

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

December, 2019 issue #136



## Snow Removal 1952 Pt II

# The Epic Battle

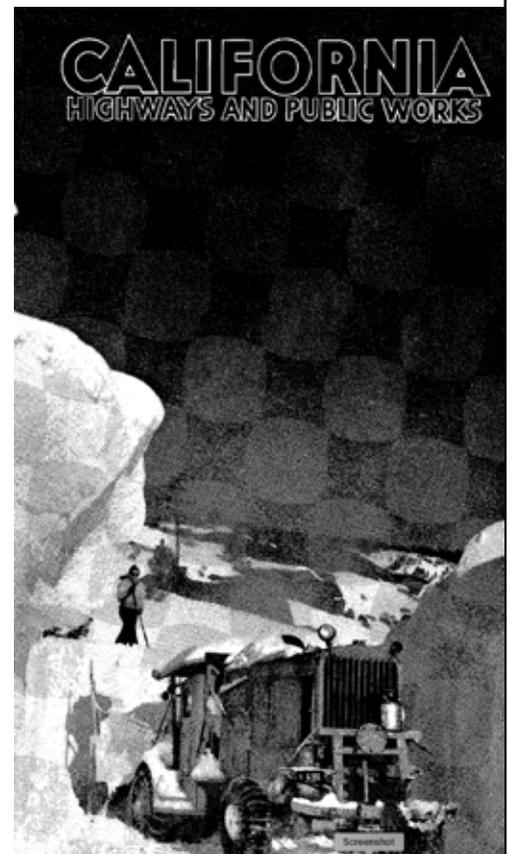
We can hope this winter will not be a repeat of last year but just in case it is, we should be happy that it's not as bad as it could be - as it was in 1952

Judy Lieb volunteers for the DSHS. She's been annotating Norm's many pictures for a couple of years. In July she took the 1952 picture box (see the October, '19 [Heirloom](#) for the box story and last month's [Heirloom](#) for some of the pictures in the box) and started to work. As she was working it occurred to her there might be more information to get and so she Googled a search for snow removal equipment in California in 1952. Up came an issue of [California Highways](#) dated January - February, 1952 (that's the cover here to the right). In the front were some articles about the "Epic Battle" against snow waged by the Highway Department against the January, 1952 storm, "The greatest snowstorm in more than 50 years..." that swept into California on January 10. This was a good "find." Here we find out what was happening on the highways. It's interesting to note that some of the pictures in the 1952 box appear in the [California Highways](#) magazine. That's because the donor, Hank Goodrich, worked for Cal-Trans.

The storm came in on January 10, 1952 and eventually put a halt to all transcontinental traffic on the highways and railroad. "Howling winds sweeping at velocities of 75 to 100 miles per hour drove freshly fallen snow into mountainous drifts, isolated many mountain communities for days, and set the stage for many courageous and dramatic rescue efforts..."

The area affected by the storm was so great and the effects so dire that the focus, instead of being on opening the highways, was on "bringing relief to as many snowbound communities as possible..."

Equipment was immobilized by breakdown and impassable snowdrifts. New auger type rotary plows were ready in Sacramento for assembly and they were put into service. "Mechanics and shop foremen worked 16 to 20 hours" a day. To get to the Truckee area the plows had to go by way of the Feather River.



[California Highways and Public Works](#) magazine, January-February, 1952  
Official Journal of the Division of Highways,  
Department of Public Works, State of  
California

# Story Locations in this Issue

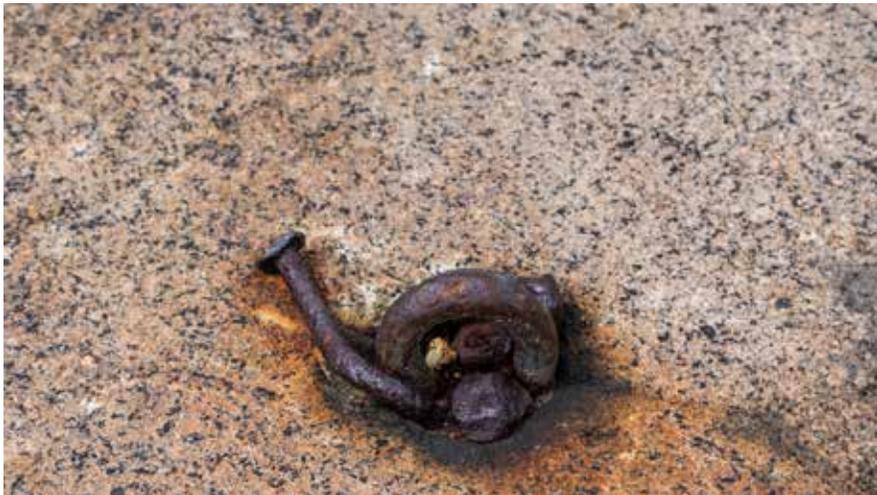
City of San Francisco stranding site

U.S. 40 in the stories is Donner Pass Rd. today. Soda Springs pg 11  
Sheep Wall pg 18

## DONNER SUMMIT



Nyack and Laing's pg 7 Winter walk pg 8 Possible Iron Horse scene's route pg 15 Central Shaft Tunnel 6 pg 13



This didn't fit on our "Odds & Ends" page. Granite is really hard and good for anchoring many things to Donner Summit so the wind doesn't blow what's anchored away. This sits in the rock below the Lincoln Highway below Tunnel 7

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

It was not just the falling snow that hampered efforts. There were snow slides. Between Tahoe City and Truckee there was snow seventeen feet deep. It formed a “solid barrier, against which rotary plows made agonizingly slow progress.”

“Under average conditions, sufficient plow equipment is assigned to U.S. 40 to handle the notoriously heavy fall of snow expected in the Donner Summit area. The storm which broke into full fury January 11<sup>th</sup> was not, however, an average storm, and as drifting and low visibility prevailed on all roads in the mountain area...” Equipment remained on the job until “broken beyond immediate repair or overwhelmed in impassable drifts...” Eventually all efforts ground to a stop. Crews focused on digging themselves out and maintaining communication. Keeping the roads open was impossible. Then the City of San Francisco Streamliner was trapped at Yuba Gap. Road crews were spurred to “superhuman efforts”.

Eventually the storm abated and the [Sacramento Bee](#) reported, “Motor vehicles are proceeding over the Sierra on Highways 40 and 50 for the first time in nearly a month.” “The clouds [had] dropped eight feet of snow on the Sierra in less than a week... the storm king threw some 100 miles an hour gales at the highway crews, making the task of clearing the highways an impossibility.”

“Thirty-foot drifts – almost as high as a three-story building – clogged the rights of way and the temptation must have been strong to let the thing lie until spring.”

“It was a Herculean task...”

It took a week after the storm arrived to open an emergency passage through the snow to the snowbound streamliner, the City of San Francisco, so food and fuel could be brought in. Unrestricted traffic was allowed as far as Donner Summit after two and a half weeks. Then they started clearing the snow down to Donner Lake. There it had drifted to 16 to 20 feet deep.

To begin clearing the snow large hand saws were used to cut the upper portions of the snow and the rotary plows focused on undercutting. Later, drifts had to be removed with explosives. In some areas the snow removal was so tough that crews could only progress the length of a football field in one day. In spots snow depth was forty feet and snow removal work was “undertaken under the threat of sudden engulfment by snowslides.” Initial “punch through” to Donner Lake was on February 5, three and a half weeks after the storm arrived. Then the crews worked on widening the roadway, “back sloping of the icy slopes, and shooting down of overhand...” The road was opened on February 8. At one time Truckee was completely closed off and large bulldozers were used to “Move mountainous drifts...”

The [San Francisco Chronicle](#) ran an editorial on January 19, 1952, “The blizzards bred ‘em tough, and life above the snow line is hazardous. When a mountain man’s pickup truck stalls, or his weasel or Snow-cat breaks down, he is thrown back onto his own hind legs, so to speak; back where the 49’ers were, or the Indians before them, in a man-against nature conflict.” It was suggested that the first day of spring “be set aside to honor these ‘valiant crews’.”

# from Man Vs. Snow

Art Hoppe [San Francisco Chronicle](#) January 19, 1952

The rotaries roll up the road, chewing away at the accumulation on the sides, spewing it far from the road. On their fronts is a six by eight-foot opening like a shallow upright box. Inside the box three rows of augers, meat-grinder-like, send the snow into a two-foot hole in the middle of the box. There it is picked up by a whirling fan and shot out in a 100-foot plume through a funnel above and behind the augers. When one has passed, the jumbled banks are neat and square as though some huge hand had sliced them with a knife.

That was October.

The month is January. January 10th – a Thursday.

The forecaster is talking about a new storm. But Highway 40, closed for four days over the New Year’s holiday, is in good shape. The road has been widened out to maximum by the rotaries and there seems to be plenty of room for the push plows to shove aside any new snowfall.

There have been only five days since November 13 when it hasn’t snowed. The pack along the road is six feet deep.

It begins to snow again in the morning and the push plows roll. By mid-afternoon the rotaries are out again. Shifts are changed at midnight. The men will work until noon the next day, eating sandwiches in the cabs of their equipment.



A howling wind sweeps across the mountains and into the canyons, carrying the snow before it. Visibility is cut to nothing.

At 1:20 p.m. Friday, Snider orders the road closed. He still has a narrow, two-way road, but the parking lots are filled with snow, and only emergency traffic can be allowed through.

The California Highway Patrol sets up a roadblock at Colfax and the cops are tough on motorists with excuses. They know from experience that some skiers will swear to anything—starving relatives,

doctor needed—in order to get to resorts.

Then, finding no parking spaces off the road, they leave their cars on the highway and the snowplows can't get through.

Saturday - Still snowing; road still open to emergency traffic. A falling tree crashes through the windshield of one of Snider's two rotaries, putting it out of commission for a precious 90 minutes.

Snider orders it lubricated while being repaired. Lubricate all equipment every 48 hours. His other rotary is having trouble with its fuel pump, but it keeps going.

Both rotaries are having trouble with fallen trees



and rocks that have slid down and been buried in the drifts. When the augurs on a rotary hit a rock, a small shearing pin breaks to save the heavier machinery and the crew must get out into the gale, take off their gloves and put in a new pin with their blue hands. Three times in an hour... A brand new rotary is almost ready to go from the State's garage in Sacramento. "All it needs now is a coat of paint," he is told.

You can forget the paint," Nicholson tells the radio. "Get it up to Snider as is."

Sunday - The snow is heavier. Five feet have fallen in the past three days. Snider is losing ground - even with the third rotary. He only has a one-way road open now. But the storm lets up in the afternoon and by late Sunday night the road is again two-way, though narrow, in most stretches.

Monday - A new storm strikes. This one is a blizzard with 100-mile-per-hour winds. The drifts are soon over the snow markers along the highway and the plow operators steer by feel. It is a fine, powder snow falling and the wind picks it up and drops it into the 16-foot-deep trough that is Highway 40.

The two push plows are soon helpless. Their drivers take shelter in a roadside garage.

By midafternoon the word comes through from headquarters: "Abandon the road."

An hour earlier, the newscast had told of the snowbound City of San Francisco, only a mile and a half from Yuba Gap, with 226 passengers aboard. And though the Highway Department had not yet been asked for help, Snider wanted to get his equipment back to the barn in case of emergencies.

But the new rotary is cut off at Baxters, 10 miles west, by 25-foot drifts. Old 1162 has broken an axle again and is

helpless until a truck can deliver the parts.

Snider, in his pickup, reaches the third rotary just six miles to the west about dark. "Let's get her home," he yells above the blizzard.

They reach the two snowbound push plows and the rotary digs them out. The caravan turns back toward Yuba Gap. But after only a mile, the windshield wiper on the rotary breaks. Struck blind, she goes up and over the bank.

Without the rotary, the other vehicles are helpless and the men walk a long, long mile through the howling darkness to shelter.

It is the first time since 1938 that Highway 40 has been abandoned to the elements.



a new storm strikes.

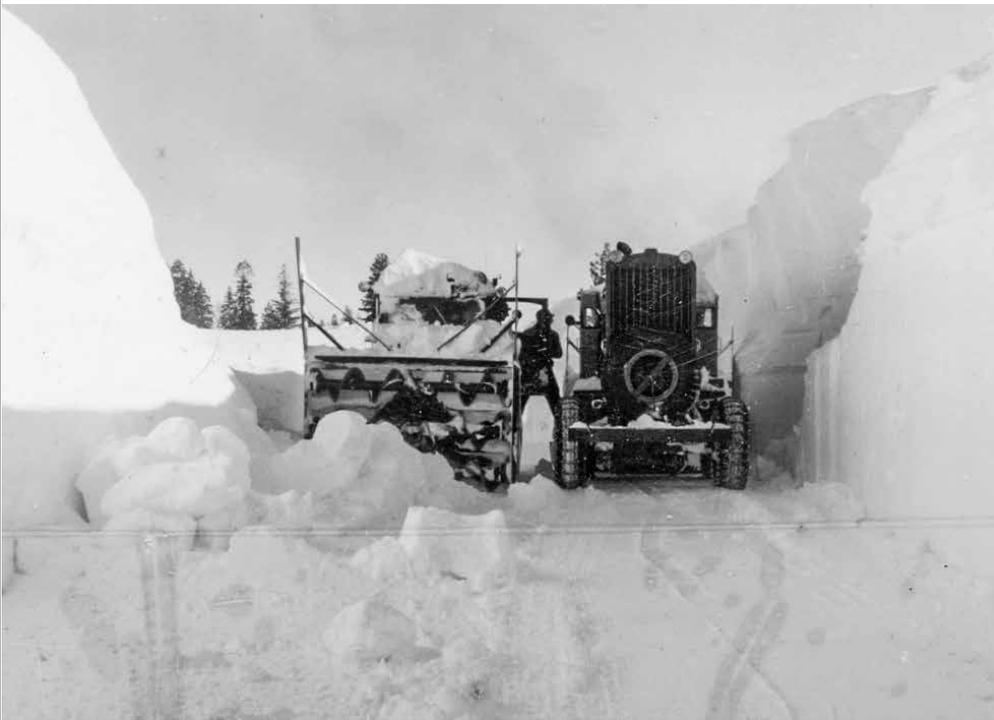
The battle in which Snider and the 27 men at Yuba Gap took part was only an incidental action in the total war the State waged against The Storm.

In all, the State had 1,200 men and some 400 snowplows and trucks in its battle lines.

Just how many thousands of tons of snow they moved, no one will estimate. But department officials say that more than 35 feet of snow has fallen at Donner Summit since those first few flakes last October.

The goal of the 1,200 men is simple - two lanes of black asphalt, with plenty of parking spaces.

And for this, the department spends an average of \$500,000 each year. This year the snow removal bill is expected to reach \$1,000,000.



The story of how Snider and the seven men with him dug out their rotary by hand the next day and battled drifts for 24 hours to rescue the passengers on the streamliner has already been told.

The next night, with the passengers safe, the Yuba Gap crew returned to the job of clearing Highway 40- now just a faint depression in the wilderness of white. The night and day struggle of the big rotaries has to begin all over again. And the next day



## “Sierra Crews Fight Drifts”

"If it hadn't been for the hurricanes and gales, we could have handled a 200-inch snowfall without too much trouble. But when you get hurricane winds, they blot out visibility, drift the snow and fill the roadbed entirely. Then the pushplows are no good and you have to send the rotaries through, backing and banging, to open a single lane... the worst is yet to come on U. S. 40, where rotaries have gnawed their way into a tremendous drift a thousand yards eastward from the division maintenance station on Donner Summit.

Jack Welter, San Francisco Examiner  
January 27, 1952

about a squashed car:

"When it was finally dug out it looked like it had been through a big press..."

California Highways and Public Works  
Jan-Feb 1952



Pictures on the previous page are from the 1952 box.



Here we have a stuck truck on Highway 40 below Donner Summit during the 1952 storm.



Look closely here. This is down at Laings, just below Nyack. The billboard is editorializing about Highway 40, saying that the highway should be four lanes. Left is the original, below is a blow up of part of the picture.



The other pictures are from the 1952 box.



## Stabbing Affray in Placer is Reported

### Special to the Union

AUBURN (Placer Co.) Dec. 15 Al Massino, an Italian member of a section gang at Soda Springs in the upper part of the county, is said to have stabbed another member of the gang in a row this morning. A report was made to the sheriff's office by telephone, but a short time later another report stated that Massino had been captured by members of the railroad police and was being brought to Auburn.

Sacramento Union December 16, 1917

## Donner Summit Beauty, Winter, 1866

The dramatic contrast between the beauty of the land and the ferocious efforts of the workers to push the line forward touched the company's usually no-nonsense chief engineer for tunneling, John R. Gillis. In a report several years later to other professionals, he vividly recalled one special experience. One evening in late 1866 after snow had fallen, he went for a walk in the summit area. The path was "strangely beautiful at night," he said. "The tall firs, though drooping under their heavy burdens pointed to the mountains that overhung them, where the fires that lit seven tunnels shone like stars on their snowy sides." As Gillis described it, "the only sound that came down to break the stillness of the winter night was the sharp ring of hammer on steel, or the heavy reports of the blasts." The Railroad Chinese night shifts were hard at work in those tunnels.

John Gillis, "Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad," 1870

From Ghosts of Gold Mountain page 123  
Gordon Chang  
reviewed in the September, '19 Heirloom

## One Hundred two years ago this month (1917)

Traveling over the Sierra by automobile in the early days was a challenge but “in season” there were roads and people did it. There were also people who wanted to “push the envelope.” Here is one such story.

Two fellows were owners of the Snow Bird Placer Mine about 35 miles from the summit. They were quite isolated there and in the winter time there was little for the men to do but discuss “war news gleaned from belated papers” they acquired on trips to town for supplies.

“As no altitude is too great to keep away the wave of national patriotism” the men decided to enlist in the armed services (this is WWI). They were attracted by the Navy and Marine posters they’d seen in Truckee and could not decide which branch to join. They wrote to San Francisco for more information. The general manager of the Western Motors Co. heard about the recruits. As it happened he was sending a Maxwell Motor Car over the summit and so invited the Navy and the Marines to send representatives along and they could talk to the miners.

The car left San Francisco on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December for its trip over the summit against the advice “of natives who predicted that it would never get through.”

Half way between Crystal Springs and the summit the weather turned cold and there was snow. Then the storm broke “with a vengeance. Great flakes beat against the windshield.” Soon the windshield was coated with ice and the driver could not see. The windshield was raised. “The car was now plowing through about three feet of snow” and since they could not see the edge of the trail “we were practically compelled to feel our way.”

They traveled all night, afraid to stop. They had to get out and shovel snow and sometimes had to put their blankets “on the path so that the machine would not sink into the drifts.” About 5 A.M. they stopped to make coffee and the fire attracted “a beautiful collie dog” which was half frozen and starving. It became the recruiting station mascot. At 10 A.M. they stopped again to make a fire and they met a party of Los Angeles autoists who’d gotten lost in the storm. Those two people joined the driver, the dog and the recruiters in the Maxwell which overloaded the car “considerably.”

As the car got to a point opposite the miners’ cabin the recruiters left the car and went to interview the men. Both recruiters made good arguments and the miners still could not decide so they decided one would join the Navy and the other the Marines. A toss of the coin decided who would join which. The car was already overloaded so it continued on to Truckee over the “dangerous grade at Donner lake [sic]” and arrived at 3 P.M. Sunday after two days of travel.

# MAXWELL BESTS SIERRA SNOWS

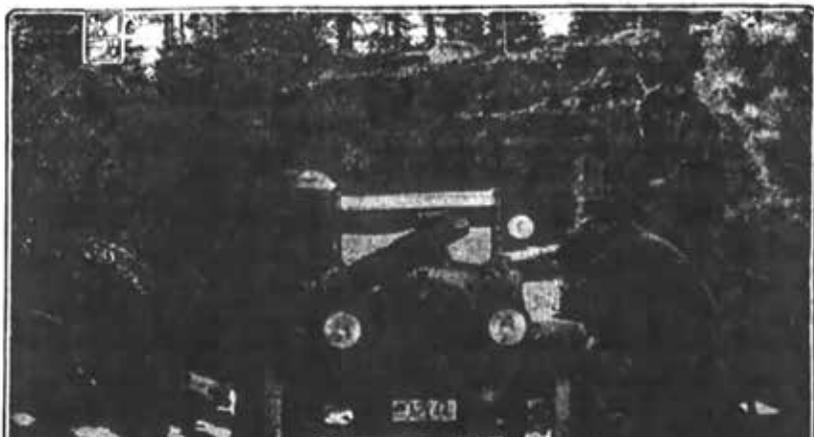
Naval Recruiting Officers  
Have Strenuous Trip Over  
Snow-Capped **Summit**

CAR SCORES IN HARD RUN

H. D. Carsey, of Western  
Motors Company, Pilots  
Machine to Truckee

## Snow Makes Sierra Trips Dangerous

Members of the Maxwell recruiting party mastering a few of the many difficulties encountered in their successful run over the snow-capped Sierra **summit** and on to Truckee. The Maxwell party encountered a severe snowstorm that caused many drifts and made the trip a most strenuous one for both the members of the crew and the sturdy car.



In Truckee there was a movie being filmed. The leading lady, Jewel Carmen, named the collie “Rescue” and on hearing of the miners, they insisted on accompanying the recruiters back to the miners’ cabin. On reaching the cabin the two miners were “sent by railroad to San Francisco” and the story ends.

San Francisco Chronicle  
December 23, 1917

# From the DSHS Archives

Headline:

Near Tragedy in the Sierras [sic]

## Poorly-Clad Gypsy Band Had Narrow Escape from Burial in Summit Snows BY DIRECT WIRE TO THE TIMES

Truckee, Dec. 9

The fate of the Donner Party was almost duplicated. A band of gypsies along with 10 horses and five wagons passed through Truckee on its way to Sacramento. While in Truckee "they done [sic] everything they could for one penny and up. They were here for three days soliciting among the business houses and residents for alms" but by the time they reached the head of Donner Lake a snow storm was raging "in all its fury." The gypsies struggled against the storm for hours but half way up the pass they were ready to give up and return to Truckee. The snow had piled up deeply behind them though so they were forced to go on. At the summit they found shelter.

No one tries to get over the summit during winter "but these gypsies did not realize their peril, although repeatedly warned.

In the same Wednesday issue of the Truckee Republican, on the same page, is an article noting that in on Monday morning the temperature was 10 degrees below zero. Climbing to the summit through the snow is hard. Doing it in subzero temperatures is even harder as perspiration freezes against the skin.

Los Angeles Times Friday December 10, 1909  
Truckee Republican December 8, 1909

## Idaho Man dies while crossing summit with automobile

### Idaho Man Dies While Crossing Summit With Automobile

Last Saturday afternoon about three o'clock, Norman Green a resident of Boise Idaho, expired a short distance on this side of the Summit Hotel as he was assisting his car through a shallow snow drift. The chafeur [sic] saw him when he fell but before he reached the dying man's side he had passed away. The chauffeur [sic] immediately returned to this place and notified deputy coroner Ocker who took charge of the remains and brought them to this place. The remains were shipped to Oakland last Tuesday night for cremation and were accompanied to that place by his wife, who arrived here early in the week. Death was due to heart trouble.

Truckee Republican  
December 6, 1917

## GYPSIES SUFFER GOING OVER SUMMIT

### Traveling Up Steep Mountain in Heavy Snow Storm Nearly Traps Band of Wagon Tourists.

During last week a band of gypsies were in Truckee. While here they done everything they could for one penny and up. They were here for three days soliciting among the business houses and residents for alms. The band consisted of five wagons and ten head of horses. They were on their way to the coast having traveled from the east.

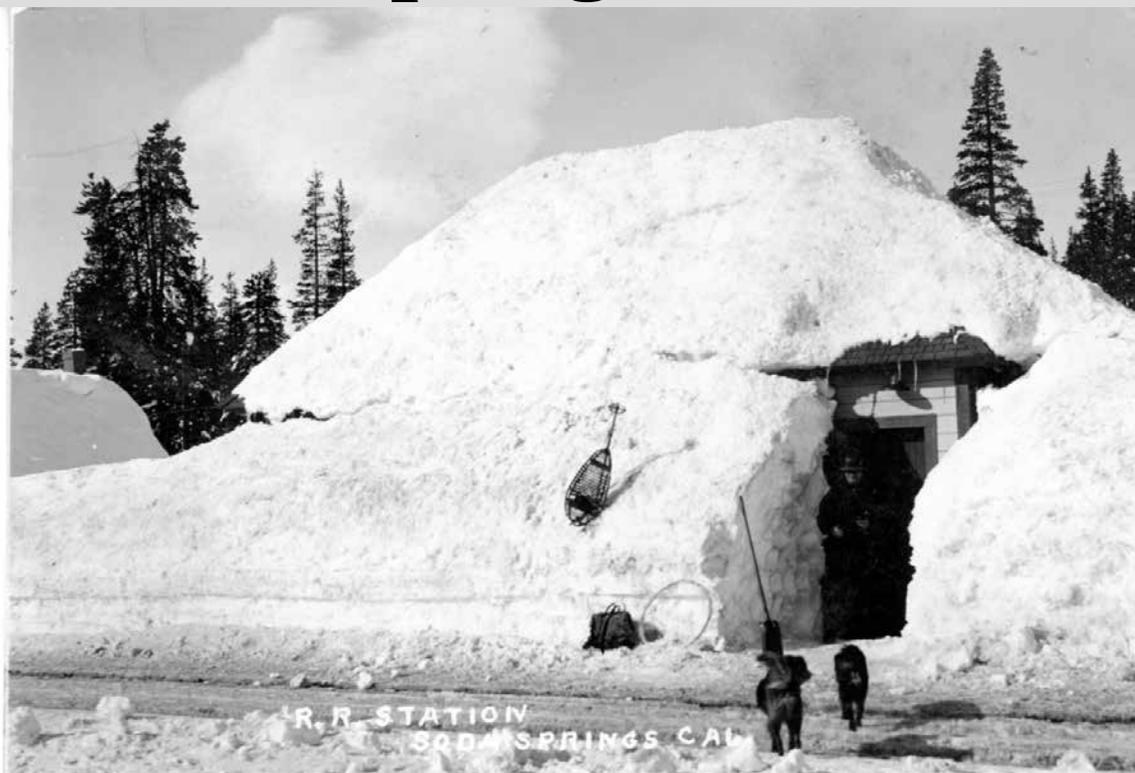
They left here Sunday to travel over the Summit. When they got about half way around Donner Lake they encountered a heavy snow storm. It was quite a struggle for them to reach the Summit and when they did many of them were suffering from cold, as they were poorly claded, especially the children. According to a statement one of the men made, they came very near coming back to Truckee the women and children suffering intensely with cold.

Tuesday they left the Summit traveling on down the mountains for the Sacramento valley.

Truckee Republican  
December 8, 1909

# From the DSHS Archives

## Soda Springs in the Old Days



Left is undated, Soda Springs Station when the trains used to stop there.

From Chuck Oldenburg about the picture below:

"I thought you would recognize it. It's the building on the corner where Norm Saylor has all his stuff [the home of the DSHS]. But it doesn't look like that now. Starting in 1975 we would buy our tickets and rent cross country skis in that building."



# Book Review

## The Iron Horse - the novel

Edwin C. Hill 1924 329 pages

### Preface to the book review

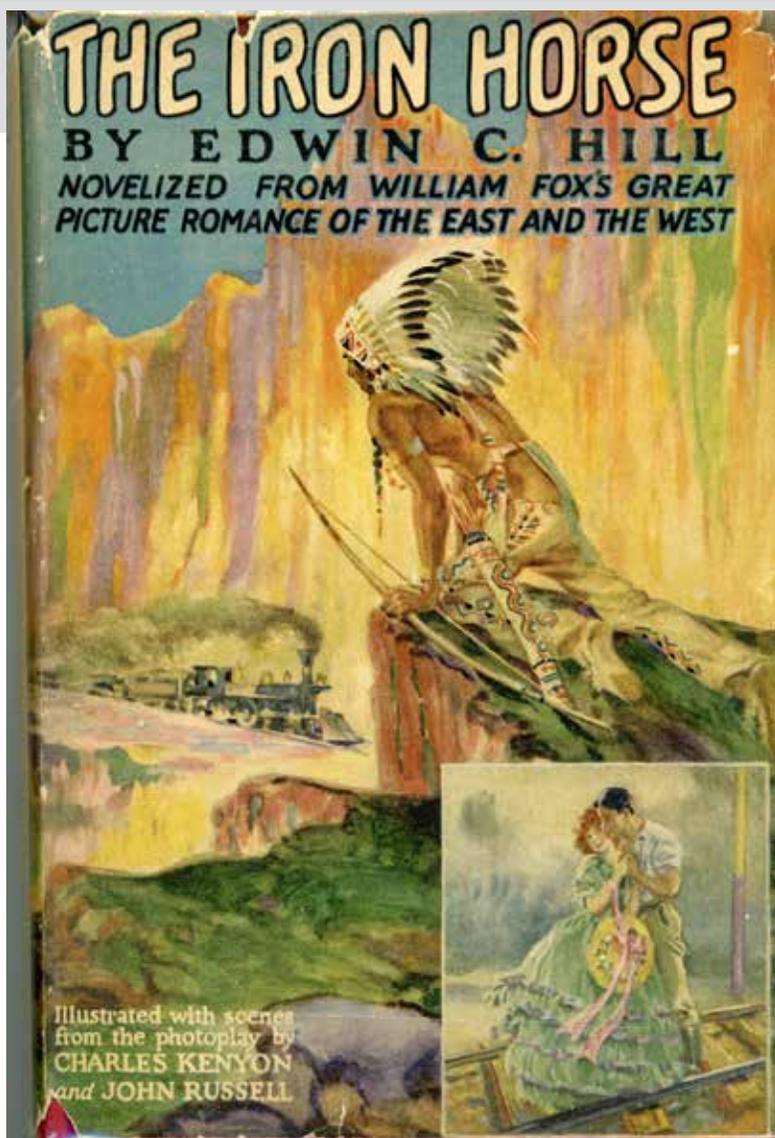
It was a race. The Central Pacific was constructing the transcontinental railroad from the west and the Union Pacific was working from the east. The more miles of contiguous track they laid the more money they got in the form of bonds from the Federal Government. The Union Pacific was building like crazy over the easier part of the transcontinental route. It had been the easier part for the emigrants and so it was for the railroad. The Central Pacific was bogged down in the Sierra, hemorrhaging money while building the 15 tunnels of the Sierra crossing. The Union Pacific even taunted the Central Pacific saying they'd be in California before the Central Pacific even got out of the Sierra. The Central Pacific thought they might be right.

The first thing the Central Pacific did when they set out to dig Tunnel 6, the longest of the 15 Sierra tunnels, was to work from both ends at once which made the job harder because both tunnels had to meet in the middle. Then they partially dismantled the first locomotive in California, the Sacramento. Renamed the Black Plucked Goose, the locomotive was put on a huge wagon with wheels twelve inches wide and pulled by oxen. It was such a huge and fearsome apparition on the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. that oncoming mules, pulling freight wagons, spooked and ran. To prevent that, mules had to be blindfolded.

At the summit the Black Plucked Goose was installed as a donkey engine over the center of Tunnel 6. There a shaft was dug 88 feet down to the level of the two tunnels coming from the east and the west. The shaft under the barn\* housing the Goose (we can be a bit informal here) enabled the work in the tunnel to progress from the inside out as well as from the outside in. Work progressed on four faces at once, but still the Chinese workers only made progress of less than a foot a day.

The next trick was to haul two locomotives, 40 miles of track, and railroad car parts over Donner Summit. The Central Pacific could then start building in Nevada where the job was incomparably easier: no tunnels, no granite. When the tunnels were done all of it could be connected and the Central Pacific would get a windfall from many miles of contiguous track.

When we first heard about this Herculean story\*\* of locomotives and rail going over the summit we wanted pictures, but pictures don't exist. That seems unfair to us. The protagonists in the story were more interested in getting over the Sierra than in satisfying their descendants' curiosity.



\*picture on the next page - the barn over the central shaft of Tunnel 6 is the building on the right. Today that location is just 50 yards west or so of the parking lot at the top of the pass.

\*\*a rail weighed 532 lbs. In those days and was 30' long. So 40 miles of track was about 7,000 pieces of rail. Figure ten tons to the wagon that's 176 wagons over Donner Summit not including the locomotive and car parts



It turned out, though, that John Ford directed a 1924 movie, "The Iron Horse," which includes scenes of Chinese railroad workers hauling the locomotive over the summit (see page 15). Since some of the movie was filmed locally we tried to find something about it in the local newspapers. Truckee newspapers don't exist for 1924 – another discourteous oversight by our ancestors. So we are left with a movie with a short scene showing John Ford's idea of what the event looked like, some newspaper articles noting locomotives had arrived in Truckee, and some ads (see page 17) soliciting teamsters for the hauling job.

Then it turned out there is not just "The Iron Horse" movie but there is a 1924 novel by the same name. Just for fun the DSHS library committee found [The Iron Horse](#) on the Internet and ordered it. We'd already reviewed the movie (see the 1/18 [Heirloom](#)).

### The book review

This is a fun book. There's a little history of the railroad of course: the Railroad Act; the need for the railroad; some personalities; the work and the workers; and "Hell on Wheels," the temporary towns that came with the railroad.

Then, reading it in 2020 there is also the history of the time in which the book was written. It exposes some of the prejudices of the time: referring to the Chinese as "Mongolians," "slant eyed," "yellow boys," and pagans for example, or the evilness of the Indians. There's not much of the racial prejudice though and the real evil-doer is the white guy.

The foreword lays out a more general view of 1924, "It was President Lincoln who made possible that road which broke the power of hostile Indians, conquered nature itself and opened up an incredibly rich empire to millions of future home-seekers – the central exploit of a thrilling and romantic

phase of the Republic's history." 1924 was still a time in America when wilderness was there to be conquered as opposed to today's preservation or more tame resource extraction.

The reason to pick up the book is that the story reads like an old-time western overlaid with melodrama. On the bad guy side there is betrayal, murder, dastardly action, violence, a horribly evil villain, and the requisite Indian attack. There is also the love story, misunderstanding separating the lovers, upstanding characters, and the triumph of good over evil, civilization over savagery, and love over hate. What's not to like?

Dave Brandon is a dreamer. He thinks there will be a railroad "clear across Ameriky some day." He's a hero to the reader but there is derision from ordinary people, " 'f that ain't bein' a crank..." "Jest as crazy as a loon," "Tain't in Nature and I misdoubt it's in religion for folks to travel that swift. 'Twould snatch a body's breath clean away!" That's all cliché now, but maybe in 1924 it wasn't yet. So there's one conflict set, one man's dream versus accepted wisdom.

People called him "Crazy Brandon," "The crank," "Dreamin' Dave," etc. but Dave is strong. It's his dream and the country has always been "Westward Ho ! for the white man..." "It's the Iron Horse he's ridin' now, and the Indians will be powerless to stop it. Nature, herself, can't halt the American spirit!" The wilderness needs conquering.

As it happens Dave meets Abraham Lincoln long before he even became a congressman and Lincoln, also being a good guy, is infected with the same views about transcontinental railroad possibilities.

Dave, a widower with a son, sells his home in Illinois and

heads for Washington State. Part way there he leaves the riverboat and starts to head for Oregon after receiving a lot of advice about Indians and “2 Fingers,” a “murderin’ devil.” On his way west he’s also searching “for the pass which would make possible the railway, the great railway which would link East and West.” This would be the route over the Rockies and here the readers should forget that thousands of wagons have been heading over this pass already in the years before the railroad arrived. We must allow some “literary license” to further the plot later.

Dave is attacked by white men disguised as Indians, just after he found the needed pass. His son, hiding behind a log, was spared and he buries his father. Coincidentally some men who had been on the riverboat too, arrive. They also happen to be employees of a famous mountain man, Jim Bridger. How do Jim Bridger’s guys happen to arrive at the exact place at the exact time that there is an orphan boy who’s just buried his father and whom they just happen to know as a good boy? We must allow a little literary license here too because we have to save the boy to be the hero later.

Bridger’s men take the boy to California, parenthetically traveling along Donner Lake.

Little Davy grows up in Sacramento wanting revenge and of course, a railroad because he’s his father’s son.

There’s a Cameo by Buffalo Bill but it doesn’t further plot.

We have to pick up the rest of the exposition. When Davy and his father lived in Illinois, Davy’s father had a friend whose daughter, Miriam, was Davy’s best friend. She’s been growing up too while Davy’s been in California.

Here we should describe Miriam: “Her hair, so long that it swept almost to her knees when she loosed it, was of a wonderful blue-blackness, and as fine as spun silk. Great, dark eyes which at times seemed purplish gray and at other times deep blue; glorious eyes, veiled by long, curving lashes, were perhaps her most arresting feature. A low, broad forehead, a short, straight nose, with a tantalizing tilt; full, curving lip with a delicious upward curve at the corners; a perfectly modeled chin, softly hinting at strength of character, and a complexion like sweet peas in the dewy morning.”

Miriam’s father, coincidentally, is responsible for building the Union Pacific side of the transcontinental railroad. He is also a widower.

There is also Peter Jesson: arrogant, ambitious only for wealth since his family’s fortune was mostly gone, self-centered and in debt.”

Miriam has been following her father in his railroad building, taking care of him as any dutiful daughter would. Peter Jesson, working for the railroad, has his eye on Miriam.

Jesson, has been wooing Miriam but then betrays their relationship with Ruby, a dance hall girl and then a fellow appears, Deroux, who bribes Jesson to affect the railroad route by not finding the pass the railroad needs to cross the Rockies. That missing pass will send the railroad through Deroux’s land and make him rich.

Coincidentally, Miriam is riding in a train with her father one day when they see a rider being chased by Indians. The rider aims for the train and is saved. There he meets Miriam, “All at once they found themselves looking into each other’s eyes, and Miriam discovered that she was clinging to this surprising young mans’ hand

## Description of railroad building

"Then she caught the rhythm of the swift, smooth system of track laying. It thrilled her like the beating of drums. She saw the trackmen, two by two, carrying ties, and dropping them quickly but accurately-space upon the smooth, bare grade. A light car, drawn by a single, galloping hoese, clattered down the track, bringing two rails. Before it could stop, two men seized the end of a rail, heaved it up and started forward, the rest of the gang taking hold in pairs, until the rails was clear of the car. The bearers went forward at a run, and at the bellow from the gang boss, dropped the rail upon the ties. On the other side of the car, with a second rail, the same game was played... Miriam timed the job and found that took less than thirty seconds to swing a heavy rails from the car and run it forward to its exact place upon the cross ties. Thirty seconds to a rail, four rails to a minute. Breathless work, but the men were driven by demons, fired by the spirit of the race. The moment the car was empty it was tipped over the side of the track to clear the way for the net load... They worked in triple time, three strokes to the spike, four hundred rails to the mile... Those sledges were to be swung forty million times before East and West were linked."



and that right arm was very firmly attached to her waist. The curious discovery did not provoke her to any immediate or hasty movement. It was a nice hand, a bit hard, but warm and comforting; and the arm around her felt extremely satisfying, delightfully protective.”

The rider, of course, is Davy and Miriam is his long lost best friend from Illinois, “we lose sight of you for fifteen years and then you pop out of nowhere one jump ahead of Indian and leap squarely among us. You can’t beat that in the novel,” says Miriam’s father. No you can’t.

Of course Davy knows of the pass the railroad needs, that Deroux wants to be kept secret, and which Jesson has been bribed to lose. Jesson wants Miriam too. So Deroux aims to have Jesson deal with Davy, “it should be easy. Accidents are common in this country. Brandon goes with you, but you come back alone!” Indeed, Jesson and Davy Brandon go out looking for the pass and only Jesson comes back. Miriam’s tears flow, “She had loved Davy, loved him as woman loves a strong man. His face, shining with courage and cleanness of heart...” It had been love at first (second) sight.

Of course Davy reappears and the pass is exposed. Jesson lures naïve Miriam to his side. A misunderstanding splits Miriam and Davy. Deroux is crafting revenge against Davy. His minions will goad Davy into a gunfight if Jesson is too yellow to kill him.

There is a gunfight after Davy promised Miriam he would not fight. He’d been pushed into it though when Jesson cheated with a swivel holster (you’ll have to read about the technique so you’ll be aware of what skulduggery awaits in western saloons). Fortunately Deroux’s minions had been incapacitated by others in the bar so Davy survived only to lose Miriam for breaking his promise.

The next scene has 500 Indians attacking the end of track crews. People from town come to confront the Indians on a train. “The red wave rolled at them the ground shaking under the tread of horses, the air hideous with menacing whoops.... Volley after volley roared and spurted from the barricaded cars. Warriors shot through and through rolled under the hooves of the terrified, plunging ponies. Horses with broken legs or streaming with blood limped along the front of the shattered line... The whooping commands of the war chiefs ran... Arrows came in clouds... Arrows and bullets zipped and crashed... but the steady, accurate shooting of the defense was too much.... The hailstorm of lead shatters their [Indians’] ferocious valor...”

The Indians back off but there is one of them who confronts Davy. He has an “evil, swarthy countenance... streaked with red and black... It was convulsed with murderous rage, the face of a wild beast...” It was Deroux. He’d been goading the Indians disguised as an Indian. There is cursing, blood running, “slavering foam,” Deroux pounding Davy’s head with fists like hammers, ripped fingers, torn strips of skin, thumb in the eye... and then Davy’s headlock – “unbreakable.” The dreadful scene represented justice and there was a death rattle and then silence. And then it turns out that Deroux has two fingers – “the mutilated hand with three missing fingers...”. He was “the murderous beast who struck my father down! Butchered him with an ax while his Cheyennes held him!” Deroux had worn gloves or kept his injured hand in his pocket all during the book.

Davy then decides, since Miriam has broken with him over the misunderstanding, to go to the CPRR in California. He’ll help build that railroad. He’s immediately given a responsible crew leader job and is there to see the locomotives go over Donner Summit. He works for the railroad all the way to Promontory Point, Utah where the railroad is completed and he sees Miriam again. She sees him “In that instant his heart stopped beating, then pounded tumultuously as joy that could never be equaled in a lifetime sent his blood surging. For Miriam’s eyes were sending him that message no man could fail to understand, the electric message forgiving love.” The book goes on for a few more pages but what’s the point? The story has climaxed and you don’t need a denouement after all that action.

Besides the melodramatic plot there’s humor. For example Ruby is a dance hall girl who shot a guy who threw whiskey in her face. The ad hoc court ruled that it was attempted

suicide by the guy who threw the whiskey and freed the victim, Ruby. To add insult to the decision, the guy had to buy drinks for everyone.

Even though 1924 was a time different from today, that ran at a slower pace, some of the colloquial speech that slows down the action is a bit much. For example, "By th' heft of ye, stranger, I reckon y' ain't afeerd uv work, but by the eternal ! you'll need every ---- ounce uv yer grit 'f ye trail wit htat outfit! I kinda cotton to ye." First you have to translate it and that keeps you from following the action as quickly as you want.

Another good example of translation needed is, " 'Twas no later than yistady that the General Superintendent sint for me. 'Corporal Casey,' he says, 'Corporal Casey, I'll have ye know,' he says, 'that the U. Pay is daypindin' upon yer industry and inilligince,' ... 'I misdoubt that the road could built without ye, Mister Casey,' he says. 'Th' times is hard an' troublous an' the min are grumblin'."

That said, some of the descriptions and language use are really interesting, evocative, and vivid such as the following.

"He began to weave through the crowd, graceful as a serpent." "old Haller caught the eye of Kentucky Jack,

leading apostle of draw poker, a square gambler and a dead shot of indomitable nerve." "often the coyote concert ended with a shrill, sobbing cry, like the shuddering scream of a woman in agony, a strike which ran up and down the scale of maniacal mirth." The Nueces Kid "possessed ever engaging train of the diamond-back rattlesnake." "His blue eyes were as keen as the point of a Bowie knife and his voice snapped like a whip."

"Week after week the great road lunged forward, a shining rapier thrusting at a sullen frontier." Miriam "joyed in the great game, fired by the ambition that lashed the builders, the ambition to override or break though every obstacle of Nature and savage man; to win the splendid race...."

"Destiny, having decided that the American Union was to stand, unbroken, one and indivisible, stretched forth a great hand, swept back from shell-harrowed fields the gallant forces of the Confederacy and upon the clearing sky wrote "Appomattox."

"Nature had done its best to impede them by thrusting valleys and mountains across the right of way, but they had striven ahead mile after mile, blasting through the mountains, filling the valleys with stone."

## 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.

Article about John Ford as part of a presentation of "The Iron Horse," <https://www.nyu.edu/projects/wke/press/ironhorse/ironhorse.pdf>

## The Making of the Iron Horse

Ford went to Truckee, California, to film an old locomotive being shipped across the Donner Pass on skids. Publicity for the film described how this was done exactly as it had been done originally – with two hundred and fifty Chinese labourers and fifty head of horses. The Chinese were retired railroad workers who, despite their advanced age, said the publicity, heaved the locomotive across the snow. Disaster almost struck when half-inch cables began snapping, but everyone stayed at his post. In reality, the locomotive had stubbornly refused to move and Ford had tried dollying the camera past the engine. Only a few preemptory jerks of the skids can be seen in the film.

*The War, the west and the Wilderness* by Kevin Brownlow

Testimony about the locomotives and track going over Donner Summit - validating "The Iron Horse" and The Iron Horse

We built some road across the mountains before the mountain portion was done finished. The men were driven out of the mountain portion by the storms and could not be kept there any longer; could not do any work. The snow would fill up just as fast as they could dig it out, so I moved them down on the Truckee River. We hauled locomotives over (and when I say "we" I mean myself), and we hauled iron and cars and all that sort of thing and built 50 miles."

Congressional Series of United States Public Documents, Volume 2508

"We hauled them over on sleighs. I think we hauled some of them over on logs, because we could not get a sleigh big enough. We cross the snow-line before the gap in the mountains was finished, and we used to take passengers at Truckee and bring them to Cisco, where the road terminated, then they would get on stages and go over the mountain, and then get on the railroad again and go to Reno. That was before the mountain portion was finished.

Charles Crocker before the U.S. Railway Commission, 1887

"We hauled over that snow to Donner Lake the material for a railroad track of forty miles, with all the trimmings, three locomotives and forty cars. We built forty miles of railroad in the Truckee Canyon before the connection was made by way of the Summit.... In that manner we forced our way across the mountains at an enormous cost. It cost nearly three times what it would have cost to have done it in the summertime when it should have been done..... This material that we hauled from Cisco we hauled to Donner Lake on sleighs, and then reloaded it on to wagons and hauled it over a muddy road to Truckee, and there we commenced laying the track, and laid 40 miles in that way." Once spring arrived workers were sent back to the Summit to dig out ten or twelve feet of snow so the grading gangs could prepare the route for track laying. As they worked on the Summit tunnels the workers sometimes had to dig snow tunnels of hundreds of feet to get to the areas to dump the excavated rock and to the workers' camps. "The snows were so great ...the snow slides carried away our camps, and we lost a good many men into slides; many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted." ...

James Strobridge before the Pacific Railroad Commission, 1887

**I WANT TO CONTRACT FOR THE  
HAULING OF  
3,00 tons railroad iron  
from Cisco to Coburn's station  
(TWENTY MILES). I WILL PAY ten dollars per ton  
and Toll Free**

Sacramento, July 17, 1867 C. CROCKER

### **Teamsters Ahoy!**

I desire to contract for the hauling of 2000 Tons of Iron from Cisco to Coburn's Station to be delivered in 90 days. Snow all the way and Splendid Sleighing! A Liberal price will be paid.

Chas. Crocker, Superintendent, CPRR  
page 5 col 6 1/20/68 Sacramento Union

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



For a time Soda Springs was the second most active sheep shipping center in the country. In spring sheep herders would leave the Central Valley and head for the high mountain meadows that kept sheep healthier, wool cleaner, produced more live births, produced more multiple births.

To get from Summit Valley to the meadows below Castle Pk. and beyond sheep went up Castle Cr. To make way for them this rock wall was built to separate the sheep from the creek.



A little further up the route an underpass was built so the sheep could go under I-80. See the August, September, and October, '13 [Heirlooms](#) for more on the sheep business 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](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass them on to the editor - see page 2

\*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.

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Donner Summit Historical Society.org

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\_\_\_\_\_



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