

# The Donner Summit

# Heirlooms

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

April, 2020 issue #140



## Ferocious Beasts Updated

Regular readers have come to expect our April Heirlooms to include some April Fools which of course is always fun - except for the time the editor was accosted by someone who was irate that we'd "renovated" the steam heat ad on the rocks below the Lincoln Highway below the pass. Of course we'd not done any such thing except in the computer (see picture below).

Here, just for fun, is this year's April Fool's article but mostly it's true and an update, following further research, of the March, '10 Heirloom's article about a circus train derailment on Donner Summit.

The Truckee Republican (May 4, 1904) caught up a few days after the incident with an update, "Monkeys Beat Their Way".

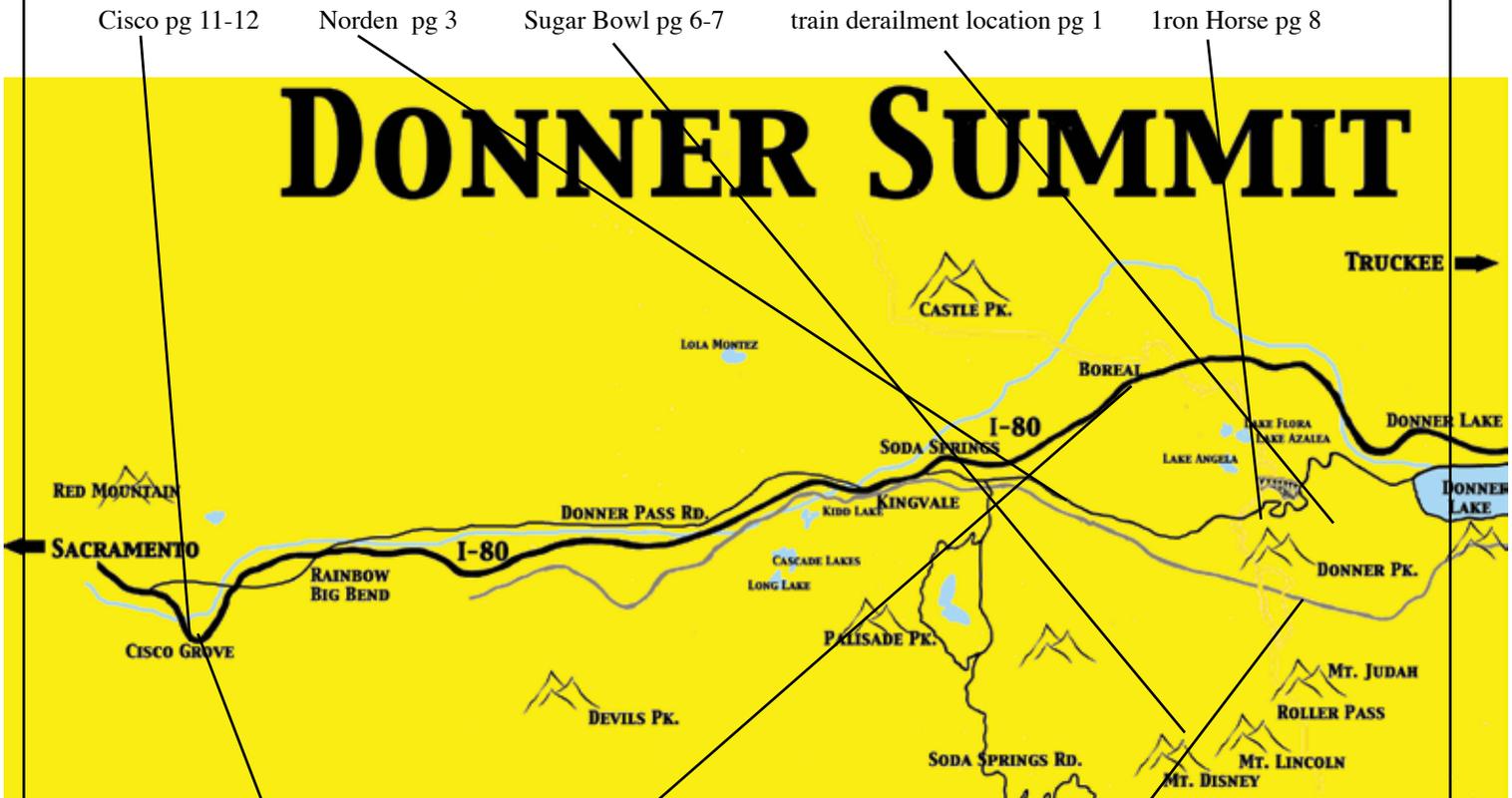
Two of the monkeys that escaped when the Norris & Rowe circus wagons left the train just before Donner Summit apparently found it a little cold outside in the snow. They found the warmest place nearby which was under a locomotive. The stowaways traveled with the locomotive down to Rocklin, then back up to the Summit and then to Truckee where they were discovered but refused to come out. The Republican concluded, "They were finally taken out in the local Round House [sic] by a liberal application of smoke." Then we are left to guess that the monkeys were transferred inside a train and caught up with the rest of the friends.



Everything except a few monkeys were recovered after the original crash and all the animals were "placed in the Summit depot until cages" could be arranged. It was said that monkeys scampered about in the snowshed and branches of nearby trees for some time afterwards which leads us to the "Lost Tribe of Summit Monkeys" which may be in our next book. One can imagine the fun they had exercising their new freedom. Did they hitch rides on trains crossing the summit and head for warmer but less interesting climates or did they head down to Donner Lake and get rooms at a resort?

So instead of an April Fool's article, we'll leave you to use your own imagination and see what you can come up with about the "lost tribe" on Donner Summit.

# Story Locations in this Issue



Cisco pg 11-12

Norden pg 3

Sugar Bowl pg 6-7

train derailment location pg 1

Iron Horse pg 8

# DONNER SUMMIT

Auburn Ski Club in 1940

Auburn Ski Club today

Coldstream Pass pg 18

Absolutely love your newsletter, Bill. Thank you for your efforts and those of others in the group at the DHS. Will I get a renewal reminder? I don't know when we joined but seems like about a year ago

Donna Furlow

In answer, we send out our membership renewal letters each June, so stay tuned.



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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

# Donner Summit, Winter, 1940

in case you need a place to stay and have snow fun

Norm's collection of Donner Summit history ephemera includes all kinds of things. Here are parts of a 1940 Southern Pacific brochure encouraging people to "This time, try the train." To see the actual brochure in total, stop by the DSHS at the blinking light in "downtown Soda Springs." Then you can see it, many other things, and talk to Norm about the old days on Donner Summit.

For many 1940 travelers the train made travel to the Sierra possible since everyone didn't own automobiles in those days. It was probably a lot more convenient than taking the highway for those who did have automobiles. Highway 40 was two lanes. Four wheel drives were not ubiquitous or even available, and road clearing was not as efficient as today. For example, it took Pat Malberg (Lake Mary on Donner Summit today) regularly 7 ½ hours to get to Donner Summit from San Francisco on a Friday night in the 50's. ("Sometimes when there was a bad storm, we waited in the Baxter cafe for the road to open, even overnight!"\*)

The train, besides making travel easier, was also more fun. You could walk around, eat, talk to friends, meet new friends, and even get outfitted for skis (see the inset picture at the bottom right of the photo on page 4).

"Let's go skiing!" said the brochure and the place to go was "atop the Sierra at the West's greatest skiing center – the Norden-Sugar Bowl-Soda Springs-Donner area. The way to go was by train which was quick, inexpensive (\$4.05 from San Francisco), and safe. Passengers would arrive at the snow ready to ski and return home rested and invigorated.

**SPECIAL LOW FARES to the Norden Area**

350

\$4.05 from San Francisco—\$3.95 from Oakland and Berkeley roundtrip on the *Snowball Special*. These bargain fares for week ends only.

Below are special round trip rates to Norden and Soda Springs for the 1940-41 winter sports season. (To April 6) Tickets have 10-day return limit.

Norden-Soda Springs from—	Coach	Tourist*	Standard*
SAN FRANCISCO . . . . .	\$4.60	\$5.15	\$6.85
OAKLAND . . . . .	4.45	5.00	6.70
BERKELEY . . . . .	4.35	4.90	6.55
SUBSUN . . . . .	3.60	4.05	5.35
SAN JOSE . . . . .	4.85	5.45	7.25
SACRAMENTO . . . . .	2.70	3.00	4.00

\* Berth rates each way from San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley and Sacramento: \$1.35 tourist lower; \$1.00 tourist upper; \$2.10 standard lower; \$1.60 standard upper.

See your local Southern Pacific agent for low fares between other points.

**SKIMUTES**

Save money on low-priced commute ticket to Norden.

Ten individual ride Skimutes to Norden and Soda Springs from San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley:

COACH . . . . .	\$17.25
TOURIST* . . . . .	21.75
STANDARD* . . . . .	29.00

Good for 90 days.

\* Berth extra at regular rates.

Like in U. S. A. 12-20-40

*Let's Go Skiing At*

**NORDEN**

SUGAR BOWL SODA SPRINGS

DONNER AREA

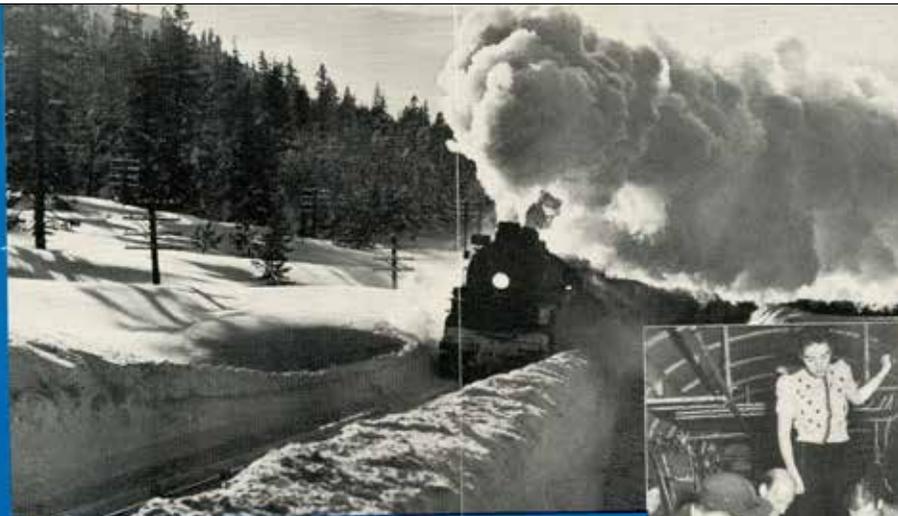
Resort Bureau  
1940-41 WINTER SPORTS DEPT.  
TELEPHONE 222

**S·P**  
Southern Pacific

\*Pat Malberg illustrates our story: My Dad fabricated a masonite canopy for the 1950 Chevy pickup (the only kind of vehicle available for purchase after the war). It had a bed for me to sleep during the trip up and back, with space below the mattress, for skis, winter clothing, and whatever we would be carrying into or out of the cabin. My Mom would make sandwiches and we sometimes stopped at Del Paso Park in Sacramento to stretch our legs, since it was a long trip, and we would take time to have a snack then, but never buy anything, because my parents were very frugal.

The "Snowball Special" was "truly a skier's train." A special feature was the "Ski Hut Car" where travelers could rent skis and equipment at city prices. There was also a lounge car with music and radio. A dining car served a complete "Skier's Breakfast" (35c, 50c, or 60c). The Special left San Francisco at 10:40 PM and arrived at Norden by 6:45 AM having served a Skier Dinner (75c) on the way. Friday and Saturday nights sleeping cars were also offered.

Coming back from Norden the trains left the mountains at 3:00 and 4:30 PM and arrived at San Francisco by 9:30 and 11:10 PM. Sleepers returned by Monday morning.



*This time, try the train*

**TO DOUBLE THE PLEASURE OF YOUR SKI TRIP**

Once in the mountains the "headquarters in the snow" was the Southern Pacific's "semi-rustic" Norden Ski Hut (the dimensions advertised at 168' x 28') There travelers had the "advantages of a private club in the snow." The railroad claimed to have developed a new Winter Sport Playground just outside. The Hut was inside a snowshed (see the next page) and offered a waiting room, warming room, restaurant, and easy access to the slopes and trains.

In the hut skiers could rest and relax on benches. Racks held skis and central heating kept the space warm. There were large restrooms with radiators to dry clothes. A check-room was available for checking skis and luggage. The railroad also advertised a "complete ticket office, telegraph, and a public address system." It was all free. Berkeley Ski Hut ran the ski room in the Ski Hut renting skis and equipment at city prices just like the train. Skis rented for \$1 a day with a \$5 deposit.

Outside was the newly enlarged "Winter Sports Playground." There was a 700 foot rope tow that offered rides at 10c a trip or \$1 for the day. A ski school was available with "reasonable" rates. There was a 700 foot toboggan slide "complete with a mechanically operated pullback." That cost 10c a ride or 15 rides for a dollar. "[N]ew wide ski lanes, as long as 1500 feet" had been created by removing trees. Sleighs to Sugar Bowl also loaded and unloaded under cover next to the Hut.

For those wanting to stay longer than a day of skiing there were lots of accommodations around Norden listed in the brochure. "The modern Sugar Bowl Lodge" had been

Fresh Orange Juice 15	Grapefruit Juice 10
Tomato Juice 10	Vegetable Juice 10
Dry or Cooked Cereal 15	
Snail or Butterhorn 10	Doughnuts (2) 10
Baked Beans 20	Soup (bowl) 15
Corned Beef Hash 20	Chicken Tamale 25
Ravioli 25	Spaghetti 20
Assorted Sandwiches 10; Toasted 15	
Frankfurter on Roll 10	Hamburger on Bun 15
Bread and Butter 05	
Pie (per cut) 10	Cup Cakes (2) 10
Orange (1) 05	Apple (1) 05
Ice Cream (dish) 10; Novelties or Cup 05	
Coffee (cup) 10; with Meals 05	Tea (pot) 10
Milk (half-pint bottle) 10	
Hot Chocolate 10	Coca-Cola 10
Cigars, Cigarettes and Tobacco	Orangeade 10
Candy, Gum, Mints, Etc.	
Goggles 50c - \$1.00	

During "off-peak" hours the regular menu will be augmented by the following special plates:

Hot Cakes 20; with Bacon or Sausage 30
Omelet, Plain, with Toast 30
Ham Omelet with Toast 40
Cheese Omelet with Toast 35
Ham or Bacon and Eggs, with Toast 40
Two Eggs, Fried or Scrambled, Toast 25
French Toast with Jelly 25
Hamburger Steak with Fried Potatoes and Bread and Butter or Toast 35

Menu at the Norden Ski Hut

enlarged (it had only opened the year before). It was “nestled in the bottom of the Sugar Bowl” where the surroundings captured the charm and comfort “as well as the gayety and spirit of the Tyrolean Alps.” Rates were \$7.50 for a single room and bath. A room with an adjoining bath cost only \$5.00. Double rooms were \$10. A bed in the women’s dormitory was \$2.50 and in the men’s, \$2.00. Meals in the new larger dining room were 75c for breakfast, \$1.00 for lunch and \$1.25 for dinner. The phone number for reservations was “Soda Springs 6”.

New tractor drawn sleighs brought people from the Ski Hut to Sugar Bowl for 25c each way. At Sugar Bowl “clean northern slopes of powder” provided thrilling downhill, slalom and cross country runs. The only chair lift in California took skiers to the top of Disney Pk. That cost 25c a ride or \$2 for a daily ticket. Weekly tickets cost \$10. They also had two new rope tows.

The Soda Springs Hotel also offered accommodations. Double rooms were \$5.50 to \$7.00, American Plan. Dormitory space without meals was \$2.00. Meals were 75c for breakfast, \$1.00 for lunch, and \$1.25 and \$1.50 for dinner. For reservations you had to write Oscar Jones, “Soda Springs Hotel, Soda Springs, California.”

The House of Vanderford (across from today’s Donner Ski Ranch) was located “atop the Sierra” about “one and a half miles from Norden Ski Hut.” They provided transportation via a station wagon at no charge for guests. There were two new rope tows on Signal Hill (today’s Donner Ski Ranch hill). Nearby was Johnny Ellis’ “ski tows”. The Sierra Club also had a rope tow. The House of Vanderford ski school charged \$2 per session or twelve lessons for \$12. They had new dormitories and a new lounge. Dormitory rates with meals were \$3.25 or \$3.50 per person in double rooms.

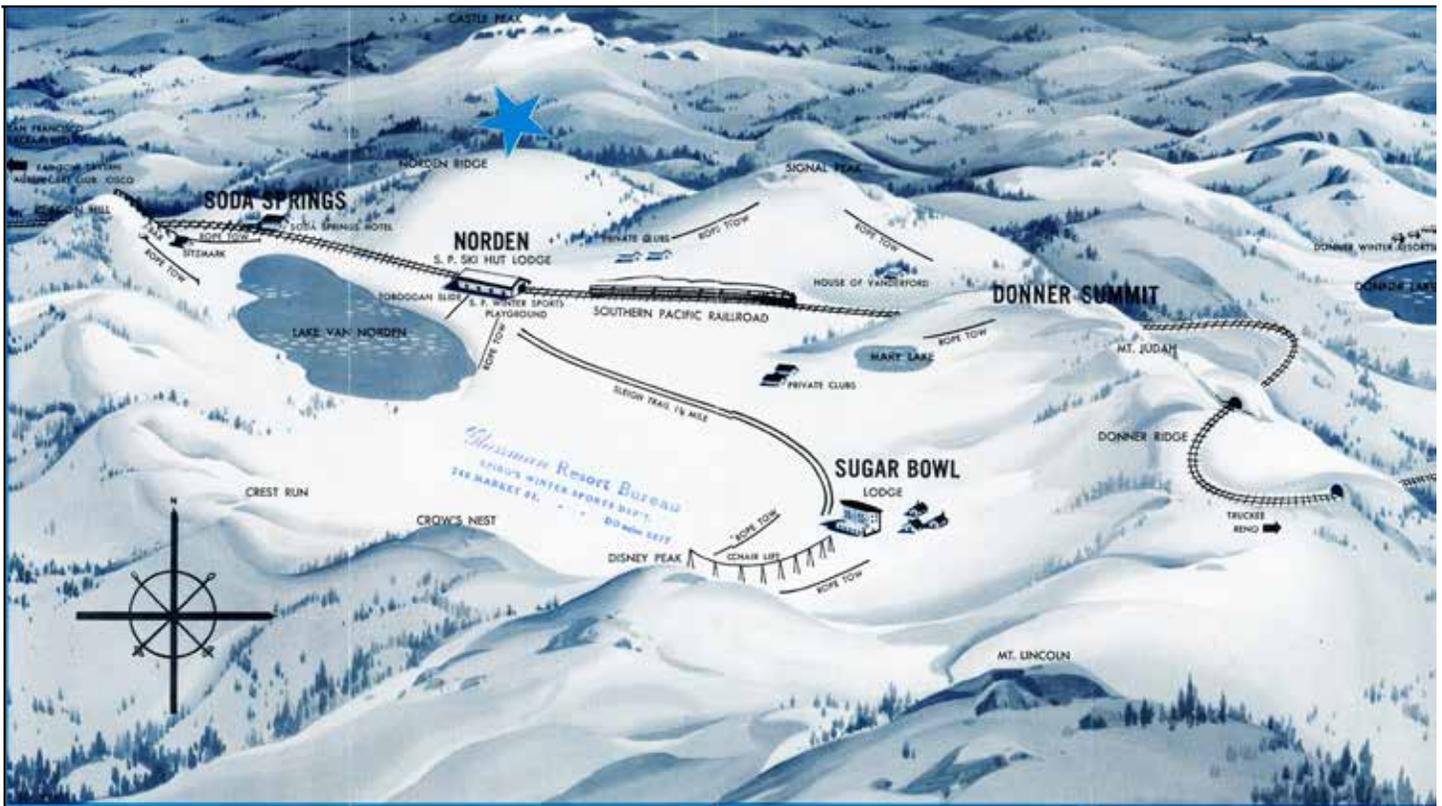
Ice skating was available at the Rainbow Tavern. It cost 50c per session and skates could be rented at 35c a pair. Single rooms at the Tavern were \$6.50 American Plan for singles and \$13.00 for doubles. For reservations there, one had to call “Rainbow Tavern via Truckee” or write Herstle Jones in San Francisco.



SP's Norden Ski Hut is "a house within a house" ... built under the protection of a snowshed



Piping hot meals are served inside the Ski Hut. Here you can warm, rest and check your baggage.



*Southern Pacific's* **NORDEN SKI HUT** *Norden, California*  
 In the Heart of the West's Greatest Skiing Center

The railroad also advertised more activities and accommodations down at Donner Lake. Resorts there would meet passengers at Norden or Truckee.

Cisco had the Auburn Ski Club and the Cisco Hotel near the Cisco railroad station (see page 12). The Auburn Ski Club had "good ski runs" and ski jumps as well as a ski school.

Southern Pacific also had a small shed at Soda Springs and a porter met trains there. Beacon Hill (Soda Springs ski hill) was "one of the best equipped ski hills in the West." There was a 1250 foot long J-Bar and three rope tows. The J-Bar cost 15c per ride or \$3 per day. The rope tows were 10c a ride or \$2 a day. The Sitzmark Lodge (sat in the middle of the Soda Springs ski area ski slope) provided "eating, warming and restroom facilities for skiers." The California Ski School offered lessons at \$2 per class. Skis could also be rented.



Ever popular Sugar Bowl Lodge

The Norden Store and Ski Lodge was within 100 feet of the Norden Ski Hut. There were also "Several fine private clubs" on Donner Summit nearby: Sierra Club (Clair Tappaan Lodge), Sierra Ski Club (today's Hutchinson Lodge which belongs to the Sierra Club), U.C. Club (Cal-Lodge which is now privately owned), Oakland Ski Club, and Viking Ski Club.



"SP's new winter Sports Playground is an ideal place to learn to ski, toboggan or to have fun in the snow."



The only chairlift in California - at the Sugar Bowl - note that it's a single person chairlift. That's Sherman Chickering in the white sweater with the reindeer. He was one of the four founding members who started Sugar Bowl. Behind him is his friend, Norman B. "Ike" Livermore in the chair behind. Ike Livermore was Secretary of Resources for Governor Reagan and a well known environmentalist who served for many years on the board of the Sierra Club. That last information came after publication from Nick Chickering, Sherman's son.



The challenging Schweinbund at Mt. Lincoln



# Revisting the "Iron Horse" and the Iron Horse

In our December, '19 [Heirloom](#) we reviewed the [Iron Horse](#) novel which came after the 1924 movie by the same name (see our January, '18 [Heirloom](#)). The story is fun, classic melodrama with an extremely bad bad guy, an extremely virtuous good guy, and of course a beautiful love interest for the good guy. That review occasioned one of our readers, Phil Sexton, to "weigh in" with some interesting information about the locomotive in the movie in the scenes about the building of the railroad over Donner Summit. Here we should note that a trip to the January, '18 [Heirloom](#) also includes an article about hauling the first locomotive over the summit which is one of the scenes in the movie. After "weighing in" a little, see below, Phil contacted a friend, Kyle Wyatt who is a retired California State Railroad Museum historian. He supplied the January, 1925 [Southern Pacific Bulletin](#) (next page) which had an article about the SP and the "Iron Horse" movie making.



Phil, who used to be the ranger at Big Bend where there was an interesting little history museum (since dispersed by the Forest Service to who knows where - they don't even know), said, "...If you've seen the entire film, you'll notice one short shot showing Chinese pounding rail over Donner. The shot is facing east, and Donner Lake is in the background [we tried to grab a screen shot but that portion of the movie is not clear on internet versions and could not be copied from our actual DVD]. As far as I can tell, John Ford used the Lincoln Highway (Dutch Flat Road) for this to fill in as the roadbed. Traffic would have been light in those days [1924], and it is a great cheat for most viewers who aren't familiar with the area.

"And you didn't mention it in your article, but the locomotive used to replicate hauling a loco over the Pass was the CP Huntington, which at the time was one of the corporate "pets" of the SPRR. I've attached a few photos (see page 10) for reference so that you can compare them with the stills you show in the newsletter. The raised track was at the south end of the SPRR erecting shop. For many years in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the loco was there apparently to inspire workers, but it also travelled to fairs and festivals, and of course was used in shooting "The Iron Horse." At some point, perhaps in the 1920s, the loco was also displayed on what appears to be a lawn in front of the SPRR Hospital that was located trackside where the CSRM Parking lot is today." There on page 9 you can see the CP Huntington today at the State railroad museum in Sacramento -picture courtesy of Mr. Sexton.

Now we come to the January, 1925 [Southern Pacific Bulletin](#) which has an article titled, "S. P. Aids Filming of Big Pictures." Apparently Southern Pacific helped make a number of movies. For example the Southern Pacific helped with the filming of Charlie Chaplin's "Gold Rush" on Donner Summit (see our August, '11 [Heirloom](#), our exhibits page on our website or our 20 Mile Museum "Gold Rush" sign) that same year.

For "Iron Horse," the movie, the Southern Pacific supplied "old equipment such as the pioneer railroad builders used" along with old photographs to use as the movie makers made sets. Probably the biggest help, though, was finding locations "on the 'hill' between Truckee and Summit ... where the movie actors could make scenes that would show the difficulties met in the big job of building a railroad over the Sierra." Tunnels then under construction, as the railroad moved to double tracking, served as stand-in's for the original tunnels under construction in 1868. Since the rock was just as "hard and jagged as it was in the early days the movie makers were able to get some very realistic 'shots.'" The movie makers also tried to duplicate the feat of hauling locomotives over the summit before the tracks were completed. "The little engine 'C. P. Huntington,' one of the first engines bought by the [railroad] company, was among the equipment placed at the Fox [movie] Company's disposal." Director John Ford

tried to be authentic in depicting the hauling of the locomotives and used a sled pulled by fifty horses. The Huntington was so heavy that it "broke a lot of harness into smithereens." So the movie company used a concealed cable and many pulleys to help the horses. They got the engine to move about 150 feet and then quit "with a feeling of profound respect for the pioneers who had dragged half a dozen larger engines over steeper trails with the aid of mules and oxen."

January, 1925 SOUTHERN PACIFIC BULLETIN 17

**S. P. Aids Filming of Big Pictures**



"C. P. Huntington," which was No. 2 of the old Central Pacific locomotives, played an important role in the new movie, "The Iron Horse," which depicts the building of the first transcontinental railroad. During the construction work, the Huntington was used to haul the heavy iron rails over the steep mountain slopes. The old pioneer locomotive is shown here receiving the steel for the movie.

HELPING to make motion pictures for the "movie" producers has given to an important branch of the Southern Pacific service. Along the line of the Pacific System, the movie director can find everything in the way of scenery that he is likely to need. Charlie Chaplin found a California scene, with Southern Pacific service ministering to the needs of a large company, in the Sierra near Summit, and Buster Keaton made some exciting submarine scenes in the still, still waters of Lake Tahoe.

The William Fox Videovision Company, making a location on which to show how the first transcontinental railroad was built, was directed by the Southern Pacific to a hill-topped basin on the Nevada desert, part of the Pyramid Lake Indian reservation. Here, according to the way the camera was pointed, could be depicted almost every type of scenery to be found along the line of the railroad—as it looked in construction days.

On a stretchy river bottom were found ideal settings for some of the Indian scenes. Towns of the early pioneer type were built on the desert, and for nearly two months the movie actors and a tribe of Indians from the Pyramid reservation worked and played at building a railroad and the motion picture scenery recently released under the title "The Iron Trail."

The Southern Pacific also loaned for the Fox Company old equipment such as the pioneer railroad builders used, and supplied the picture makers with

photographs that had been taken back in the nation where the Central Pacific first unit of the Southern Pacific, was being built.

Locations on the "hair" between Truckee and Summit were found where the movie actors could make scenes that would show the difficulties met in the big job of building a railroad over the Sierra. Trails connected with the present double-tracking program, were being driven in the mountains and as the rock is just as hard and jagged as it was in the early days the movie makers were able to get some very realistic "shots."

One of the big jobs done by the builders of the Central Pacific was to haul a number of locomotives, cars and rail from Reno to Truckee over roads and trails. The movie people tried to do this. The rapid disappear-

ance of the snow last winter almost spoiled their plans. The little engine "C. P. Huntington," one of the last engines bought by the company, was among the equipment placed at the Fox Company's disposal. Director Jack Ford undertook to show the world how the pioneer builders dragged a locomotive over a Sierra trail. The Huntington was placed on a sled and the William Fox railroad builders hitched fifty horses to the sled and broke a lot of harness into smithereens. Later with a concealed wire cable, many pulleys and a locomotive on one of the Summit spurs to help the engine, they succeeded in moving the Huntington about 150 feet. They quit the job then with a feeling of profound respect for the pioneers who had dragged half a dozen larger engines over steeper trails with the aid of mules and oxen.

Of interest to the Southern Pacific family is the fact that among the movie stars in the "Iron Trail" cast was Miss Frances Tanager, daughter of Walter E. Tanager of the General Manager's office. Miss Tanager's grandfathers worked on the building of the Central Pacific and later was one of its best engineers.

Southern Pacific's supply of moving picture locations is without limit. W. L. Maynard, manager of the company, looks at Truckee, recently named the "high spot" of trail or scene in offer. Here are some samples: Mammoth, forest, mountains, rivers, springs, canyon chasms, gorges, rapids, lakes, coast, sage brush, ranches, a steam, dog train, cliff jones, old lodges, cabins, deserted towns, cattle sheds, cowboys, Indians, buffalo and snow scenes.

**COAL, OIL AND MATCHES IN ONE SHIPMENT IN USE**

In these days when "valley fire" features every operation and activity of the railroad, it is interesting to note the care of shipments that were postponed in the early days of railroading. J. A. Gill, chief inspector, has a shipment receipt issued by Central Pacific, dated in October, 1904, in a Marysville consignment, covering shipment of 15 tons of coal oil and 4 tons of matches. Strict rules regarding handling of inflammables have for many years prohibited handling such a mixed shipment.



This group of gentlemen efficiently take care of baggage serving at the Fresno station. From left to right: Tom Janssen, station baggage agent; Steve Patterson and Clifford Swanson and John S. Papp, baggage helpers. The photograph was taken by Mr. Swanson.

After Reading Your Bulletin, Pass It Along

In *The War, The West and The Wilderness*, the author Kevin Brownlow says in an article about "The Iron Horse," "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."

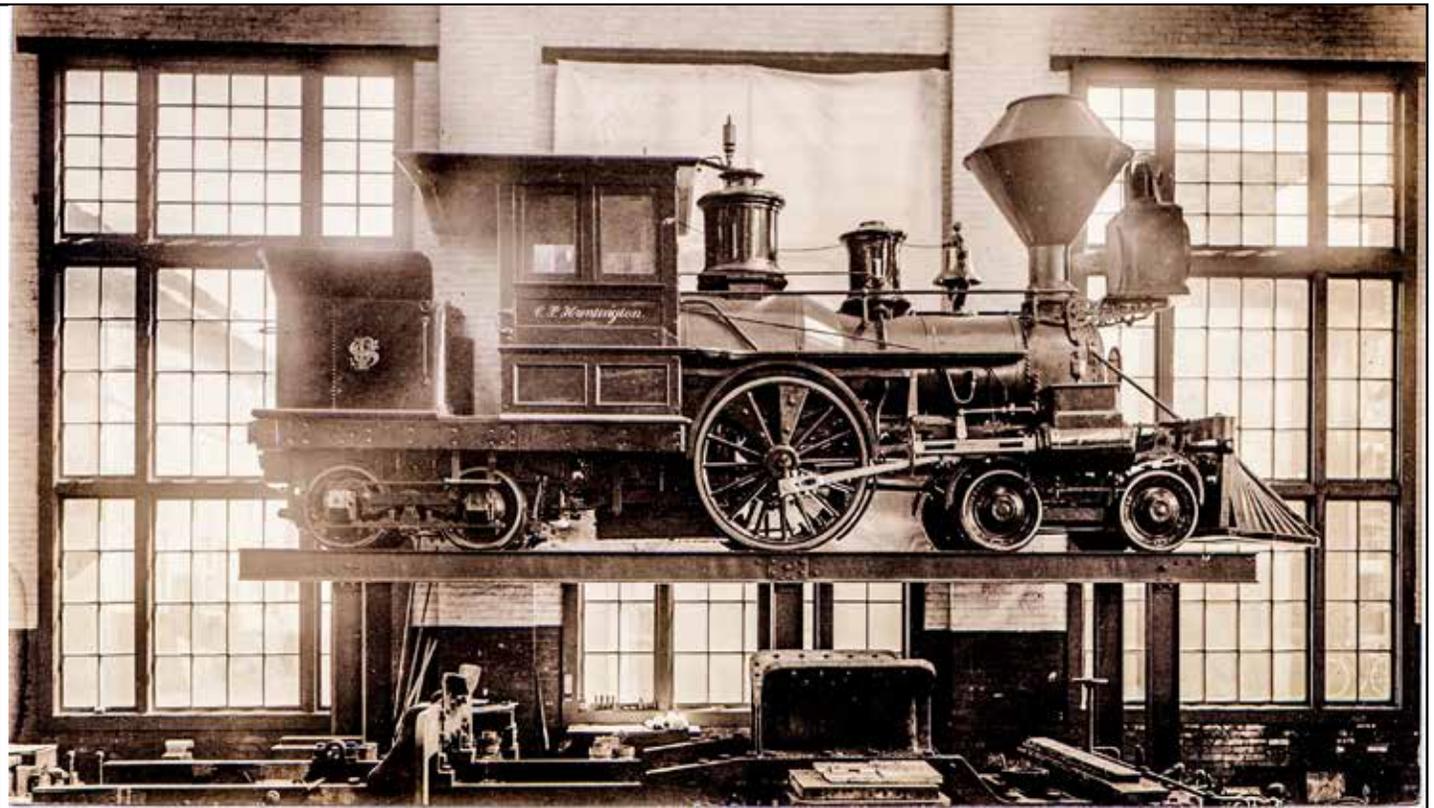
Certainly the locomotives were not hauled over assembled as shown in the movie, but rather in shipping crates and very large pieces and were assembled in Truckee. Still that was a massive feat which was done three times for three locomotives, 80 miles of track, various bits of iron needed to lay track, and railroad car parts.

In reality the movie crew tried hauling a locomotive but gave up after a few hundred yards and they were hauling a smaller version than what the guys in the old days had to haul. People were tougher in the old days.

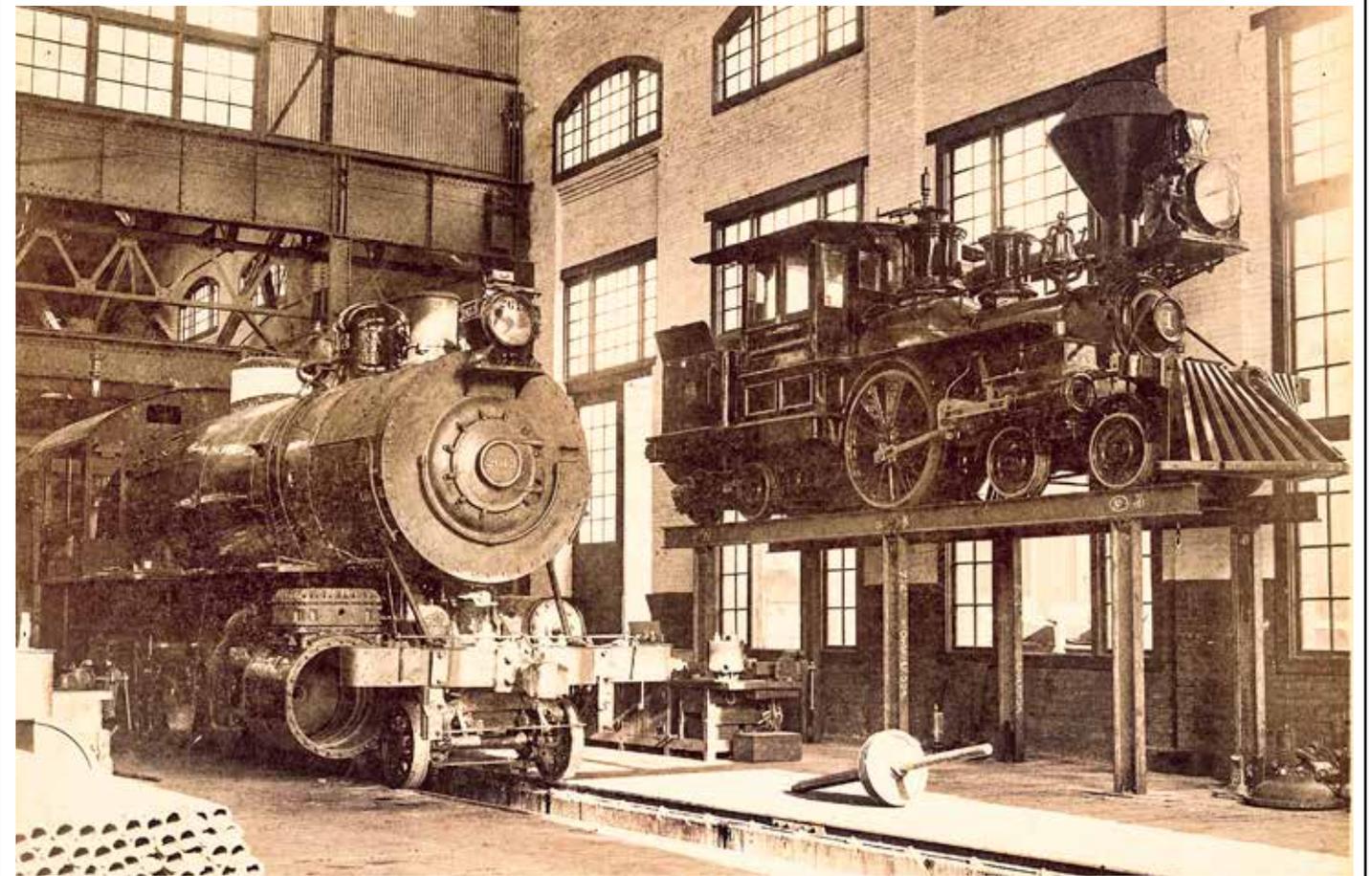
from the January, '18 [Heirloom](#)



CP Huntington today at the State RR museum in Sacramento. Photo by Phil Sexton



Courtesy California State Parks. The CP Huntington in the erection shed of the Southern Pacific RR in Sacramento.



# From the DSHS Archives



A Wohlbruck photo of the Auburn Highway (Lincoln Highway) along the Yuba River above Cisco. The road now goes on the other side of the river and the freeway crosses here. Date about 1920

Right, postcard of Cisco Grove area, 1921. Below, looking east from Roller Pass between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln, Anderson Pk. is in the distance. It's not "near Cisco."

See the next page for the backs.



# From the DSHS Archives



Left card:

Dear Leona,

Cisco is wonderful this year. There are still so many flowers right around the hotel. You are evidently quite a famous character here. I met a Mrs. Wiggins ... knows you and Miss Freeman says she couldn't get through a year without your visit. Yesterday we went to Donner Lake and Truckee. I told Miss F. I thought you would be here on Saturday.

Right card:

We have moved to other tents and so yours is ready for you now. I wish you could come a day earlier as we could enthuse together. We went yesterday again to Donner Lake and Truckee and drove up with a Nevada friend from here at Summit we stopped and took quite a climb. It was simply lovely. I am not going home until Sunday anyhow so will see you Saturday night I guess.

Cisco Hotel, 1920, the time of the postcards



# Book Review

## Challenging the Mountains

The Life and Times of Wendell T. Robie  
Bill G. Wilson 1998 249 pages, large format

Here's an example of our readers helping out. The 1952 snow articles and pictures about snow removal in the November, '19 [Heirloom](#) interested Phil Sexton who used to be the Big Bend ranger and who now works for the State Parks in Sacramento at the Capitol. He remembered this book and sent the title along to our editorial staff. (Let this paragraph serve as an encouragement for you to send along your own ideas.) The book is available on the internet.

Wendell Robie was an amazing man who made huge contributions to his local community and to the Sierra. Unfortunately this book does not rise to Robie's level and so is a disappointment. Even though this book is a disappointment we'll include it in our collection of Donner Summit related book reviews. We can acquaint our readers with Mr. Robie as we have with other Summit personalities: Norm Sayler, Hannes Schroll, Bill Klein, Dennis Jones, Edvi Aro, Moses Schallenburger, Dick Buek, Emil Papplau, Herb and Lina Fredericks, Margie Powell, etc. (check out our Heirloom article index on each Heirloom page on our website).

Here, let's have a change in strategy. Normally one would talk about the book and go on and talk about the subject. We are sensitive to our readers, however. You may not want to read the criticisms of the book and are more interested in the subject. So let's put the critique after the subject.

### **The Subject: Wendell T. Robie**

The book does give us a fairly good outline of Wendell Robie and his contributions to his community and the Sierra. First we learn about his character in the first few chapters which we can view as the exposition since we have here "novelized" non-fiction. These character traits are perhaps what's needed to make the contributions Mr. Robie made. He was

It was recognition of the accomplishment of a man with the tenacity of a bulldog, the drive of a mule skinner, and the vision of a statesman –A man whose credo is not "Can it be done?" but "Here's how we'll do it." We heard murmurs that he's the last of the breed. We certainly hope not. Somewhere, there must be another lad or two willing to make an effort, to recognize and grasp an opportunity and to view life as an individual experience rather than as a prescribed bureaucratic regimentation. What the world really needs now is few more Wendell Robies!"

# Challenging The Mountains



## The Life And Times of Wendell T. Robie

stubborn, hard driving (both literally and as a character trait), impetuous, tough, a businessman, dare-devil, a man of action, generous, controlling, determined and a problem solver. He was also a prankster and a dreamer. He loved the Sierra and the outdoors.

There were negative characteristics as well. He had a temper, once throwing a copy machine out the window. He could be rude. He once sideswiped a car and did not stop. Confronted later by the sideswipee (literary license) Robie told him to sue him, "I haven't got time to talk about it." He once told his workers he never took vacations and so they didn't need them either, "I can replace any of you by going down the sidewalk."). He was unfaithful.

We learn about those traits through a series of vignettes of

Auburn Journal. May 15, 1978 at Wendell Robie's memorial

his life: working with the convent, getting his first horse, cutting the Christmas tree, his first foray into business, almost getting expelled from U.C. Berkeley, etc.

Those character traits, good and bad, were what Wendell used to make his big contributions. First, although Wilson has Robie's father thinking over and over that Wendell would not amount to much and was a dreamer instead of a doer, Wendell Robie headed up a number of successful businesses that grew immensely even after his father's presence was gone. Those businesses improved the local communities around Auburn and the Central Valley. The biggest contribution was in helping people into their own homes with loans from his various banking endeavors and lumber from his Auburn Lumber Co.

One of Robie's dreams was to popularize winter sports and he seemed to work tirelessly at that. He founded the Auburn Ski Club which became the largest ski club in the west. The Club hosted ski jumping and slalom competitions and provided people with the opportunity to play in the snow. There was a 1,000 foot toboggan run. See the Placer Herald article in the sidebar on the next page from January, 1931. It's not in the book but our researchers found it as a good example of how the Auburn Ski Club worked to popularize winter sports. The events garnered publicity and newspaper articles carried Robie's quotes, "We're at the same gateway that the gold miners of 1849 were at when they came to California. We must open that gate and let the people into winter sports." "The snow covered slopes were like gold, You have to mine skiing. You have to tell the people of its benefits, of its healthful nature and of a place in winter where anyone can compete. The true mountaineer enjoys skiing because it brings him near to his beloved mountains."

Robie brought top competitors to the club and gave them jobs in the off-season. Those top competitors drew spectators and fame to the Club. He brought ski jumping exhibitions to Berkeley and Treasure Island. He advocated for the Olympics. He also did things like hold mid-summer ski contests at Sugar Bowl (see pages 16 and 17). The publicity encouraged attendance and then the spectators wanted to participate. A whole new set of California recreational activities and the winter sports industry were born.

One big piece of that popularization was his scheme to open Highway 40 in winter. In January, 1931 he invited the State



*Wendell and his pal enjoy a play day in the Sierra snow.*

legislature to a skiing exhibition. He even let legislators try skiing as well as bourbon (it was Prohibition time). The event had been well publicized and about 2,431 private vehicles followed a State police motorcycle escort and the 65 automobiles carrying the legislators. It was a monumental traffic jam but it showed the legislature that people driving to winter sports would produce enough gas tax money to pay for road clearing. It was a genius idea and belied Wendell's father's scoffing.

Those efforts also earned Robie the title of "Father of organized skiing in Northern California."

Another accomplishment was the 100 mile Tevis Cup horse race which he started by laying out the route and then

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“The Auburn Ski Club has done much to popularize that sport in northern California and is now the largest club of its kind west of the Mississippi. Their “hill” is located a few miles east of Towle [between Alta and Drum Forebay on I-80], on the Auburn-Tahoe highway. Here, with a few steps of his car, the ski sportsman is afforded fast runs over an open course.

“On tournament days the spectators can see the ski jumpers in the most spectacular feature of all winter sports. Sig Vettestad, the 1930 California amateur champion, is a member of this club. The amateur is by o means excluded, however; scores of youthful Californians are gamely trying to learn “how to fly like the wind” on skis. On the weekends when tournaments are not being held, ski tours into the mountains over the old trails of the pioneers, are on the program. For visitors who do not care to ski, the Club has a fast toboggan slide, 1000 feet long.

“The Auburn winter sports area is readily accessible to California motorists via the Auburn-Tahoe Highway Victory Highway (U.S. 40). Like an old Indian trail this road follows the main ridge of Railroad Divide through the scenic Sierra country. Trailing backward to the day when California highways were trails worn smooth by the incessant tread of oxen and the constant rolling cumbersome wagons, we may dwell upon that region made famous in the writings of Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and others who have perpetuated the lore of the ‘diggings.’ Today motorists may travel in comfort throughout this romantic region.

“Last year 23,000 motorists visited the Auburn winter-sports area, single Sundays breaking all records for travel on the Auburn-Tahoe Highway. Such a road leading to the mountain snow areas marks a path to a new appreciation of the value of life in California.”

Placer Herald January 3, 1931

publicizing the race. There are quite a few anecdotes about Robie and the race. Here we get an example of the true mettle of the man. Going one hundred miles outside of an automobile is difficult. Doing it on a horse in no more than 24 hours is hard on the rider and the horse. Only, according to the Tevis Cup people, 54% of contestants finish the race. The trail, used by 19th Century travelers heading for the Comstock or back is really REALLY rough. There are places where the narrow trail drops a thousand feet and then immediately rises a thousand feet. The steepness, the dust, and the mosquitoes are almost unbearable (editor's personal experience). They have vets check the condition of the horses during the race, pulling out those that are exhausted. Robie not only started the annual Tevis Cup race but he won it a number of times (including the first four he ran) starting in 1955 when he was 61. Amazingly, Robie, at the time of the book's printing, had also been the oldest contestant to finish the race - age 79 in 1974. That's one tough guy.

There were a myriad of other things too that Robie did to support his local community. He helped save a grove of redwoods east of Foresthill. He helped with fundraisers. He actively supported the Republican Party.

The book's concluding paragraph says, “He was a man who was not only a visionary, but a man with such substance that he enthusiastically and with an enduring purpose lived every day of his life as if it was his last. Robie was a man of

challenges.”

You might be interested in the Wendell T. Robie Historical Foundation <http://www.robiefoundation.org>

### The Critique

There are quite a few problems with this book despite the subject being so very accomplished and interesting. It attempts to “novelize” or “conversationalize” Wendell Robie's life by telling or making up conversations and even Robie's thoughts. It doesn't improve the story at all and because it's difficult to capture someone's thoughts to share with readers, there is left a nagging doubt about veracity. We wonder whether all of Robie's thoughts are accurate. Robie was interested in the emigrants and their trails so to illustrate that the author has some internal musings, Robie “could see the wagons tilt as the wheels rolled up a big boulder, and for a moment, he heard the crash of the wheel when it slid off the rock... He could smell the sweat of the Missouri mules, and hear the crack of a bull whip... The yells, the creaking of the timbers, and the rattle of cooking pans... ‘I was there. I came over the trail with the pioneers,’ he said to himself.” It's evocative imagery but did Robie really think it?

On the birth of Robie's son, Wilson has Robie walk outside to muse about his disappointment, “it was a devastating blow to him, a man who wanted many sons and could only have one. What had befallen him? He thought he had always done

Snow – “white, cold weather residue that makes money.”

pg. 3 Challenging the Mountains

the right things, at least most of the right things. His world had appeared bright, and now the curtain had been drawn tight. He ached inside, and the torment was just beginning." That last was never followed up upon.

"Inez turned around from the piano bench and smiled. He felt better when she acknowledged him, an assurance of his role as a husband." As self-assured as Mr. Robie appears to have been that sounds a bit doubtful. The larger question is how did the author, Bill Wilson, come up with those thoughts?

Then too, the author just makes up scenes to make his points. In response to Wendell's father saying Wendell would never "amount to a hill of beans" the author says, "His mother, always proud and protective of her son, listened intently but went on with dusting the baby grand piano." Really, this was so momentous that the family remembered mom was dusting the grand piano?

Another problem is the continual repetition of so many things in the book. Over and over we hear about the disappointment Wendell had about his son, that he was a terrible and dangerous driver, that he sold winter sports, that his interests continued to expand, the purpose of the lumber yard was to help people get homes, lumber was his work but there were other interests and challenges, and some variation of his "future was before him." If you've made your point adequately

**"for him the genuine unfettered and uncomplicated life was found outdoors."**

pg. 5 Challenging the Mountains

you don't need to repeat. The repetitions, just thrown in, lend to the feeling of disorganization. Cover a subject and move on; don't keep going back.

The chapters are arbitrary and don't divide the book into discrete subjects.

Sometimes the book is a mash of ideas. On page 101, Robie loves his wife, wonders about his son, a public relations vendor comes by and Robie talks about tough men and his being tough, there's a comment from someone about how Robie wanted to be loved and was due more than he had, and then the text goes to Robie roaming the hills as if he owned them. That's all within a few hundred words on one page. Included in that, for some reason the author has Robie partially dressed and drinking in the beauty of the American River Canyon.

Sometimes ideas are broached but not followed up upon. For example, one passage says Robie had critics and "antagonists" but never identifies who, why, or the ramifications.

**This California 4th of July Ski Tournament will be held in the easily accessible "Sugarbowl" at the Summit of Donner Pass on the Auburn, Lake Tahoe Highway. The "Sugarbowl" is only a short walk from the highway and has offered a spectacular setting for many well known films, including Chaplin's "Gold Rush". The bordering snow packed bluffs at Mt. Lincoln have many times served the movies for Chiliquot Pass or other mountain barriers of the North country.**

**Ernest Anderson, a member of an inspection party of Chicago ski riders, who visited the Sugarbowl Sunday, stated "there is now more snow there than at any Chicago ski tournament held in the last five years."**

Placer Herald July 2, 1932

At another point in the book Robie helped save a grove of redwoods east of Foresthill, then it was on to a fountain in downtown Auburn, and then to a car wreck. That was all in one page.

There are many irrelevancies in the book: there are stories about a killer mule, a goat, dynamite, and a skunk story. They don't add to Robie's character. At one point there are a couple of paragraphs about a store in Auburn having a multi-day sale, the prices charged, and the closing of the street in front. Then there immediately follows meat prices, teacher salaries, and a new Placer County song.

A variety of the irrelevancies are gratuitous thoughts, "Wendell enjoyed extracurricular activities, but he also knew he had to direct much of his attention toward business. Without the lumber operation he did not have a base to operate, nor funds to do the things he wanted. He had to make sure that his work and outside interests were compatible. But business always came first." It might occasion interest if there was tension between the ideas of fun and work, but for Wendell Robie, that was apparently never the case.

Getting past the book's problems there is a lot about Wendell Robie here. The author interviewed everyone and got a lot of stories and quotes. Then, because he'd accumulated so much and did not want to waste the work, he felt he had to "shoehorn" it all into the book – hence the continual repetitions and disorganization.



**San Francisco, June 28—  
Winter Sports —ski Jumping,  
tobogganing and all—are coming  
back to California, for the Fourth  
of July.**

And 'that's no fooling!

Plans for a full-fledged ski tournament and winter sports carnival, for Independence Day were made public here today by Siggurd Vettstad, three-times California ski champion, in charge of the meet. The Auburn Ski Club, of which Vettstad is a member, is sponsoring the midsummer winter sports program. The meet will be held in the Sugarbowl [sic], high up in the Donner Pass, near Summit, in the Sierra Nevada mountains of Northern California. Ten feet of snow, a portion of the State's record snowfall of last winter, still lies on the ground there and conditions are reported ideal for the unprecedented summer ski tournament in [summer?] California

*Placer Herald* July 2, 1932  
*Auburn Journal* July 7, 1932  
*Big Pine Citizen* July 2, 1932

*Auburn Journal* July 7, 1932

**T**HE ski tournament held at the Sugar Bowl in Placer County last Monday, was one of the most novel events of its kind ever held in this country, and Placer County will receive much valuable advertising as a result of the interest and efforts of Wendell T. Robie and members of the Auburn Ski Club who put it over.

Two sound movie cameras were present to record the jumps of the jumpers of National reputation who participated in the event. That fact in itself would bring advertising of inestimable value to this county, but newspaper feature writers from all parts of the United States and Great Britain have been interested in this most unusual event.

Seldom it is indeed that a winter sport event can be held in the middle of summer. With a summer sun boiling down upon the residents of this county, participants in this snow event coolly jumped and rode skis in another section of the county, with the greatest of comfort. Jumps of over one hundred feet were made in the tournament so there was nothing fake about the whole affair. It was a real bona fide ski tournament, with all of the attractions of a winter event, plus summer skies to make more pleasant the part of those who watched.

The Auburn Ski Club has brought much valuable publicity to this county. More than any one organization we have ever had in the county. They have been consistent head liners ever since the inception four years ago when they gave notice to the world that Placer county has something besides eternal sunshine, oranges, roses and fruit of all descriptions. To thoroughly know and understand that this advertising has brought results, one has but to drive along the highway from Roseville to the summit and witness the small homes and small places of business that have been established in the past two years, to see how many residents have come to our county, as a result of this very advertising. It has not only brought economic results, but has opened a new field to occupy the surplus time of those who have idle time on their hands to spend. It will relieve this situation to greater extent each year. As time goes on, we can look to this field of endeavor as one of our most lucrative openings.

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



One of Donner Summit's firsts is the first wagon trains to come to California with wagons. Two trains abandoned their wagons and so came to California without wagons before the Stephens Party came over in 1844. The Stephens Party was the first wagon train to California with wagons.

Various members of later generations have marked the various iterations of the Emigrant Trail over Donner Summit. Above is a picture taken by George Lamson of an arrow blazed into a tree towards the top of Coldstream Canyon and not far below Coldstream Pass. That's your editor on the left and Art Clark, intrepid member of the Mobile Historical Research Team on the right. The close-up to the right, above, was taken by Art Clark. The lower picture is another blaze in the same area taken by George Lamson.



If you want to trace emigrant routes the best source is [Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada \(A Guide\)](#) by Charles Graydon

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.

# It Takes a Village

You will remember in our January, '20 and March, '20 Heirlooms we noted that the 1921 film *The Golden Snare* was filmed on Donner Summit. Shortly after our March edition “hit the stands” former Big Bend ranger, Phil Sexton weighed in with a source for stills and a New York Times review.

I'll include his email below right.

Here's the Times review in case you want to put the movie on your watch list in case it ever turns up.

The story of the Canadian Northwest with the Mounted Police as the centre of action is becoming to the screen what the cowboy Westerners used to be and James Oliver Curwood, one of the first to supply material for the new melodramas, continue to be one of the most steady providers. His latest, “*The Golden Snare*,” is at the Strand this week. In substance it is pretty much like the others telling of an intrepid Sergeant of the Mounted who follows his an over the frozen North and finally gets him, and also the girl, who has remained as spotless as the snow.

“*The Golden Snare*” differs from the others in being more melodramatic and has ??(unclear) but it has Lewis S. Stone, who at least looks like a mounted Policeman, or as a Mounted Policeman ought to look and its characterizations are strong, even if they are stereotyped, especially those by Wallace Beery, Melbourn MacDowell, Wellington Player and Ruth Renick. Also there are lots of snow and ice for a hot day, and the action is action such as only the movies can boast. David M. Hartford directed this production.



New York Times  
July 11, 1921

I looked up *The Golden Snare* on imdb and you might be interested in looking at [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0012228/companycredits?ref\\_=ttrel\\_sa\\_3](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0012228/companycredits?ref_=ttrel_sa_3) It was released in 1921 by First National, which was a big and prestigious company. In the 1930s, they were absorbed by Warner Bros. so throughout the 1930s you see films made by Warner Bros. credited as “Warner Bros.-First National” in the main titles.

Wallace Beery and Lewis Stone are the stars, and I'm guessing that Beery is the bad guy (Bram Johnson.) It ran only 60 minutes and was both produced and directed by David Hartford, who only has seven films credited to him, all before talkies. Since your news clipping is from Jan 21 and the film was released in July 21, it probably wasn't an 'A' title, but a somewhat minor film, and very melodramatic in the imdb summary. Apparently the entire film is lost, but there is a partial copy in an archive in London at the British Film Institute. There is a NY Times review online at <https://www.nytimes.com/1921/07/11/archives/the-screen-6000-hear-julia-clausen-sing.html> and it reads like a lot of reviews of the time, and definitely confirms the melodramatic content. You can also find four stills at [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0012228/mediaindex?ref\\_=tt\\_ql\\_pv\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0012228/mediaindex?ref_=tt_ql_pv_1)



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\_\_\_\_\_

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