

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

September, 2019 issue #133

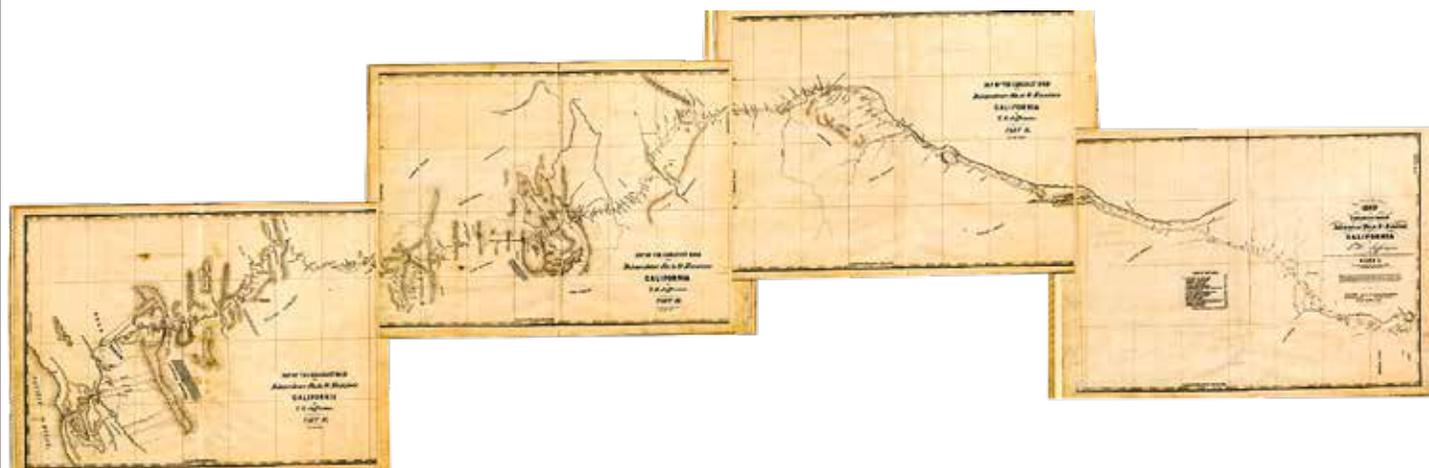
## Map of the Emigrant Road from Independence Mo. to S<sup>t</sup>. Francisco [sic] California

T. H. Jefferson, 1849

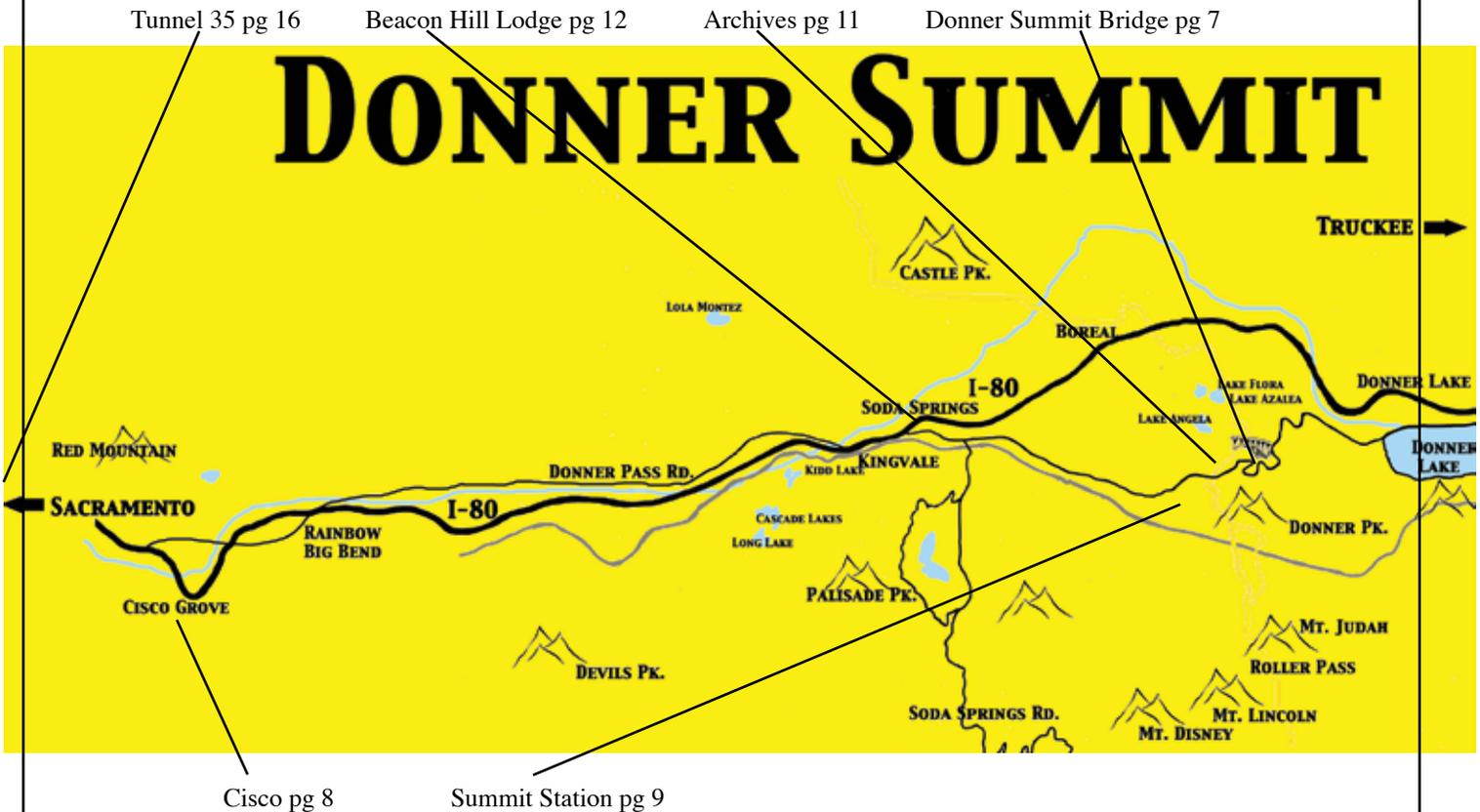
The map below, and the emigrants' guide of which it's a part, have been sitting in the DSHS [Heirloom](#) computer for a couple of years, getting pushed from month to month in favor of other stories. We've not done anything about the emigrants for some time so here we'll pass on important advice in case you are contemplating an authentic trip across the country. We've not included all the advice of even the whole map of the route so when you get serious you might want to read the whole thing. Mr. Jefferson, the author, has a lot of good detail.

Mr. Jefferson traveled the entire route to California "with a party of Emigrants with wagons drawn by oxen. All the streams of water and springs are delineated as well as the daily courses, distances and camps made by the party. With this map for his guide the emigrant or traveller can start upon the journey and pilot himself through." Mr. Jefferson made his map partly using a map made from one of the John C. Fremont exploration trips.

The map on page 4 is Part IV of the entire map which is a few feet long. The map on page three is a small section extracted from Part IV so you can see what Donner Summit and environs were like and named in 1849. Here also is a note printed on Part IV noting that the hardest part of the journey is from the summit to California. To make the point stronger note the graves marked on



# Story Locations in this Issue



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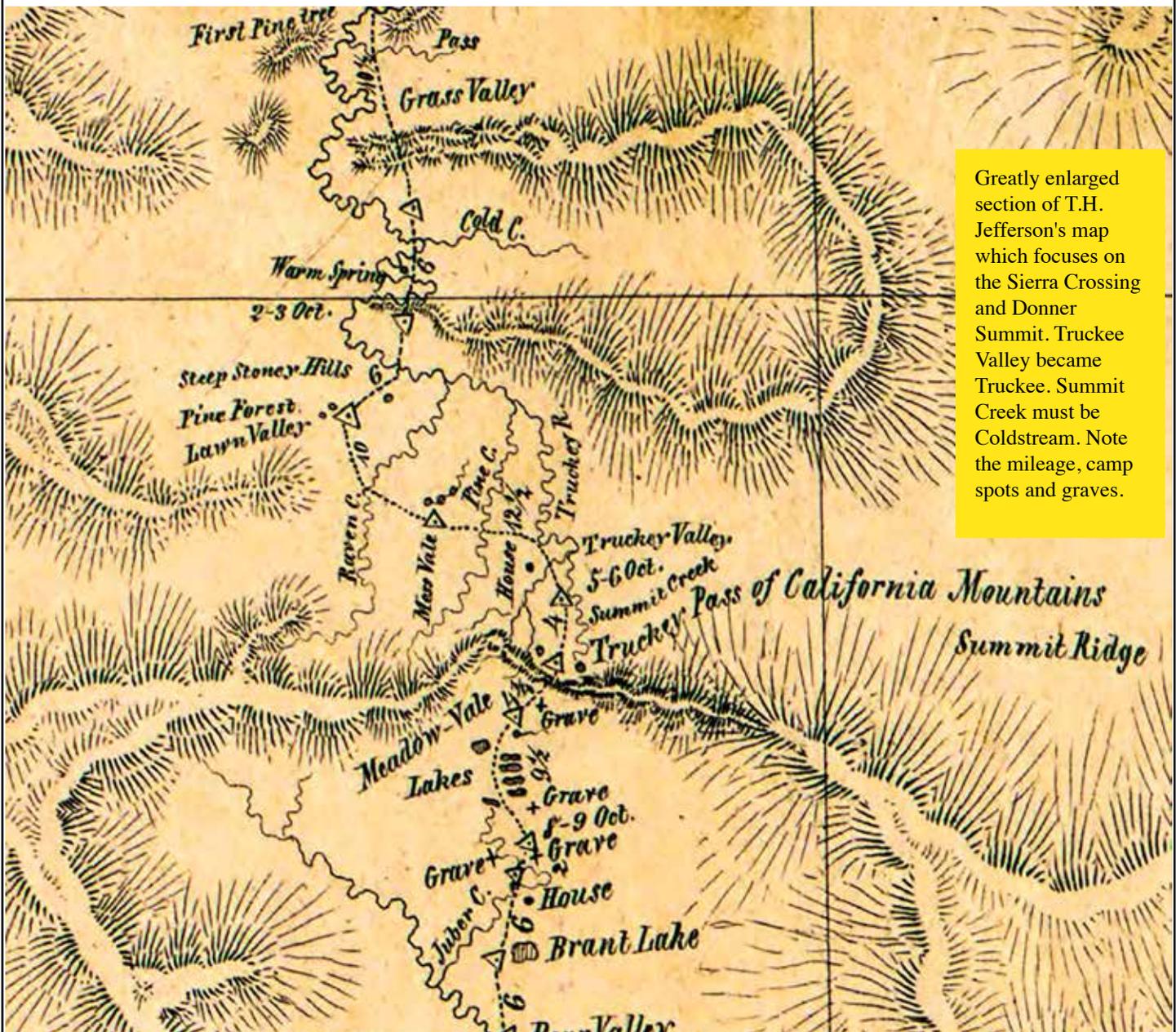
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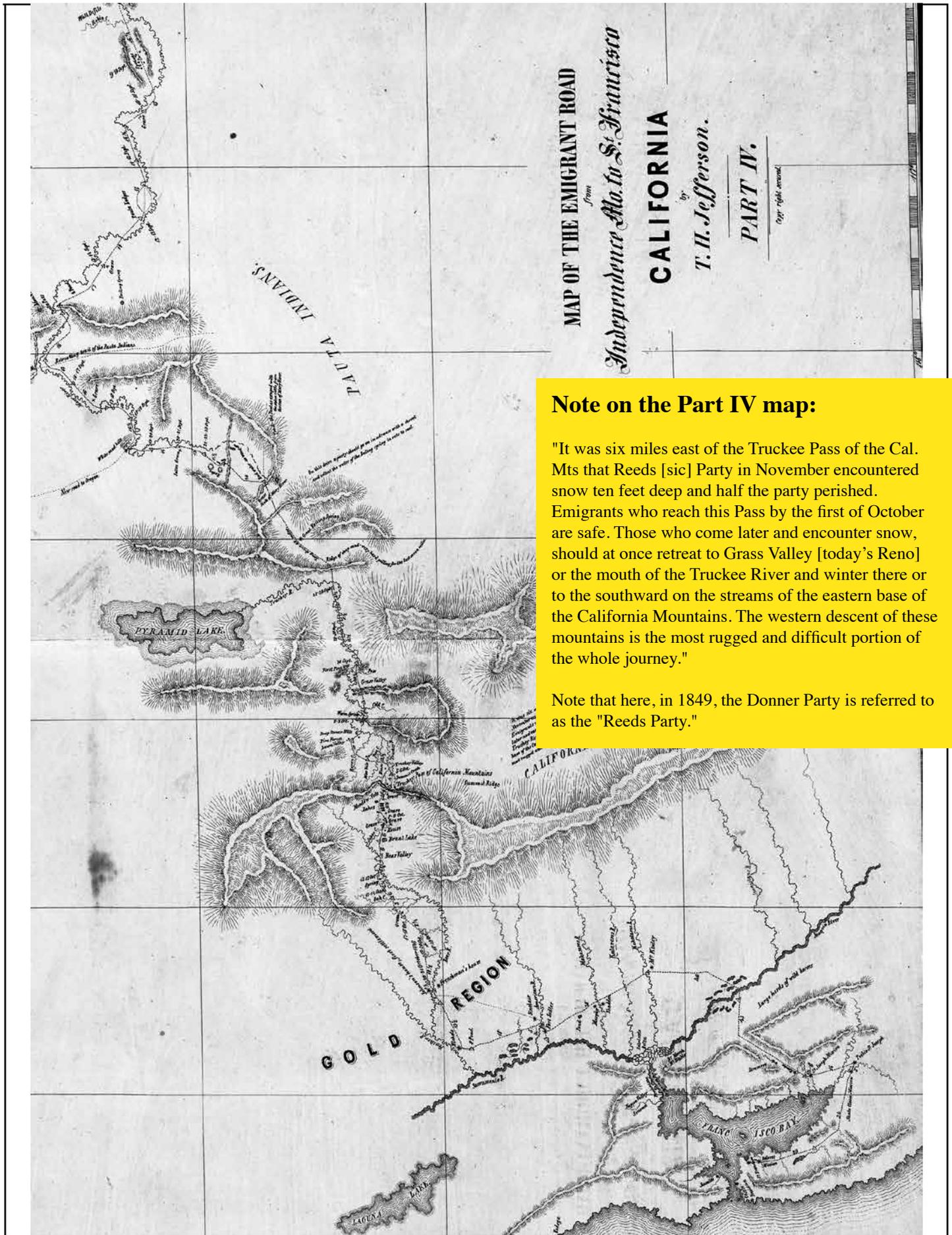
the map. They must have been grim reminders to the emigrants that they were not yet in California and winter was coming soon, if it had not arrived yet. All the emigrants knew what had happened to the Donner Party and if that story was not immediately on their minds there was a reminder printed on the map at the Sierra crossing. Look closely at the map and you can see where Jefferson's group camped each night. Jefferson apparently made up the names for the geographic features and since his guide had little circulation the names did not take hold. For comparison, Jefferson and his group reached "Summit Creek" which is apparently today's Coldstream Canyon, on October 5/6. The Donners did not get to Donner Lake on the north side of the ridge that separated them from Coldstream and Roller Pass until October 31. By then it was almost too late.

The map and accompanying guide was reprinted in 1945 by the California Historical Society and contains an introduction by George R. Stewart\*. Stewart says Jefferson was part of the large Russell party that crossed the country in 1846 and that Jefferson was later part of Lansford Hastings' company. That would mean he was in a group just ahead of the Donner Party. Apparently he made his guide in 1849 after returning to the east at some point. Stewart was able to find no references to Mr. Jefferson in any of the 1846 works about the emigrant movement. He left his guide before disappearing into history.



Greatly enlarged section of T.H. Jefferson's map which focuses on the Sierra Crossing and Donner Summit. Truckee Valley became Truckee. Summit Creek must be Coldstream. Note the mileage, camp spots and graves.

\*author of many books including The California Trail, Ordeal By Hunger, etc. and for whom Mt. Stewart on Donner Summit is named. Take a look at our 20 Mile Museum sign for Mr. Stewart either on our website or in person on Donner Pass Rd. above the bridge in front of Mt. Stewart.



**MAP OF THE EMIGRANT ROAD**  
*from*  
*Independence Mo. to S. Francisco*  
**CALIFORNIA**  
*by*  
*T. H. Jefferson.*  
**PART IV.**  
*Copyright reserved.*

**Note on the Part IV map:**

"It was six miles east of the Truckee Pass of the Cal. Mts that Reeds [sic] Party in November encountered snow ten feet deep and half the party perished. Emigrants who reach this Pass by the first of October are safe. Those who come later and encounter snow, should at once retreat to Grass Valley [today's Reno] or to the mouth of the Truckee River and winter there or to the southward on the streams of the eastern base of the California Mountains. The western descent of these mountains is the most rugged and difficult portion of the whole journey."

Note that here, in 1849, the Donner Party is referred to as the "Reeds Party."

Mr. Jefferson's guide for emigrants, in case you want to go, is much more detailed than other guides available for your cross country journey. You will get detail here you cannot get elsewhere. Still, our legal department says we should still encourage you to read the whole booklet so as to preclude any liability because we did not include something particularly salient. We must also say we have not actually trail tested this advice ourselves.

The journey across the country is not a pleasure trip. It is accompanied by "hardship and privation" but all that can be overcome by those with "stout" hearts, in good condition and properly outfitted. Small parties of 10-12 work best. "Large parties are to be deprecated." If you decide to just use a pack horse you can cross the country in 60-90 days. If you decide to take a wagon it will take 4-6 months.

Taking only horses, not bothering with wagons, is to be preferred but if you do that, women should not take side saddles. They should wear hunting frocks, loose pantaloons, and men's hats and shoes. Do not count on game. "Dependence on game is precarious," you'll wear out your horse and it will slow your progress. Carry enough breadstuffs for the whole journey and don't take unnecessary items.

For those taking horses only, your sleeping tent should be 7ft. long, 4ft. high, and 5ft. broad. It will cost about \$5. The floor should be oil cloth, made of the same material as the tent but painted with linseed oil. Be sure to wash your horse's back each evening. Bring along a strong umbrella for protection from the desert from the sun. Note here that this practical advice is not seen in any of artists' renditions of the emigrant trail. No doubt the umbrellas were left out so as not to offend viewers' sensibilities about the courage our ancestors faced crossing the country. A bunch of people with umbrellas would not be as stirring a site as the emigrants in "American Progress" (right). Without a wagon you'll make 20-30 miles a day.

For those with wagons, take a "Farmers' wagon" made of seasoned wood. The floor should be slightly concave. The sides should be two feet high or so and the sides should be above the bed so water can run out. Wheels fall apart by Ft. Laramie because of the dry

climate so take extra care to be sure they won't cause "vexation." Wheels should be made by "superior workmen" in the driest weather so they won't shrink. Wagons will cost \$60-\$75

You should not take more than 1,000 to 1,500 lbs. in your wagon to be pulled by two yoke of oxen (four oxen). You should have an extra yoke just in case. Don't take loose cattle except one for milk. If she becomes troublesome kill her for meat. Oxen go about 2 miles per hour. That will be about fifteen miles a day.

In taking enough "bread stuff" for the journey be sure to take unbolted wheat flour and Indian corn meal. Relying solely on fine flour has a "bad effect upon the bowels and is unwholesome."

Buffalo meat is "sweet and wholesome" but killing one requires skill. Their skulls are too hard for bullets. Aim behind the shoulder after approaching from the leeward. If you don't practice your pistol shot first, "beware."

Wear sack coat and pantaloons of "stout sheep's grey cloth - very large and strong." Deer skin hunting shirt and pants are good too as are red flannel shirts, cotton socks, and stout shoes or brogans. Stout white felt hats are also necessities.

General advice: avoid partnerships. Provide for yourself and "expect to take care of yourself." The only reason to join with others is for protection against Indians. Appoint no captains and make no by-laws. "Be quiet; attend to your business; make no promises." Feel free to leave one small group and join another. It's best for small groups to travel separated by a day or so rather than go in large groups. "Try and go in company with quiet, peaceable men - avoid braggarts; they perform the least." "Those who go ahead get

the best grass and clean camp grounds."

Horses and mules are more likely to stall in mud holes than oxen. Don't worry about Indians. "An Indian values his life as much as you do, and thinks twice before he molests resolute men."

Don't put more



than 200 lbs. on a pack horse.

The cost of an outfit for a packer with two horses is \$150-\$200. For a man on foot with one pack horse, \$100. A wagon and three yoke of oxen will cost \$250-\$300. Those amounts include all provisions and equipment.

Jefferson then describes the actual trip and what to expect in different places: hot springs, alkali, lack of grass, desert, long drives, where to get good water, how to get across the desert and how long to expect, etc. "The most difficult portion of the whole journey is the passage of the Californian Mountains, and particularly the descent of the western side. The only serious difficulty, however, is when you arrive late in the season, with a short supply of bread stuff, and encounter snow ten or fifteen feet deep."

Jefferson closes with a little editorial saying that

"we want a good wagon trail across this continent, and we must have one. It will not cost much to improve a few bad places... At convenient distances upon this road military provision posts should be established. This journey then would become a pleasure trip."

"Why don't the government do something immediately that will be of practical utility to the emigrant or traveller across our own territory?"

Of course less than twenty years later the government did step in enabling the transcontinental railroad which supplanted the emigrant road.

## Things you might like to take

Don't take fat bacon  
Take lean ham  
Smoked beef smoked salmon,  
herring, sardines,  
Preserved meats  
Soups in tins.  
Cheese in tin case.  
Olive oil  
Butter  
Meat and grease packed in tin  
Rice  
Beans,  
Peas  
Butter crackers  
Soda biscuit  
Ship bread  
Dried fruit  
Honey  
Preserves  
Vinegar  
Pickles  
Pepper  
Salt  
  
Tea  
Coffee  
Single barrel rifle (\$25)  
One brace of pistols  
1-5 lbs. of powder  
percussion caps  
bullets  
and tools to make more  
sheath knife  
whetstone  
Mackinaw blankets  
axes  
hatchet  
sickle  
spade  
saw  
gimblet  
nails,  
tacks  
needles  
pins

thread  
thimble  
scissors  
wax  
shoe leather  
hammer  
wagon parts  
rope  
cotton cloth  
camp stool  
bees wax and tallow for  
greasing wheels  
chain  
soap  
candles  
lantern  
camp kettle  
back pan  
frying pan  
tin ware  
coffee pot  
water keg  
medicines and herbs  
trade goods for Indians

If you want to be  
"annoyed" by coffee take  
along a coffee grinder  
bolted to the side of the  
wagon.

"Water drinkers" fare the  
best.

Cooking is an annoyance.

# Donner Summit Road Improvements, 1934

Oakland Tribune August 26, 1935 Automotive Section

As you can imagine, given the amount of history in our august historical publication, The Heirloom, there must be a lot of research going on. Indeed, there is a whole crew ferreting out the history of Donner Summit. Beneath the unimposing DSHS is room humming with computers and bleary-eyed researchers gathering the information for story after story. Those stories have gone to populate now, 133 Heirloom issues. That's a lot of history.

One whole squad is devoted to combing old newspapers for Donner Summit related stories and since success and remuneration are based on results, imagine the joy the researcher felt when this newspaper article from a 1934 issue of the Oakland Tribune came up.

“One of the outstanding highway reconstruction jobs in the state is the road through Auburn and the Sierra to Donner Lake and Truckee and points east.” With the 1933 reconstruction the highway was “one of the finest in the mountain area...” To help the public understand the context the top left picture shows Donner Peak. The dark line across the middle is the snowsheds of the railroad. Next is the Emigrant statue at the State Park and to the right the Donner Summit Bridge. The car is an Oldsmobile from an East Bay dealership. With the reconstruction of the road a trip that took a “day of hard driving” could be done in a few hours.

**AUTOMOTIVE SECTION**  
OAKLAND TRIBUNE  
OAKLAND, CALIF.  
AUGUST 26, 1934

## Auburn-Truckee Route Now High Gear Road To Summit

One of the outstanding highway reconstruction jobs in the state is the road through Auburn and the Sierra to Donner Lake and Truckee and points east. Within the last year major reconstruction jobs have been completed and the highway is now one of the finest in the mountain area of the west, a high-gear road all the way. At the upper left is a view of Donner Lake, near Truckee. In the center is the famous Donner monument and at the right is the bridge across the deep rock gorge at the summit of the Sierra above Donner Lake. At the right below is one of the beautiful mountain streams near the summit. The car is an Oldsmobile from the Oldsmobile dealers in the Eastbay. A trip that formerly required a day of hard driving can now be made in a few hours.

**Famous Road Rebuilt, Offers Scenic Tour in Mountains**  
By R. J. ROBERTSON.  
Summer is in full swing in the high Sierra mountains. Recreationists are flocking to the high mountain lakes in the high mountains. One of the most beautiful scenes in the state is the road through the mountains. The road is now in the best condition in the state. The road is now in the best condition in the state. The road is now in the best condition in the state.

**TIRE MILEAGE NOW INCREASED**  
The tire mileage has been increased. The tire mileage has been increased. The tire mileage has been increased. The tire mileage has been increased.

**Borden Highway To Be Oiled**  
Oiling operations will be started on the Borden Highway. Oiling operations will be started on the Borden Highway. Oiling operations will be started on the Borden Highway.

**Lake Tahoe Road Nears Completion**  
The reconstruction of the road around Lake Tahoe is nearly completed. The reconstruction of the road around Lake Tahoe is nearly completed. The reconstruction of the road around Lake Tahoe is nearly completed.

**Roads to Recreational Areas In Good Condition for Travel**  
Road conditions on main routes are in good condition. Road conditions on main routes are in good condition. Road conditions on main routes are in good condition.

**AMERICA'S GREAT TRUCK VALUE**  
The FORD V-8 alone offers all these 5 important truck features

The old road used to go through the snowsheds until a “hole was bored under the snow sheds.” The new paved road bypasses all that and goes over one of the “most picturesque bridges in the west.” Improving that old road was a challenge with huge amounts of powder needed to blow up the granite. “Gradually, year by year, bad stretches of the road were rebuilt, rerouted, curves eliminate, and grades reduced, until the highway now is easy to drive and is kept in good condition all year round.” Grades used to be as much as 20% requiring hours of “low and second gear.”

That the road was improved was one boon to motorists. In addition, snow removal equipment was kept on both sides of the summit. Snow plows and power shovels are always ready for instant mobilization “as soon as snows start.”

Elsewhere the State was also finishing the surfacing of the last few miles of the road around Lake Tahoe. Soon the “motorists will be able to enjoy the spectacular ride of 75 miles around Lake Tahoe over surfaced road.” A new G3 rubber was being introduced by Goodyear that would increase safety. The new tires could “take it, literally, on the chin without flinching.” Mileage would be increased by 43% too, over any other Goodyear tire.

# The Snowsheds, 1878

## A Trip from the Summit by Railroad

We're still in the sesquicentennial year of the transcontinental railroad and there's still so much to share.

19<sup>th</sup> Century writers had such a way with words. This excerpt comes from [Between the Gates](#) by Benjamin Taylor in 1878. [Between the Gates](#) was a guide book sold by the railroad to passengers. We ran another excerpt previously in the March, '19 [Heirloom](#). Here we see the snowsheds described.

Do you remember the old covered bridges that used to stand with their feet in the streams like cows in midsummer, and had little windows all along for the fitful checkers of light? Imagine those bridges grown to giants, from five hundred to two thousand feet long, and strong as a fort. Imagine some of them bent into immense curves that, as you enter, dwindle away in the distance like the inside of a mighty powder-horn, and then lay forty-five miles of them zigzag up and down the Sierras and the Rockies, and wherever the snow drifts wildest and deepest, and you have the snow-sheds of the mountains, without which the cloudy pantings of the engines would be as powerless as the breath of a singing sparrow. They are just bridges the other side up. They are made to lift the white winter and shoulder the avalanche. But you can hardly tell how provoking they are sometimes, when they clip off the prospect as a pair of shears snips a thread, just as a love of a valley or a dread of a cañon, or something deeper or grander or higher or ruder catches your eye, "Out, brief candle!" and your sight is extinguished in a snow-shed. But why complain amid these wonders because you have to wink!

wherever the snow drifts wildest and deepest, and you have the snow-sheds of the mountains, without which the cloudy pantings of the engines would be as powerless as the breath of a singing sparrow.

Summit Station is reached, with its sky parlors, and grand Mount Lincoln, from whose summit it is two miles "plumb down" to the city by the sea, and we have a mile and a half of it to swoop. The two engines begin to talk a little. One says, "Brakes!" and the other, "All right!" "Take a rest!" says the leader. "Done!" says the wheeler, and they just let go their nervous breaths, and respire as gently as a pair of twin infants. The brakes grasp the wheels like a gigantic thumb and finger, the engines hold back in the breeching, but down we go, into the hollows of the mountains; along craggy spines, as angry as a porcupine's and narrow as the way to glory; out upon breezy hills red as fields of battle; off upon Dariens of isthmuses that inspire a feeling that wings will be next in order. Sparks fly from the trucks like fiery fountains from the knife-grinder's wheel, there is a sullen *gride* of expostulation beneath the cars, but down

we go. Should the water freeze in the engines' stomachs, "the law that swings worlds would whirl the train through!"

The country looks as if a herd of mastodons with swinish curiosity had been turned loose to root it inside out. It is the search for gold. Mountains have been rummaged like so many potato-hills. When pickax and powder and cradles fail, and the "wash-bowl on my knee" becomes what Celestial John talks—broken China —then as yonder! Do you see those

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Snowsheds at Cisco, 1908





SUMMIT STATION WITH WEST END OF TUNNEL.  
C.P.R.R. WATKINS' NEW SERIES.

streams of water playing from iron pipes upon the red hill's broad side? They are bombarding it with water, and washing it all away. The six-inch batteries throw water about as solid under the pressure as cannon-shot. A blow from it would kill you as quick as the club of Hercules. Boulders dance about in it like kernels in a corn-popper. I give the earnest artillerymen a toast: "Success to the douche! The heavier the nugget the lighter the heart."

The train is swaying from side to side along the ridges, like a swift skater upon a lake. It is four thousand feet above the sea. It shoulders the mountains to the right and left. It swings around this one, and doubles back upon that one like a hunted fox, and drives bows-on at another like a mad ship. Verily, it is the world's high-tide! You have been watching a surly old giant ahead. There is no climbing him, nor routing him, nor piercing him; but the engines run right on as if they didn't see him. Everybody wears an air of anxious expectancy. We know we are nearing the spot where they let men down the precipice by ropes from the mountain-top, like so many gatherers of samphire, and they nicked and niched a foothold in the dizzy wall, and carved a shelf like the ledge of a curved mantelpiece, and scared away the eagles to let the train swing round.

The mountains at our left begin to stand off, as if to get a

Above, Snowsheds on Donner Summit about 1875 by Carleton Watkins. The Sheds coming to the center of the photograph lead to Tunnel 6. The white building in the background is the Summit Hotel, version I, and includes Summit Station mentioned in the text. Today's Donner Ski Ranch is to the right. Mt. Lincoln is off to the left.

good view of the catastrophe. The broad cañons dwindle to galleries and alcoves, with the depth and the distance. You look down upon the top of a forest, upon a strange spectacle. It resembles a green and crinkled sea full of little scalloped billows, as if it had been overlaid with shells shading out from richest emerald to lightest green. Nature is making ready for something. The road grows narrower and wilder. It ends in empty air. There is nothing beyond but the blue! And yet the engines pull stolidly on.

Down brakes! We have reached the edge of the world, and beyond is the empyrean! You stand upon the platform. The engines are out of sight. They are gone. The train doubles the headland, halts upon the frontlet of Cape Horn!—clings to the face of the precipice like a swallow's-nest.

The Grand Cañon is beneath you. It opens out as with visible motion. The sun sweeps aslant the valley like a driving rain of gold, and strikes the side of the mountain a thousand feet

from the base. There, twenty five hundred feet sheer down, and that means almost a half mile of precipice, flows in placid beauty the American River. You venture to the nervous verge. You see two parallel hair-lines in the bottom of the valley. They are the rails of a narrow-gauge railroad. You see bushes that are trees, martin-boxes that are houses, brodered

handkerchiefs that are gardens, checked counterpanes that are fields, cattle that are cats, sheep that are prairie dogs, sparrows that are poultry. You look away into the unfloored chambers of mid-air with a pained thought that the world has escaped you, has gone down like a setting star, has died and left you alive!

## Update on Transcontinental RR Construction, 1867

Like the Heirloom the Scientific American is an august publication. It is devoted today to science and the Heirloom is devoted to history so there is no overlap or competition. The Scientific American used to focus on new technologies as well as science and the Heirloom didn't exist so there was no competition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century either.

With two years to go to the completion the Scientific American reported on the progress of the transcontinental railroad, the engineering marvel of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In a longer form this article appeared in the May 18, 1867 issue of Scientific American (page 318 if you go looking).

### "THE PACIFIC RAILROAD — ITS SEVERAL GRAND DIVISIONS.

"The Pacific Railroad is to owe its anticipated early completion (1870) to three causes : the unequalled material intensity of California life and enterprise ; the opportune interposition of the cheap Chinese labor ; and the judicious subsidy of the national government, which allows each company — that building from the west and that building from the east — all the road it can build, with the loan of national bonds to the amount of \$16,000 a mile for the same. The Californians (Central Pacific Railroad Company of California) have shown their mettle in this competition, and have driven their end of the road forward with an energy that has accomplished wonders. The whole mountain ascent and descent is now nearly graded, and most of the heaviest portion completed and running. The chief difficulties of the undertaking had to be encountered on that part of the line. The dreaded barrier of the Sierras, of impassable altitude and obstructed with impassable snows in their season, was met in the first one hundred miles. Before bold determination and able engineering these difficulties have dwindled so that, considering relative prices of all things, the road has not proved after all so much "steeper" in cost or grade than some others built long before, and the expected impassable snows have proved sufficient to make only three days interruption of trains in a whole winter as severe as the last. The estimated cost of the ninety-four miles in operation since last fall, with the remaining eleven miles to the summit, was above that of any road heretofore built... When 150 miles are completed, which is expected in July next, the costly work will be done, and the total construction cost will be, it is now supposed, about \$15,000,000, or \$100,000 per mile. There will then remain 575 miles to Salt Lake City, which it is supposed will be built for \$60,000 per mile, and in one fourth the proportional time of building the mountain section.

"... The time now occupied by trains is six hours : thus running nearly sixteen miles an hour. Fourteen tunnels have been made or are making, to secure the easiest possible grades, the longest of which, piercing the crest of the summit, is 1,658 feet in length, and lacks 500 feet of being completed, but is going forward with a large force of hands, working night and day. Protection from snow slides has to be provided in some places by sheds adapted to shoot the snow slides across and clear of the track. Two miles of these sheds will be required. The highest elevation is 7,042 feet above the sea level, or three times as high as railroads have ever before been constructed on this continent. Large working parties have been employed at the summit all winter : which reads singularly when we think of the exploring party under Fremont, that perished almost entirely in the attempt to pass the snows of the Sierras a few years ago. The earnings of the road are already nearly \$10,000 a mile per annum, in its fragmentary condition ; and even without natural growth and the addition of through traffic, would yield at the same rate a handsome profit for the whole capital to be invested."

Scientific American went on to talk about the Union Pacific Railroad which "is not disparaged by comparison with its western rival" because they are apparently not as parochial as we at the Heirloom are. Although not "disparaged" here, The Union Pacific is in second place to our historical emphases.

# From the DSHS Archives



These two photographs date to the 1930's and come from Herb and Lena Fredericks' album at the DSHS, donated by their niece, Milli Martin. The Fredericks owned the Norden Store and Lodge and ran the post office. The Norden post office now resides next to the Soda Springs post office in the general store building in "downtown" Soda Springs, both zip codes (95728 & 95724) occupying the same hallway.

# From the DSHS Archives

## Beacon Hill Lodge, 1968



Beacon Hill Lodge sat next to today's NancyO Glass Gallery. You can still see the concrete foundation remnants as well as the swimming pool. Local kids took swimming lessons there for years.

The lodge burned down in the early 1970's.



# Book Review

## Ghosts of Gold Mountain

### The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad

Gordon Chang 2019 248 pages and then 60 more pages of notes and index.

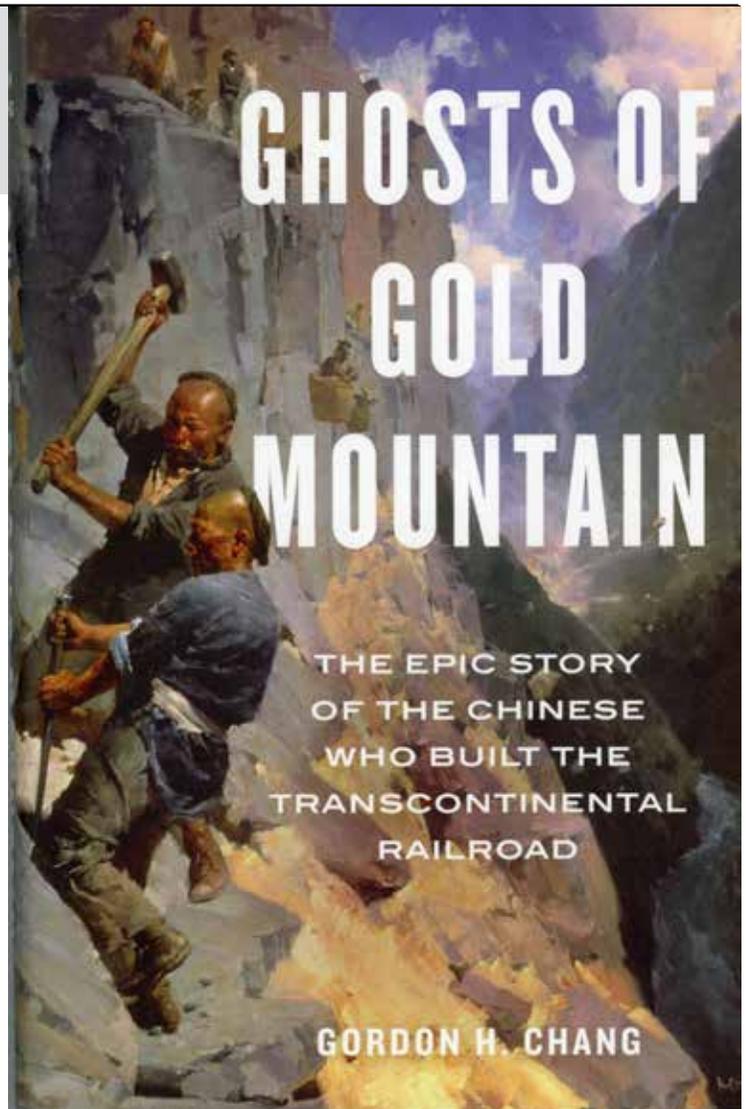
There have been a lot of books written about the Transcontinental Railroad so one might think that all the interpretations of the topic would have been covered. There have been no interpretations of the story focused on the Chinese, however, and given that they made up eighty to ninety percent of the work force, that's a huge oversight and has been corrected by Dr. Chang's Ghosts of Gold Mountain.

Without the Chinese the Transcontinental Railroad could not have been built. Despite the difficulty of the work and the sacrifices they made, the Chinese did not get credit at the time or even one hundred years later at the centennial celebration. With this book, one hundred fifty years after the completion, their contributions have been recognized. In his introduction Chang says this is "the first book to attempt to fully address the inadequacy, amnesia, and insults, that for a century and a half, have relegated the Chinese workers to the margins of history."

Chang does a marvelous job.

The introduction immediately personalizes the story with one known Chinese worker, Hung Wah. That draws the reader in and bypasses the anonymous workforce of popular memory. Hung Wah appears again and again throughout the text to focus particular aspects.

The Chinese were critical to the railroad's building. One of the few recognitions of their contribution came in an 1869 benediction by the Reverend John Todd who said, "The road could never have been built without the Chinamen." That contemporary reference aside, the predominant view has been as Chang says, "the Railroad Chinese remain silent spikes to this day." They left no letters, no diaries, very few stories, and very few pictures. Their individual names were not even recorded. "This presents a formidable challenge to the historian today. How does one give voice to the voiceless?"



How does one recover a sense of lived experience if there is nothing from the central actors themselves?" Chang gives them the voice by covering every conceivable aspect of the "Railroad Chinese". Chang uses not only previously used history texts but adds a richer description with materials previously ignored or which were too challenging, such as Chinese language material from China, poetry, folk songs, interviews made decades after the railroad, missionary letters, Chinese language periodicals, Chinese officials' diaries, and extrapolating and applying other Chinese experiences on other railroads to the transcontinental effort. Putting it all together Chang calls the Chinese story "an epic story of dreams, courage, accomplishment, tragedy, and extraordinary determination." That kind of analysis has not

"No account of the experience of working on the line for the CPRR by a Chinese is known to survive. We can only imagine what the lived experience may have been like..."

Gordon Chang

been done before.

Most of the “Railroad Chinese” came from Guangdong in southeast China with about one quarter of the population of the province leaving for “Gold Mountain” (California) where a folk song encapsulated their hopes, “Marry your daughter to a Gold Mountain guest./ They would come back home with glory and wealth.” It wasn’t just wealth the Chinese were after though. They were escaping a densely populated area of China where there were few prospects. Chang describes the area, the history, social connections of people, cultural interactions, events in China at the time, the Opium Wars, Taiping Rebellion, and the lure of gold in California. “No other place in the world then possessed such unspoiled wonders and attractions” than California. So the Chinese, like other immigrants to California, came for better lives. Many returned to China or sent money back. More stayed in California to live. Many died.

Chang covers the methods of going from China to California and elsewhere in the world. He covers the arrival in California. Describing the arrival of Huie Kin in California we get a sense of the hope the Chinese had. He said he could “hardly contain himself” as he arrived in the “land of our dreams”. “The feeling that welled up in us was indescribable.” “Everything was so strange and exciting.” He was helped by Chinese already there. This sounds no different from other immigrants’ experiences but has not been described before and the focus on a particular immigrant humanizes the story.

Of course Chang talks about work on the railroad and how hard it was, no matter the occupation and he describes the camps in which the Chinese lived. Talking about working conditions in the tunnels he vividly describes,

“Imagine the noise, vibration, fatigue, and monotony but also the hellish confinement in those tunnels, lit only by oil lamp or candlelight! The air was thick with rock dust, acrid fumes lingered from previous explosions, water dripped and flowed from fissures in the cold rock and sharp heavy icicles hung down in the winter. Air temperature ranged from cold to frigid. Rock fragments flew through the air and into eyes and mouths. A moment of distracted attention, mistiming, or simple error and there would be

smashed hand, arm, or finger. Work in that great dark maw of the mountain never stopped.”

Other books talk about or focus on railroad construction but Ghosts... goes into every conceivable aspect of the Chinese experience. Chang talks about organization, the conditions Chinese faced, food, sex, population sizes, occupations, the histories of the few who can be identified, marriage practices, customs, recreational activities, health, festivals, spirituality and spirits, remedies, and even how things must have smelled.

Surprisingly the Chinese had many things from China, the result of extensive supply channels. The demands of the work are conveyed by the details of construction, diary entries

by non-Chinese, and Alfred A. Hart pictures of construction and geography. Looking at the few pictures of Chinese workers does not convey a sense of the work or the danger, but the evidence from photographs of “the massive amount of cleared ground, moved earth, and shaped roadbed evidences the stupendous effort expended” by the Chinese. Pictures don’t lie.

One can’t talk about the railroad without focusing on Donner Summit in the high Sierra where the workforce was mired in tunnel construction for two years. There are no written records of what the conditions were like with the many dangers and huge snowfalls. Chang resorts to archeology though and various other records and photographs. From those we can glimpse life in the Sierra.

Talking about the Chinese strike on the summit gets into a discussion of relative pay, disparities in job skills and white-Chinese interactions.

One of the chapters in the book is titled “Truckee” which takes the story of the Chinese away from working conditions on the railroad to conditions in town, leisure activities, a description of Truckee, the numbers of Chinese, their occupations in town, games played, and the kinds of Chinese businesses. This also gives us something that’s not been

“an epic story of dreams, courage, accomplishment, tragedy, and extraordinary determination.”

Gordon Chang

## 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.

We young Chinese saw many strange thing; the most remarkable being the steam-engine. We were told that those iron rails running parallel for a long distance were the “fire-car road.” I was wondering how a car could urn on them, and driven by fire, too, as I understood it, when a locomotive whizzed by, screeching an ringing its bell. That as the first iron-horse we had ever seen, and it made a profound impression on us.

Yan Phou Lee on seeing his first steam engine.

available in other studies.

One point of interest is Chang’s wading into the story of Chinese hanging from cliff faces to cut the roadbed and set off explosions. He gives the arguments against the veracity of the story which appeared apparently in some railroad publicity about 1927. He explains how it could not have worked and that “it was said” “There simply was no textual or visual evidence to substantiate the claim...” That fits many modern historians’ analyses. Then Chang reverses it completely and provides a number of contemporary sources validating the “legend” of the Chinese in baskets hanging over the cliffs at Cape Horn. Isabella Bird, traveling across the country in 1873 mentions it for example in her book, A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains (see our October and November, ’18 Heirlooms). Chang also lists a couple of contemporary newspaper accounts. Apparently the Chinese did hang in baskets. Note too, there is a completely inadvertent reference in this Heirloom on page 9, column 1.

Almost finally, the book talks about what happened to the Chinese after the railroad. There were lots of opportunities as the Chinese spread across the country. Chinese went to work on other railroads, started businesses, and went into agriculture. With their increasing numbers Chang offers quote after quote complimentary of the Chinese. Then, at the end of the book, there is a discussion of the numbers of Chinese who died in the building of the railroad and then the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century growing anti-Chinese actions and sentiments including expulsion, the Truckee Method (of expulsion), murder, riots, lynchings, scalplings, mutilations, and other cruelty ending with the Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882. It was first vetoed by President Arthur because he recognized the Chinese contributions to the country in building the railroads. Congress didn’t care about the contributions though and voted to override the veto.

That would be a depressing ending but then there is a conclusion that is more inspiring as it focuses on successful Chinese and their legacies, all made possible by the “Railroad Chinese.”

## Old Time Sunday Drive

**Next Time  
Take Scenic  
Old Hwy 40  
instead of I-80**

Historic Towns  
Interesting Scenery  
Fascinating History  
Picnic Spots  
A Slower Pace

Take a look at our guide to Old Highway 40: turn by turn instructions from Rocklin to Truckee, broken into four legs and including pictures and history. Available on line on the brochure page of [donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://donnersummithistoricalsociety.org), at the DSBS (at the blinking light in “downtown” Soda Springs, or the visitors’ centers in Truckee and Auburn.



And while you are at it, check out the 20 Mile Museum - interpretive signs from Nyack to below Donner Summit on Old 40. Information at [www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Above is Tunnel 35, built in 1924 and still in use today. Once the original 15 tunnels of the Sierra's transcontinental crossing were done the railroad didn't stop as it worked to improve and shorten its route by double tracking, eliminating curves, etc. This tunnel sits above I-80 just east of the Highway 20 turnoff. In the background is Old Man Mountain and someday a steam train will come through offering the opportunity for a spectacular picture.

**Odds & Ends of Donner Summit** 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.

## Fan Mail

Our June notice contained the wrong link for a little while sending some people to the April issue instead.

I must have somehow missed reading the April issue, because I happily (while certainly noticing its April date) devoured all its new-to-me material! It all works out. I will now get to read the June issue. Thanks for all your great newsletters.

Chip Couril.

Dear DSHS,  
We love the newsletters - we enjoy reading it "cover-to-cover" when it arrives in our in-box. Good Good Job!

Question: have you ever considered a hard-bound edition of past years? (newsletters that is) I would be very interested in purchasing a copy....

Sue Bell and Tom Hallendorf

Sue Bell has an interesting idea which the [Heirloom](#) staff has contemplated. The problem is there are just not enough hours in the day or our staff is not large enough. Meanwhile all previous issues reside on our website with indices so you can track down what you're interested in.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[Donner Summit Historical Society.org](http://Donner Summit Historical Society.org)

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)

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

\_\_\_\_ Friend Membership - \$100

\_\_\_\_ Sponsor - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Patron - \$500

\_\_\_\_ Benefactor - \$1000

\_\_\_\_ Business - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Business Sponsor - \$1000

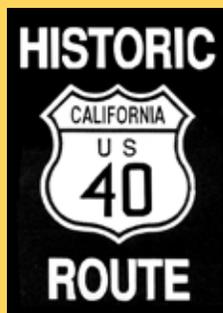
Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

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

\_\_\_\_\_



# Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



**20 Mile Museum**  
Take the Scenic Route  
Along Old Highway 40  
on Donner Summit



Pick up or download the brochure  
at the DSHS  
at <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>

**50 interpretive signs along Old 40**  
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>

# Margie Powell Hike, 2019

Margie Powell was the inspiration, energy, and guiding force behind the establishment of the Donner Summit Historical Society. Her passion was local history. Unfortunately she passed away of ALS. Each year since, in her memory, we have hosted the Margie Powell Hike. This year the hikes on August 10 and 11 were down Summit Canyon. About sixty people participated and a good time was had by all as they heard some of the many history stories of Donner Summit.



Above: on the Lincoln Highway



Above, left, and below - most important: the lunch stop overlooking Donner Lake. Bottom right: coming down from the knoll at the top of f the pass to the Lincoln Highway



top left, bottom left and center right courtesy of Joni Rubin. Left: on the rocks above the petroglyphs and below the old RR route

