

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

February, 2017 issue #102



The Donner Party & Donner Summit - Part III

170 Years Ago This Month

In December, in our 100th issue, we started a series focused on the Donner Party and Donner Summit. Half of the Donner Party was at Donner Lake during the winter of 1846-47 and half, including the actual Donners, was at Alder Creek, about seven miles away. Since the action did not take place on Donner Summit we would not cover it since that's in the historical domain of the highly reputable Truckee Donner Historical Society. We, on Donner Summit will not poach the history of others. That said, some of the action did take place on Donner Summit. 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. Somewhere on Donner Summit there was "Starved Camp" too, but "Starved Camp" comes next month in March.

To get to February in the story, the Donner Party got trapped at Donner Lake upon their arrival on October 31. They tried to get over the pass but the snow was too deep. There were some escape attempts but they failed. In mid-December the Forlorn Hope managed to get over the pass on snowshoes and spent 31 days walking through the snow, suffering from starvation and buffeted by storms that continued to drop snow on them. That was all chronicled last month. The arrival of the Forlorn Hope in California told Californians there was a tragedy in the mountains and rescues were set in motion. By mid-February the first relief party was on its way.

February 16 The men of the first relief had been struggling through the snow sometimes sinking to their knees or thighs carrying heavy packs. They'd been sleeping sitting on logs in the snow under blankets. They'd set trees ablaze, leaving the scorched trunks to mark the route for the return journey from Donner Lake. They also left caches of food along the route. The snow was fifteen feet deep on February 16 and the group was only able to travel three miles. They made snowshoes to make travel possible.

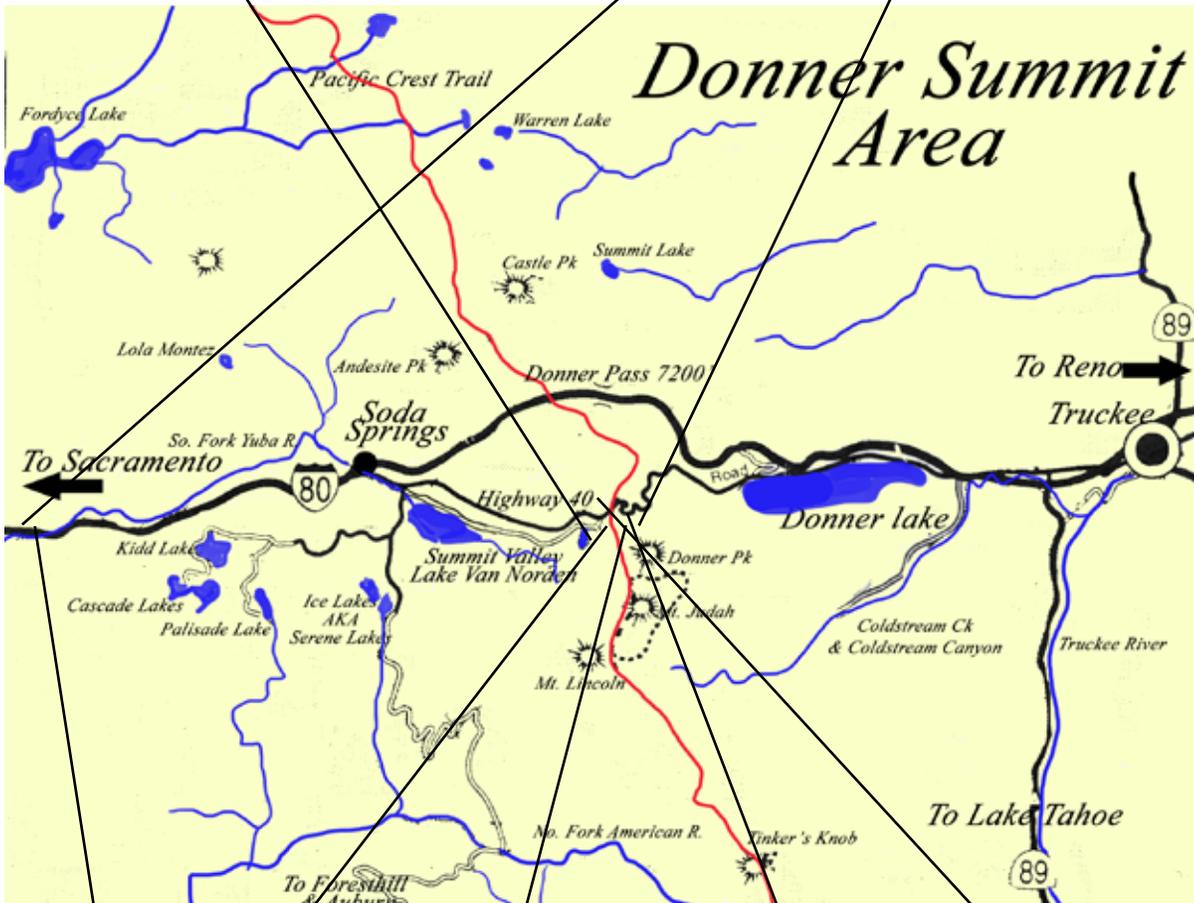
February 18 First Relief arrived in Summit Valley. They'd traveled eight miles that day and 5 miles the previous day. The snow was thirty feet deep.

February 19 they arrive at Donner Lake. "Are you men from California or are you from heaven?" a woman asked after appearing from what looked like a snowfield. Her shelter was buried under snow. Reasin "Dan" Tucker of the relief party wrote, "At sundown we reached the Cabins and found the people in great distress such as I have never witnessed there having been 12 deaths and more expected every hour the sign of us appeared to put life into their emaciated frames."

February 22 Thirty people, including the men of the first rescue party left Donner Lake for California. Two returned and 28 made

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

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

Donner Party and Donner Summit 170 years ago this winter

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 fail trying for Donner Summit.
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 the 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 at Starved Camp
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

it to the top of the pass.

February 23 Patty Reed (9) and Tommy Reed (5) returned to Donner Lake with two rescuers. They were too weak to go on. What a choice Margaret Reed, their mother, had. She could continue on with her other two children and hope her two youngest would return successfully to the lake and be taken care of, or go back with the youngest and hope the two oldest could survive the journey without her. "Good bye, Momma. If I don't see you again, just do the best you can," said Patty Reed as they part.

February 26 John Denton died on Donner Pass. Ada Keseburg (3) died on Donner Summit. One of the food caches was found but it had been emptied by animals. In April Lewis Keseburg, Ada's father, reached into the snow to pull on some cloth he'd found. It was his daughter's dress. He had not known she did not get to California. Reasin Tucker wrote that at noon "had a small divide of shoe strings roasted and ate them and then proceeded about half mile when we met two men with provisions we struck fire and feasted on our dry beef."

February 27 The second relief party, led by James Reed who'd been banished from the Donner Party and who'd gone ahead to California, met the first party. James Reed found his wife and two of his children. He said, "I cannot describe the death like look they all had Bread Bread Bread was the begging of every child and grown person except my wife. I gave what I dared and left for the scene of desolation" at Donner Lake.

Some miles further on near Bear Valley, Virginia Reed said "We camped that night and ate the bread my father had brought for us. We were out of the snow, could see the blessed earth and green grass again. How beautiful it looked. We stayed a day or so, getting the horses and mules ready to ride. No more dragging over the snow, when we were tired, so very tired, but green grass, horses to ride, and plenty to eat." (from [Across the Plains in the Donner Party](#))

Next month: March on Donner Summit.

150 Years Ago on Donner Summit

Donner Summit is justifiably famous for lots of reasons* but everyone knows why so we don't need to repeat it all. One of the larger episodes in Donner Summit history is the building of the transcontinental railroad and right now we are at the sesquicentennial of the construction, which finished in 1869. During the winter of 1866-67, 150 years ago this winter, construction focused on Donner Summit where the construction of the Sierra tunnels was slowing work. It wasn't just the hard Sierra granite that was slowing progress to inches a day. The winter of 1866-67 was horrible and adds credence to another aspect of Donner Summit renown: hard winters during which we get an average of 34 feet of snowfall.

In January 1867 Dutch Flat Enquirer said, "...we are now in the midst of one of the most severe winters we have experienced for years..." It advised the railroad that repair work resulting from weather should be put off until the rains stopped. There had been so much damage in some places on the transcontinental route that "the fills.... are so completely washed out that nothing but the rails are to be seen suspended in the air, resembling telegraph wires, being from ten to twenty feet high." That's a good visual to start with. Parenthetically that was also the winter that the stage got stuck in the mud at Gold Run for six weeks – but that's not Donner Summit and so should be ignored by readers. At the summit the weather was more severe.

Tunnel portals were buried by snow. Chinese encampments were snowed under. The Chinese lived under the snow and workers didn't see daylight for days at a time as they moved from their living sheds to the work faces through tunnels dug into the snow. Chimneys poked up through the snow as did airshafts. Snow had to be continually shoveled away to get to the real work. Work materials had to be lowered down snow shafts some forty feet tall and rock debris had to be hoisted up the same shafts for disposal. There was so much snow the snow tunnel leading to Tunnel 6 had to be lengthened by fifty feet so the workers could still have access. The lowest temperature recorded that winter was 5.5 degrees.

The winter of 1866-67 had one of the highest snowfalls on record: 40 feet, according to James Strobridge, construction superintendent. There were a total of 44 storms that winter with one multi-day storm dropping 10 feet of snow. The depth of hard, settled snow in midwinter was eighteen feet on a level in Summit Valley and Donner Pass, Strobridge said in his later testimony to Congress. Then he said that over the snow "we hauled on sleds track material for forty miles of railroad, three locomotives, and forty cars from Cisco to Donner Lake, where all was reloaded on wagons and hauled over miry roads to Truckee, a total distance of twenty-eight miles, at enormous cost. [Thus] the road [the RR] was forced to the east slope of the Sierra Nevadas [sic]. . . ." but that's a different story for a different Heirloom. We will say, to build a little suspense and anticipation, that they didn't just haul the locomotives over the summit on the road by wagon. Stay tuned.

The huge snowfalls caused avalanches. One avalanche in February, 1867 took away a cabin filled with Chinese workers who were not found until spring. That was just one instance.

Then in the spring workers were taken back from Truckee into the mountains and an average depth of ten or twelve feet of snow was cleared away before grading could be commenced.

"A gang of Chinamen employed by the railroad were covered up by a snow slide and four of five died before they could be exhumed...The snow fell to such a depth that one whole group of Chinamen was covered up during the night and parties were digging them out when our informant left."

Dutch Flat Enquirer
December 25, 1866 and
Sacramento Daily Union
December 18, 1866

*...besides recreational opportunities, scenery, unique geology, and biological diversity**: Native Americans crossed for thousands of years leaving behind petroglyphs and grinding rocks. The first wagon trains to California came over Donner Summit. The first transcontinental railroad, telephone line, air route, and highway all went over Donner Summit

**here is a rare double asterisk: 500 species of plants, 100+ species of birds, 115 species of butterflies, dozens of species of mammals and amphibians.

100 years ago this month

Across Donner Summit on a Horse on Snowshoes - 1916



from the Marin County Tocsin
July 22, 1916
showing Hank Weber and
"California"

Here is a little gem discovered by our research department while perusing old newspapers. As the team was busily looking to harvest items about Donner Summit history there were a couple of snippets:

Grass Valley. – Hank Webber, the cowboy is crossing the Sierras [sic] on his snowshoe horse "California." Mariposa Gazette February 19, 1916 _

Nevada City. – Hank Webee [sic] has challenged a snowshoe horse race against his horse "California." Mariposa Gazette March 11, 1916

Sausalito News March 11, 1916: same as the above with the same spelling

Then there was this one with a bit more detail from the Sacramento Union on March 2, 1916, "Truckee and the vicinity will celebrate the big event of this year's winter sports by having next Sunday set aside as Truckee day. Hank Webber will start back over the mountain on his hazardous trip to the other side of the snow line. He will journey back to San Francisco as he came, on horseback. Everyone in Truckee will turn out and give him one of the most royal send offs he has ever witnessed on his many trail trips he has undertaken in the United States. Many people from out of town will also be present next week and arrangements are being made to show them a good time when they visit the snow city."

Hank Webber crossing the Sierra with a horse on snowshoes? That's the equivalent in historical circles of "man bites dog" (which is an expression we journalistic types use to note something out of the ordinary and worthy of reporting to our public

as we're doing here). We had to find out more. A trip to the Truckee Library was in order to see the microfilmed Truckee Republicans. If anyone was going to report this obviously heroic trip it would be the Truckee Republican. Surely they would not have let this adventure go unnoticed in town.

The microfilm machine in the library needs replacement but probably not many people use it nowadays. The thing is hard to load, light cannot be adjusted, it squeals as it runs, etc. Those are the kinds of things researchers have to put up with and we hope the reader appreciates the sacrifices made on their behalf. We just "soldier" on.

We squeaked through January, '16 and half of February, '16 until, there it was on February 17, 1916: "Webber to Arrive About Saturday – Help Swell the Crowd." We'd found Hank Webber. Now for the details and what do horse snowshoes look like?

"Next Saturday morning (Feb. 17 was a Thursday), Hank Webber and his famous snow shoe horse, California, will arrive in Truckee at ten o'clock from his hard trip over the mountain." Then the paper went on to exhort the readers to come out and welcome Mr. Webber, "...This is one of the biggest pieces of advertising that the Winter Sports have ever had and we should do all in our power to aid it on to a successful conclusion..." The Winter Sports events were created to attract winter time tourists to Truckee. We'll leave it to the Truckee Donner Historical Society to cover that.

A number of weekly motion picture companies were supposed to be in attendance. The article went on, Webber had started two weeks prior in San Francisco to get to Truckee Winter Sports. A bet of "several hundred dollars" had been made about the outcome by Samuel Shortridge, a lawyer in San Francisco, and Dr. Howard, also of San Francisco. Whether this bet was made by inebriated visitors to a gentlemen's club was not mentioned. How does a conversation lead to a bet about whether a horse could cross Donner Summit on snowshoes in mid-winter?

The Truckee Republican said there was more enthusiasm for this "trip on a snow shoe horse" "than any other event of like nature..." "It is the talk of the lower country and even the newspapers of Nevada county [sic] are giving it a great deal of publicity."

Webber apparently got to Truckee after crossing Donner Pass a few days after the February 17 edition. On the 24th Weber [sic] was thanking Truckee. He'd had a "royal hearty welcome" on arrival to "your bustling little city." He'd also had an "elaborate banquet" put on by the Chamber of Commerce.

The next week, on March 2 the headlines said, "Webber Will Depart Sunday." Webber was going to go back across the mountains making the "trip on his horse California [sic] who will wear the snow shoes the same as she did in coming over." Again a crowd was exhorted to attend, "Be sure to see him at the start next sunday [sic] morning because he has done a lot for Truckee and the Winter sports in the line of publicity."

Once you are scrolling through history it's hard to stop. A few weeks later the Truckee Republican noted that the monument at Donner Lake would soon be finished. It would be dedicated later in the year. That story too, belongs to the Truckee history people.



Horse snowshoes from the Alaskan Heritage Book Shop (the only ones we could find)



The Snowshoe Horse on Donner Summit

This article shows the dangers of taking a snowshoe horse over Donner Summit when there's lots of snow. Note that the article talks about "Weber" leaving the snowsheds but does not go into any detail - like did he use the snowsheds all the way up from snowline? Others had done so avoiding trains (see the [Heirloom](#) for July, 2015) Why this article is dated April when Hank went over in February our [Heirloom](#) research staff has no idea.

HORSE FALLS 100 FEET, UNHURT*

TRUCKEE, Cal., April 29. -- Hank Weber, with his snowshoe horse, arrived at Truckee after a hair-raising trip down the mountain side.

After leaving the Southern Pacific snowsheds at the summit, the way to the bottom of the mountain was almost perpendicular, with many drifts of snow nearly 50 feet deep. The only way over some of the drifts was to tie a rope on the horn of the saddle and let the horse slide down. The horse slipped on one of the drifts and fell to the bottom, almost 100 feet below, luckily escaping injury

Telegram from Soda Springs about Hank Weber's Progress as reported in the [Marin County Tocsin](#) July 22, 1916. The date is correct. The newspaper was just filling space apparently with an interesting story.

Among the reprinted stories from the previous February, the [Tocsin](#) reported on a telegram received from Soda Springs, "Weber and horse arrived at road crossing west of Soda Springs at 9:30. Passed Soda Springs depot at 11:04. Will make Summit today. Seem to be making very good progress. Easy going in the early morning."

Horse and Rider Fall Into the Yuba River**

Then from Cisco, earlier, "H.O. Weber, who is attempting to ride over the snow drifts of the Sierras [sic] to Truckee on his snowshoe horse "California" and incidentally to win a bet of \$250 for Samuel Shortridge, the San Francisco attorney, met with his first serious mishap near here yesterday afternoon. He was able to resume his trip today however.

"Weber was riding along the bank of the Yuba river, about a mile east of Crystal Lake, when his horse slipped through a great drift of heavily packed snow that hung out over the river, and fell into the water.

"Fortunately the water was not over the horse's head. Weber disengaged himself and made his way through the snow to the river bank with some difficulty. L. Anderson the Pacific Telephone patrol who was escorting Weber from Emigrant Gap to Cisco, helped Weber out of the water and then sent for assistance. With the help of several men and block and tackle "California" was extracted and brought safely to land. The horse did not seem to be injured by his icy bath and Weber remounted and rode into Cisco.

Weber left Cisco at 4 AM taking advantage of a crust of ice that had formed on the snow and was escorted by a member of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Co. line patrol. He was expected to reach Telephone Shelter Cabin No. 3 by breakfast time. The [Heirloom](#) staff notes the last to show how times and occupations have changed with technology. There are no more line patrols or telephone shelters on Donner Summit or elsewhere, just as many of the railroad stops have disappeared along with telegraph wires.

*Actual headline as set in the newspaper. ** Not a headline at all.

Hank Weber's snowshoe feat was billed as the first ever crossing of the Sierra by a snowshoe horse. Here the Sacramento Union weighed in with a little fact checking.

Pioneer Antedated Webber Fifty Years

W. J. Organ Rode on Mule Over
Sierras With Snow 20
Feet Deep.

Special to the Union.

NEVADA CITY (Nevada Co.), Feb. 8.- Even though Hank Webber succeeds in winning his bet by making the trip over the Summit on his famous snowshoe horse "California," it will seem as a tame feat to Pioneer W. J. Organ of this city, who made the same trip fifty years ago with his mule when there was snow to the depth of twenty feet on the ground.

"I made the trip because I wanted to get home and not for any wager or spirit of deviltry, but merely an ordinary trip," said Mr. Organ, who rode the old mule, and while it was a very hard trip as he remembers it he had no hair-breadth escapes. He was advised that the trip was impossible and told that he would never reach here alive, but he paid no attention to this advice and got through successfully. He has not much interest in the journey now being made by Webber assisted by expert snowshoers.

Sacramento Union
February 9, 1916



There was room on this page so why not include an ad from the Marin Country Tocsin from July 22, 1916. What were people seeing 100 years ago?

"New Post Toasties are not only inexpensive but they bear a new deliciousness, produced by a new process of cookery... So fine is this flavour that New Post Toasties are wondrous good eaten dry.... These New Post Toasties don't mush down in cream, and they are not "chaffy" in the package like common flakes. They're new in form, new in flavour, and new in appearance. Note the tiny bubbles on each flake - an identifying feature. Put up in wax-sealed packages, New Post Toasties retain their even-crispness...Have your grocer deliver a package for tomorrow's breakfast."

Over Sierra Snow a-la-London Hero Wager Will Take Rider On Plucky Horse

Jack London's heroes nature takes?
Never!

Hank Webber, Wyoming cowpuncher, and "California," the original "Snowshoe Hoss," are going to prove it. That is, they're going to try, and Samuel Shortridge, lawyer, and Dr. E.S. Howard, of San Francisco have large sums up to say that Hank cannot fail. Charles Shortridge, of Oakland, is watching his brother's wager on literary license with considerable interest – but isn't risking his money on Jack London's word.

It was to be a "death-defying trip" as he was to go on his snowshoe shod horse from the eastern side of the Sierras to Truckee [sic]

"I'm not a Jack London hero," says the cowboy; "but I'm a first-class hoss-rider, and if it can be done, I am the man to do it."

The adventure was based on "an episode recounted by Jack London in one of his books. Many people in a San Francisco club said it was impossible. Shortridge and Dr. Howard thought differently, and so financed the attempt, after placing a wager on its outcome. Webber expects to make the trip in a week. He will release two carrier pigeons belonging to Walter Wells en route."

Oakland Tribune
January 30, 1916 pg 21

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, “Odds & Ends” of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit: making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we’ve been collecting them. Now they’re making appearances in the [Heirloom](#). Last month we covered the old Sugar Bowl gondola sitting out in the forest. This month it’s some rock work at Big Bend.



Here we have railroad rock work just above Big Bend. Walk along the railroad where streams cross the railroad and you can see rock work done long ago. Unfortunately the railroad guys in the old days were not so diligent about dating their work so we can't tell if the rock work is 100 years old or 150 years old and maybe built by the Chinese. Take a walk and see what you can see.

@ the Museum

Last month the first of this series covered the heart of the Donner Summit Historical Society, Norm Saylor’s incomparable photographic collection. This month Norm wanted to focus on our library of books on history and especially local history.

In the back corner of the museum next to Norm’s desk are shelves of books about local history, old time skiing, the railroad, National Geographics featuring the Lincoln Highway and Highway 40, old ski manuals, etc. These are all books you can come in and look at, talk to Norm about, or even check out.

Norm’s favorites are [Donner Pass](#), about the railroad and [U.S. 40](#), about Highway 40. The Donner Pass book has so many pictures of things Norm has seen on the summit since he arrived in 1955. Stewart’s U.S. 40 book also talks about things Norm has seen, “it talks about what was here... what Highway 40 really was.” He loves paging through books or magazines about local personalities from the old days and thinking, “Hey, I knew that guy.”

If you want to start out studying Donner Pass history, Norm suggests you start with Duncan’s book, [To Donner Pass from the Pacific](#) (reviewed in our July, '09 [Heirloom](#) and on the book review page of our website). It covers everything: the old wagon road, the railroad, the Lincoln Highway, U.S. 40, etc. There are lots of pictures and maps. It is Norm’s #1 seller. He thinks he’s sold 1,000 copies of it over the years.



From the Archives of the DSHS

Edited from the Sacramento Daily Union February 11, 1867 150 years ago this month

THE WORK OVER THE SUMMIT

From the Virginia Enterprise:

The work on the transcontinental tunnels “goes bravely on” despite the snow. Gangs of “Chinamen” are busy at both ends of the “main or longest tunnel”. The “Chinamen” are like “ants swarming in and out” of the tunnel at both ends. In the middle “great globular, rolling masses of more than snow white vapor” (see the end of the arrow in the picture to the right) can be seen coming from the shaft house.

The central shaft has reached the level of the railroad grade [88 feet down]. Now the workmen are driving outwards from the center toward the other two tunnel faces. They are working on four faces at once. “The progress made, we are informed, is about six feet per week.” Further east other tunnels are being bored “through the hard gray granite...”

In the distance, “standing on a naked pinnacle of granite” that stands in direct path of the railroad appear to be two ravens, “pecking spitefully at each other – each pecking in turn.” Looking closer “at the black figure, so grotesquely bobbing upon the spire of rock... we at length made out three Chinamen – one holding a drill, and the other two striking it. In other places the same black specks were moving along the steep walls of the cliffs – all boring and hammering away at the tunnels in the great granite domes. How cold it looked way up there - how far away and lost in the dreary glitter of the frosted snow !

Top: the top of the central shaft today.

Middle: Alfred A. Hart #202 "East Portals of Tunnels 6 and 7 from Tunnel No. 8 See the steam at the point of the arrow.

Bottom: the bottom of the central shaft today looking up.



From the Archives of the DSHS



Left, as soon as there were automobiles people wanted to see where and how far they could go. Donner Summit was an attractive destination. Could they get over and how early in the year? Here an automobile is challenged by the granite just as the emigrants were. The poles are of the first transcontinental telephone line. Some of those poles are still standing, 102 years after installation.

When an automobilist couldn't get across the tracks by going through the snowshed which was the route before the underpass, they went over the snowsheds. Here an auto and passengers are on top of the shed between Tunnels 7 and 8 with Mt. Stewart in the background.

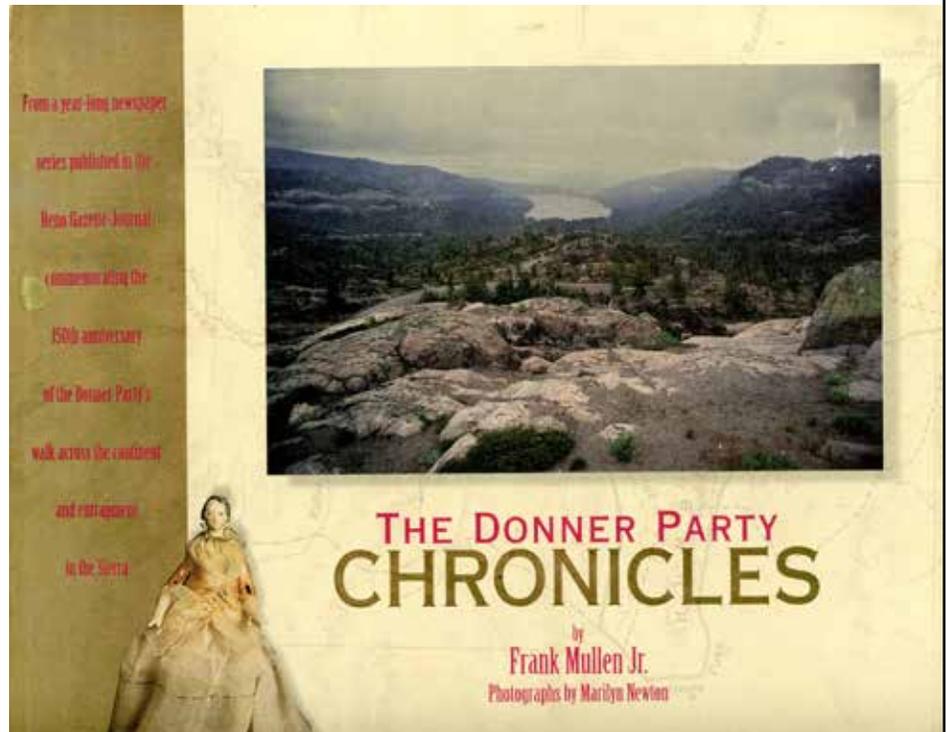


Book Review - The Donner Party Chronicles

Don't take no cut-offs and get where you're going as fast as you can."

Virginia Reed May 16, 1847

We've reviewed a number of books having to do with the Donner Party. There have been many interpretations starting with lurid contemporary accounts immediately following the tragedy. The first serious treatment was by C.F. McGlashan in 1879, History of the Donner Party. He was the first to do actual historical research and interview participants rather than rely on sensationalistic reports. Following McGlashan authors have focused on the weather (McLaughlin, Donner Party Weathering the Storm), the rescue parties (Kaufman, Saving the Donner Party), the human element (Rarick, Desperate Passage), or just a basic history (Stewart, Ordeal by Hunger), etc. You can find those reviews and more in past Heirlooms or on our website (<http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/BookReviews.html>).



The Donner Party Chronicles is a different treatment. Frank Mullen, Jr. approaches the topic from the perspective of a newspaperman. He reports the tragedy almost day by day with each page beginning with a newspaper type headline. In the Chronicles we can follow the events closely and so have a little different perspective from the typical history. For example there will be, in a typical history, a description of the Donner Party getting through the Hastings Cut-Off. Mullen lets us know what they are doing most of the days of that part of the trip with headlines leading us into the daily episodes. Originally the material was published in the Reno Gazette as a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Donner Party tragedy in 1996-97.

The book begins with a collection of contemporary photographs of the route and we can see exactly what the Donners saw. We can see the Hastings Cut-Off and that ill-fated left-hand turn (top of the next page). Other pictures show the terrain the Donner Party crossed and brings to life many of the tragic episodes. For example there's a picture of where James Reed stabbed John Snyder. That resulted in Reed's banishment but also his early arrival in California which helped get rescue parties started.

The book is made up of two page spreads for each reported day. The headlines indicate the date and what happened followed by the "newspaper" article. There are pictures in each spread, both historical and contemporary. There are pictures of artifacts and there is a map portion at the bottom of each page so the reader can follow the Donner Party's progress to California.

...it's a compelling tale of people pushed to the limits of survival, overflowing with all the heroism and evil that attends such hard times. It is so awful in its particular, so dramatic in its inescapable chronology, and so compelling in its personae that it is, simply, a great story. But the details are so troublesome – it's a witches brew of excellent contemporary sources, confusing reminiscences, lies and legends – and the material is so inherently dramatic, that perhaps it is a subject best left for novelists and dreamers.We learn that the Donner Party was not made up of heroes and villains, but of ordinary people, just like you and me, trapped in extraordinary circumstances.

Will Bagley
Author and trail historian

An eclectic mix of information comes with each article: historic ads, maps, quotes by historians or contemporaries, articles for perspective, e.g. Independence MO prices or what is happening elsewhere in the U.S., things carried by the Donner Party, documents, clothing, wagon components, the Pioneer Palace Car, and quotes from journals of Donner Party members and others. It's almost like visiting a Donner Party museum.

The headlines are evocative. For example, "May 24, 1846 Donner moving slowly westward; Bryant worries about progress." On the facing page there is a quote by Bryant, "Singular as it may seem, there are many of our present party who have no just conceptions of the extent and labor of the journey before them. They appear to be desirous of shortening each day's march as much as possible, and when once encamped are reluctant to move..." Indeed, Bryant eventually left the train, traded his wagon for mules and arrived California weeks ahead of the Donner Party. Then he wrote What I Saw in California (1846), a review of which you can find in an old Heirloom or on our web site.

Some of the Chronicles headlines are prosaic, "May 26, 1846 Donners, Reeds reach Big Blue, do laundry, and hold meetings." Others are of more import to the characters, "May 29, 1846 Grandmother Sarah dies in camp." On July 19 there is the fateful turn, "The Donner Party is born; emigrants take left turn to 'shortcut.'" That was of course "Hastings' Long Tripp" as someone in a train before the Donners called the Cut-Off. That turn added about 125 miles and weeks to the journey.

The new road, or Hastings Cut-off, leaves the Fort Hall road here, and is said to be a saving of 350 or 400 miles in going to California, and a better route. There is however, or thought to be, one stretch of 40 miles without water... On the new route we will not have dust, as there are about 60 wagons ahead of us. The rest of the Californians went the long route feeling afraid of Hastings Cut-Off. Mr. Bridger informs me that the route we design to take, is a fine level road, with plenty of water and grass, with the exception before stated. It is estimated that 700 miles will take us to Capt. Sutter's Fort, which we hope to make in seven weeks from this day.

James F. Reed,
letter from Fort Bridger, July 31, 1846

Optimistic assessment of the route the Donner Party was to take. The desert was 80 miles. The party arrived at Donner Lake on October 31.



The start of the Hasting Cutoff - just in case you are in the neighborhood and need a shortcut - from The Donner Party Chronicles

[The Donner story's] got everything. Human endeavor and failure, blunders and mistakes, ambition and greed. It has all the elements. And if you call the rescue of the surviving parties a happy ending, it had a happy ending.

Harold Schindler,
historian and author

Good writing makes the story come alive, "November 3, 1846 Fresh snow thwarts attempt to cross Donner Pass" is the headline and in the text of the article, "Panic springs on them. Some of the pioneers are in such despair they refuse to make further effort to cross the mountain wall, a few miles away." The Donner Party had chosen the Hastings Cut-Off optimistically thinking it would cut hundreds of miles from the trip. They'd go southwest directly, rather than go north like everyone else and then southwest. Hastings had promised to meet them and guide them through but he didn't. They spent weeks on the cut-off. Then the desert was twice the distance they'd been told in a note Hastings had left. They'd lost cattle to Indians. They'd lost wagons. People had died on the journey. It was getting later and later in the season. They'd already suffered so much. Snow was coming, and then they saw the Sierra. They struggled up to Donner Lake in the snow. Some fought to get to the top of the pass where the snow was deeper. Imagine how they felt. They were worn out. They were cold and wet. It was freezing. Some slept on the snow under blankets and blankets of snow. No wonder panic and despair set in. Following the party day by day brings the reader closer to the experience. Then for good measure there are the quotes. Virginia Reed said, "When it was seen that the wagons could not go through the snow, the goods and provisions were packed on oxen and another start was made... men and women walking in the snow up to their waists, carrying their children in their arms and

trying to drive their cattle... We camped within three miles of the summit. That night came the dreaded snow. We children slept soundly on our cold bed of snow... every few moments my mother would have to shake the shawl – our only covering – to keep us from being buried alive. In the morning the snow lay deep on the mountains and valley. With heavy hearts we turned back.”

Their dreams of California, even though they were so close, were shattered. Despair is understandable. Mullen gets it just right.

I started with shoes that were too large for me and they would come off in the snow when I pulled my feet out. Mr. Thompson, who took charge of me to assist me to California, got tired of pulling them out so often. So at last he left them where they pulled off. Then I traveled in my stocking feet for a time, then he took his mittens and made me a pair of moccasins and he went bare handed.

Frances Donner in a letter to CF McGlashan.

In studying the Donner Party, I expected to find heroes, and villains, monsters and saints. Instead, I found families and a cascade of events which swept them to disaster. They made mistakes; the biggest one was allowing the differences of class and race and national origin to keep them apart. Keseberg says they were born under a bad sign and what happened was predestined.

It was not fate, but human failure that undid the Donners. The Donners are us, written very large.

Frank Mullen Jr.
Reno Gazette-Journal
June 15, 1997
Author The Donner Party Chronicles

Note:

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

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

You might even want to do a review for us.

Special Notice Donner Party Class

Donner Party Class offered March 25 at Truckee Meadows COMMUNITY College.

The Donner Party Tragedy

The saga of the Donner Party is a tragic icon of the American West. Learn the inside story of these doomed pioneers' 2,000-mile trek and their entrapment in the Sierra from nationally recognized expert and author Frank X. Mullen. View hands-on artifacts of that fateful journey, explore the mechanics of wilderness survival, and gain a deeper understanding of America's period of Manifest Destiny.

Schedule : One-afternoon session, Saturday, March 25, 1-4 PM, at TMCC Meadowood Center campus, Tuition: \$39.00;
Materials Cost: \$0.00

Students are encouraged to read articles and view videos about the Donner Party prior to class.

SIGN UP BY PHONE: 775-829-9010 (easiest way)

www.wdce.tmcc.edu (You can sign up on Web but TMCC site can be confusing.)

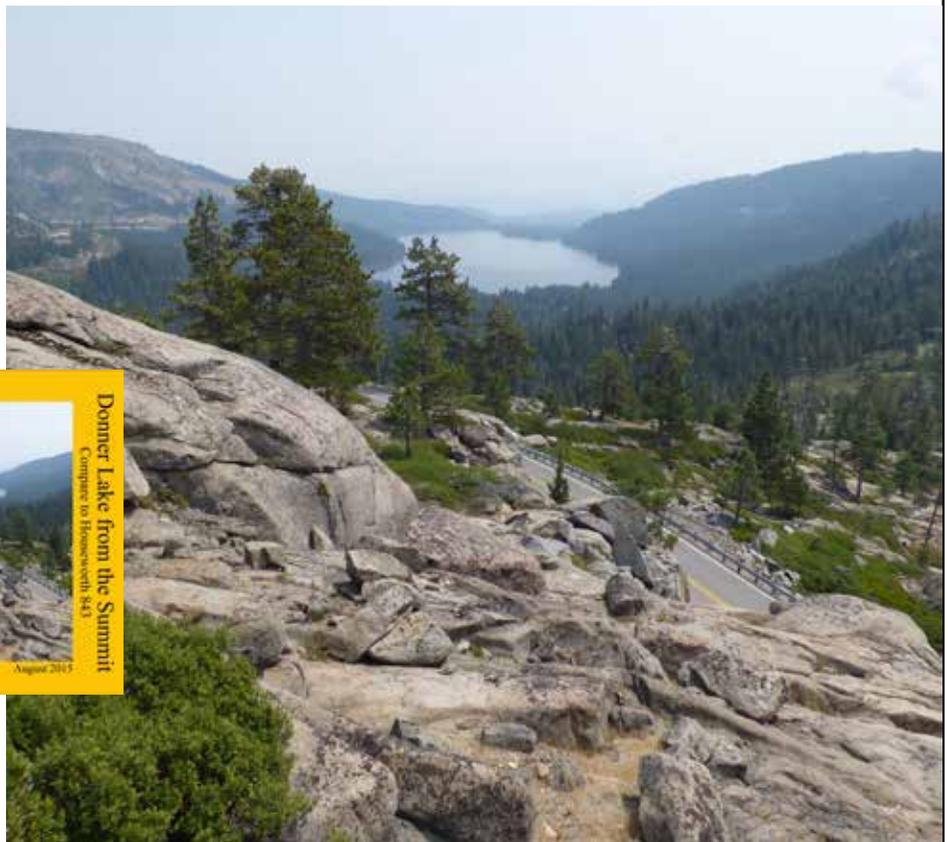
Then & Now with Art Clark



Lawrence & Houseworth 843

In the 1860's the San Francisco firm of Lawrence & Houseworth published several catalogs of photographs and stereographs. These came from a variety of photographers. This image was taken from a knoll above the Dutch Flat Donner Lake wagon road overlooking Donner Lake. Today Old Highway 40 passes around and below this spot.

Photo location N39 19.126' W120 18.867'



Membership

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

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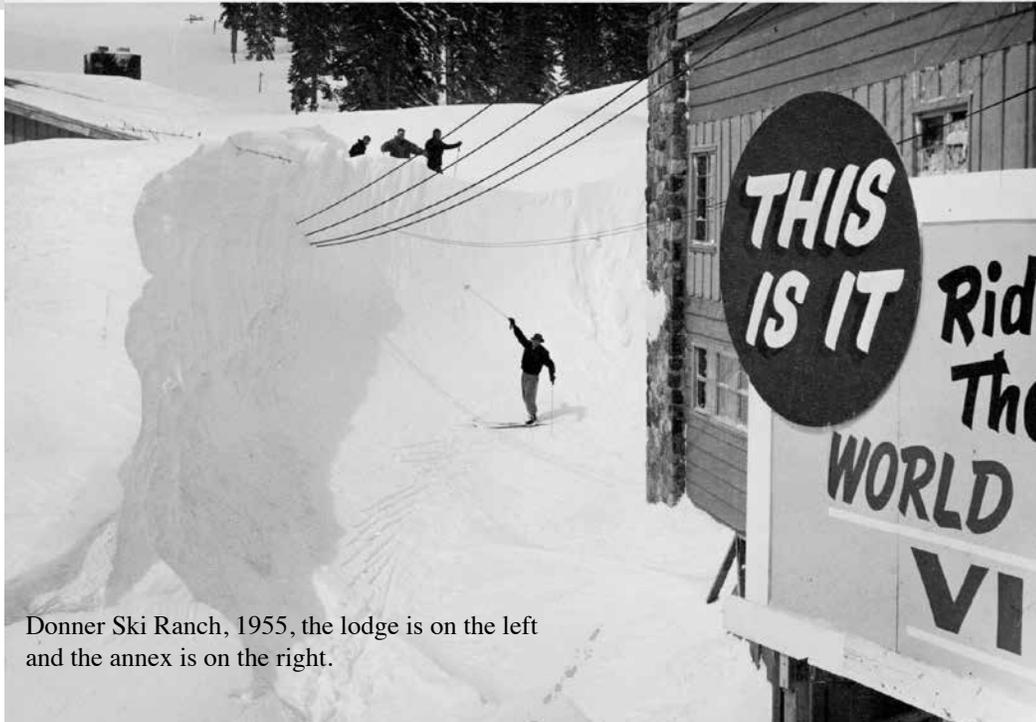
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Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

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

From the DSHS Archives



Donner Ski Ranch, 1955, the lodge is on the left and the annex is on the right.

Fan Mail

".... I look forward to the Heirloom so much. It gets me through the winter down here in the flats dreaming of the summer at the summit. Because of the hiking suggestions, I have tramped all over the summit with my dog enjoying beauty and history. Thanks fo all of you for your dedication and hard work.

Jane O'Donnell
Piedmont, CA