can take a day in poor conditions; and there have been fatalities. Nonetheless, thousands of people have had the pleasure of making the trip and enjoying a night ‘off the grid.’ With luck, some realistic planning, and modest investment of resources, Peter Grubb and the other three huts will continue to be not only historic treasures but active parts of the Donner/Tahoe winter landscape.

Dick Simpson (hut.coord@yahoo.com)  
Sierra Club Hut Volunteer Coordinator

## Structural Engineer Wanted for Peter Grubb Hut

The Sierra Club seeks a professional engineer (independent contractor) to assess the condition of Peter Grubb Hut (<http://www.sierraclub.org/outings/lodges/huts/grubb.aspx>), make recommendations for refurbishing the existing loft and roof, to work with a design team on a north side ‘mud room’ addition, and to provide signed/stamped plans suitable for obtaining building permits to carry out the work.

The renovation plans must be commensurate with the hut’s status as eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A (but it has not been registered), its remote location (and challenging access), and the Club’s limited financial and labor resources for construction.

For more information contact Dick Simpson at [hut.coord@yahoo.com](mailto:hut.coord@yahoo.com), 650-723-3525 (M-Th days), 650-494-9272 (M-Th eves), or 530-426-3536 (F-Su).

Dick Simpson

Pictured above left:  
Peter Grubb’s high school  
graduation photo