

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

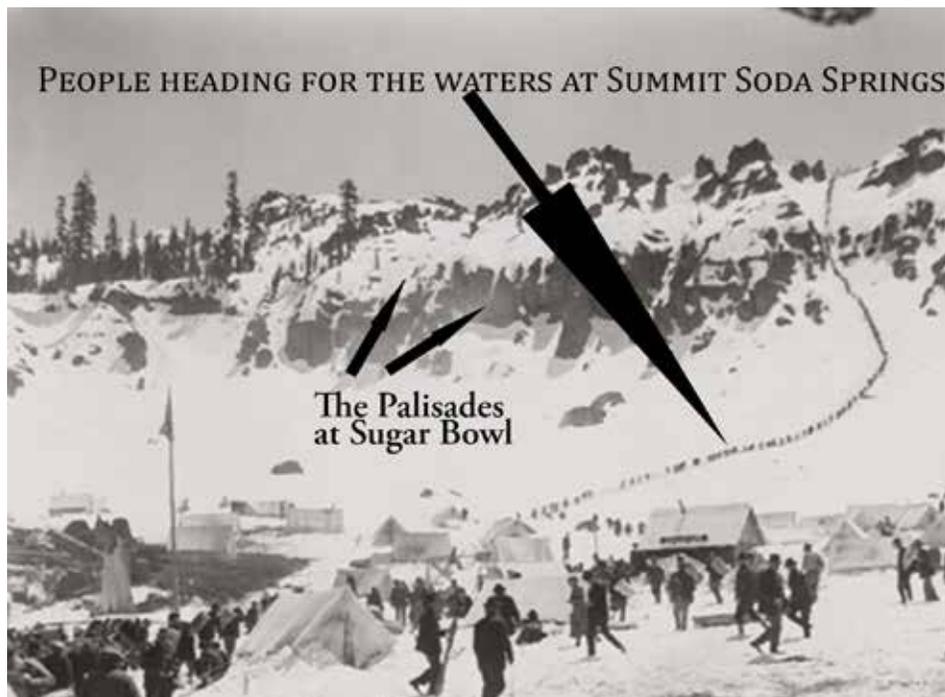
April 1, 2017 issue #104

Over the Palisades on Donner Summit Going to Take the Waters at Soda Springs

Here, for our **April 1** edition are two pictures (one is on page 3) of the Palisades at what is now Sugar Bowl. The volcanic formations on top of Sierra granite are striking and deserve comment but this Heirloom is not about geology. What's important is what are these people doing? Why are they climbing the Palisades and what are the buildings at the bottom? You can imagine our historical research arm's interest and so into the mystery they delved. We'd get the answers for this April 1 Heirloom. We'd fulfill our mission of bringing the very best of Donner Summit history to our readers.

It was difficult being a pioneer on Donner Summit so pioneers looked for anything to relieve their hardships. There were saloons like Tinker's at Soda Springs Station and other sorts of enterprises that could relieve tired workers in various ways. Summit residents could also hop the train and head for Truckee and its attractions.

One of the least known outlets (obviously, based on these historic photographs) for Donner Summit pioneers was just over the hill, but not towards Truckee. It was down at what is now called the Cedars where Mark Hopkins, one of the Big 4 of the transcontinental railroad, had built an estate. Mark's wife was a San Francisco socialite and coming to the Sierra was a bit lonely for her. Mark, apparently a doting husband, relieved his wife's loneliness by building her a hotel for her friends. The hotel, Summit Soda Springs, became a draw for high society San Franciscans. They would take the train to the summit, get off at Soda Springs Station, and take the stage the eight miles or so to the hotel. There they would stay for weeks or even the whole summer. Hunting, fishing, horseback riding, walking, exploring Native American artifacts, dancing, and just relaxing were all activities



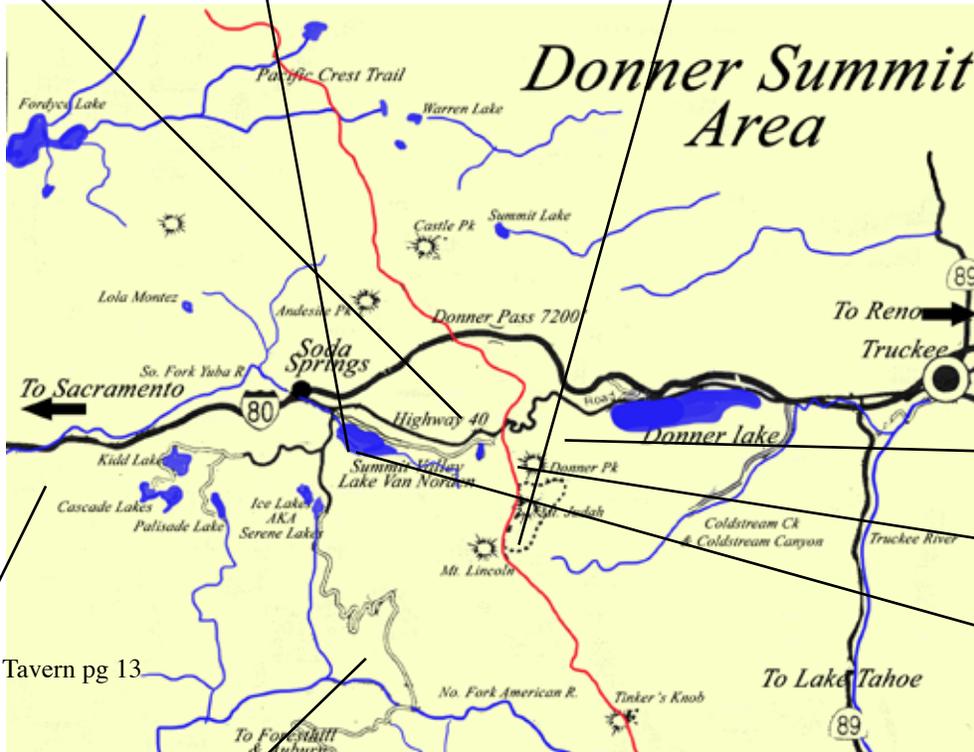
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1895 ad for the Summit Soda Springs Hotel at the original Soda Springs, Mark Hopkins' estate.



SUMMIT SODA SPRINGS HOTEL.

Situated on the American River, in the
HIGH SIERRAS,

THIRTEEN MILES FROM SUMMIT
Station, C. P. + R. R. Various improve-
ments recently made, including a

LARGE NEW LOG CABIN.

This well-known Summer Resort will be
open to guests **JUNE 20TH,**

GOULDEN & JACOBS, Proprietors,
DONNER P. O.

editor:
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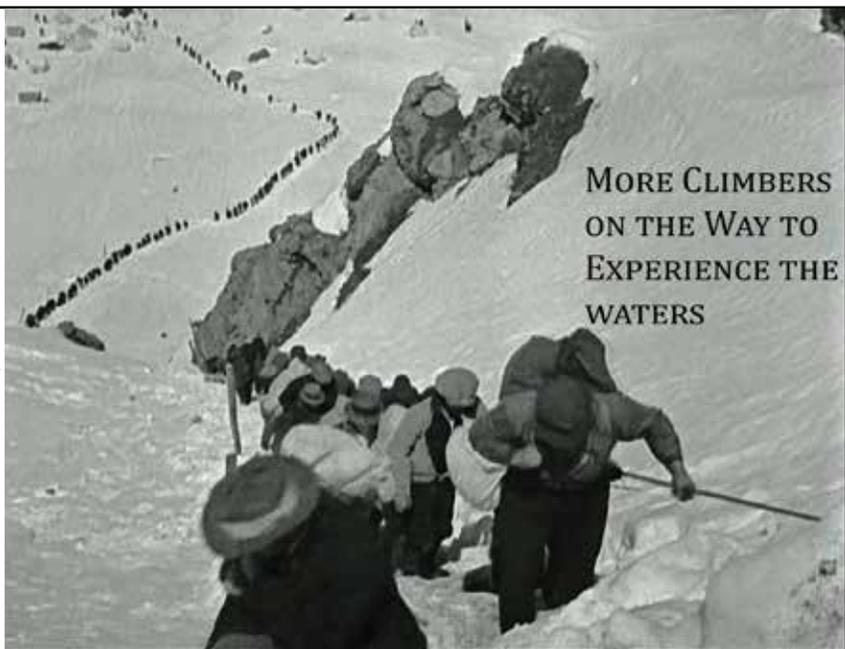
Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit

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

for the summer set.

Not only did the hotel attract socialites but as you can see from the picture, it attracted crowds of others from Donner Summit who wanted to go to Summit Soda Springs. There was not room on the stagecoach for all prospective customers though, and besides, there was a short cut: head directly towards the Palisades between Mt. Lincoln (formerly American Pk. and earlier Turret Mtn.) and Mt. Disney (formerly Mt. Hemlock and earlier Red Top), up the ever steeper slope, crest the ridge, and then over the other side to drop right down to the Cedars.

Local entrepreneurs seeing the possibilities built a little staging area for travelers at the base of the peaks, in what is now the actual "Sugar Bowl." They charged 25 cents to use a rope strung to the crest to make the death defying climb easier.



close up of pioneers conquering the Palisades - note the rope.

One of those entrepreneurs became rich through the enterprise but that's a different story for a different [Heirloom](#).

The discriminating reader may be wondering what the attractions were at Summit Soda Springs to bring such crowds. A "Letter from Soda Springs" in the [Sacramento Union](#) in July of 1875 gives us an answer.

"Man cannot live by scenery alone; but here [Summit Soda Springs], while the sense of sight is feasted, the others need not suffer famine. Ample accommodations of the very best are provided for the visitor. The hostess is unrivaled in her capability for giving a home-like aspect to her house, and her table is all that could be desired, and more than one could reasonably expect at such a distance from the centers of supply. I have visited many of our prominent watering places, and do not hesitate to place this in the first rank."

That's one reason but the letter goes on to name another reason to visit.

"The Soda spring, which gives name to the place, is highly recommended for its curative properties, and is a very agreeable drink, cold as ice, with a little taste of iron, a very strong flavor of soda, and a pungency, due to the presence of considerable carboic acid gas."

The waters were no doubt the real attraction. [California Spirit of the Times Magazine](#) on June 13, 1885 describes the wonders of the waters at Soda Springs. The waters leave your lips "smarting, your mouth is almost raw, a bitter taste hangs around the palate..." But visitors are told to "drink as often as you conveniently can..." The taste will grow on you. The water is made up of bicarbonate of lime, carbonate of magnesia, carbonate of soda, chloride of sodium, oxide of iron, silica, and alumina. It is clear, cold, and sparkling, "constantly more or less agitated by escaping carbonic acid."

Why would anyone want to drink the water and work to be accustomed to the taste? For someone of the valetudinarian (someone concerned with one's health) persuasion, the water is a wonder. It's good for invalids in the early stages of phthisis. It helps with torpid digestion and dyspeptic troubles. It's efficacious for scrofulous diathesis, "especially of the intestinal canal." It helps with rheumatism, and along with the locality and elevation, it's "effectual as a tonic and restorative in some nervous diseases." No wonder people were lined up below the Palisades.

Historians at work: So, we have a long line of people heading up what is indisputably the Palisades at what is now Sugar Bowl. Clearly they are not coming back down so they must be going over the other side. At the bottom of the other side, and a bit further, is what is now the Cedars, formerly Summit Soda Springs Hotel. Then we have recommendation for visiting including analysis of the salubrious waters. Is that not good historical research?

One day, and not for an April First issue, we'll do some stories on the original Soda Springs in the [Heirloom](#). Stay tuned.



Clair Tappaan Lodge, February, 2017

The Clair Tappaan Lodge

The Sierra Club and the Growth of Backcountry Skiing at Donner Summit

by Kimberly Roberts

But First a little serendipity

The staff at the [Heirloom](#) is always looking to gather more history related to Donner Summit. One expedition in search of history led to the Matthewson Center at the University of Nevada at Reno. We were looking for Old Block which was the pen name for Alonzo Delano. Alonzo Delano first came to California during the Gold Rush in 1849. He became a well known author and columnist. His columns have been collected into a couple of volumes such as [Pen Knife Sketches or Chips Off the Old Block](#). He did a lot of traveling around and we'd come across a column of his about camping during an 1873 trip to Donner Summit. One day we'll do more than just quote from that (which we did on our Summit Valley exhibit - see our website) and see what 1873 Donner Summit was like. The staff thought there might be more. An Internet search did turn up trips to Independence Lake and Weber Lake but those are not Donner Summit. We thought a scan through his collection of columns might turn up something - which it did - but wait 'til I tell you. The nearest repository of Old Block's works is at UNR's Mathewson Knowledge Center (library). Upstairs in their rare books room reside lots of old volumes.

On the day of our visit there was a nice lady at the reception desk where old tomes and photographs are to be found. She took the information sheet that noted the volumes desired and then.... it turned out that Kimberly J. Roberts, that is her name, is familiar with the DSHS, its website and the [Heirloom](#). What a coincidence. It also turned out that she's been working on a paper about the history of Clair Tappaan Lodge on Donner Summit.

Herewith, the results of serendipity. Part II follows in May.

Donner Summit, 1929

Nathan Clark remembered his first winter snow wilderness adventure vividly. In 1929, he and his older brother Lewis, both members and future presidents of the Sierra Club, got on board the overnight train from Oakland and arrived at Donner Summit in the middle of a blizzard the next morning. They loaded their gear onto a toboggan and set out in search of the telephone company cabin they had made arrangements to stay at. They had never been on skis before. Nathan recalled,

“We didn't know where we were; we didn't know where anything was; it was terribly cold; and the wind was blowing, and the snow was flying. We bravely took the toboggan off the train and lowered it down onto the tracks, and the train went away. Then we pulled it along the ties inside the snow shed for quite a long way. We struggled thru deep snow and reached a well-made little lodge and knocked on the door. A rather stern and grumpy man opened it and said we couldn't stay there-it was private. He let us in for a while, and we thawed out and behaved very respectfully... After a while we left this lodge, put on our skis, and started out eastward in search of the telephone cabin. We returned to the toboggan, which I think we'd

left near the snow sheds, and went along the tracks. We found a cabin--roofed but too open--it was no good. It had a stove and wood, but one side was missing, and we left. We found another building, which was not the telephone cabin, but it was at least complete. We were too cold and lost to go farther, so we dug down thru the snow, went in, removed the tin can from the top of the chimney, struggled with the toboggan, fixed our meals, spent a couple of nights there, and did so-called skiing during the day. This was Washington's Birthday weekend, 1929--Friday, Saturday and Sunday. There were no developments at Norden at all. Just the railroad station." (1)

Clearly despite his insistence that the area was undeveloped and wilderness, they were surrounded by infrastructure. Nathan's account mentions train stations, snow sheds, and three cabins not including the one they were actually looking for. They were not far from Highway 40. This is not to downplay the danger they faced: they were clearly isolated and at the mercy of the elements, and as such, this can certainly be defined as a wilderness experience. Safe, mediated access to our public lands is something we take for granted today, not realizing it isn't natural, and what a barrier the lack of specialized infrastructure and amenities can be to experiencing the backcountry. Even a simple trail makes all the difference in the world to traversing the landscape. Backcountry recreational areas are in fact, carefully designed to create a wilderness experience, and the Sierra Club's work in the Tahoe-Donner area provides a blueprint for both understanding the development of the recreational landscape and the club's own value system.

In the 1920s, the area was largely logged out and abandoned by the timber companies who had operated there for decades. The Forest Service was actively looking for new uses for land with little commercial value left. Outdoor recreation was at this time a new craze: free time and mobility, resulting from the invention of the automobile and the implementation of the forty hour work week, spurred an explosion of interest in outdoor travel and activity. The impact of the automobile cannot be overstated: for the first time in history people could get out and explore, no longer hampered by the limits of railroad tracks and the slow plod of horses. This provided the Forest Service with new opportunities as they took over the abandoned logging roads and began expanding them. The implementation of the New Deal in 1933 provided the Forest Service with the manpower to build trails and facilities, shelters and campgrounds, roads and scenic vistas, guard and ranger stations, lookouts and telephone lines. This is the kind of constructed landscape that provides access to land as wilderness while at the same time providing a safety net against the kind of exposure the Clark brothers experienced on their first outing. Finally, the invention of the snow plow made year round mobility and access possible. Like the automobile, the impact of the snow plow cannot be overstated. In 1931, the newly formed Auburn Ski Club



25th Year anniversary of Clair Tappaan Lodge invitation 1959

convinced the California legislature to appropriate funds to plow Highway 40. At this point, the Forest Service began leasing lands for private development and became involved with efforts to create and develop ski areas.

As the Forest Service began these construction projects, they turned to the Sierra Club for advocacy. At this time the club was the leading voice in conservation efforts, the legacy of its founder John Muir, who had spoken so eloquently about the virtues of experiencing nature first hand. For Muir and an emerging generation of wilderness enthusiasts following in his footsteps, outdoor activities and recreation were equated with character formation. Physical testing and hardship were integral to this process so outdoor activities assumed a moral dimension, helping to build leadership skills and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility. These activities also assumed a patriotic dimension as engagement with previously remote and inaccessible areas became an expression of civic pride and love for one's country.

It is important to understand that during the first half of the twentieth century, preservation was a comparatively harmonious national movement and public lands were not yet a contested political landscape. The Sierra Club was one of many groups working in tandem with Federal agencies to set

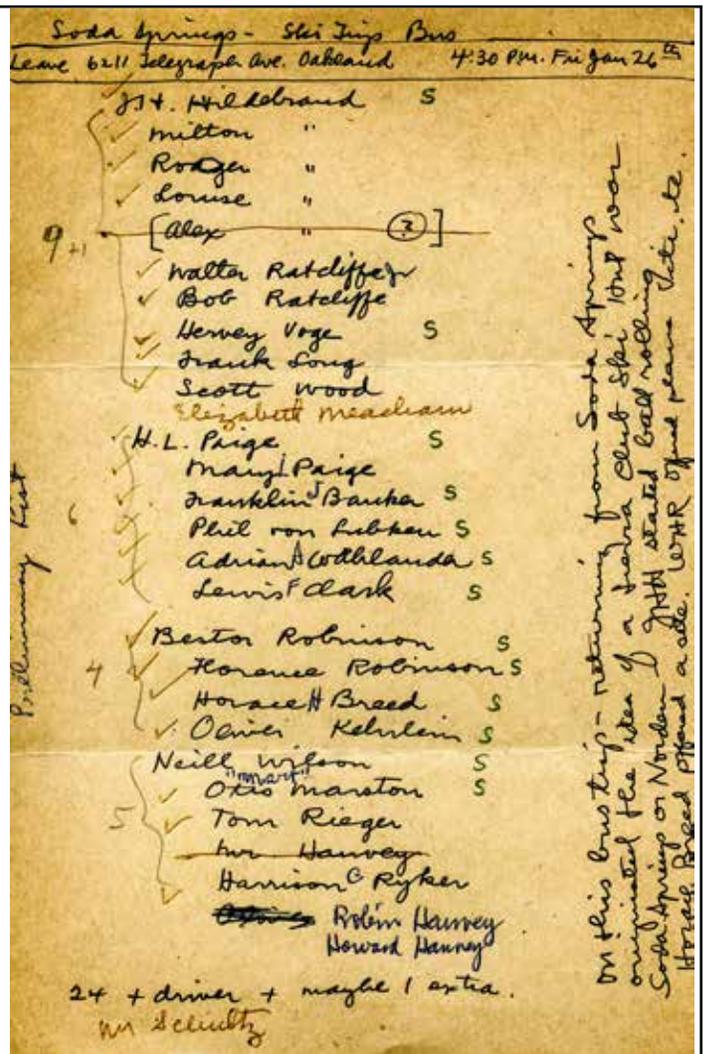
public land aside from commercial use and develop it instead as recreational space. Prior to the emergence of environmental issues in politics, the Sierra Club's main mission was to get people out doors experiencing the beauty of our backcountry. This is why they wanted to build a ski lodge.

Donner Summit, 1934

Unfazed by the hardships they encountered on their first trip, Sierra Club members continued to make the trip from the Bay Area to ski at Donner Summit. Now well prepared, they carried the latest cold weather gear, skiing and packing equipment, and knew what lodging accommodations to make. They were no longer wandering lost along the railroad tracks; however, they were still unmoored in a seeming wilderness. According to one Sierra Club member, they were "homeless wanderers, sponging on the hospitable Auburn Ski Club, renting Boy Scout camps, or sleeping like tramps in the abandoned railroad-station at Soda Springs."⁽²⁾ With both their membership and their commitment to the sport of skiing growing, it was clearly time to take the next step.

On January 26, 1934, 26 people rented a bus (see the list in the next column) for three days of skiing at Donner Summit. They left the Bay Area on Friday at 5:45 pm and arrived at Soda Springs at 12:10 am. According to Joel Hildebrand and Lewis Clark, who jotted down their departure and arrival times and listed the names of the people on the bus, the idea of a ski hut was born on the return trip. Among these people was an architect named Walter Ratcliff who offered his services in the design and building of the lodge, making the notion a realistic possibility. The very next month, on February 7, 1934, the Snow Sports Committee of the Sierra Club met and "officially launched the hut idea." Shortly thereafter, the club obtained a property lease through the Forest Service and began collecting funds for the building of a ski lodge on that property to be named in memorial of former club president, Judge Clair S. Tappaan.

Lewis Clark kept a pocket diary full of notes on the construction of the Clair Tappaan Lodge. What emerges from his scribbles is the scope of alterations the Sierra Club made to the landscape and the amount of physical labor and infrastructure necessary to create a natural appearing back-country skiing environment. This was a massive construction project involving miles of trails and ski runs in addition the lodge itself. According to this diary, the preliminary site survey was the weekend of April 21-22, 1934, when club members met with a Forest Service ranger and surveyed the plot. They cut trees. It rained. Construction began the weekend of May 19-20 when five men arrived with a tool box consisting of 6 shovels, 3 axes, 2 picks, 2 mauls, a two man tree saw and a hammer. Lewis' first summary of work began with the word "build." Realizing perhaps that he was already ahead of himself, he crossed that out and wrote this plan instead: "Layout, clear, excavate road...to SC lot, Build log bridge over stream, Corduroy across swamp, Drain Swamps, Fell a number of trees dead & dying around Site, Burn cuttings, Discuss site



From Lewis Clark's pocket diary.
 Title: "Soda Springs Ski Trip Bus
 Leave 6211 Telegraph Ave. Oakland 4:30 PM Fri. Jan 26th."
 Note on the side: "On this bus trip – returning from Soda Springs originated the idea of a Sierra Club Ski Hut near Soda Springs or Norden. JHH started the ball rolling Horace Breed offered a site. WHR offered plans, etc. etc."

layout, Fight Mosquitoes."⁽⁴⁾

Not only did they have to build their own shelter; they needed to build their own ski runs. Far from simple paths meandering through the trees along the mountains, constructing the ski trails became a serious logging operation as well. One particularly interesting sequence of events occurs in fall of 1935:

Sept 14-15: ...selected trees to be cut to open up present ski trail and develop new one from top of knoll to Diddle Slope including new crossing of creek...felled over 3 dozen trees... hauled down logs from ski trail –lower end cleaned up. Much brush burned (i.e. tree leaves) Sun pm, 3 men busy drowning fires.



The warming hut on the ski hill, 1954

Sept 21-22: Visited by Cunningham and Hodgson, forest rangers at Big Bend who had forest fire report. Satisfied with our handling. Advised us to get burning permit.

Sept 28-29: Got burning permit from Ranger Hodgson.(5)

What these cryptic, understated remarks mean is that after downing over three dozen trees, the Sierra Club decided to burn the refuse without a permit and started a forest fire in the process. More importantly, it clearly shows the Sierra Club was engaged as developers of wilderness rather than preservationists. Understanding the reasons behind this—the need for access—breaks down the dichotomy between the two concepts (development versus preservation) and complicates it with the inference that the wilderness ideal is dependent on a specific kind of development. It also shows very clearly to what lengths this was a manufactured landscape. In October of 1936 they felled over 300 trees to open a schuss run from the beacon on top of Signal Hill. “Fine run,” wrote Lewis. (6)

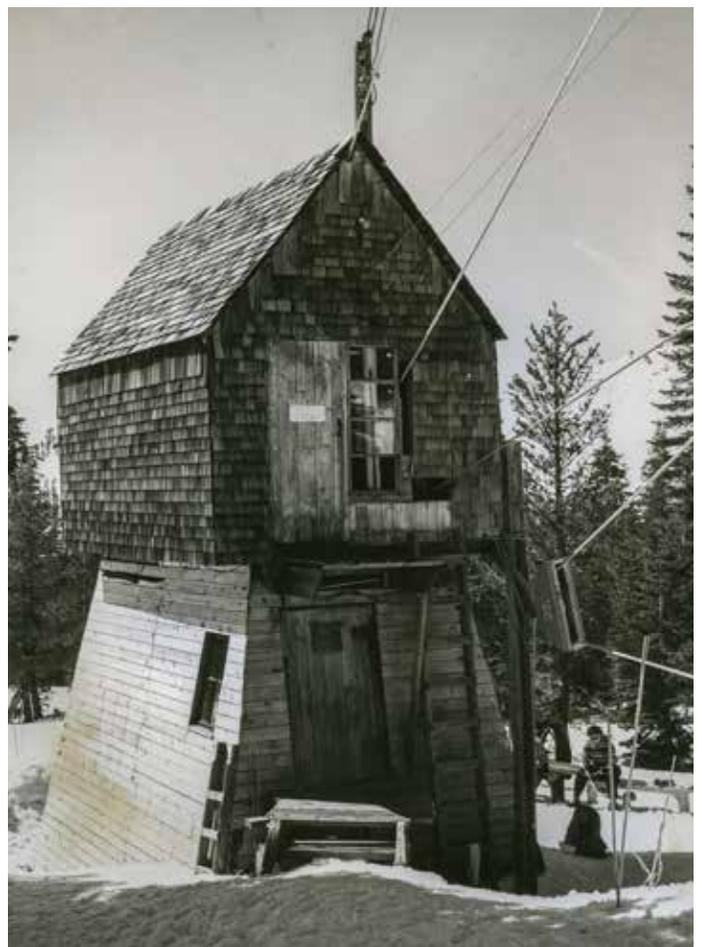
The final work entries in Lewis Clark’s diary return to the beginning: they began requisitioning supplies, tools, and lumber to start more construction in the form of the Peter Grub ski hut, a small back country shelter along the ski trail near Castle Peak for longer, overnight ski trips. Ultimately four more huts for overnight use were built, stretching south and east towards Squaw Valley. For several decades, the club continued to acquire more properties at Donner Summit, including the Norden store and part of the town of Norden itself. Buildings and lands under jurisdiction of the Lodge Committee included the Clair Tappaan Lodge, the Hutchinson

Lodge, all the ski huts and the Sierra Club Ski Lands, as well as properties at Flora and Azalea Lakes, the tow and spring property, the water development system, and the Signal Hill Warming Hut and Tow House. Born of an original need for overnight shelter, the bunkhouse they built expanded into a development with all the amenities of a resort.

Part II next month.

Footnotes

1. Nathan Clark, Oral History Transcript, 31-32
2. Joel H. Hildebrand, "Ski Heil!" Sierra Club Bulletin, v. 20, no. 1 (1935): p. 2
3. Lewis Clark, Official History of the Clair Tappaan Lodge
4. Lewis F. Clark Papers, Lodge Diary May 19-20, 1934
5. Lewis F. Clark Papers, Lodge Diary Sept 14 thru 29, 1935
6. Lewis F. Clark Papers, Lodge Diary Oct 17-18, 1936



Rope tow building, 1950's

Photographs in this story from the private collection of George Homsey, used with permission

Kimberly Roberts grew up in Colorado and studied literature and history at Colorado State University and used to work at the Denver branch of the National Archives and the Minnesota Historical Society. She is now a photo curator in the Special Collections Department at the University of Nevada at Reno. She has a master’s degree in history, specializing in the history of photography and landscape.

Van Norden Update

White Hats vs. White Hats: Debating the Destruction of Van Norden Dam

by John Loll

As part of his master's program in history at Arizona State University John Loll decided to investigate the current history of Van Norden dam and the controversy surrounding its proposed notching. Our editorial department debated including the article in the Heirloom. It's not the kind of article we print since we focus on history and not current events. Finally it was felt that there is a connection to the rich history of the valley and it could be of interest to readers *if* it were prefaced by the actual history.

There has been a lot of history in the Heirloom over the 104 previous issues and as we sat down to write some history about Van Norden we came across some already written articles. It turns out that the Heirloom has already covered the history in a two part series in May and June of 2013. Those articles covered the history, both 19th Century and recent, who the Van Nordens were, and even the Summit Valley Ice Co.

In his article here, John describes the alternatives.

The climax of movie westerns usually involves good guys in white hats facing bad guys in black hats. But when I look at the showdown over the fate of Lake Van Norden in California's historic Summit Valley, there are three groups facing off, and all the groups seem to be wearing white:

- White Hat One is Truckee Donner Land Trust (the Land Trust), that wants to notch the remains of a useless dam to restore Van Norden Meadow. The Land Trust is the nonprofit organization serving as the region's champion for public open land and has owned the Summit Valley since 2012.
- White Hat Two calls itself Save Van Norden Lake and Wetlands (Save the Lake), and its lines in this showdown might be, "Save our 100-year old lake! Don't foolishly destroy an important wetland ecosystem." Save the Lake is led by people who supported the Land Trust's acquisition but now have splintered into an opposing camp.
- White Hat Three is local historian Norm Sayler, who proposes rebuilding the original, larger dam to stimulate our tourist economy.

All three are fighting for the well-being of the Donner Summit region, which is nestled in the California Sierra at an elevation of 6,750 feet. All three want enjoyment and prosperity for their neighbors and their surroundings. All three think their option best serves the public interest. And all three believe that history and science are on their side.

I think all three camps are right. Even though there can be only one physical outcome for the dam, I have come to learn that passionate opinions find their own truth, and being right is a matter of perspective.

At issue is the utility of the Van Norden Lake and Dam. Created in 1890 by the South Yuba Canal Company (now PG&E) and then expanded in 1916, the lake was part of a Sierra Nevada system feeding water and power downstream toward Sacramento. In its day, it held 5,800 acre-feet of water and spanned a third of a mile, but structural worries in 1976 prompted PG&E to notch the 27-foot-high dam down to about 6 feet, leaving a shallow 150-acre-foot pond.(1) The Land Trust argues it is time to cut away the rest of the dam to restore the full size meadow that predates European impact. This solution respects the natural history of the region, and it supports the Land Trust's mission to fight developmental encroachment that originated with the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, when forest lands were checkerboarded with private parcels.

The Land Trust is struggling to address strict dam regulations and water obligations. This is a complex situation that prohibits unregulated reservoirs larger than 49 acre-feet and mandates the acquisition of water rights to divert California's precious supply. According to Land Trust leadership, the notched dam is a win-win situation: locals get their meadow restored as nature intended, and the dilemma of an illegal lake is instantly solved.(2) The Land Trust claims that forestry experts can employ a pond and plug technique (i.e., using heavy equipment to carve a new contour for the South Yuba River), which will slow water flow and keep the region moist. An op-ed by the Land Trust's president titled "Just Add Water" shows pictures of a lush, hydrated meadowland; however, the pictures are not of Van Norden but of nearby Perazzo Meadow, which exemplifies the Land Trust's vision for Summit Valley's future.(3) The Land Trust wants a healthy solution, and its added effort to open visitor access, build trails, and mitigate nearby fire risk is a testament to its public service mission. Truckee Donner Land Trust is clearly



wearing the white hats in this story.

Summit Valley today

However, Save the Lake questions the Land Trust's science and points out that a high-altitude wetland ecology has lived and thrived for decades and will be destroyed if the dam is breached. Save the Lake's spokesperson is George Lamson, a local photographer, blogger, and retired biochemist who challenges the Land Trust's assertions with numerous Internet missives. In reply to the Land Trust's just add water argument, Lamson writes, "Asserting that there will be more water storage without the lake is absurd."⁽⁴⁾ Unlike Perazzo, which has three times the watershed and functions as a sponge-like transitory meadow, the Summit Valley is a headwater meadow with no upstream feed. Pond and plug may retain some moisture along the riparian waterway, but the overall result will be a lower water table and an 87% increase to the acreage of meadow territory that dries up every summer. Lamson believes the Land Trust's plan will destroy 95% of the wetland and lake habitat that is vital for the threatened boreal toad and breeding water fowl such as mergansers, and it will disrupt an important waypoint for avian visitors such as white pelicans and sand hill cranes.⁽⁵⁾ Lamson's nature photographs accompany detailed reports that rival the work of full-time environmental scientists. He presents a compelling solution that is sensitive to regulatory legalities: make the notch only 2.2 feet to retain 49 acre-feet, and earnestly and legitimately apply for appropriate water rights.⁽⁶⁾

According to Lamson, the Land Trust disregarded the lake's recent history and refused to pursue water rights for one reason alone: money. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) pledged to purchase the valley for \$2 million in conjunction with the Land Trust's 2012 fundraising campaign, but it refuses to complete the transaction with the dam in place. ⁽⁷⁾ Lamson speculates that if the land transfers to federal ownership with an intact wetland, USFS would be legally required to sustain it, which could divert resources from its primary forest management responsibilities. Save the Lake sees this approach as a bait and switch, and it argues that

the Land Trust has cherry picked its scientific evidence to focus only on support for its predetermined conclusion.⁽⁸⁾ Lamson and his allies are doing their work pro bono, and their tireless efforts on behalf of the local ecology clearly indicate to me that Save the Lake also wears the white hats.

Norm Sayler is a White Hat as well. He is a 62-year Donner Summit resident and president of Donner Summit Historical Society, and he has a different opinion about Van Norden's fate. Sayler agrees with Lamson's assessment that the dam destruction is driven by USFS's antipathy toward lakes, but he claims that the economic history of the region points to rebuilding the entire dam. Donner Summit survives as a tourist economy, and a restored lake would be a draw for fishing, boating, and shoreline recreation. The dam also provides an ecological benefit by holding back the spring thaw and regulating downstream flow to ensure a functional South Yuba River all summer. Just like the PG&E days, spillways could slowly drain the entire lake each summer, resulting in no change in the volume of water flowing downstream. With other options, aggressive lodgepole pine growth—which took root after decimation of the original forests—will eventually overtake the meadow.⁽⁹⁾ Sayler is informed by a lifetime of experience (including running local businesses, collecting thousands of regional stories and historic photographs, and once maintaining a water ski jump on the old lake). His thoughtful opinions are worthy of consideration, but they will not gain traction because they lack capital backing and run contrary to the anti-development mindset embraced by most property owners.

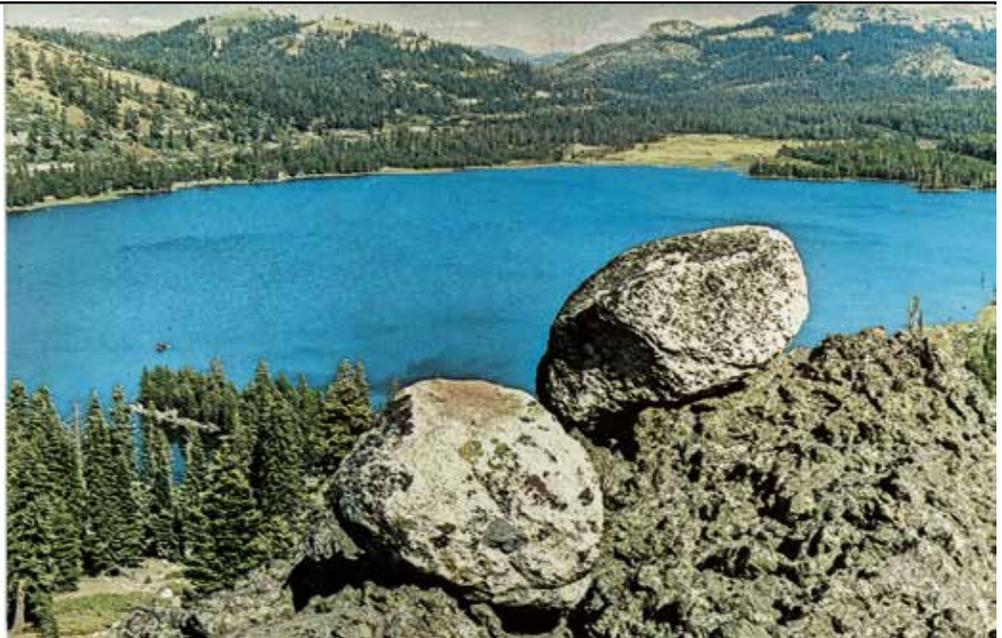
The main showdown is between Save the Lake and the Land Trust and hinges on the California Environmental Quality Act review of the Land Trust's proposal. Lamson could prevail if the review mandates protection of the existing ecology, but his only influence comes from the power of his rhetoric. On the other side, the Land Trust is marshaling

the loyalty of its supporters, who rebut Lamson's accusations with claims of deception and expensive delay tactics. Acrimony is rising. Personally, I find it interesting that all the proposals tout their harmony with nature, but none try to recreate the natural state that predates European encroachment. I am also curious how a legal conflict might play out: what happens when the lake itself and also its destruction are simultaneously deemed illegal? Some kind of compromise would have to be found.

If there is a Black Hat in this story, I think it might be the U.S. Forest Service. The Land Trust is balancing enormous responsibilities as the title holder, but it admits its options are restricted by USFS's proclamations that the dam is a significant hazard (a point that Lamson rebuts) and that meadow restoration is USFS's only objective for the valley. Land Trust leaders clearly value their partnership with USFS, but perhaps they should revisit their arrangement if USFS is pressuring an action that violates USFS's own best management practices for wetland regions, as Save the Lake's Blue Paper asserts. Reopening negotiations with USFS might generate some interesting conservation assurances, but the cost could be enormous: the Land Trust risks losing a \$2 million pledge and bearing sole responsibility for all wetland and meadow maintenance costs. On the other hand, the Land Trust might disarm its critics and win new support by courageously retaining title and full autonomy over this strategic piece of land. Given the current tone of the White Hats' arguments, it seems unlikely that anyone will budge from their current positions; however, I hope the environmental review might ferret out some fresh discussions and new alternatives.

Summit Valley history teems with stories of enormous ecological impact, including westward emigration in the gold rush era, construction of the transcontinental railway, the onrush of motorways and tourism, and creation of the Van Norden Dam. I find it interesting that little, if any, evidence exists of community opposition to these earlier events. And I would speculate that 100 years from now, history will have also forgotten the two runners-up in today's cinematic drama.

John Loll is pursuing an M.A. in History at Arizona State University, and he owns a cabin at Serene Lakes. He can be reached at john.loll@asu.edu.



Lake Van Norden, ca. 1955

Footnotes

1. Historical information was obtained from Donner Summit Historical Society (DSHS). See DSHS newsletters May 2013 issue #57 and June 2013 issue #58, donnersummithistoricalsociety.org, and DSHS founder Margie Powell's book *Donner Summit: A Brief History*, Grass Valley: Cottage Hill Publishing, 2003.
2. Truckee Donner Land Trust White Paper "The future of Van Norden Meadow: an opportunity for restoration and a return to natural ecosystems", TDLandTrust.org.
3. Anne Chadwick, "Just Add Water: The Opportunity to Restore Van Norden Meadow", 1 August 2014, TDLandTrust.org.
4. Save Van Norden Lake and Wetlands, "Draining Van Norden Lake – Absurd Assertions #3 – More water storage after the lake is replaced by meadow", 28 February 2016, SaveVanNordenLake.org.
5. Save Van Norden Lake and Wetlands, "Toadal Tragedy", 10 June 2016, "Donner Summit Valley Habitats", 20 June 2014, and Van Norden Dam – Blue Paper, 28 June 2014, SaveVanNordenLake.org.
6. George Lamson, Opposition Response Report to Nevada County Project Application (U16-003; MGT16-010), August 2016, SaveVanNordenLake.org.
7. U.S. Forest Service, "Letter of Support and Interest", 30 April 2014, TDLandTrust.org.
8. Save Van Norden Lake and Wetlands, "Van Norden Lake – Bait and Switch", 12 May 2014, and "The Best Science Money Can Buy", 21 August 2016, SaveVanNordenLake.org.
9. Norm Saylor, interview with author, 23 October 2016. See also Save Van Norden Lake and Wetlands, "Lodgepole Meadow?", 9 July 2014, SaveVanNordenLake.org.

The Donner Party & Donner Summit - Part V

170 Years Ago This Month

Last December we started a series focused on The Donner Party and Donner Summit. Even though the Donner Party was not on Donner Summit some of the action did take place there. The escapees from the Donner tragedy, the party called the Forlorn Hope, crossed Donner Summit and spent some miserable days doing it. The rescue parties crossed Donner Summit on the way to Donner Lake. The rescuees all came across the pass as well. Here the saga of the Donner Party is almost done. There was just one last rescue party in April, 1847, 150 years ago this month.

April 16 4th Relief Party approaches the Donner camps

April 21 or so Lewis Keseburg lags behind his rescuers on the way over Donner Summit. He sat down to rest and pulled on a piece of cloth sticking out from the snow. The cloth is a calico dress his daughter, his dead daughter, is wearing.

All that's left now is for the Army to arrive in June, bury the remains and burn the cabins. Edwin Bryant ([What I Saw in California](#), 1846) accompanied the military and described the scene but since that description is revolting, it did not happen on Donner Summit, you can look it up in the book (available for free on the internet), and this august publication is a family [Heirloom](#) we'll dispense with the reporting of it. It's interesting though.

Donner Party and Donner Summit

October 31, 1846 Donner Party arrives Donner Lake
November 3, 1846 The Party tries for Donner Summit
Panic and despair set in.
November 13, 1846 15 people try for Donner Summit
They fail.
November 22, 1846 22 people and seven mules try for
Donner Summit. They argue and fail
December 16, 1846 The Forlorn Hope make it over
Donner Summit. 7 of the 17 will survive to reach
California in 33 days.
December 21, 1846 Charles Stanton dies near Cascade
Lake.
January 5, 1847 Four people try for Donner Summit.
They fail.
February 18, 1847 The First Relief arrives in Summit
Valley. Snow was 30' deep.
February 22, 1847 30 people make it to the top of Donner
Pass.
February 26, 1847 more die on Donner Summit.
February 27, 1847 the 2nd Relief meets the 1st relief
somewhere on Donner Summit.
March 3, 1847 The 2nd Relief gets to Donner Summit
from Donner Lake – Starved Camp.
March 5, 1847 2nd Relief is camped in Summit Valley. A
storm rages.
March 6, 1847 Isaac Donner dies in Summit Valley.
March 8, 1847 James Reed takes those who will go away
from Starved Camp.
March 9, 1847 More die at Starved Camp.
March 13, 1847 The 3rd Relief arrives at Starved Camp.
11 people are lying at the bottom of the deep pit.
March 14, 1847 The 3rd Relief arrives back from Donner
Lake.
March 16, 1847 John Stark's heroism

From the DSHS Archives

Storming Again – The Bad Condition of the Central Pacific Road – More Men Sent Forward to Fight the Elements

...The terrible storm of wind and snow set in on the mountains again this morning, and has continued all of to-day, with no signs of cessation... The like of the weather now prevailing on the main line of the Central Pacific was never known before at this season of the year... It has been impossible to open the road for travel on account of the continued slides and falling-in of the snow-sheds, which have occurred with alarming frequency during the past ten days. No sooner is one obstruction removed than another blockades the road. Between Alta and Summit nothing can be done with the snow ploughs, and as a result, the slow work of shoveling has been restarted.

[At Alta there was no solution to a snow slide but to "sluice" it out using water from mining ditches.]

At a point east of the Summit 400 feet of snowshed went down this morning on the track, carrying with it masses of snow, earth and rocks, and covering the track eight or ten feet...

Along through Summit Valley there is from six to eight feet of snow on the track for a distance of two miles, and this is very much of a consistency that it will have to be removed with pick and shovel. The difficulty of removing this mass can readily be imagined when it is known that the snow is falling steadily at the point mentioned the wind is blowing fiercely, it is so cold as to freeze the extremities of the men...

[150 men were being sent or had been sent up to the summit to shovel snow off the tracks.]

Daily Alta California April 23, 1880

Plow Through Snow Drifts Near Summit

Special to the Union

AUBURN (Placer Co.) April 25 - A caterpillar engine and plows are being used by state road superintendent to plow through the snow drifts near Emigrant Gap, on the Lincoln highway [sic] in order to melt them off more rapidly. The work has been under way for several days.

Up at the summit stone gravel and sand have been thrown upon the snow to cause it to melt rapidly and become rotten so that it will break down more easily and disappear. There is a slide piled on the road there that will be difficult to clear, but it is being worked upon. Men will tackle it from both ends.

Sacramento Union April 26, 1917

Summit Valley ice was introduced to-day and is now selling at two and a half cents per pound, heretofore at five cents.

Daily Alta California April 16, 1879

Summit Valley Ice was a company in Summit Valley started by Tom Macaulay. His novel way of producing ice which was patented in 1868, did not use ice ponds. See the May, '13 [Heirloom](#) for more.

From the DSHS Archives



Rainbow Tavern, 1948



Rainbow Tavern, Sept. 1939 note the "J" Bar behind the lodge.

Book Review

Picturesque America, 1874

Picturesque America, published in 1874 by Wm. Cullen Bryant, was one of many large-sized books bringing the grandeur of America into homes in the 19th Century. It was an era when people did not travel easily as they do today but people were hungry for what was outside of their immediate neighborhoods. People lined up to pay admission to see art shows or specially painted panoramas showing off America's wonders. Books like this brought the artwork home.

One of the wonders of America in Picturesque America is the train trip over Donner Summit on the transcontinental railroad in 1874, just a few years after the transcontinental line's completion. See if Mr. Bryant's superlatives and evocative prose match your experiences.

Leaving the Utah and the Nevada desert "The monotony of the view begins to change." "Truckee itself, a little city in the wilderness.... Is a picturesque, bright place of six thousand inhabitants – a place that has had a 'great fire, its revival, its riots, and adventures..."

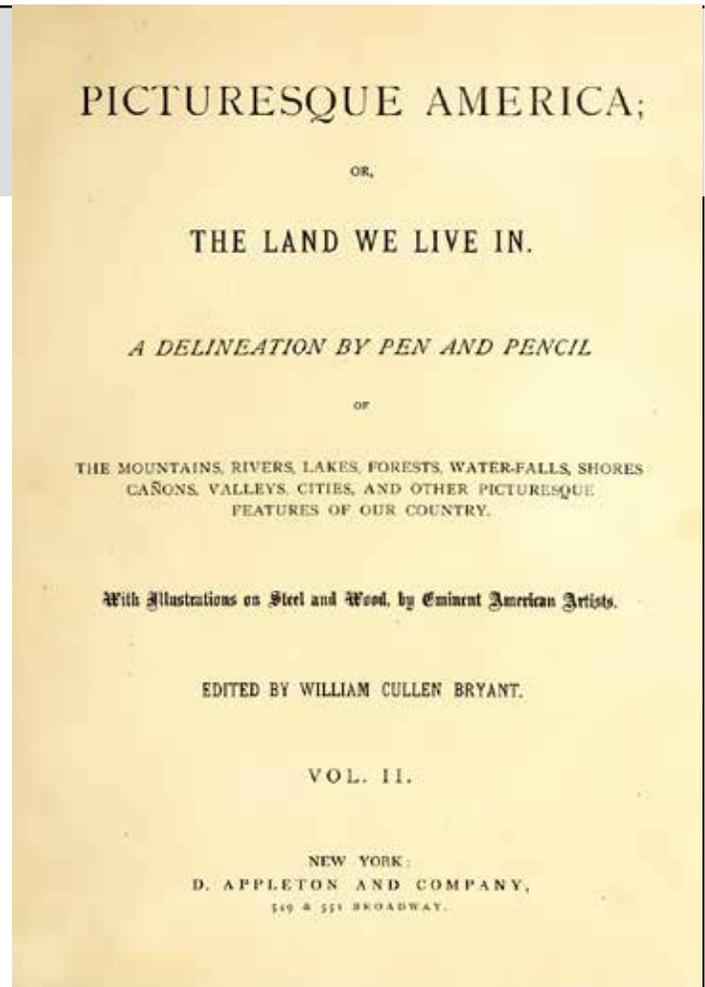
"Along the rocky shores of its river lie the noblest scenes; the tall cliffs are ragged and bare, but pine-tree-crowned ; the rock-broken water ripples and thunders through gorges and little stretches of fertile plain ; and the buzzing saw-mills of an incipient civilization hum with a homelike, New-England sound on its banks. From the town itself, stages-the stages of luxury and civilization, too-carry the traveller to the beautiful and now well-known Donner Lake, only two or three miles away. The great sheet of clear and beautiful water lies high up in the mountains, between steep sides, and in the midst of the wildest and most picturesque of the scenery of the Sierra summits. The depth of the lake is very great, but its waters are so transparent that one can look down many fathoms into them; they are unsullied by any disturbance of soil or sand, for

"It is ... always bracing, invigorating, inspiring with a kind of pleasant and energetic intoxication. Already invalids come to these saving lakes from east and west, and find new life up among the pines and summits."

they lie in a bed formed almost entirely of the solid rock.

"Few things could have more perfect beauty than this

mountain-lake, and its even more famous neighbor, Lake Tahoe, some fifteen miles farther to the south. The scene is never twice the same. Though it lies under the unbroken sunlight through a great part of the summer weather, there



is perpetual variation in the great mountain-shadows, and in breeze and calm on the surface. There is a climate here that makes almost the ideal atmosphere. It is ... always bracing, invigorating, inspiring with a kind of pleasant and energetic intoxication. Already invalids come to these saving lakes from east and west, and find new life up among the pines and summits. There are trout in the waters around, and fishing here is more than sport-it is a lounge in dream-land, a rest in a region hardly surpassed anywhere on the globe.

"Here, as elsewhere in the Sierras, the rock-forms are picturesque and grand at all points of the view. Castellated, pinnacled, with sides like perpendicular walls, and summits like chiseled platforms, they give a strangely beautiful aspect to every shore and gorge and valley..."

"It has been said that the traveller is here in the very centre of the mountain-range..."

Here we skip a many paragraphs long disquisition by Clarence King (the U.S. Government's King Survey of 1874 and go to Donner Summit.

"In this region of hidden grandeur lies the ground of hope for those cosmopolitan tourists who complain that the world

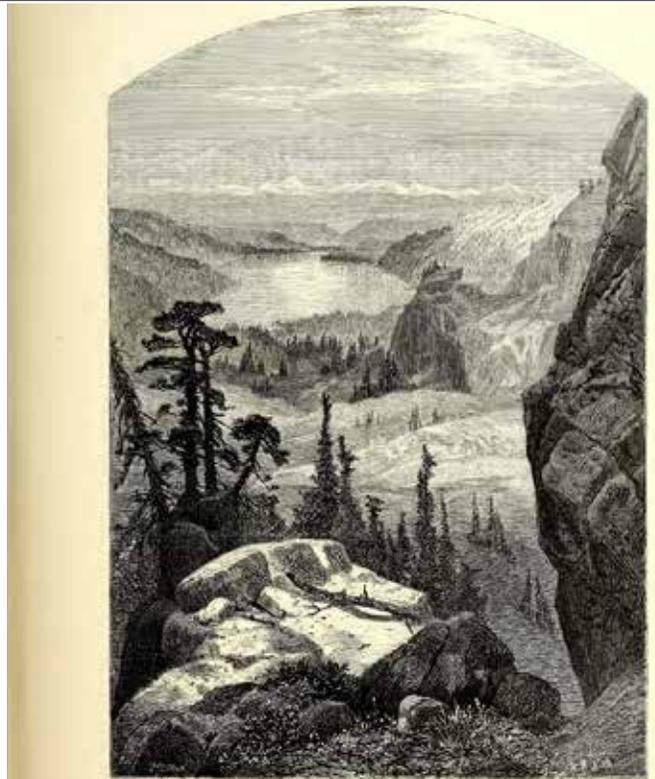
is a small place, full of hackneyed scenes, after all. So long as there is locked up here in our 'great mountain-chain such a glory as the few who have penetrated into its fortresses have described, even the mountaineer who fancies he has exhausted two continents, need never despair.

“One noble feature of the whole Sierra-of all of it save that which lies above the level of any vegetable life-is its magnificent forest-covering. It may well be doubted if the growth of forests of pine is ever seen in greater perfection than is found here. These tall, straight, noble shafts are the very kings of trees. Covering the great slopes with a dense mantle of sombre green, they lend a wonderful dignity to the peaks, as one looks upon them from a distance ; and, to one already in the forest, they seem the worthy guardians of the mountain-sides. They are magnificent in size, as they are admirable in proportion. No mast or spar ever shaped by men's hands exceeds the already perfect grace of their straight, unbroken trunks. They are things to study for their mere beauty as individual trees, apart from their effect upon the general landscape, which even without them would be wild and picturesque enough.

“Of all these features of the noble Sierra scenery, of which we have said so much, and spoken with such positive enthusiasm, the traveller by the railway sees little or nothing. For through the very finest regions of the mountains the track is of necessity covered in by strong snow-sheds, extending, with only trifling breaks, for many miles. Indispensable as they are, no one has passed through their long, dark tunnels without feeling a sense of personal wrong that so much that is beautiful should be so shut out from view. Through breaks and openings he looks down into dark canons, with pine covered sides, and catches a glimpse of a foaming river hundreds of feet below, when suddenly the black wall of boards and posts closes in again upon the train, and the picture is left incomplete. That happiest of men, the lover of the picturesque who has the leisure to indulge his love, must not fail to leave the travelled route here for days, and to satisfy himself with all the grander aspects of what he will find about him.

“The railway passes on from Truckee, climbing a gradual slope to Summit, fifteen miles farther, the highest station on the Central Pacific... Summit... is at an altitude of seven thousand and forty-two feet above the level of the sea...

“This part of the journey-the western descent from Summit-is one that the writer has several times reached just at the most glorious period of sunrise. There can be no more perfect scene. The road winds along the edges of great precipices, and in the deep canons below the shadows are still lying. Those peaks above that are snow-covered catch the first rays of the sun, arid glow with



"Donner Lake, Nevada" from the book.

wonderful color. Light wreaths of mist rise up to the end of the zone of pines, and then -drift away into the air, and are lost. All about one the aspect of the mountains is of the wildest, most intense kind; for by that word "intense" something seems to be expressed of the positive force there is in it that differs utterly from the effect of such a scene as lies passive for our admiration. This is grand; it is magnetic; there is no escaping the wonder-working influence of the great grouping of mountains and ravines, of dense forests, and ragged pinnacles of rock.

“But soon the mountains seem to fade away...

“Civilization appears again ; houses and towns begin to line the track; the stations are like similar places in the East; the prosaic railway-peddlers come back again with their hated wares; for us, the picturesque is over; and already the hum of the still distant city seems almost to reach our ears, as we dash in under the great green oaks of Oakland.

Note:

You have noticed our monthly book reviews. You might want to do some reading of your own.

Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Sayler has a large collection of books for perusing, buying, or checking out.

You might even want to do a review for us.

Then & Now with Art Clark

Witherspoon's Station

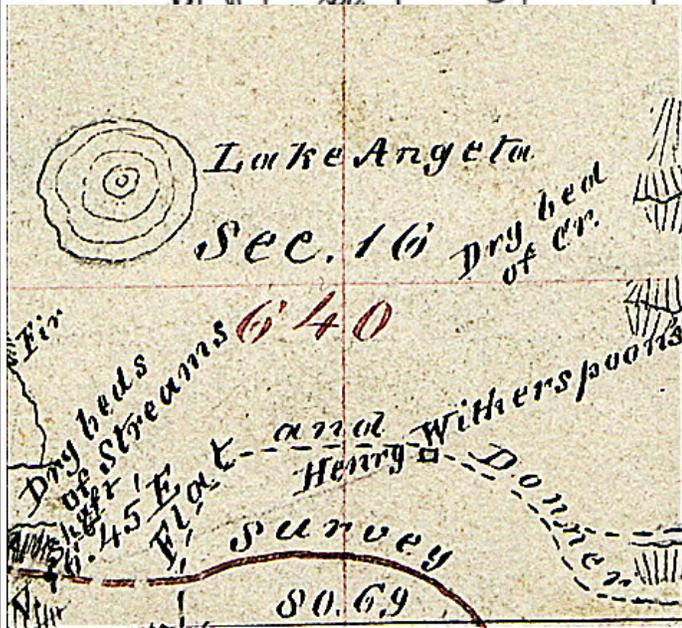
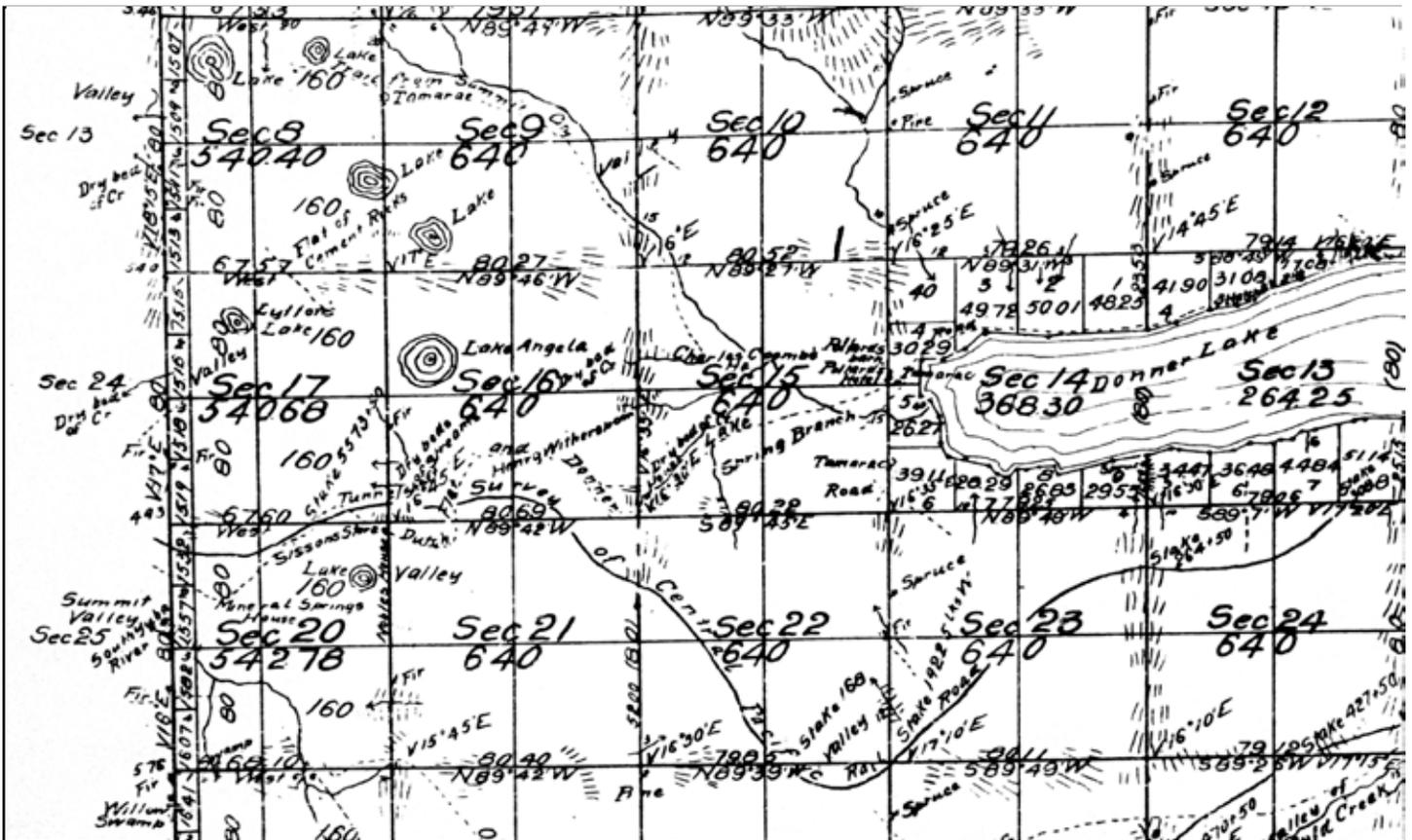


Because there's been so much history on Donner Summit there's a lot to investigate. One topic to investigate is the old settlements on Donner Summit. In previous [Heirlooms](#) we've investigated (check out the indices on the [Heirloom](#) pages on our website) Chinese railroad workers' camps, Native American sites, an old hotel, and townsites. There are lots to go.

In this case Art Clark was investigating old town sites by looking at old maps, in particular the 1866 U.S. Gov't. survey (next page). The various maps that make up the survey show the sites of lots of buildings and settlement sites. One is Witherspoon's in Summit Canyon, just below Donner Pass on the old Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. At the same time Art had an old picture of a building in about that exact spot that he got from Rick Martel who has the Historic Donner Trail Committee's website. Art decided to do a Then & Now. Art's "Then" photo was lo-res so our research department traced down the original at UNR and you can see the credit on the next page.

Further research using Bean's [History of Nevada County, 1867](#), turned up Witherspoon's Station on the Donner Lake Road. Rick Martel also found a reference to Witherspoon's in an old directory, "Witherspoon's Station, Donner Lake road. Witherspoon J. H. proprietor Witherspoon's Station, Donner Lake road." Rick says also that "the father was the engineer for the DFDLWR." (Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.)





Above, part of the first survey of Donner Summit by the U.S. Gov't. in 1866. Have some fun looking at the details in those days. Left, a snippet of the map above highlighting Henry Witherspoon's. Below, from the Bean's History of Nevada County, 1867 noting Mr. Witherspoon.

Welch T. saloon, Coburn's station, Don-
Wells, Fargo & Co. C. B. Higgins agent,
office cor B & 4th sts.
Welton J. A. milwright, res B st.
Witherspoon's Station, Don'r Lake road.
Witherspoon J. H. prop'r W. station,
Donner Lake road.

Top picture on the previous page:
Special Collections, University of
Nevada, Reno used with permission.

Lower picture by Art Clark.

Letter to the Editor

We received this letter about tunnel graffiti last October but since winter was coming we thought it made more sense to hold on to it until closer to summer when people will begin to go out hiking and exploring.

I recently read your article, "Rock Art: Petroglyphs of Donner Summit" (story by Priya Hutner) in your October 20-November 16, 2016 issue of Tahoe Weekly, and I am very concerned about your support for the spread of graffiti on the railroad tunnels at Donner Summit. While the focus of the article is on the petroglyphs, it turns on the notion that modern-day graffiti is somehow comparable to ancient rock art.

"When you enter the tunnel where the trains once traveled...take in the modern-day graffiti art. As our ancestors before us, these artists tell a story...On this spot, the ancient ways continue into modern day...the Donner Party, Chinese railroad workers, Washoe and Paiute tribes and their ancestors – all stories converge in the granite, in these mountains and on this summit."

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

You and your Tahoe Weekly contributors are obviously unaware that the transcontinental train tunnels and the Native American petroglyphs are both eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. These tunnels are the center piece of transcontinental railroad construction, which is designated as a State Historic Landmark. As such, these prehistoric and historic cultural resources are subject to protection by federal and state law from vandalism. The train tunnels are owned by Union Pacific Railroad and the petroglyphs are under jurisdiction of the U. S. Forest Service. Graffiti is outright vandalism unless the artist is painting on their own property or with the consent of a property owner. Otherwise, the act is illegal and subject to prosecution. The graffiti paint obscures and threatens the design, materials and workmanship of these historic rock features. The urban stamp of graffiti is totally out of character with the historical and natural setting of Donner Summit and the motifs heralded in your article, such as "...Aliens, robots, animals and even Krusty the Clown from The Simpsons", trivialize our national heritage and destroy the integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association of the place.

In response to the graffiti, local organizations and groups are mobilizing to combat these acts of vandalism -- and from the content and tone of your article, it is all too evident that your readership needs educating about the value of historic preservation and about the laws enacted to safeguard these fragile and irreplaceable cultural resources. Over the last several years, graffiti has spread throughout the tunnels, and just last year, granite bedrock in dangerously close proximity to the Donner Summit petroglyphs was tagged. Where will the graffiti stop? The China Wall? The Old Hwy 40 Rainbow Bridge? Historic buildings in downtown Truckee's National Register Historic District?

The Tahoe Weekly is a voice for the community with a wide readership, and it behooves the editor of this publication to accept your civic responsibility in furthering the education and preservation of our regions unique heritage.

Susan Lindström, Ph.D., Consulting Archaeologist
Truckee, California

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A Little History on the Ridge Between Lincoln & Anderson

Jim White



This page was going to contain an "@ The Museum" feature but at this writing two things happened. It kept snowing and snowing and so it was hard to pin Norm down for what he might want to cover and Jim White sent this really nice picture of the ridge between Mt. Lincoln and Anderson Pk. which is now on the PCT (Pacific Crest Trail). Jim sent along some history and since there must still be a lot of snow on the ground why wait until next winter to publish this?

"Working on my old snow pics on this stormy day and thought you guys might like to see this one. This ridge goes from Mt Lincoln to Mt Anderson and is the ski trail that has been used for the last 50 years or so to access the Sierra Club's Benson Hut on the north flank of Anderson. I can remember many deaths of skiers mostly by avalanche along this trail. The avalanche accidents happen when skiers attempt to cut to the left over to the lee side of the ridge, often heading for the Truckee area. Lee slopes are often unstable below the cornice and are triggered by the skier. The last death I remember occurred near the little tree you see in the right foreground. Skiers also get into trouble when they are heading to Squaw Valley from the Benson hut by cutting around Mt Anderson on its right (west) flank which is very steep and often solid ice. The Benson hut is two stories tall with a high metal smokestack. I remember on more than one occasion digging in the snow trying to find that smokestack. A really great ski tour. Jim"

Jim has written before for the Heirloom: "Fong Snowshed Chef" (2/11), "Coming of Winter" (12/11), "Lost; A True Story" (3/17), "Lost Horse" (4/11), "Old Donner Summit" (2/12), "Ever Wonder When You Will Die?" (11/12), and "Undercover at Sugar Bowl" (2/13). Jim was a Fish and Game Warden on Donner Summit starting in 1957. In 1970 he was put in charge of all Fish and Game training and safety statewide. Jim conducted cold weather survival training, wilderness horse use and snow avalanche programs in the Donner Summit area for various agencies, companies and colleges. Jim (88) and Shirley (86) live in Auburn and still ski, hike, fish and camp the high backcountry of Nevada and Placer Counties. He can be contacted at padhorski@wavecable.com.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

Membership

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

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

____ New Membership

MAILING ADDRESS _____

____ Renewing Membership

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

____ 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)

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