

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

July, 2020 issue #143

Camping on Donner Summit, 1873

“Old Block” was the pen name of Alonzo Delano, a 19th Century author, columnist, humorist, lecturer and social commentator. He also ran the Wells Fargo office in Grass Valley and later had a bank as well. He came to California overland in 1849 but not over Donner Summit. You read Grass Valley above and that his overland trip did not include Donner Summit (it was the Lassen route), and you wonder why he'd be in the Heirloom and particularly why he'd be the front page.

Delano (pronounce like the "Delano" in Franklin Delano Roosevelt to whom he was related) lived nearby and did visit Donner Summit on a couple of occasions. It's his observations that got him the page 1 presence in the Heirloom where the "real estate" is of great value. You're going to read more about him in a future Heirloom - how's that for anticipation - so stay tuned.

Alonzo Delano arrived in California during the Gold Rush in 1849. In general, we have the outlines of history which tell us what happened and when and who famous participated. We often don't have the more personal history of individuals or the social history of consequential events. We don't often know what every day life was like, for example. Alonzo Delano wrote a lot, though, about his trip across the country and what he found in California. His writings are also full of humor and so take us beyond the dry history of secondary sources or other primary sources. So the collection of his writing is special. He is also credited with a “new school of literature”, “California Humor,” that made him popular but also influenced Bret Harte and Mark Twain who wrote later.

Health problems and gold fever sent Delano west leaving his wife and two kids behind. He arrived in California via one of the Sierra crossings north of Donner Summit. He settled in Grass Valley and visited the summit on a number of occasions,

fortunately removing his Heirloom ineligibility (although the Heirloom would prefer that he'd settled on Donner Summit). Delano made small illustrations of miners in the mining camps and started a number of small businesses. He later became Grass Valley's first treasurer and the Wells Fargo agent. He lectured and his writings became popular: letters, plays, poems, articles and at some time adopted the pen name, “Old Block.” After six years away from his family Delano's daughter joined him in Grass Valley and the next year his wife followed after their son had died. His wife died in 1871 and he remarried the next year and died in 1874. (He'd been born in 1806)

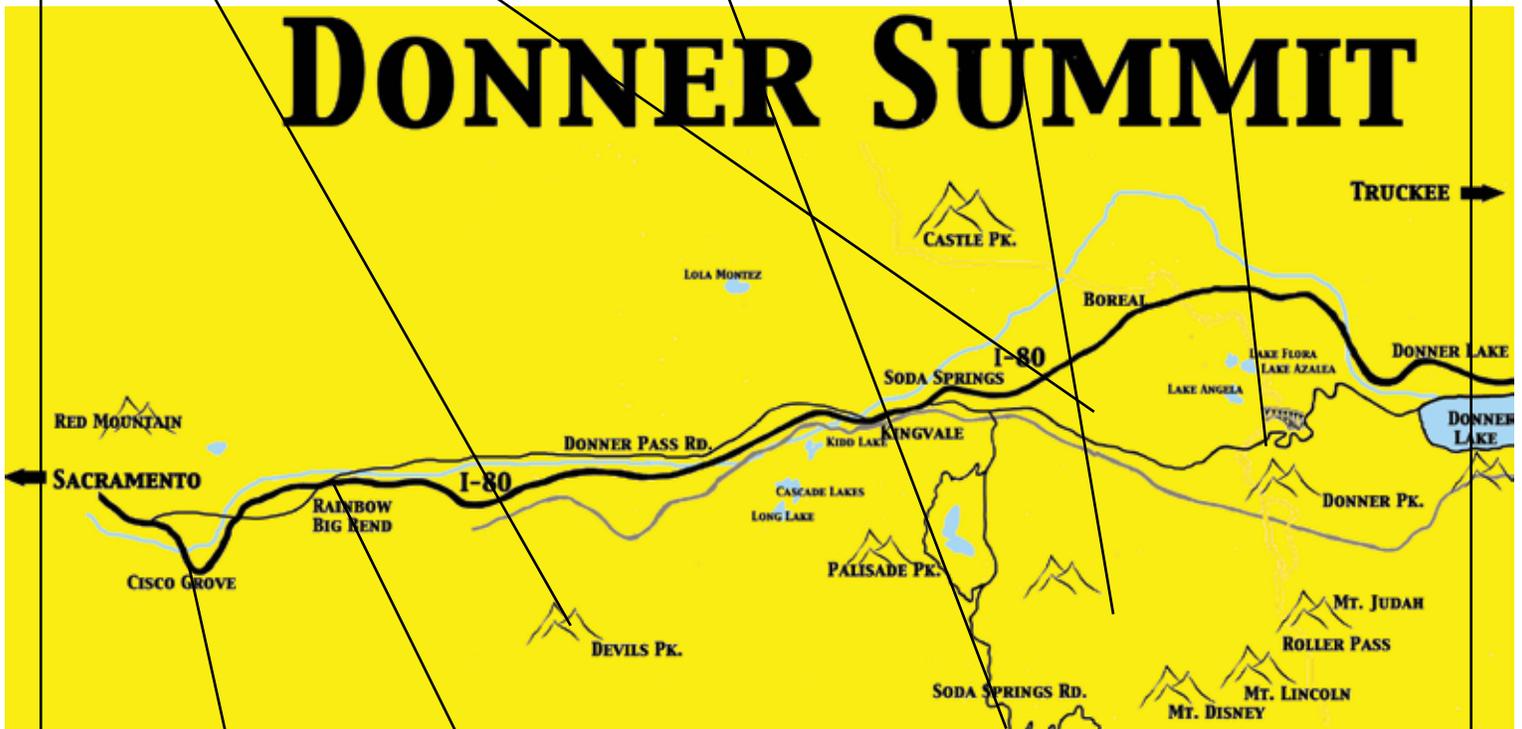
(Source: "Alonzo Delano: Nomad Denizen of the World" by Gary Noy, Sierra College Press <https://www.sierracollege.edu/ejournals/jsnhb/v3n1/Delano.html>)

We've had the article from which the following comes in our DSHS article computer for some years. It comes from the Sacramento Daily Union, November 1, 1873. It was happily sitting with friends in the future archives waiting its turn for Heirloom exposure when one day the editor of this fine Heirloom was visiting in Truckee at the Truckee Donner Historical Society. One of the members there said she had something for the DSHS – the first woman to climb Tinker's Knob. This, the member felt, went right along with the many other firsts on Donner Summit*. Our editorial staff agreed and “Old Block's” article moved up in the line of waiting articles.

*the first wagon trains to California with wagons, the first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, the first transcontinental air route, the first transcontinental telephone line, and other smaller firsts.

Story Locations in this Issue

Devil's Pk. pge 6 Summit Valley pge 4 Original Soda Springs pge 4 Tinker's Knob pge 5 Donner Pass pge 14 & 17



Forest Gift Shop pge 17 Big Bend marker pge 22



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

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit

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

"Camping in the Sierras A Watering-Place in California"

In August of 1873 Alonzo Delano, "Old Block," decided to leave Grass Valley and head for the "old volcanoes, the craggy peaks reaching to the clouds, the charming valleys, the fairy lakes" and the grand scenery of Donner Summit. He said it was the place to "elevate one's ideas and teach him the greatness and power of the Almighty." He could worship the "Great Architect" there better than in any of the "tamer portions of earth." That shows he had good taste although not good enough taste to live on the summit year-round. Delano wrote about his adventures in the November 1, 1873 issue of the Sacramento Daily Union from which the following was written.

Apparently Mr. Delano was quite popular and had more "applications" to join him camping than he had room to take. He could be selective about his companions' personalities and characteristics: no fretting, no swearing, no putting on airs, and no grumbling. You've got to do your part unloading the wagon, pitching the tent, gathering wood, bringing water, cooking, eating, shouting, laughing, snoring and telling stories. If you can handle that you could accompany Mr. Delano. That list may stem from the experience of an aborted trip he took to the summit in 1854 with Lola Montez (Mt. Lola, Upper and Lower Lola Montez Lakes on Donner Summit) but that's skipping ahead a few issues in the Heirloom - stay tuned and keep your subscription up.)

To go camping in 1873 Delano recommended a boiled and baked ham that would last several days, boiled corned beef, bologna sausage, baked pork and beans, dried beef, sardines, deviled tongue and chicken, fresh bread and butter, flour for biscuits and slapjacks, canned sweetmeats, sugar and syrup, pickles, dried apples and peaches, and lots of boiled eggs. There ought to be "nick nacks" like ginger cakes and crackers. Coffee, tea and condensed milk were important too. A flask of brandy was good because the ladies of the party "may need a little stimulus now and then. Men, you know, never get thirsty!" That sounds nicer than the dehydrated foods campers now swallow. Maybe it was all better in the old days (editorial comment).

Delano had a six person tent and brought along tools: shovel, pick, ax, hatchet, and a saw along with a few pounds of nails, rope and twine, knives, and forks, and tin plates and cups. Bring along straw to spread on the ground to soften lumps, he said. A simple carpet bag was all that was allowed to those chosen to accompany Delano - no "Saratoga trunks." For clothing a bloomer suit of calico would be fine for traveling and climbing. (No REI in those days - another editorial comment.)

Approaching the summit with the railroad "on the ridge above"



the air became more "pure and exhilarating..." The party arrived "where Cisco once stood" when it was "end of track" during the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad and several thousand people lived there. It had been a lively town of a thousand people having hotels, saloons, livery stables and stores. In 1873 there was not a person or building left and that was only four years after the completion of the railroad. Winter snows had crushed the buildings. Probably too the buildings had been dismantled for use elsewhere, a common practice.

Ahead of them were bare granite mountains; "it was a picture of desolation, yet of grandeur." The mountains, the snowsheds, the columns of lava made a scene that was awe-inspiring and grand. You can see he had good taste.

The wagon road (Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. - you'll have to wait for the 150th issue of the Heirloom to read about that history) traveled along the Yuba River. It had been built

by the railroad but now it was long neglected. Bridges had been swept away leaving only a few rotting timbers. Again, this was only four years after the completion of the railroad. "Along the route were the remains of many buildings which had been erected years ago... but disused as soon as travel was transferred to the great passage-way [the railroad]. Large barns and hotels still stood as wrecks."

Delano's party camped in Summit Valley, "a charming oasis in the lap of the summit", where Delano had camped 19 years before (see "The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69" which follows this article). Here a cup of tea, a tenderloin steak, sweet potatoes, and a roaring fire were called for because it had been a hard journey. Local herdsmen provided the sweetest butter for warm biscuits.

At the east end of the valley a hotel, Cardwell's, gave visitors the "comforts of a first-class hotel..." [later named the Summit Hotel, it sat across from today's Donner Ski Ranch in their auxiliary parking area). From there carriages could take visitors to the original Soda Springs now "next door" to the Cedars, about eight miles down Soda Springs Rd. from today's Soda Springs. One day we'll be doing the original Soda Springs in the Heirloom so stay tuned. Delano said Soda Springs was "a new watering place which is beginning to attract public attention." There was another "most excellent" hotel at Soda Springs run by Wm. Jones. Guests could get grizzly bear steak there "in profusion." The road to Soda Springs passed through "Magnificent pines" and past two lakes that were "mountain gems" (that would be today's Serene Lakes which in those days was three lakes instead of today's two lakes - perhaps Alonzo was anticipating the 1940's era dam). "The flowers of spring were in full bloom. There were magnificent views. They pitched their tent near the springs on the bank "of a pure, ice-cold stream of crystal clearness..."

Twenty years before Delano had had to stand guard on Donner Summit against the Indians stealing their food. There was no such problem in 1873, he thought, and was just biting into a sweet potato when his wife yelled, "They're coming - they're coming." Delano grabbed his pistol but realized the people approaching, ladies, had no "hostile demonstration." Delano wanted to invite the ladies to dinner but his wife was worried about her dress. Delano saw nothing wrong with her dress and notes everyone's faces were clean. His wife was wearing calico bloomers, a sun-bonnet, and stout calfskin shoes. Some mountain dust had stained their clothes. Delano was less particular than his wife. His pants and coat were old and thread-bare. Their original color was hidden by dirt, grease and stains. His Zip Coon hat was one he'd discarded three years before. The arriving visitors were from San Francisco, New York, Sacramento, and St. Louis.

Soda Springs was surrounded by the remains of volcanoes

and two imposing peaks were Tinker's Knob and Anderson Peak (see the next page). There were no trails up and Delano learned that no one had actually summited Tinker's Knob.

Delano's wife, Maria, loved "the mountains with the ardor of an old pioneer" and so they decided to climb to the summit. They started off on two "excellent horses" taking along a lunch and a pistol. Maria wore bloomers and used a man's saddle. It was a circuitous route they had to take before they could even begin to climb. The climb was much harder than it looked from down below and then the climb became steeper and rougher. There was thick thorny chaparral. "The tracks of grizzly bears now became as numerous as those of cattle in a corral." Some tracks were fresh.

Above the tree line steepness increased "and it was only by zig-zag courses" that they could make progress. The air got thin and finally they reached the base of Anderson Pk. (see the caption for the top picture on the next page). There were still two miles to go but the chaparral was impassable. They found a break in a perpendicular wall and led their horses through. There was more chaparral. The rocks were loose and slid down the forty five degree slope. The heavy black lava was jagged. There seemed no way to give up and go back down due to the steepness, but continuing up was almost as hard.

Delano and his wife were bruised from slipping and falling and being pierced by sharp rocks. "...blood actually starting from our excoriated limbs." Breathing became harder. Vertigo troubled Delano. He sank "exhausted upon the ground... and all was dark before me" even though the sun was "pouring its hot rays upon the mountain side..." "...there was scarcely a breath of air, and we began to feel the pangs of thirst... My courageous wife stood the trial even better than I did, and gave me words of encouragement instead of yielding to any weakness of her own." (Delano was 67 years old at this point; his wife was twenty years younger.)

Their mouths were dry and their lips parched. They fought the rocks and the thorny chaparral but began to see the route to Tinker's before them. They led and slid their horses. Thirst became unendurable and they looked longingly at a bank of snow high above them. Then they found a little stream "...we were soon sitting by that ice-cold rill, and quaffing its liquid treasure with all the pleasure of thirsty sufferers upon the desert, and our poor animals seemed to enjoy it as much as we did."

The only tracks around the rill were those of grizzlies and deer. Delano and his wife still had fifteen hundred feet of climbing to go (a little exaggeration but it sounded good to Delano's vicarious readers) but there was less chaparral and loose rocks. "...we finally accomplished the ascent to the great ridge, the rim of the volcano... A short and easy ride now brought us to the base of the lava cone of Tinker's Peak, which still rose one hundred and fifty feet above..." For



Above, a Sierra Juniper in the foreground. In the background the sharp peak on the left, to the right of the tree trunk, is Tinker's Knob, named about Joseph A. Tinker's nose. The mountain to the right is Anderson Peak.

Below is Tinker's Knob from the original Soda Springs. This perspective gives you an idea of the climb that Delano and his wife made from Soda Springs up to Tinker's Knob.





What it looks like atop Tinker's Knob today - a very nice hike along the PCT from the PCT trailhead on Donner Summit - about eight miles one way. In the distance of the left hand picture is Lake Tahoe. These pictures are by Art Clark.

and fifty feet up to the view in the pictures above). They climbed on their hands and feet. A grizzly ran by below. Delano said their coming had probably disturbed the grizzly's "meditations." It was "an exciting show, and didn't cost a cent."

They "stood upon the very apex of Tinker's Knob. And what a Magnificent View..." "It looked like the wreck of a world and as if we were standing among the fragments (see the shattered basalt in the pictures above). For miles and miles were the sharp, black lava outcrops of old volcanoes mingling with the clouds." Devil's Peak (right), under which Delano had camped in 1853 was to the west (one version of the Emigrant Trail went along the north side of Devil's Pk - the right side of the picture to the right - and maybe Delano was on that trail in 1853 otherwise it would have been tough going). To the east, Lake Tahoe "like the great mirror of the mountains... set in a grand frame of huge, everlasting hills [see above left]. Oh it was a glorious view, and we felt well repaid for the labor of our ascent." "It seems to me that no one can fully understand and appreciate the power of the Great Architect of the universe till they can view his work from those grand old mountains."



Since we have room, here's view of Devil's Pk. a basalt volcanic plug.

At the top they found a cairn of stones and a tin box containing the names of previous adventurers. There were no women's names recorded. Apparently Tinkers' had been conquered before.

The trip back, by a different route was harder and Delano and his wife returned to camp after nine hours.

The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69

"The Central Pacific Railroad of '49 and '69" was a piece of social commentary (24 page pamphlet size) written by "Old Block," Alonzo Delano, in 1868 (close enough to '69 for the 19th Century I guess - perhaps he just couldn't wait). This bit of serious writing shows Delano was more than a humorist and newspaper column writer.

This little pamphlet, available today only in extensive libraries like the Bancroft at U.C. Berkeley (and the DSHS), is interesting social commentary about California in 1868 and so gives us a window into the California of a time we can hardly conceive. Today California is highly populated, highly technologically advanced, diverse in industry, and either the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world, depending on who's counting. 1868 was very different but people then were just like us, looking back with wonder at the changes being wrought.

"Old Block," looking back from 1868, says that in 1849, the year he'd come to California, emigrants had taken six months or so to cross the continent to get to California building bridges, roads and rafts; fighting off Indians; facing hardship and deprivation; and six months without civilization. Some families "were shipwrecked... and dependent... upon other[s]" who had been more fortunate. Emigrants were exhausted upon arrival in California. Then, instead of finding a "land of plenty" where they could recuperate, they found a "comparative wilderness." There were only a couple of small towns. Just to survive in the new land required "renewed labor and exertion". That's a very different perspective from what we usually consider. We just naturally assume that crossing the continent was difficult and sometimes death-defying, but upon arrival in California, everything became fine.

By 1868, twenty years later, things had changed in California. There were cities and towns, "immense commerce with the whole world," "magnificent farms," thousands of houses, "manufactories," railroads, "overflowing abundance," and "produce of its rich soil." "Old Block" said, "These changes seem like the enchantment of the magician's wand."

Still California was isolated in those early years. It took thirty days for a letter to arrive in the east and another thirty days for a reply. For that and other reasons people began to think about a railroad across the country. The problem was the Sierra. Besides the annual thirty feet of snow and the landslides, there was no locomotive with the power to go over the mountains. Many people felt "it could not be done." Maybe it would be done in a hundred years, "provided California [was] worth retaining."

Technology and engineering improved though, and at the same time there was a National push for a transcontinental railroad and the Federal Government stepped in to support the railroad companies. There were benefits for all with a railroad. "Enterprising citizens" who "comprehended the benefits of such a grand highway" undertook the task despite its difficulties. They dealt with avalanches, land slides, rain saturated earth, and the difficult mountain soil. They built long lines of sheds to protect track from the snow. They invented new "immense plows" to clear snow. The logistical problems of the huge workforce so far from its sources were dealt with as was coordinating the myriad of suppliers. The Sierra that had been seen as a problem was now seen as a valuable natural resource for timber and stone. Towns started to appear along the railroad line and the line opened up economic activity in previously inaccessible places.

By 1868 what had seemed insurmountable was being accomplished with the help of new technology and National laws.

After pages of detail about the building of the railroad, "Old Block" turned to the scenery of the Sierra Nevada from the railroad, which in 1868 had gotten to the deserts of Nevada. Here's what you can do if you want to take this trip in 1868.

For a trip to explore the scenery along the Pacific Railroad arrive in Sacramento by 6:30 AM. Two hours later you will be in Newcastle, having gone 31 miles or so. You could see a lot from Newcastle because in 1868 the air is clear but that's irrelevant to us waiting for the scenery of the higher altitudes.

After another hour you are in Colfax, 23 miles further up the line. The place has 800 residents and it's named after Schuyler Colfax. In 1868 "Old Block" just said Colfax was a friend of the Nation (he was Speaker of the House in Washington D.C.). Colfax would later become vice president for U.S. Grant, but not yet. We just have a little benefit of hindsight during our trip.

Then it is on to Cape Horn, frowning down on human attempts at progress. Down its perpendicular sides, two thousand feet, is the American River. From the bottoms of its rocky cañons “gigantic mountains” rise from its bed. There are “mighty hills... far as the eye can reach, till their snowy crests mingle with the blue ether of Heaven.” The view is enchanting and there is more flowery language but we have to go higher.

On to Emigrant Gap and here was an 1854 camping spot for “Old Block” “when the cougar, and the grizzly bear, and the wild Indian disputed possession with civilized man.” He reminisced about early adventures and then, this was where the “toil worn and weary emigrant, who had made his way over terrible steeps and almost impassable rocks, was obliged to let his wagon down the precipitous bank with rope... in his route to the smiling plains of Sacramento.” Here the railroad has been built where “the wrecks of wagons, and the bones of animals killed in making the descent, covered the ground in 1849” (the year “Old Block” arrived in California.)

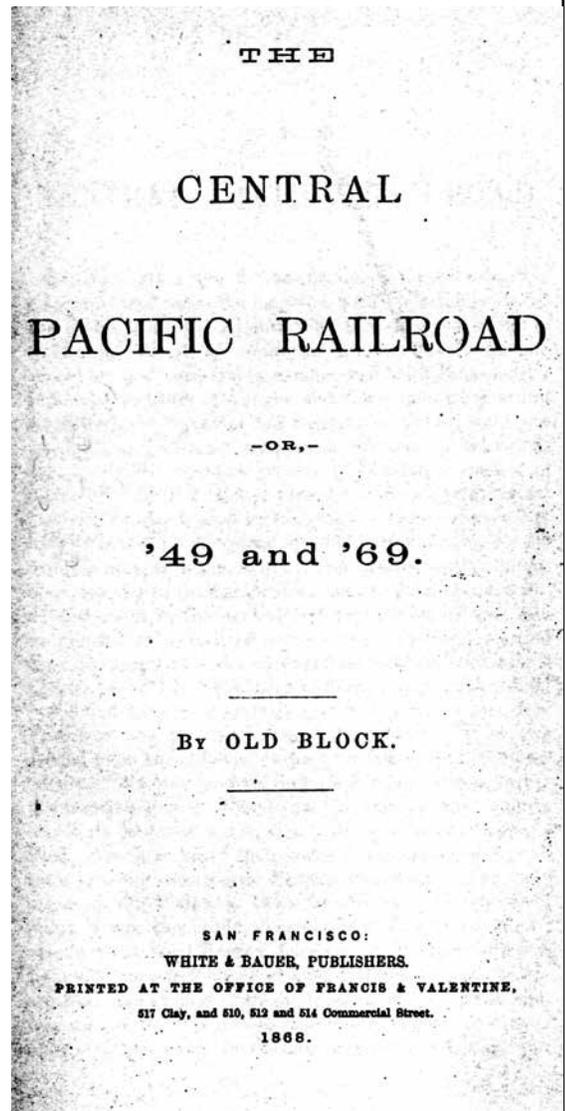
By dinner time the train has reached Cisco, ninety two miles from the start this morning and we’re getting close to the summit. The Yuba’s “wild scene breaks upon the view. Language has not power to give an adequate description... A vast amphitheater, surrounded by towering mountains... the whole vast area covered with bare, naked, gray rocks, apparently scattered over the ground in reckless disorder... a wild scene of confusion... Only a few stunted pines or hardy shrubs find a foothold among this wreck of creation...”

Castle Peak appears. “On every side a scene of desolation presents itself of volcanic heaving, and the eye is never weary in gazing upon this weird scene... it has the fascination of wonder and awe.” The railroad bed has been blasted from granite. “Winter snow sometimes falls to a depth of twenty feet.” Snowsheds protect the (rail)road here.

Then “we reach the pleasant opening of Summit Valley, which lies nestled at the western base of the great wall and backbone of the Sierra Nevada. A charming glade of a mile in length, by half a mile broad, presents in summer an interesting contrast in its green bosom to the great wall of everlasting snow which rises on its eastern border, the apex of which is more than eight thousand feet.” “Old Block” had visited the valley in 1854 and it had taken “two days of hard riding and arduous travel, by tortuous and difficult paths, in picking our way over and among the rocks, from Emigrant Gap to this lovely valley, a distance which the locomotive now spans with ease... in an hour and a half.”

Just beyond, the barrier of the Sierra was insurmountable, and so the builders went through the mountain with tunnels of nearly a mile, the longest being 1659 feet. The tunnel building was done with blasting, “It was a grand sight from the valley of Lake Donner, at eventide, to look up a thousand feet upon the overhanging cliffs, where the workmen were discharging their glycerine blasts. Through the gathering shades of night, immense volumes of the fire and dense clouds of smoke broke from the mountainside, as if a mighty volcano was rending it to atoms. Huge masses of rocks and debris were rent and heaved up in the commotion; then anon came the thunders of the explosion like a lightning stroke, reverberating along the hills and cañons [sic], as if the whole

...as if the whole artillery of heaven was in play.



artillery of heaven was in play. Huge masses of rock rolled far down the steep declivity, and pieces weighing two hundred pounds were thrown a distance of a mile. Sometimes the people at the hotel, a mile from the scene of destruction, were obliged to retire to avoid the danger from the falling fragments.”

The train has gone 107 miles from Sacramento in seven hours. In 1854 “this was an arduous ride, on horseback, of four days.” Then there were no settlements along the way except for a few mining camps. “The traveler was compelled to carry his own provisions and sleep in the open air. Now [1868] there are towns, and hotels at convenient distances all along the line, and comfortable dwellings.”

In 1854 "Old Block" had made the journey as part of a party that included Lola Montez, a very famous 19th Century entertainer. They camped one night along the Truckee River and were waylaid by some "Pi-ute[s]" who tried to steal their horses. "Little did we dream that a few brief years would see a grand national highway passing within five miles of the place of our watch and ward" [where they guarded the horses through the "cold, frosty nights."] Where "Old Block" and his 1854 traveling companions "suffered for food," a town of two thousand has arisen by 1868 "With all the luxuries and concomitants of civilized life... It is truly wonderful."

Wonderful, wonderful indeed, is the science, energy, and skill of man.

Then the train passed a curve, "another grand and unique view breaks upon the vision. Glimmering through the tall pines, the placid waters of Donner Lake were seen embosomed at the foot of the grand old hills... It is a gem in the mountains, and with comfortable hotels... [that] has already become a favorite watering place for the citizens of the great cities below, who are glad to escape the fervid heat of summer in the valley, to seek recreation and relaxation from the cares of business, in the pure, bracing air and sublime scenery of its locality."

Just eight miles from the summit "A soda spring has been found, equal in purity and deliciousness to the water of an artificial fountain." This is the original Soda Springs which will one day appear in the Heirloom. Stay tuned. "Old Block" predicted that the spot would soon become "the resort of the invalid and pleasure-seeker."

The train glided smoothly along, the passengers traveling "with a feeling of exhilaration and delight." In Truckee it is "life and animation." There are twenty four "magnificent saw-mills" at work reducing the stately forest trees into material for ties, and timber and lumber..." Here also is the seat of the Donner Party where "several families perished for want of food, and the survivors lived for days upon the dead bodies of their companions." "Old Block" had visited the spot in 1854 and seen the cabins, bones of cattle, and stumps of trees "ten or twelve feet high." In 1868 a large sawmill occupied the site and "seemed like the desecration of a hallowed spot" but which attested to "civilization and progress."

The train continued on to Reno, which had about a thousand residents, and then on into the desert. "On this horrid waste hundreds of teams gave out, and cattle perished miserably for want of food and water. Families were shipwrecked, and saved only by the kindness of more stalwart and fortunate emigrants... The ground was literally strewn with the bones of starved animals, with abandoned wagons, chain and household utensils, when the suffering emigrants were fleeing for life across this Upas [sic] plain. No wonder a shout of joy went up when the long-tried traveler caught the first view of the saving waters of the Truckee..." "Old Block" shuddered as he remembered his experiences here, "and think that now a railroad is built over those wide wastes; when a pleasure trip is made in a few hours over ground which took many weeks to pass, with unalleviated suffering. I can scarcely realize the fact; and like one recovering from a trance, gaze around in uncertainty and doubt, in wonder and surprise. Wonderful, wonderful indeed, is the science, energy, and skill of man."

Here the railroad comes to an end. It will be almost another year before the transcontinental railroad is finished in May, 1869. "A continuous track will be laid from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean; vast tracts of valuable land will be available for all purposes of settlement; towns will be built, farms cultivated; property will be created, valuable alike to the Government and the settler... and the distance which required six months of weary travel to make, in 1849, will be spanned from ocean to ocean in seven days... [and] may well be classed the greatest work of the age..."

Science and Enterprise can well exclaim with Caesar, we 'came, saw, and conquered.'"

THE OLD BANK,
Next Door to the Exchange Hotel
STANDS WHERE IT HAS DONE SINCE
 1852 and **OLD BLOCK** is behind the counter as he was twelve years ago. He appreciates the very liberal patronage which he has received through a long course of years, and begs to assure old friends and new, that they shall continue to receive the same attention which he has always striven to render.

Rothschilde's Exchange On Europe,
 COIN EXCHANGE on the Atlantic States, at the very lowest rates,
 DEPOSITS received as usual, payable in Coin
 GOLD DUST sent to the Mint or Assay Office,
 \$500,000 worth of Gold Dust wanted for which the highest price will be paid.

HIS CONNECTIONS BELOW, ARE WITH
D. O. MILLS & CO.....Sacramento
BANK OF CALIFORNIA.....San Francisco

AMPLE ARRANGEMENTS ARE MADE FOR any amount of money which can be used in Grass Valley.
LIBERAL ADVANCES MADE ON CONSIGNMENTS of Gold sent to the Mint.
COIN CHECKS ON SACRAMENTO AND SAN Francisco, as usual.

From his well known manner of business and fair dealing he hopes for a continuance of patronage.
A. DELANO, Grass Valley

Ad for "Old Block's" banking operation from the Grass Valley Morning Union January 30, 1866

More on Airmail Over the Hump

Last month we covered the story of a couple of air mail pilots over Donner Summit as they time and again conquered “the Hump.” In our research for the story we came across a series of articles in the Oakland Tribune printed in January and February, 1923, but previously printed in 1922 in the Nevada State Journal. They give a more general view of taking the air mail over Donner Summit. The prose of Jack Bell, the author, is very descriptive and bears repeating.

The First article is “Hooded Messengers Who Brave the Red Line ‘Hump’” and introduces “The hooded, goggled wonder-men of United States Air mail.” These men risk themselves daily facing “the terrible, terrifying 100 miles of two-mile-high peaks, of mile-deep canyons, great fields of giant boulders, forest-covered screens of the hundreds upon hundreds of death holes that lurk below...”

The route over the Sierra went right over Donner Summit. Eventually every thirty miles there would be emergency landing fields and weather stations, their roofs marked with the station’s number and “SF-SL” so pilots could know exactly where they were on the route from San Francisco to Salt Lake. There would also be concrete arrows to mark the route and even later, beacons for radio guidance. In 1922 though, it was the days when there was no instrument flying. Everything was by what you could see – “visual flight rules.” This was only two years after the final leg of the transcontinental air mail route has been inaugurated and mail flew across the country and over the “Sierra Hump.” (Sky Logs section of the Oakland Tribune May 1, 1929)

“This 100 miles of Red line [the government's line of flight] is recognized the world over as the greatest hazard in aeronautics for any kind of aircraft. This danger applies to balloons, dirigibles and aeroplanes for the reason that there is absolutely not one single landing place for the entire 100 miles.” Then, over Verdi “is what is officially known as the

roughest place of record in air flying. It is here that all the winds of the vast expanses of mountains and desert converge and meet. The air currents may take the pilot and his ship miles out of compass course: they may take him and his ship up into an altitude of 17,000 feet from the landing level of 12,000 feet that is the usual altitude taken for a landing at the Reno field.” (Reno is really only at 4,500 feet altitude - ed.)

The winds can be so strong that pilots’ necks can almost be dislocated by their “holding belts.” “As the pilot fights for his very life, he watches the wings of the wonderful craft, expecting the wings to fold and the ship to drop wingless into that vast space above the earth.”

“ an ant hurtling its puny self against a locomotive under full headway.

Oakland Tribune
February 25, 1923

The winds are one thing, but there’s also fog and when the pilot can’t see and his plane is pushed down a thousand feet in a downdraft, there are a “thousand rocky peaks”

waiting. Sometimes the altimeter will read 12,000 feet but “in the twinkling of an eye the plane will be dropped to 8,000 feet or be lifted to 16,000.

Of course these air mail pilots are modest (as well as “Stalwart, clean-living, fine, upstanding young men”). They don’t boast of their feats or escapes from danger. One fellow flying “the Hump” ran into trouble. His motor began to sputter and he looked for a place to set down. The chosen half dark spot turned out to be the top of a tree. A wing was torn off and the plane plummeted to the ground. The pilot was thrown out of the plane and landed on his feet. He was rescued by some lumbermen and said to them he “couldn’t keep her up with only one wing” and then lapsed into unconsciousness. He regained consciousness five days later and continued to fly the “hump.”

The real danger flying “the hump” was winter, “driving through the dense barriers of snow, of hail and rain...” “There is absolutely no way to determine the flying keel of

It is no easy matter to start an airplane engine in the open in minus-thirty degree weather, in the midst of flying snow. Sixteen gallons of boiling water are poured into the radiator, twelve gallons of heated oils in the tanks. “Contact!” shouts the mechanic at the throttle and three mechanics link hands, lurching forward together to pull the propeller through compression. The footing is treacherous on the icy ground, and should slip and fall into the whirling risk his life would probably be forfeited. If the engine fails to start after the first few trials, the water and oil must be quickly drained before freezing, reheated, and the whole weary process repeated.”

From National Geographic January, 1926
“On the Trail of the Air Mail...”

a ship in a snowstorm - the planes have no instrument that records the level keel. The pilot may be almost upside down, and not even the strain of the belts will appear changed as the ship flied through the blinding snow."

Pilot Claire Vance, "was flying blindly through a terrific blizzard in the High Sierras. He had lost all sense of direction. This was last December [1921] during the usual storm period. His ship, without warning, swerved into a tailspin and in the twinkling of an eye the ship spun tail down from 12,000 feet to within 4,000 feet of the ground. With the instruments frozen and the stick ice-covered and the levers clogged, Vance fought the battle of his spectacular career in trying to right his plane. Coming out of the smother of snow he found himself over Donner Lake, the body of water that lies in the lap of the crests of the 'hump' on the great divide of the Sierra mountains."

What do the pilots wear over the "hump?" Most pilots wear fur. Skin mukluks come up to their hips. "The wind cannot pierce the hide, which is of the hair seal. They are waterproof. The bottoms are packed with hay or straw, and then the ordinary woolen socks are worn." Even so, there is not a pilot who avoided frozen feet, face, and hands. There were times when the pilots had to be carried into the warm offices of the airfields to thaw out.

January 27, 1923 Claire K. Vance left San Francisco with his mail and made good time until he got close to Colfax. There he hit a bump "that almost unseated him with the shock of a liner striking a submerged iceberg. Then the battle began." "Vance found himself standing still in the air, immobile, with the grand Liberty motor holding its own, against the pressure immeasurable, unknown, singing its song in the long roar of combat, in defiance to the kinds of the whirlwinds. The ship shook and wavered with the jumpy increase of the raging element." Then a wave of energy struck the ship from above "with an impact terrific." He was blown back to Sacramento. Vance climbed up and tried to get over the wind and then headed straight for the "Hump." "Into the cauldron he went again and against the gale. He was again blown back to Sacramento. It looked like he'd never get over the "Hump." Vance headed back, this time at 15,000 feet. It was an exhausting fight and then dense black clouds began to envelope the mountains. He couldn't make it. Vance went back to Sacramento and put his mail on the train.

From National Geographic January, 1926
"On the Trail of the Air Mail..."

New York to San Francisco 2665 miles, 34 hours 20 minutes westbound and 29 hours 15 minutes eastbound. There were 15 stations for gas and oil and the exchange of mails.

In case you want to try flying across country.

Popular Aviation
March, 1929



\$1795
Less Motor and Prop.
Fly-Away Wichita

For student training—for a "sport job"—for lowest priced, fast transportation, the new SWALLOW T-P leads the field.
Here are a few of its features: Detachable motor mount—for used OX-5s—or any new production motor up to 110 H.P., Student's Rudder and Stick Release, Crash Pads. No lessening of the well-known Swallow Quality in construction.
Let us tell you more about this splendid plane. A post-card request will do.

THE SWALLOW AIRPLANE CO.
WICHITA, KANSAS

A Forced Landing in Sunny California

Popular Aviation March, 1929

We spent some time in last month's Heirloom looking at the heroes who flew over Donner Summit, "The Hump" as air mail pilots. There were hair-raising tales certainly not for the faint hearted.

We can't leave things alone though at the Heirloom. Norm Saylor remembered a picture of the fuselage of an air mail plane on a truck being moved off of Donner Summit. He's been remembering that for awhile and we wanted the picture to go along with the crashed air mail plane on page three of the last issue. We were hoping the number on the fuselage would be "164" so that it would be the same plane, because that is what they did after 164 crashed on the summit. Presumably it flew again. Unfortunately people in the old days did not have much consideration for the people of today and so we don't know of any pictures of #164 getting hauled off the summit. You'd think 1923 people would have found the view of the plane being hauled off by truck from Donner Summit remarkable and have taken pictures with their smart phones. But no.

So we are left with an entirely different plane. And how did we get to that? Norm kept remembering but could not find the picture he was remembering in his voluminous collection of historic photographs.

George Lamson has been digitizing Norm's pictures for easier access by people, for easier access by the Heirloom, and just in case of catastrophe. We had a little conference at the DSHS and Norm remembered his picture again. George piped up saying he'd seen it too. George went home and started looking through what he's digitized. He found the missing picture.

At the same time our research department was adding to our stories about flying over "The Hump" and found the January, 1926 issue of Natinoal Geographic. There, in the first story in the magazine was the picture to the right, the picture Norm had been remembering.



The pictures' caption says that the mail plane crashed into twelve feet of snow while crossing "high up in the Sierras on a frozen lake too small to permit a successful take off." Since the transcontinental air route was over Donner Summit and Donner Summit gets an average of 34' of snow per winter, it's likely the caption on the picture here refers to Donner Summit or nearby, maybe as far west as Emigrant Gap.

More searching turned up the March, 1929 issue of Popular Aviation which had an interesting article, "A Forced Landing in Sunny California." It's also a bit hair-raising and reinforces the title in last month's Heirloom, "Heroism Over Donner Summit" as those pilots, equated with the Pony Express riders, were heroic in their delivery of the mail. The article does not say Donner Summit, but the transcontinental air route went over Donner Summit, right over the concrete arrow, beacon, and weather station at the top of the pass (check out our Heirloom indices on our web pages). Did we mention we get a lot of snow here too? The article mentions crashing in twelve feet of snow. You don't find that down in Baxter or Emigrant Gap, to the west of Donner Summit, or down in Truckee and the Truckee River Canyon on the way to Reno on the east side. The article also mentions the railroad tracks and you don't find those Southern Pacific tracks anywhere but on Donner Summit where the plane tried to cross the Sierra. So our amateur literary sleuthing concludes the story took place at one of the many lakes around Donner Summit near enough for the train to pick up the wreckage that the truck delivered. Before we give away the whole story in the introduction let's get to the story.

The article starts with a good introduction familiar to anyone familiar with Donner Summit, the Heirloom's home base, "Over the Sierra, on the San Francisco-Reno Run of the Transcontinental Air Mail, one is favored with a view of nature's grandeur that is unsurpassed... The Sierra, with their deeply cut canyons and crevasses and when heavily mantled with the winter snows, truly

present an awe-inspiring sight from the vantage point of an airplane seat..." It's really beautiful, unless, the article says, you have no "knowledge of the temperamental characteristics... of internal combustion engines." There were no landing facilities along most of the trans-Sierra route in 1929 in case of mechanical failure. Soon there would be emergency fields under construction but in 1929, not yet.

Air Mail plane #424 left eastbound on February 5, 1927 with a forecast of unfavorable weather. The tops of the storm clouds over Reno were 20,000 feet so there was no flying over them. The railroad was the only possible route to get through the storm, meaning the pilot would be following the tracks over the Sierra between mountain peaks. The higher #424 got the worse the weather and the rain turned to snow. The snowfall got heavier. The falling snow soon blended with the snow on the ground and except for the black ribbon of train tracks, everything was disorienting. Then the tracks disappeared into the snow covered snowsheds. That offered "innumerable anxious moments, with the pilot fervently hoping the ribbons of black steel would emerge at the estimated point." By then the plane was flying about track level so the pilot could see. Fortunately the De Haviland airplane was known for its maneuverability, that "was being well tested."

The goal was Donner Pass. Shortly after the summit there is a big "S" turn in the tracks and a drop of a thousand feet. But then it levels out, kind of, on the way to Reno. But then winter "stopped meddling around" and the snow increased to "obscurity complete."

Now the story gets hairy.

The pilot tried a couple of times to find the pass but in the "swirling mass" he couldn't find it and he was worried about the "hidden mountains" on either side of him. There were many places "more restful to the nerves." "The high winds and severe downdrafts.. made sharp turns quite interesting." The pilot couldn't see the ground. "Many times tall pines, jutting rocks, etc., brushed by underneath the ship, too close for comfort." At that point the pilot decided he had to head back for Sacramento and hope for a hole in the Tule fog but he found the storm's intensity increased going west. He had to continue east. Because of the mountains on either side he couldn't try to "blind" climb. He circled tightly looking for objects below. And here we should keep in mind it's winter, it's freezing, it's snowing, the airplane's cockpit is open, and the snow must be blasting the pilot's face despite whatever windshield the plane had.

As he flew along the pilot realized he was below the train tracks and the canyon was narrower. He made



the tightest spirals he could make to keep from crashing into the canyon walls. The bottom wing was just missing "huge, jagged rocks and tall pines." Time slowed down. The pilot-author reckoned 72 years had gone by. The pilot had to put down but he couldn't see. So he prayed, cut the switches and cut the gas pressure. And then crooked an arm in front of his face and waited for the crash.

"Immense pine trees were mowed down in the path of the ship... Fifteen to twenty feet of snow on the ground... cushioned the smash [where else to do we get that on the transcontinental air route but on Donner Pass? – editorial sleuthing note]

#424 would never fly again but the mail was "intact." Here it turns out the pilots in those days carried along snowshoes and rations. It took the pilot "many hours of steep climbing" through four feet of deep new snow before he got to the railroad tracks. Then it was a few miles down the tracks to a small station where he could call for help and "relieve the anxiety of those concerned."

Southern Pacific later helped search for the plane and took the pilot on a special train consisting of an engine and cabooses, to the next division point.

The pictures on this page are of the plane crash.



... The creations of GEORGE WHEARY,
America's Master Trunk Designer, command
world-wide appreciation



Today, the Wheary Wardrola stands apart; it is the only trunk with cushioned top and solid base, built to roll open. Beauty is combined with "rigid-stead" strength; even its method of locking is distinctive. It is the only trunk that gives you all the travel conveniences created by George Wheary. See the Wheary Wardrola at the finer stores.

WHEARY TRUNK COMPANY, Racine, Wisconsin

WHEARY
Cushioned Top
WARDROLA



In case you need to go traveling in 1926.

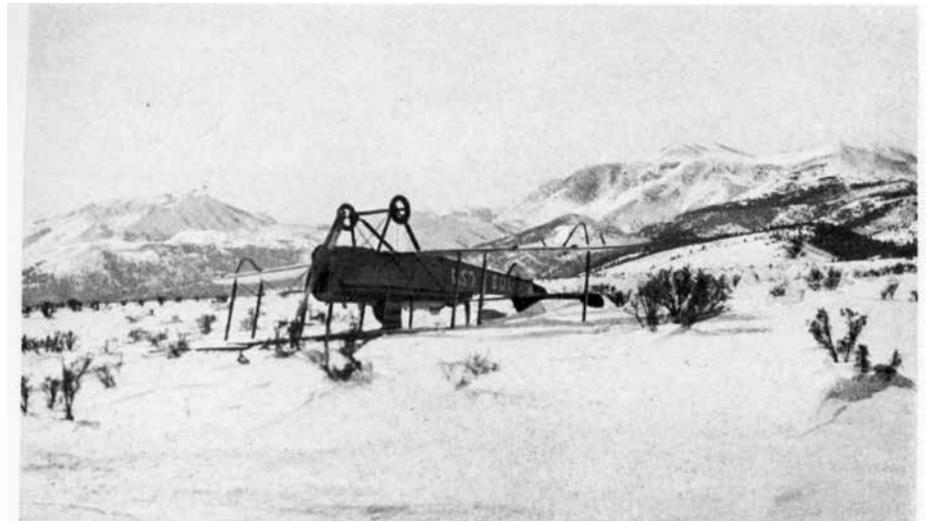


Photograph by Captain A. W. Stevens

THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC LINE TUNNELING ITS WAY THROUGH THE SIERRA NEVADA

This railroad probably has as much difficulty in crossing the mountains at this point, some 30 miles northeast of Lake Tahoe, as at any point on its whole system. The snow sometimes reaches a depth here of 30 feet, so that it is necessary to inclose the rails with snowsheds, which can be seen beginning at the lower left corner of the picture. Not only is this part of the Sierras difficult for the railroad to cross, but it is also difficult for the automobile road, which may be noted in the center, twisting and turning, as it winds up the sides of the canyon. This photograph covers territory on the exact summit of the Sierra Nevada at the crossing of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Tunnel No. 6 is the Summit Tunnel; Summit Station is to the right of this tunnel. The highway passes under the railroad tracks east of Tunnel 7. In the right foreground is seen the new State highway under construction. The straight white line at the top of the picture is the second track of the Southern Pacific's main line under construction.

Donner Summit from the January, 1926 issue of National Geographic
Below, crashed plane on Mt. Rose from the same magazine.

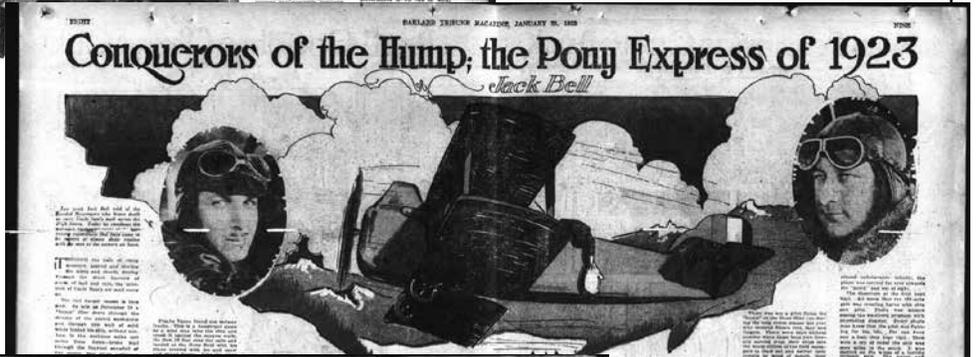




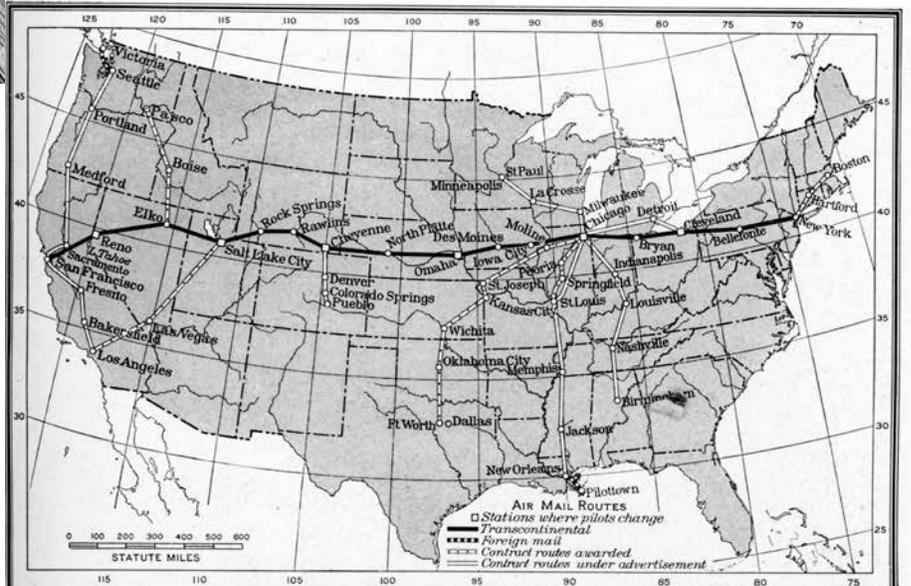
Top and bottom headlines, Oakland Tribune January 14, 1923

Below, January 21, 1923

Evocative Headlines



Map of the U.S. Mail's transcontinental air route in 1926 from National Geographic



Some Air Mail Miscellany

Air Mail from "On the Trail of the Air Mail" Feb. 1926 US Air Services Magazine, also a longer version in National Geographic January 1926 by Lieut. J. Parker Van Zandt

On May, 1918 air mail was born with the first take off at Potomac Park, Washington. Pres. Wilson was there along with other dignitaries. Everything was in order except there was no gas in the plane's tank.

July, 1924 the first serious attempt at regular night flying with a flight from Chicago to Cheyenne.

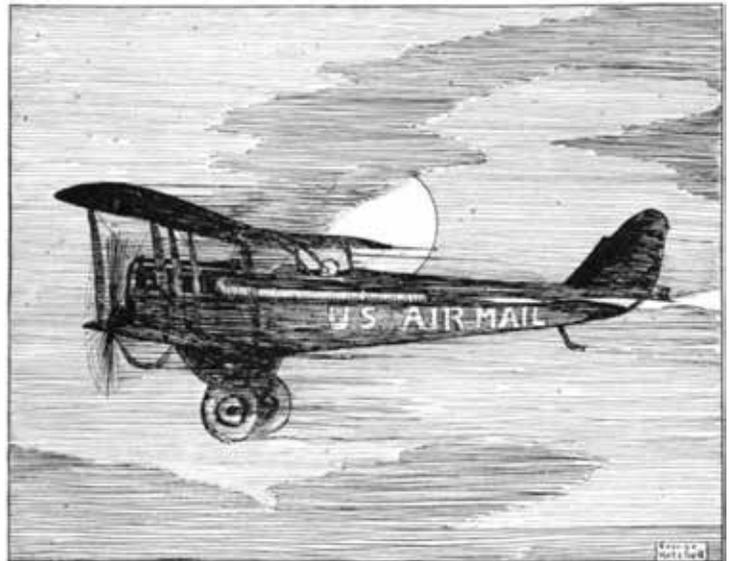
Describing flying the transcontinental route

"Then came the great day. Straight toward the mountains we headed, following Truckee Canyon. As we climbed higher and higher, fresh beauty streamed into view and the grand, massive uplift of the Sierras spread out in all its ineffable glory.

I wonder if in all the world there is another range so sublime and yet so accessible."

Deep in a girdle of snow-mantled peaks lay the broad blue expanse of Lake Tahoe, its distant shore hidden under the dense shadow of a thunderstorm. The towering columns of the clouds pressed forward in noiseless tumult, dragging their rain-drenched skirts across the mountain tops, while we fled westward seeking the pass before the storm should intercept us."

"...while the pinnacles of the Sierras receded eastward, sharply silhouetted against the storm. A glorious, iridescent rainbow ring formed in the spray at the head of a cascade and, plunging over the ledge with us, slid down the waterfall to vanish in a deep pool at its base."



ALL THRU THE NIGHT.

Flying Magazine August 1966

How they Flew the Air Mail

May 15, 1918 first regular airmail service in US between Philadelphia and Washington and NY. The Post Office supplied its own pilot and plane. The pilot got lost and had to land near a small town and ask directions to Philadelphia. The next day he started again and flew all over the east coast until he ran out of fuel.

The air mail operation moved westward with the last leg to San Francisco forged Sept. 8, 1920

Feb of 1921 in a bid to sidetrack the Harding administration's budget cuts the air mail flew at night guided by bonfires.

From the DSHS Archives



Forest Gift Shop at Cisco Grove. The May, '20 [Heirloom](#) has interior pictures.



A T.C. Wohlbruck (see the October and November, '12 [Heirlooms](#)) panorama of Donner Summit and Donner Lake. It was just sitting in a drawer in the DSHS and looked like it needed to be in the [Heirloom](#). The original, ready for inspection at the DSHS is about two feet long.

Book Review

Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings Being Scenes and Adventures of an Overland Journey to California with Particular Incidents of the Route, Mistakes and Sufferings of the Emigrants, the Indian Tribes, the Present and Future of the Great West.

1854 384 pages Alonzo Delano

Available as reprint under the original title or as On the Trail to the California Gold Rush

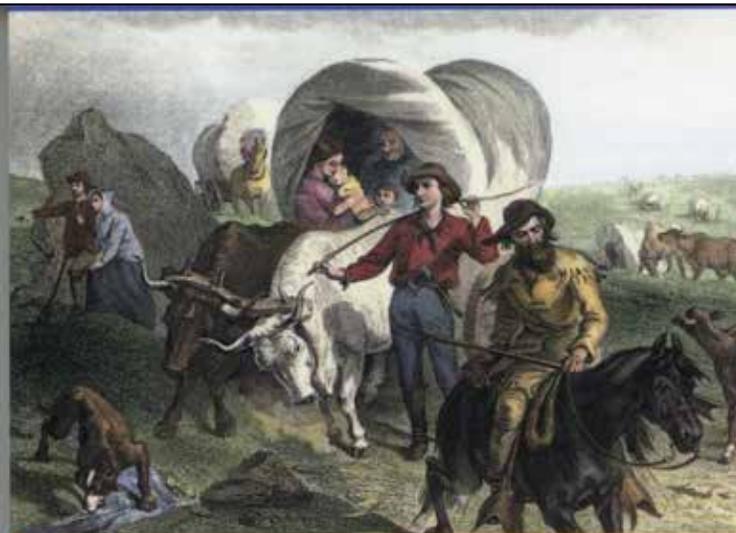
2005 384 pages Alonzo Delano

Alonzo Delano had health problems and his Illinois doctor prescribed a change of residence and “bodily exertion.” A wagon train trip to California seemed to fit the bill and coincided with his “fever of the mind for gold.” Delano set out in 1849, leaving his wife and two children behind, as part of a wagon train pulled by oxen. He became “a nomad denizen of the world, and a new and important era of [his] life had begun.” Here we will include a little aside. The “Delano” is pronounced as Franklin Delano Roosevelt pronounced his “Delano.” Alonzo was related to Franklin.

Most emigrant diaries have short entries, giving minimal information beyond miles traveled, places reached, and short descriptions. Delano’s diary is more of a well-polished literary work full of detail in the day by day recitations. Sometimes that gets tedious. In general this is a marvelous description of what it was like to travel across the continent and then what life was like in California during the Gold Rush.

His descriptions are colorful. In describing the riverboat trip to near the wagon train’s embarkation point, Delano says the boat was full. Not only were the cabins full but so was every settee and table.

“...the cabin floor was covered by the sleeping emigrants. The decks were covered with wagons, mules, oxen, and mining implement, the hold was filled with supplies. But this was the condition of every boat – for since the invasion of Rome by the Goths, such a deluge of mortals had not been witnessed, as was now pouring from the States to the various points of departure for the golden shores of California. Visions of sudden and immense wealth were dancing the imaginations of these anxious seekers of fortune, and I must confess that I was not entirely free from such dreams;... I wondered what I should do with all the money which must necessarily come into my pocket!”



ON THE TRAIL TO THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH

ALONZO DELANO

INTRODUCTION BY J. S. HOLLIDAY

Those observations and Delano’s descriptions of experiences are one reason to read this 1854 book. There is also a lot of practical advice in case you want to reprise the trip. We learn about how wagon trains worked, were organized, and what daily life as part of a train was like. We learn how jobs were apportioned. The lead was changed each day so everyone got a chance to eat dust or be in the lead. There was a night guard each night with two-hour watches. Cattle were brought into the wagon train circle each night after grazing to protect them from theft or being maimed (Native Americans would shoot arrows at the oxen so that they'd have to be left behind by the emigrants and then turned into food). Mail could be sent back to the States with people going east or more likely, according to Delano, travelers would take the money and letters and then dispense with the mail. Messages could be left for those following by writing on buffalo skulls and leaving the skulls by the roadside.

In that information there is good advice. Don’t stray from

the train. Dig a trench around the tent to prevent the water from coming in during a storm. There is the technique for preparing a raccoon for eating. Prairie dogs are fat and oily but if you parboil them it turns out they are quite good.

We also learn more general things. The Hollywood view of the migration by wagon train is the single wagon train traveling across the plain. Delano shows us that it was really a crowded affair. There were thousands of migrants behind

LIFE ON THE PLAINS
AND
AMONG THE DIGGINGS;
BEING
SCENES AND ADVENTURES
OF AN
OVERLAND JOURNEY TO CALIFORNIA:
WITH PARTICULAR
INCIDENTS OF THE ROUTE,
MISTAKES AND SUFFERINGS OF THE EMIGRANTS,
THE INDIAN TRIBES,
THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE OF THE GREAT WEST.

BY A. DELANO.

AUBURN AND BUFFALO:
MILLER, ORTON & MULLIGAN.
1854.

his train and he continually mentions traveling with or near other trains and coming across friends on the trail. All of that traffic was a problem because those following found little forage left for their animals.

Along with the information there are the observations such as when Delano rode off away from the wagon train, "I had an overwhelming feeling of wonder and surprise at the vastness and silence of the panorama... I rode, without seeing a sign of life, and with none but my own thoughts to commune with." Contemplating the migration of long trains he described the scene of the prancing horsemen, men traveling on foot, the

"display of banners from many wagons, and the multitude of armed men, looked as if a mighty army was on its march..." His party had joined a "motley throng of gold seekers, who were leaving home and friends far behind, to encounter the peril of mountain and plain."

Another reason to read the book is Delano's wonderful prose. Delano suffered from some recurring sickness. Describing another bout he says he "had a visit from my old friends, chill and fever... I went through another baptism of fire and water, the ceremony of which closed about noon." They'd bought provisions in St. Louis but they were not of the best quality. The bacon "began to exhibit more signs of life than we had bargained for. It became necessary to scrape and smoke it, in order to get rid of its tendency to walk in insect form." That tells us a lot about conditions in the 19th Century, about human nature (selling rotten food to unsuspecting travelers), about food on the journey, and hygiene, but the humor adds a lot to the story. That then foreshadows one of Delano's later careers in California as a humor writer who influenced Mark Twain and Bret Harte.

A horse was not behaving and Delano describes the "coltology" of the horse as it "wheeled like lightning," "kicking up his heels like a dancing master," with "impertinent composure" and "diabolical impudence."

The company did not have much luck hunting to supplement their rations sometimes, the "hunting corps... were generally unsuccessful, and our supplies of fresh meat mostly continued to run at large in a whole skin."

There were many adventures or incidents over the trip. Delano got lost a couple of times, walking in advance of his train. They met Indians many times. Animals ran away or were stolen. Delano's train hid a wounded Indian being chased by another tribe. There were monster storms. There were lost travelers. People had to throw away their equipment and supplies to lighten their loads. There were accidental shootings and murder. There was a desperado who came by and Indian raids.

There were small things too, the irritations and arguments that arise when people are together too long or faced with continual difficulty. Rivers had to be crossed often and there were accidents.

At one point the train came across a fellow heading back east with a leg broken in two places. They set his leg and the guy continued on. On another occasion a fellow from

"Once in every mile, at least, we saw the carcass of a dead ox, having closed his career of patient toil... in the service of his gold seeking master..."

Alonzo Delano

You can form no idea of the labor, fatigue, trials and patience of an overland journey to this country. While traveling along the Platte for hundreds of miles, cold and rainy weather benumb your fingers while pitching tents, guarding cattle, preparing meals, gathering fuel so scantily distributed, and a thousand et ceteras blunt your faculties; and when the hour of quiet arrives at dark, you sink on your hard couch exhausted. It is the same when you reach the burning sand after passing the Platte; and, in addition to this, while traveling down the Humboldt (or Mary's River) the utmost vigilance is required to keep marauding bands of Indians from stealing or maiming your cattle; and you become wearied and worn out, so that if you lay over a day, you cannot collect sufficient energy scarcely to wash a shirt or mend your ragged and dilapidated garments. Any man who makes a trip by land to California deserves to find a fortune.

Alonzo Delano October 12, 1849
Ottawa Illinois Free Trader, February 2, 1850.

another train was out hunting and was accosted by Indians. The Indians told the fellow he had no use for his “arms and accouterments... and that they would take charge of them until he passed that way again.” They robbed him of everything leaving him to return to his train naked.

As the journey progressed things got tougher for people as animals wore out and food supplies were depleted. Delano describes people left on the prairie, “hundreds of miles from aid, without the means of locomotion. We found families with women and helpless children in this sad condition, and yet we were without means to give them relief.” Sometimes “It was a kind of terra firma shipwreck, with the lamentable fact, that the numerous craft sailing by were unable to afford the sufferers any relief.”

Prairie dogs are fat and oily but if you parboil them they are quite good.

Alonzo Delano
Hints for on the trail in case you decide to travel.

Then as they approached the desert crossings things got worse. “Beyond us, as far as we could see, was a barren waste, without a blade of grass or a drop of water for thirty miles at least.” As Delano walked along he encountered a great many animals, “Perishing for want of food and water, on the desert plain. Some would be just gasping for breath, others unable to stand, would issue low moans as I came up, in a most distressing manner, showing intense agony; and still others, unable to walk, seemed to brace themselves up on their legs to prevent falling, while here and there a poor ox, or horse, just able to drag himself along, would stagger toward me with low sound, as if begging for a drop of water.”

“Once in every mile, at least, we saw the carcass of a dead ox, having closed his career of patient toil... in the service

of his gold seeking master...” Then it got worse. “The road as filled with dead animals, and the offensive effluvia had produced much sickness... the road was lined with the dead bodies of worn out and starved animals, and their debilitated masters, in many cases, were left to struggle on foot, combatting hunger, thirst and fatigue, in a desperate exertion...”

We are now within three days of Lawson's Settlement, in the Valley of the Sacramento; and if a bird was ever rejoiced to escape its thralldom, I shall be much more so to get to the end of this long, weary, and vexatious journey. A man deserves to be well paid who makes his first overland journey to California, for he can form no idea of the many trials he may be subjected to. The fatigues of the journey—the hardships of traversing an almost barren wilderness of nearly two thousand miles, I care but little for; but it is the narrow-minded ribaldry—the ceaseless strife which is constantly marring the tranquility of such a crowd—a mass of men in which each individual acts independent of all the rest, caring for none but himself, which renders it almost insufferable.

Letter to Mary Delano Sept. 13, 1851

Many people were in despair. If their animals died or were stolen or killed, they were left hundreds of miles from settlements. Men, women and children were left destitute “without a mouthful to eat, and with no means of getting forward, exposed to a burning sun by day, and the chilling cold of night.” “Mothers might be seen wading through the deep dust or heavy sand of the desert, or climbing mountain steeps, leading their poor children by the hand; or the once strong man, pale, emaciated by hunger and fatigue, carrying upon his back his feeble infant, crying for water and nourishment,” then “appeasing a ravenous appetite from an old carcass...” There was only the certainty that the next day would bring more suffering and torture.

We imagine that once emigrants arrived in California the hardship was over. There was civilization, but California was not ready for the emigrants. The emigrants were still miles away from their destinations if they even knew where they wanted to go. They had no money, not realizing there would be a need.

Prices were sky high. They had arrived in winter and had no shelter. Many were sick. And then how could they equip themselves so they could start gathering the gold they thought was so abundant?

The end of the diary turns to Delano's experiences in California. Fortunately he ran into people he knew who helped him. He did some gold mining. He opened a store and sold supplies. Just as Delano wrote his observations of the wagon trip, he described California too and its amazing growth which astonished him. Coming back to a locality after an absence Delano remarks on the huge changes. Tents had been replaced by substantial buildings. Hotels, stores, groceries, bakeries, and gambling houses had sprung up. Steamboats arrived daily and stage lines were being set up. That was all on the large scale. There was also the "march of refinement": crockery and table-cloths, glass tumblers, and wine glasses. One no longer had to sleep on the ground or

I wondered what I should do with all the money which must necessarily come into my pocket!

Alonzo Delano
on embarking for California and the Gold Rush

even carry one's own "plate, knife, and tin cup."

There was the downside too as Delano described the effects of gambling and alcohol, death

by disease and accident, bloodshed, poverty, crime (robbery, murder, and "incendiarism"), Indians, the "speculative mania" for town lots, etc. The rise in crime leads to a description of the coming of the vigilance committees.

Mining and store keeping didn't work too well for Delano so he became a miniature painter in Marysville. Shortly he had \$400 of which he lost half speculating on town lots.

He went back to tending store and there is a long section about the Native Americans of the California foothills. Delano describes their culture, living conditions, food, shelter, family arrangements, etc.

We didn't need to know every single thing that happened to Delano in his first year in California but nevertheless it's a fascinating slice of time spiced with his wonderful prose.

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.



Some months ago we received the following email.

My name is Patrick Farrell. I grew up in Colfax and started working in 1967 as a seasonal employee for the USFS at age 17. My duty station was the Big Bend Ranger District Office which is located approximately one mile west of the Rainbow Lodge along Highway 40. Back then it was a separate Ranger District of the Tahoe National Forest and it's where I began my 40 year Forest Service career in timber and fire management. You may find it interesting that back in 1976 my foreman (the late Wendel Penrose) and I constructed the Overland Emigrant Trail historical marker [left] that remains in its original location in front of what

was then the District Office but is currently the Big Bend Guard Station for the Yuba River Ranger District.

We built the structure out of rock transported from the old mini-quarry located along side Highway 40 underneath the current westbound lanes... Also, my father, Gordon Farrell, was the PG&E meter reader from the summit down to Clipper Gap. From the 40's through the late 70's he visited virtually every private residence and commercial property on the mountain. His area included Lake Mary, Norden, Soda Springs, Van Norden, Ice Lakes, PlaVada, Kingvale, Cisco, Carpenter Flat, Emigrant Gap, Yuba Gap, Bowman, Bear Valley, Nyack, Blue Canyon, Midas, Alta, Dutch Flat, Gold Run, and every nook and cranny from Colfax to Auburn. Needless to say, there wasn't an ol' timer, kid, dog or pickup on the mountain he didn't know, love, fight, pet, kick, drive or jump. Also, he was one of those PG&E and Southern Pacific employees who volunteered to carry stranded City of San Francisco passengers down the slopes to safety in the early '50s. Sadly, he took a lot of friendship, local knowledge and mountain history with him when he passed in 1998.



Which (finally) gets me to my point. With my roots buried so deeply within the area, I wanted you to know how much I and my extended family appreciate the dedication of the DSHS. So much would be swept away and lost forever without your staff and contributor's heartfelt diligence. Future generations will surely benefit from your efforts.

Left, Patrick Farrell with the emigrant monument at Big Bend

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.

DSHS Picture Project

The DSHS has Norm Saylor's incomparable collection of historical photographs and ephemera. Ever since the start of the DSHS they've existed only in binders and drawers at the DSHS. Nothing was easily accessible, and more importantly, were vulnerable to mishap.

For some years we been working on digitizing things and then developing and ACDSsee data base to accept the materials. To save volunteer time and effort we limited the exercise to Donner Summit materials and no duplicates. So far about 2800 pictures have been scanned with descriptions. That still left another 900+ that have no descriptions.

Here you see Judy Lieb and Ron Grove sitting with Norm as they "page through" the pictures needing annotation/description. Norm tells the story, names the people, looks for details we non-professionals don't readily see, and gives the dates. The information goes on a form, one per picture, which goes to George Lamson. George then updates the master file and uploads the now annotated pictures to Flickr.

With thousands of pictures now on Flickr, and all searchable, the public has a resources of Donner Summit photographic history. Larger items are in the process of being scanned now and will add ephemera to the collection (newspaper articles, brochures, maps, etc.). The collection is now easily accessible by the public and preserved for future generations.

We have a computer in the DSHS for public access too, but it's being set up just now. Stay tuned. Eventually we'll get a second computer.



This is quite an achievement by the volunteers. If you'd like to help, contact the editor on page 2 or send a check to help with equipment purchasing (see the form on the next page).

Here's the Flickr link:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/188645737@N03/albums/72157714653193812>

Top: Norm Saylor, Starr Walton, Ron Grove. Bottom: Judy Lieb, Norm Saylor

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Donner Summit Historical Society.org

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

____ New Membership

____ Renewing Membership

____ Individual Membership - \$30

____ Family Membership - \$50

____ Patron - \$500

____ Benefactor - \$1000

____ Business - \$250

____ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit
Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

____ Friend Membership - \$100 ____ Sponsor - \$250

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



Pick up the brochure at the DSHS
or download it at:

<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>

50 interpretive signs along Old 40

<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>