

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

September, 2020 issue #145



A Different Heirloom This Month

"We last heard about "Old Block," Alonzo Delano, in the July, '20 Heirloom in "Camping on Donner Summit, 1873" and his social commentary, "The Central Pacific Railroad or '49 and '69". He's made other appearances in the Heirloom as well (see "Summering in the Sierra," June and August 2011). He's just one of many people we've featured who lived on Donner Summit or just visited (page through our article index). Our research department is very thorough and so, in researching the July issue of the Heirloom, we acquired a couple of books by Mr. Delano, other pieces of his writing and newspaper articles about him. He's a fascinating character and so we decided to give him some more space in these pages. There are two book reviews of his vignettes of old California, contemporary book reviews, a melodrama he wrote, some humor, and a visit with friends to Independence Lake in 1861. The book reviews are accompanied by pictures drawn by a friend of "Old Block," Charles Nahl. The trip to Independence Lake is accompanied by Carleton Watkins photographs from a visit Watkins made in 1879.

That will all lead to features next month about Lola Montez, a friend of "Block's" while she was in California. She's got two Donner Summit lakes named for her as well as Mt. Lola, above Independence Lake.

"Old Block", Alonzo Delano, arrived in California during the Gold Rush in 1849. Although we have the history of important events, 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 found in secondary sources or other primary sources. Delano is credited with a "new school of literature", "California Humor," that made him popular but also influenced Brett Harte and Mark Twain.

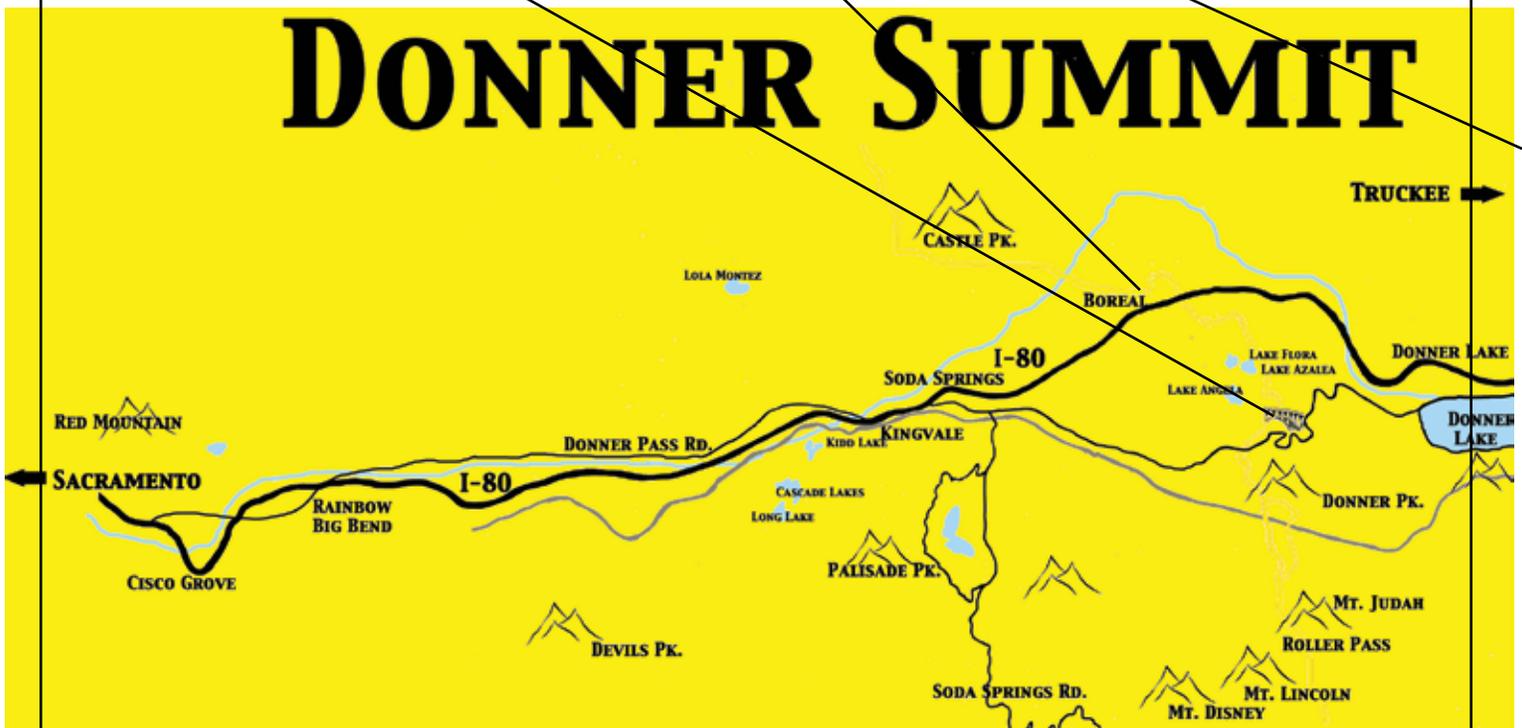
Health problems and gold fever sent Delano west leaving his family behind. He arrived in California and settled in Grass Valley. During his decades there he visited Donner Summit on a number of occasions. Delano prospected for gold, made small illustrations of miners in the mining camps and started a number of small businesses. He later became Grass Valley's first treasurer, the Wells Fargo agent, and opened his own bank. He lectured and his writings became popular: letters, plays, poems, and articles. At some point he adopted the pen name, "Old Block." After six years away from his family, Delano's daughter joined him in Grass Valley (and accompanied him on the trip to Independence Lake – see page 18) and the next year his wife followed after their son had died. His wife died in 1871 and he remarried the next year. The wedding took place in Truckee just after the woman got off the train from Ohio. Delano died in 1874.

We at the Heirloom take our responsibility for delivering the finest in local history very seriously and so we delve into the details that others, less dedicated, don't go to the trouble to discover. Delano was blessed, for example, with a large nose, one of the largest noses in all California, according to the Marysville Daily National Democrat (8/20/58). Here we should add some historical commentary to prove our serious bona fides. It may be that the nose, at which Delano often poked fun, is a reason he became a humorist. For example, Delano went to see a local visiting physical specimen, the Belgian Giant, one day and was happy to see that although other parts of the giant's body were indeed quite large, Delano had the "advantage over him in the point of noseology." (Daily National Gazette 7/21/60) The Sacramento Daily Union (8/24/58) noted that he was famous

“for one of the largest noses in all California. Indeed, he seems rather to belong to the nose than the nose to him...[and that] the brilliant and capricious Lola Montez (next month’s Heirloom) fell in love with his nose, and married him on the strength of it.” This is an example of 19th Century fake news. Although Delano had a large nose, he never married Lola. It does maybe point to why Mr. Delano became a humorist – better to live with it, celebrate it, and control it, rather than be the subject of ridicule. There is a profile of “Old Block’s” facial appendage on the cartooned envelope on page 17. Then you can wish for such a fine protuberance.

Story Locations in this Issue

Donner Summit Bridge Crater Lake and Rhino Rock Independence Lake



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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

From the DSHS Archives

Awhile ago the Caltrans Transportation Library sent the California Chapter of the Lincoln Highway Association a notice which the Lincoln Highway Association passed on to us at the DSHS. There's a lot wanting to get into the Heirloom so we've got to say, unfortunately for aficionados of old highway information, that "awhile" has been many months, actually more than a year. Still, if you like old pictures and information, here is a good source that we used for the pictures and text which follow and to which they've added following their email to us.

The Caltrans Transportation Library and History Center digitized two of the publications in their collection. California Highways and Public Works and Going Places and now everyone can have remote access, <https://cdm16436.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/>

The Caltrans announcement says,

"California Highways and Public Works was the official publication of the California Department of Public Works. Originally started in 1912 as the California Highway Bulletin published by the California Highway Commission, then as California Highways, and since 1927 as California Highways and Public Works. This magazine features a wealth of information on plans, construction, dedications, and departmental organization.

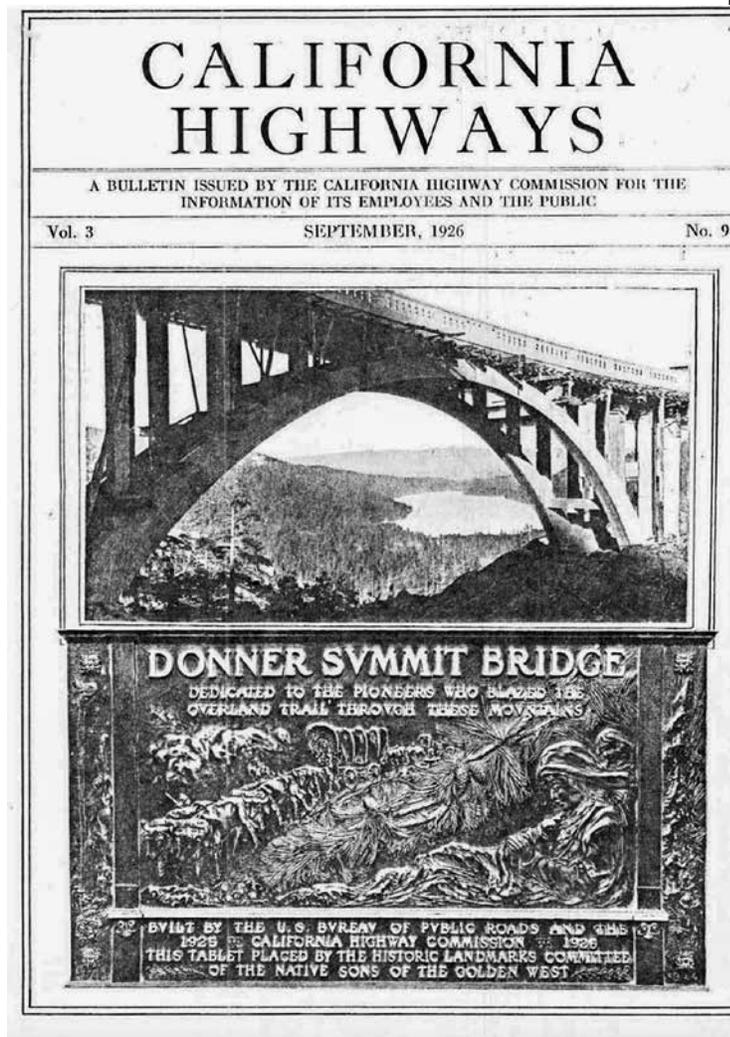
"McCurry collection --- From 1912-1933, the California Highway Commission, and later, the Division of Highways, would occasionally contract with the McCurry Foto Company of Sacramento to take scenic pictures of state roads and highways. This collection features those pictures, which chronicle the beauty of California rural highways ...

"For further information, please contact the Transportation Library and History Center at library@dot.ca.gov or 916-654-4601."

Naturally the DSHS historical resource dept. went to work exploring what's on line at the Caltrans library and we came across the September, 1926 issue of California Highways which had an article titled, "Donner Summit Bridge Marks Evolution of Overland Trail." Here's the opening of the Donner Summit Bridge almost one hundred years ago. What an introduction:

"Marking forcefully by its very boldness the evolution of the emigrant road of the pioneers into the great transcontinental highway of the present, Donner Summit bridge, near the crest of the Sierra in Nevada County, has been completed and opened to traffic."

The bridge was dedicated "To the Pioneers who blazed the Overland Trail through these mountains." Descendants of the Donner Party were present at the dedication. According to the article, in 1926 the bridge was "one of the most unique structures on the state highway system..." It's at high altitude and was built to reduce the maximum grade on the road of 18-20 percent to a maximum of 7. Prior to the bridge this had been the "most difficult section of the most important interstate connection..." For history buffs, this road improvement was the third road built up the pass.



From the DSHS Archives

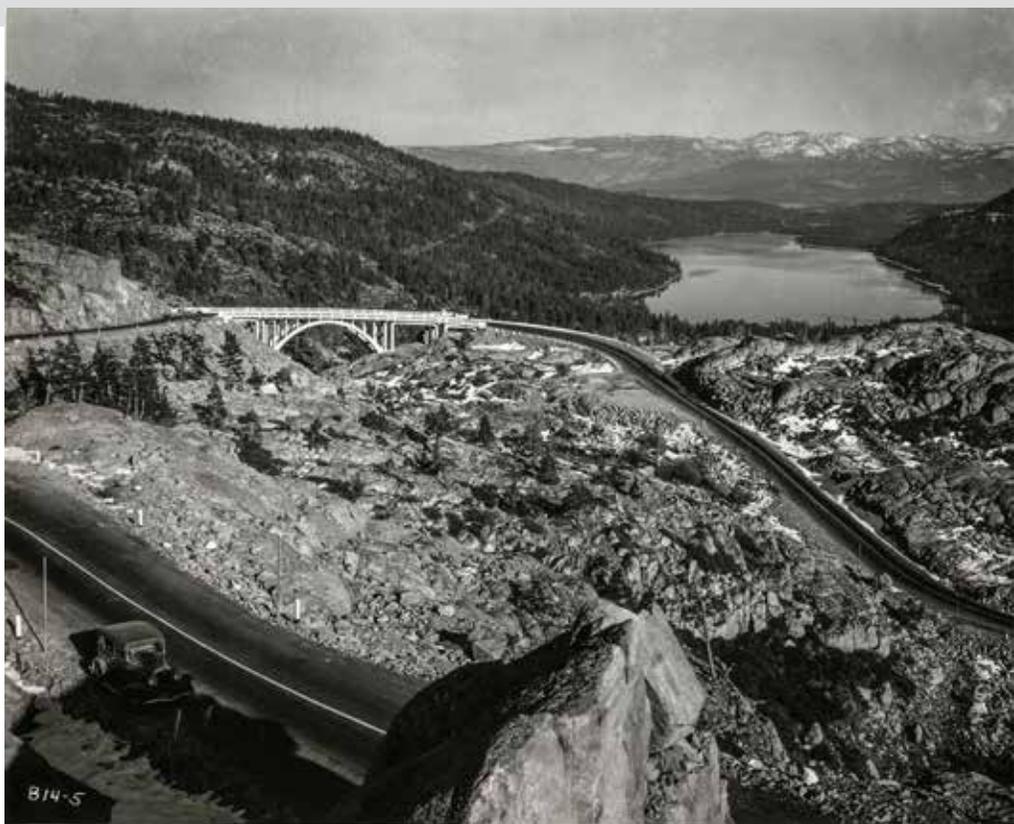
The bridge is also unique because of its engineering. Its “handsome arch” is 110 feet long with a depth of 70 feet (this will all be good information if you ever get on a quiz show about Donner Summit). It’s built on a compound curve. The road is 24 feet wide and it’s 241 feet long. It has an “elevated observation platform (on which we’ve placed, with County permission, a 20 Mile Museum sign). Parenthetically that’s also where the Native Sons’ “memorial tablet” is placed, BUT that’s a replica. The original hangs on the front door of the DSHS). See pg 6.

The bridge was built by the United States Bureau of Public Roads. Money came from National Forest (because they wanted to be able to get logs out of the Tahoe Basin but the grade of the old road made that impossible). The bridge cost about \$40,000.

Presciently, California Highways prophesied that the bridge was “destined to become a well known stopping place on the Victory Highway.” Indeed it has, even now that the Victory Highway has been replaced by I-80. The bridge has also become iconic for advertisers not just for Truckee and Tahoe but also for companies that want to show off their automobiles, for example, with a beautiful scenic backdrop.

At the same time the bridge was built 6.9 miles of the state highway from Soda Springs to Donner Lake was graded and surfaced. Here we should note that the improvements lasted until the complete renovation in 2020 when the old road was ground up, redone and bike lanes added. Besides the 1926 engineering improvements, the placement of the new road on the north side of the canyon was expected to allow the road to open a few weeks earlier than the old road on the south side of the canyon, which is shaded by the mountains.

It turns out we have a collection of 1926 newspaper articles about the opening of the bridge. One day they’ll have to make an appearance in the Heirloom. Stay tuned.



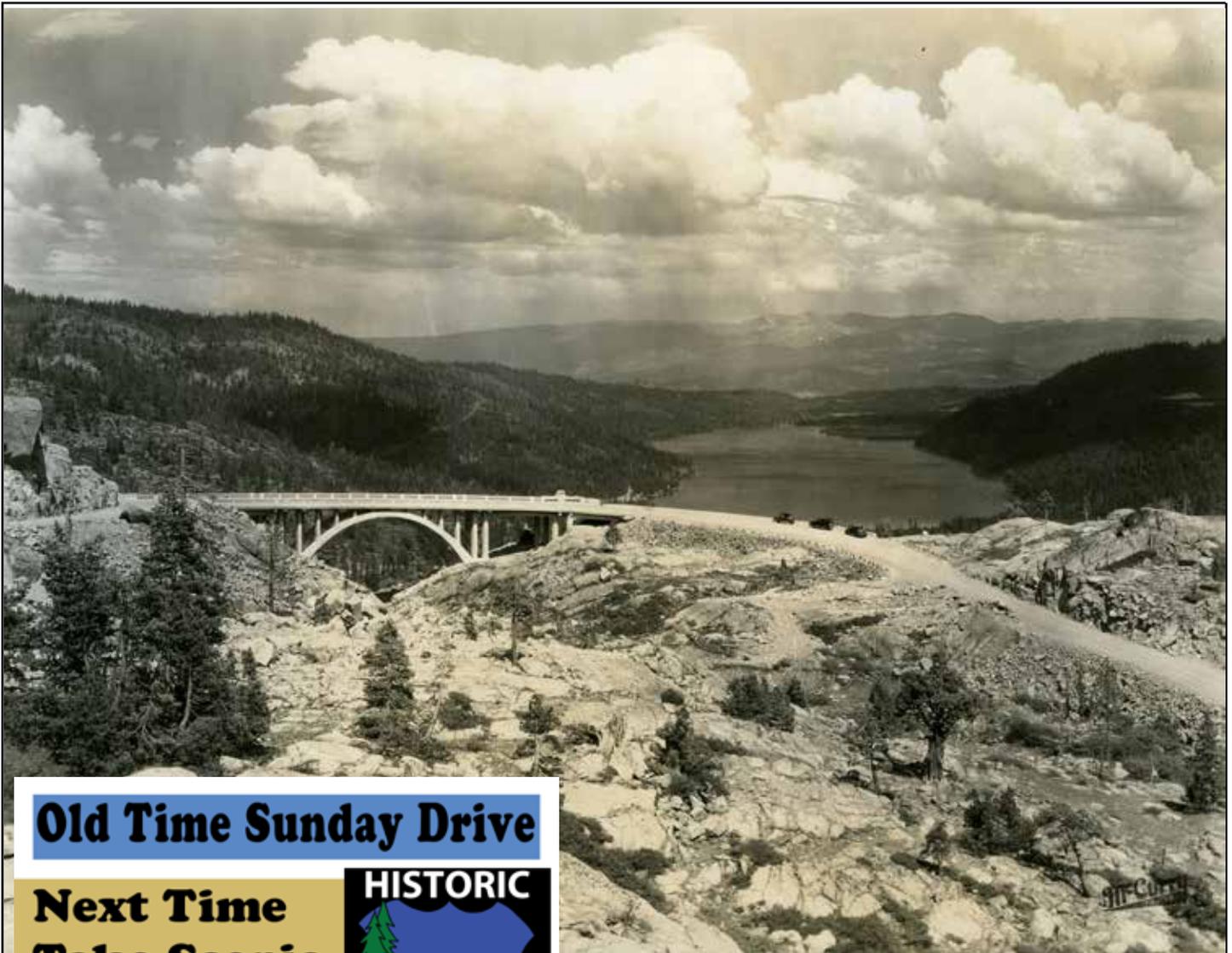
Picture of the Donner Summit Bridge from September, 1926 California Highways. Note the striping on the road in the foreground is continuous and not dashed. Dashing lane separations came into play as a way to save paint during WWII. Note too that the parking on the south side of the bridge is not there yet.

SEPTEMBER
1926

California Highways

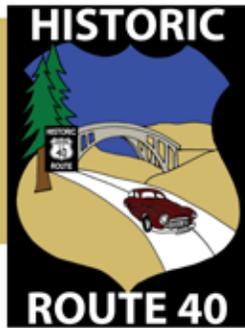
VOL. 3
No. 9

Donner Summit Bridge Marks Evolution of Overland Trail



Old Time Sunday Drive

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



Historic Towns
Interesting Scenery
Fascinating History
Picnic Spots
A Slower Pace

Take a look at our guide to Old Highway 40: turn by turn instructions from Rocklin to Truckee, broken into four legs and including pictures and history. Available on line on the brochure page of donnersummithistoricalsociety.org, at the DSHS (at the blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs, or the visitors' centers in Truckee and Auburn.



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

Donner Summit Bridge, 1926. Note there is no overlook on the south side yet (right side of the picture).



A picture from the same source. The road is not paved yet. The observation spot on the right is not done yet. There is still scaffolding on the bridge (where later a bear would hang out - see our 20 Mile Museum sign for the bridge in person or on our website). The foreground today has the parking lot for the observation point.

Then, Regarding the Plaque

Visit the Donner Summit or Rainbow Bridge and you'll see a handsome commemorative plaque on the pedestrian walkway (near our 20 Mile Museum sign). The original heavy bronze plaque was installed to commemorate the completion of the bridge (see the December, '08 and August, '17 [Heirlooms](#)). The plaque depicts wagon trains, gold miners, Donner Lake, and other scenes from summit history.

The plaque was stolen from the bridge and was later "discovered." The duplicate was made to protect the original and that duplicate was installed on the bridge. The Truckee Donner Historical Society ended up with the original and generously loaned it to the DSHS for display. There it is on our inside front door. Come by and touch history.



Above from our August, '17 [Heirloom](#)

Crofutt's Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide, 1869

Crofutt's, which had many versions or editions, was one of many guides guiding tourists who wanted to take the transcontinental railroad all or part way across the country. The guides provide useful information about train travel as well as information about what the train was traveling through. We pick up the guide at "Truckee City."

Truckee City is the largest town on the "Central road." The principal businesses are lumbering and freight which is carried to surrounding areas. "One can hardly get around the town, for the pile of lumber, ties and wood which cover the ground in every direction."

"The town is built mostly on the north side of the railroad. A narrow, crooked, muddy street separates the first row of buildings—the business portion of the town—from another string of carelessly arranged houses, which stretch along the foot of the mountains." The steeply pitched roofs show that the snow falls "deep and moist here, sufficient so to crush in the roofs." There are about 4,000 people in Truckee.

There is a weekly newspaper, the Truckee Tribune. Good schools are the rule. "The Church interest does not seem to be much appreciated here, no edifice for public worship having yet been erected, though lumber is very plenty." The town stands in need of churches.

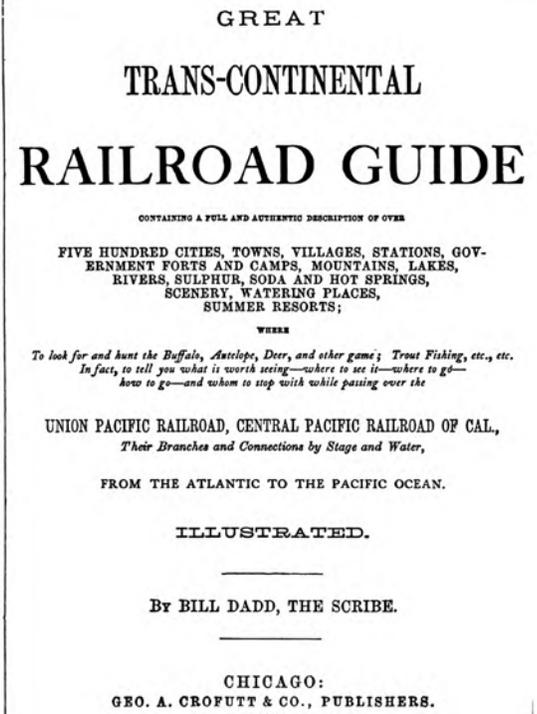
There are three hotels. Trains stop in front of one hotel for thirty minutes allowing travelers to get meals. Stages leave from the same hotel daily for surrounding areas. There are several restaurants and 67 saloons, "or places where liquor is sold."

Donner Lake, the "Gem of the Sierras" lies near Truckee. It and Lake Tahoe are no doubt the craters of old volcanoes. A fine road has been graded along the north shore which takes you to the various resorts such as Lake House or Grant House for example. At these resorts there are boats and fishing tackle for rent. At the foot of the lake is a saw mill. Logs come down the mountain sides in "shoots" or troughs made of large trees. The logs are rafted down the lake to the sawmill.

Donner Lake has the silver trout which can weigh as much as 20 pounds. Handle him delicately and daintily until he's safely landed. Then fry, bake, or broil him brown. "It is not bad employment for the jaws to masticate the crisp, juicy morsels – yes, it's far better than to be jawing your wife or companion." Quail, grouse, deer and bear abound.

San Francisco school marms visit the locality annually. "It is pleasant to see these merry girls... romping, scrambling and wandering among the hills... giving new life and animation to the scene. The gray old hills and mighty forests re-echo with their merry laughter..."

This is also the place of tragedy for the Donner Party. "Part of the train



hurried forward" for California, but Mr. Donner who had a lot of cattle, "would not hurry." He loitered until he reached Donner Lake. The road in the old days went up Coldstream Canyon which was very difficult in good weather. There were sixteen people in Mr. Donner's party and that night the storm "burst over them in all its fury." Death came on "snow-laden wings." The snow fell as fast and heavily as it can. The cattle fled. In the morning there was nothing but snow. The party could have gone on but Mr. Donner was unwell and wanted to wait until the storm passed. Mrs. Donner, "like a true woman" refused to leave her husband. The remainder of the party got ready to go except for one Dutchman, who wanted to stay with the family. The children were put on horses and the party bade good bye to the Donners. They succeeded in reaching the valley and danger was at an end. At the lake the storm continued for several weeks. The three spent the winter at Donner Lake.

After weeks of toil and exposure a rescue party arrived at the lake.

"What a sight met the first glance [of the rescuers]

which pierced the semi-darkness of the cabin! There—before the fire—sat the Dutchman, holding, in a vice-like grasp, a roasted arm and hand, which he was greedily eating. With a wild and frightened look he sprang to his feet and confronted the newcomers, holding on to the arm as though he feared they would deprive him of his repast.

"The disgusting, horrid sight almost overpowered these brave, rude men, used to scenes of blood and strife. The remains of the arm were taken from him by main force, and the cannibal secured for the time, while an examination disclosed a portion of the remains of the unfortunate lady from whence the arm had been severed, frozen in the snow, but as round, plump and fair, as if she were in possession of perfect health when she met her fate."

What happened? We only have the words of the survivor but "Suspicions, too horrible for utterance, of a murdered husband, a violated and then murdered wife—having their origin from remarks which inadvertently fell from the survivor's lips in after years—have been rife in the minds of many acquainted with the particulars of this sad affair." Besides, the Donners' money was missing. So "fake news" and "alternative facts" aren't anything new.

Summit Station lies at 7,042 feet. It's not the top of the mountains. "Piles of granite" weather stained and moss-clad, glistening in the morning sun, still lie between here and destinations west. Hardy fir and spruce line the gorges "where rest the everlasting snow." Rattlesnake Mountain lies to the west. The South Yuba is just one of the rivers here. It dances along "amid gloomy forests, and over almost countless rapids, cascades and waterfalls."

"There is no grander scenery in the Sierras [sic]—of towering mountains, deep gorges, lofty precipices, sparkling water falls, and crystal lakes—than abound within an easy distance of this place. The tourist can find scenes of the deepest interest and grandest beauty; the scholar and philosopher, objects of rare value for scientific investigation. The hunter and angler can find an almost unlimited field for their amusement—the former in the gorges of the mountains where the timid deer and fierce grizzly bear make their home; the latter among the mountain lakes and streams, where the speckled trout leaps in its joyous freedom, while around all is the music of snow-fed mountain torrent and mountain breeze, and over all is the clear, blue sky of our sunny clime, tempered and softened by the shadows of the everlasting hills. Here is life, health and vigor on every hand if one will but embrace it."

"In connection with Truckee City, this place is destined to become a noted summer resort for the invalid, the pleasure seeker, the tourist, and the business men who can spare a few weeks from their exhausting labors."

Once the railroad rises above Truckee it enters a "succession of tunnels and snowsheds, so closely connected that the traveler can hardly tell when the cars enter or leave a tunnel."

"The snow-sheds are solid structures, built of sawed and round timber, completely roofing in the road for many miles." To begin with there were 23 miles of sheds. By 1869 there were forty miles of snowsheds.

"It will repay the traveler to spend a day in Summit Valley. It is covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, affording pasturage for large bands of cattle during the summer. It is all occupied by dairymen and stock raisers, at whose comfortable dwellings the tourist will find a hearty welcome. It is a delightful summer retreat—a favorite resort for those who prefer the mountains with their cool breezes and pure water. The valley is watered by many springs and snow-fed rivulets, whose waters flow to the American river. This valley is becoming noted in a business point of view, as well as being a place of summer resort. It is becoming celebrated as a meat-packing station, it having been demonstrated that pork and beef can be successfully cured here during any portion of the year."

Three springs at the foot of Summit Valley unite with others to form the headwaters of the American River. "The water is pronounced to be the best medicinal water in the State. It is a delightful drink, cool and sparkling, possessing the best quality of manufactured soda water." "...great quantities of the water is now bottled and shipped to all parts of the state." The geography is a little scrambled here. Summit Valley is just below the source of the Yuba. The "soda water" is at the original Soda Springs, the headwaters of the American on the south side of the ridge from Summit Valley.

Meals can be had at Cisco where there is quite a little town of about 400 people. It used to be an important place as the terminus of the railroad but now the turn table and shops are little used "as the road has passed them."

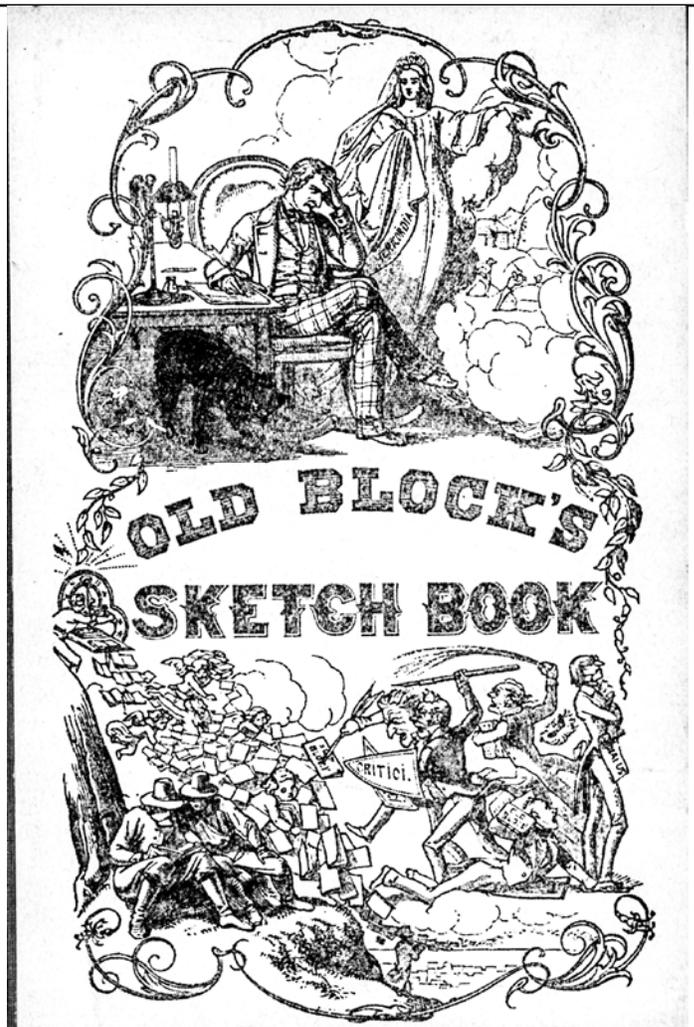
Old Block's Sketch Book

90 pages 1856 reprinted, 1947

In his Sketch Book Old Block, Alonzo Delano, relates some of his many experiences crossing the continent by wagon train in 1849 and living in California and then some of the stories he heard. The stories, some done with humor, provide insight into life in mid 19th Century California.

The book is truly a sketch book. There are many sketches done by a friend of Old Block but most of the "sketching" is done in prose. For example, the first little story is an invitation to his cabin (pictured below), "The string is out at the door – you need not knock – just pull the string, the latch will raise and the door open. Come in – sit down on that three-legged stool..." He describes his cabin and furnishings in detail and how he and his partners built it and lived in it.

Later stories tell about miners, emigrants on the trail or new to California, daily life, etc. The vignettes are humorous or full of pathos. They are about people in dire straits like the family whose mules died in a snowstorm and left them stranded, or the woman trying to shelter her baby from the storm under a tree while her husband went looking for food and shelter. The stories are also about Old Block's outlook on life. Work hard and succeed. People will help each other. Liquor and gambling are bad. A boat captain heard the baby, above, crying and rescued them and the husband. Later the family becomes economically successful in California after hard work. The family whose mules died was rescued by others coming along the trail after them, and had previously been helped when two fellows coming along going for help for another group, stopped to give the family the last of their food. According to Old Block these were true stories.



Old Block's Cabin.

The speech is done in the vernacular. A humorous example is Old Block's friend, Old Swamp. Swamp described how he proposed to his wife, "Betsy... I'm dead in love with you, and if you'll only go in cohort with me in the cabin fixins and plantation ground, I'll give up coon huntin', gal huntin', and all other huntin', except happiness huntin', and you and me will settle down for life, like two tame turkeys over a pig-sty. Will you go the caper?"

One particularly interesting story was "Sunday at Home." Old Block describes a family getting ready for Sunday church. It does not sound far off from a family today except that no one is holding cellphones or video game controllers. Then, surprise, the initial vignette is about a family in New England. The story then moves on to "Sunday in the Mines." Rather than wearing Sunday Best, Old Block says he had not used a mirror in three months and described his beard, matted locks, "old worn out hat,"

“greasy buckskin coat, wrinkled and dirty with unmentionables ditto; my toes peeping out into daylight from my old dilapidated shoes, like frogs from the scum of a pond...” He moves on to describe California and his mining camp. “The morning is always beautiful in California... Not a cloud is to be seen, and it seems as ‘Our Father who art in Heaven,’ was smiling on this fair portion of man’s heritage, to bless him – if he is willing to bless himself.”

The description of the mining camp is full of interesting detail. There are people gathering in the camp on this Sunday too, but in the California mining camp they are not gathering for church like back east. They are gathering at gambling saloons for their one day off per week. It is the only day they can trade gold, their week’s efforts, for money. All the stores are open and Sunday is the best day for sales. Fiddles, banjos, tambourines, bones and a piano are all making music. People who are not gambling and drinking are visiting, playing billiards or ten-pins, or taking a “social glass.” The attitude Old Block says, is “If we get drunk, it’s nobody’s business.”

Having described some of the mining camp scene Old Block then offers some advice, save money for when you might NEED (his capital letters) it, send it home to the family. But then he interrupts his lesson for some new entertainment that just started, a fight, “What refinement, what delicacy, what a charming picture to present...” He describes the cheers of the crowd and “the poor drunken fools, with their blood flowing freely, are rolling and tumbling in the dirt like brutes, beating and bruising each other like infuriated demons...” Sarcastically Old Block says, “we are so much ahead of the ‘old folks at home,’ in fact, we never knew anything of life till we came to California.” Old Block notes a family on the way to church among all the other goings on. “They are old fogies, who are trying to teach their children old fashioned notions of propriety, and who are opposed to bringing them up according to the new code of morals” (those of the California mining camps).

You don’t read things like that just every day nowadays. The pictures here are from the Sketch Book.



“Their Animals had Perished in the Storm.”



“A Good Hit! Give it to Him, Pete!”

Old block contemporary reviews

"Opinions of the Press. Old Block's Sketch BOOK.— are indebted to the publisher, and also to the author, for copies of this work. It is very neatly gotten up. The letter press is well executed, on good paper, and the illustrations are spirited and in the best style of the art. The sketches are purely Californian in character, and are truthful to the letter. The perusal of a single paper, 'The Mountain Storm,' is well worth the price of the work. If any one who has ever crossed the plains, and witnessed the terrible realities of such a trip, can sit down and read that sketch without dropping a tear, he must be insensible to the common feelings of humanity. That sketch alone is sufficient to stamp the author with undying fame. It will live in the literature of California so long as our glorious State occupies a place among her sister confederacies, or exists as a civilized community among the people of the earth. The work, as a whole, will add largely to the literary reputation of our friend and townsman. We are proud to claim it as the production of a citizen of Grass Valley. The book may be had at the bookstores generally throughout the State.— Grass Valley Telegraph."

"Old Block's Sketch Book.— There are few of our 1349 readers who are unacquainted with 'Old Block.' A pioneer to the State, he at an early day became intimately acquainted with all the phases of California life. He was a participant in the joys and the sorrows which the first comers experienced, and from time to time he has jotted down those things which he has seen and heard, in a ready, racy and readable style. The book before us is a chip of the "Old block," brim full of humor, anecdote and warm sympathy. Altogether a readable book.— [Marysville Herald]"

"A California Book. Some one not having the fear of the editorial tripod in his view, did appropriate to himself, a few days since, a copy of Old Block's Sketch Book, sent us by the publishers. Its loss was not known until yesterday, when the borrower returned it with his acknowledgments. We pardon him the offense, inasmuch as he adds in his letter: 'I have never read a work which possessed such absorbing interest. The tales of a Journey across the Plains are vividly and touchingly narrated, and the jocular sketches are mirth provoking to the most sedate, whilst the illustrations by Nahl are spirited and truthful, giving a zest to the work somewhat akin to a glass of bitters before dinner.' After that we cannot say anything, as the frontispiece of the work itself stands up in judgment on all critics.— [8. F. Globe.]"

The above appeared in the Sacramento Daily Union May 14, 1856, June 18, 1856, and July 30, 1856



"We Have Just Arrived from Across the Plains."



The "Happy Family" at Home.

JUST PUBLISHED,
OLD BLOCK'S SKETCH BOOK;
 OR,
TALES OF CALIFORNIA LIFE.
PROFUSELY ILLUSTRATED
WITH GEMS FROM THE PENICIL OF NAHL,
 The Oculist of California.

This new work, by the author of "CHIPS OF THE OLD BLOCK," it is believed will meet with the same degree of favor from the public of California as attended the latter publication, of which an edition of over SIXTEEN THOUSAND COPIES was sold in a few months.

Contents:

In "Old Block's" happiest style.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Introduction. | 10. Sunday in the Mines. |
| 2. Dedication. | 11. A Peril of the Plains. |
| 3. My Cabin, not Uncle Tom's. | 12. Drunken Ashley. |
| 4. "Ned." | 13. The Mountain Storm. |
| 5. "Bogue." | 14. Thirst on the Desert. |
| 6. "Old Swamp." | 15. Legislative Horse Thief. |
| 7. Miner's Love Story. | 16. The Phantom Court, or a Trip to Spirit Land. |
| 8. Pens and Quirks. | 17. Burning of Grass Valley. |
| 9. Sunday at Home. | 18. Conclusion. |

Agents, Newsmen and Periodical Dealers are requested to send in their orders.

Address

JAMES ANTHONY & CO.,
 21 J street, Sacramento.

An ad for Old Block's Sketch Book from the Sacramento Daily Union, June 18, 1856

Book Review

Pen Knife Sketches or Chips of the Old Block

Old Block, Alonzo Delano 1853 79 pages

Most historians, if they were completely honest, would say they would like a time machine. That it's supposed to be impossible leaves it off most Christmas lists. Imagine being able to travel back in time and experience first hand what you've only been able to read about – with the proviso that you could come back. Where would you go first?

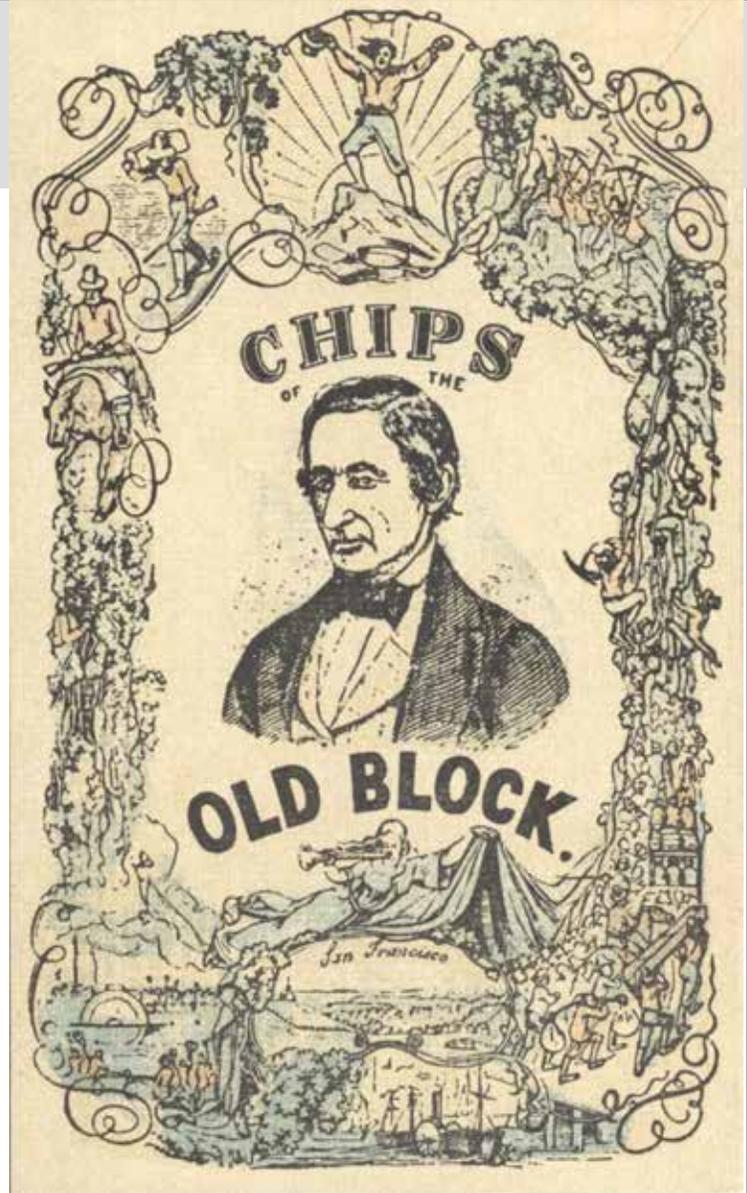
The 1853 book Pen Knife Sketches of Chips of the Old Block by Alonzo Delano (Old Block) is the wish almost come true. It is a door into 19th Century California in twenty sketches or vignettes of California life. The “Pen Knife” part of the title refers to Old Block's conversations with his pen knife which he uses to whittle the nib of his pens and also as a metaphor for whittling stories.

In “The Greenhorn” the “ardent adventurer, just arrived by the way of the isthmus” with lumps of gold as large as pumpkins dancing in his imagination. He gets advice, gets accoutered for the diggings, and heads to the mines. He forgot a water bottle, the pack gets heavy and then heavier with travel, and the way gets steeper. At the diggings all the claims have been taken. He continues on and after “three or four weeks... his clothes worn out and hanging in rags upon him, his head unshaven and unshorn, with a heavy heart he turns his face once more towards the valley, wondering what ever induced him to leave the comforts of home, to seek gold in the mountains of California.” It's a marvelous introduction to the stories that follow and a wonderful description of most gold seekers' fates.

The stories that follow are about miners' lives, the traders who mine the miners, the express man who brings the mail to the camps, the gambler, a tour of San Francisco in six vignettes, some editorial content, some stories, the Isthmus of Panama crossing, and a description of Grass Valley. About the Express Man, Delano paints a picture, “Without him, the miner would be shut out from the world, and next to the trader, who furnishes the means of sustaining life, the Express man is of the most importance...” Little else is thought of when news comes that the Express Man is on the way. “The Express Man has arrived! Every pick and shovel is dropped, every pan is laid aside, every rocker is dropped with its half-washed dirt, every claim is deserted and they crowded around the store, with eager enquiries...” “With joy letters are seized and the miners care not how much they paid for the letters.” That's for those who received letters. Others, not so lucky go “sullenly back to work, unfitted by disappointment for social intercourse the rest of the day.”

Charles Nahl, an artist friend of Delano's provided the illustrations for the book and those are as good as the prose.

The time machine is working well with the descriptions of San Francisco (picture page 14),



“A city is before you. A confused mass of building of all descriptions, from the humble shed to a four story palace, from the cloth tents on the hillsides to the iron castles over the water: a motely throng of animate life, the din of active business... the rattling of carts, the passing of carriages... Pass through Kearney Street... what a sea of heads, what a moving mass of human beings meets the view!.. It is like the waving of a field of corn in the breeze, a crowded mass of flesh and blood... Rows, fights, and robberies are the order of the day... and to see sin and depravity in its most glaring colors... Here, on the corner of Dupont, is the Polka; but we can’t get in there. It is crammed to overflowing; its tables are surrounded by a throng, who watch the turning of a card with anxious eyes; its bar is freely dispensing the bane of man in a variety of forms...” It’s a vivid description and one can imagine the activity.



The description of Grass Valley is also vivid and evocative of the early development of California, “...rich quartz veins were brought to light, crushing mills were built at an enormous expense, and through obstacles almost insurmountable roads were opened, good houses erected, and in a few short months the hissing sound of steam, the clack of the saw mill, the rattling of the daily mail coaches, the sumptuous tables of the hotels, the placards of lawyers and doctors, the signs of merchants and tradesmen, and what seems even strange now, a church arose in the wilderness...”

With Old Block’s descriptions you can set the stage for any story you’d want to tell. The pictures here come from the book.



Above, passengers sometimes had to help the stage get uphill.

Left, the story of a brave girl.



ALONZO DELANO'S

PEN-KNIFE SKETCHES

OR

Chips of the Old Block



A SERIES OF ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATED LETTERS, WRITTEN BY ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S PIONEER MINERS, AND DEDICATED TO THAT CLASS OF HER CITIZENS BY THE AUTHOR. REPRINTED FROM THE ONLY EDITION (1853) WITH THE ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHARLES NAHL AND A NEW FOREWORD BY G. EZRA DANE.



Above, a story about a mule falling.

Right: San Francisco, 1853



Note:

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

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

You might even want to do a review for us.

Live Woman in the Mines

It turns out there is a lot of history out there and there is even a lot that's not about Donner Summit. Looking through what's readily available about and by "Old Block," Alonzo Delano, as we prepared for this issue of the Heirloom, we came across a play he wrote, "A Live Woman in the Mines, or Pike County Ahead" (written in 1857, eight years after Delano arrived in California). Typically we'd shy away from non-Donner Summit history because once we start down that road where would it stop? And what of Donner Summit history might be left out? The title, though, sounded fun and Delano was an interesting guy – see his introduction on page 1.

Here is a simple little melodrama about good and bad, early California life in the gold fields, and some moral lessons. It's written in the vernacular so we can "hear" Gold Rush Californians. Some of the characters are patterned after people Delano knew in California in 1857. He names them in a prefatory note but they are no one we've ever heard of so we'll skip that. Others are "types" based on people he met crossing the country and then in California. For example, one of the main characters, High Betty Martin, is "a specimen of a back-woods western Amazonian" one of those who is "indomitably persevering, and brave under difficulties, but withal with woman's feeling when difficulty is over." So not only do we get to "hear" early Californians, but we get Delano's descriptions of early Californians and his idea of a hero. The play is a cute classic melodrama that fits its time – the kind of entertainment popular in the 19th Century. We also are introduced to the common prejudices of the time, "niggers," "diggers," "squaw," and "Chinaman." So the play is kind of a social history about people of the time.

John and Mary are new to California and completely without resources. They've tried everything but there are no jobs to be had. They have no money, no place to sleep, and no food.

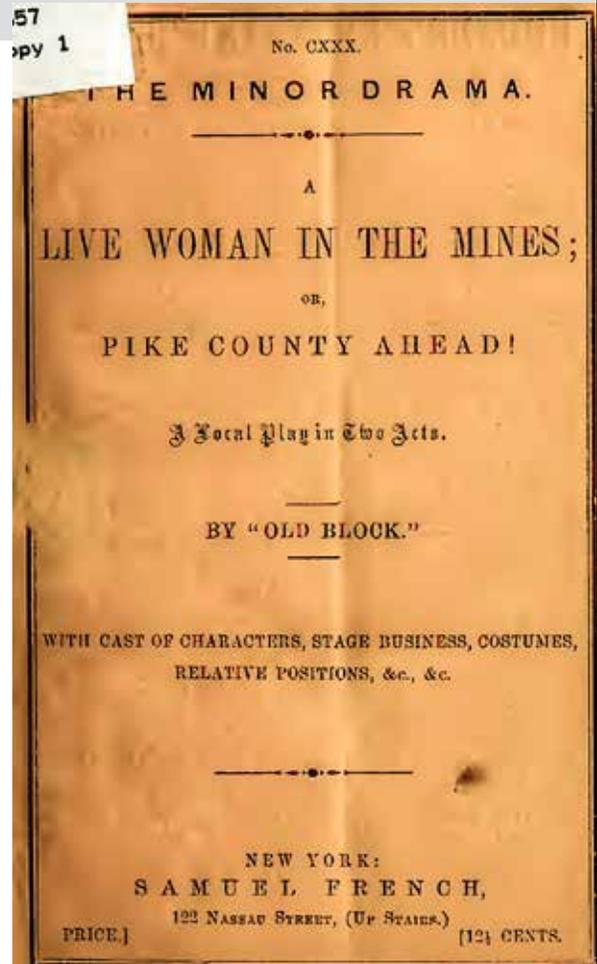
"It is hard John, but I feel not for myself. When I see your anxious brow, your cheek pale with exertion, scarcely recovered from the debilitating effect of Panama fever, I forget my own weakness, my own helplessness, and gather fresh courage, and hope against hope, and feel from my very soul that we must, we will succeed."

Here is a pure innocent young couple, clearly of high moral standards, in deep trouble. The play is partly about redemption through strength of character and providentially supplied coincidences and these two and what happens to them are some of those examples.

Two well-named fellows, Cash and Dice, have been cheating miners and there's been a murder in Sacramento. They see Mary and decide she needs kidnapping. Just as the kidnapping is accomplished, Mr. Pike arrives and rescues the innocent couple with his pistol sending Cash and Dice packing. Pike sees the further trouble the couple is in and convinces them to come to his claim: "Whoora! For a live woman in the mines. What'll the boys say? They'll peel out o' their skins for you!"

Pike takes John and Mary to Springtown, a mining camp.

That's one story. Parallel and next is Betsey who has arrived by wagon to California with a sick uncle. She's a character and tough. She threatens the "Watch" (night patrol of Sacramento) who is not being cooperative, "Do you see this pretty plaything? [knife] ... Shall I take a lock of yer hair off your figurehead, like I did the scalp lock from a digger [Native American] on the Humboldt [River in Nevada]?" The Watch remarks, "She's a true California woman, grit to the backbone." Clearly that's true. Betsey has been guiding the team across the country and dealing with things like shooting Indians for a long time. She's come to California to look for her betrothed who came to find gold some time before. While checking the mail in Sacramento for letters



from her beau, she runs into “Sluice” who has just lost his money to Cash and Dice. He’s ready to give up but Betsey says, “you are a fool to gamble, but you are a bigger fool to cry when the egg is broken.”

She convinces Sluice, with a little sermon, that he should start over rather than give up, “...there are better days coming-joy shall yet lighten your path, and home and happiness shall be yours again. Courage, my good father. You labor here to make them independent at home, and your love for them, and your present self-denial surely will be rewarded. You will yet be happy together.”

Betsey takes Sluice along with her uncle to the mines in search of her boyfriend. They get stuck in a deep canyon and while Betsey rues the low qualities of men she sends Sluice off to find a trail out.

Back at Springtown the miners are delighted to have Mary. They set her and John up in business because they are so generous and appreciative of the female presence (fixing buttons, mending pants, patching shirts, providing succor to sick miners, etc.) Some miners are so appreciative that they write letters to Mary deeding over half their claims.

Mary is apparently also the post-mistress and when the express rider arrives with mail she doles it out. Jess (Pike) has been waiting for a letter for a long time and finally it arrives. He reads it in tears and kisses the daguerreotype that came with it, “O, the misery of separation.” Mary comforts him.

Dice and Cash reappear in Springtown and they are cheating miners again.

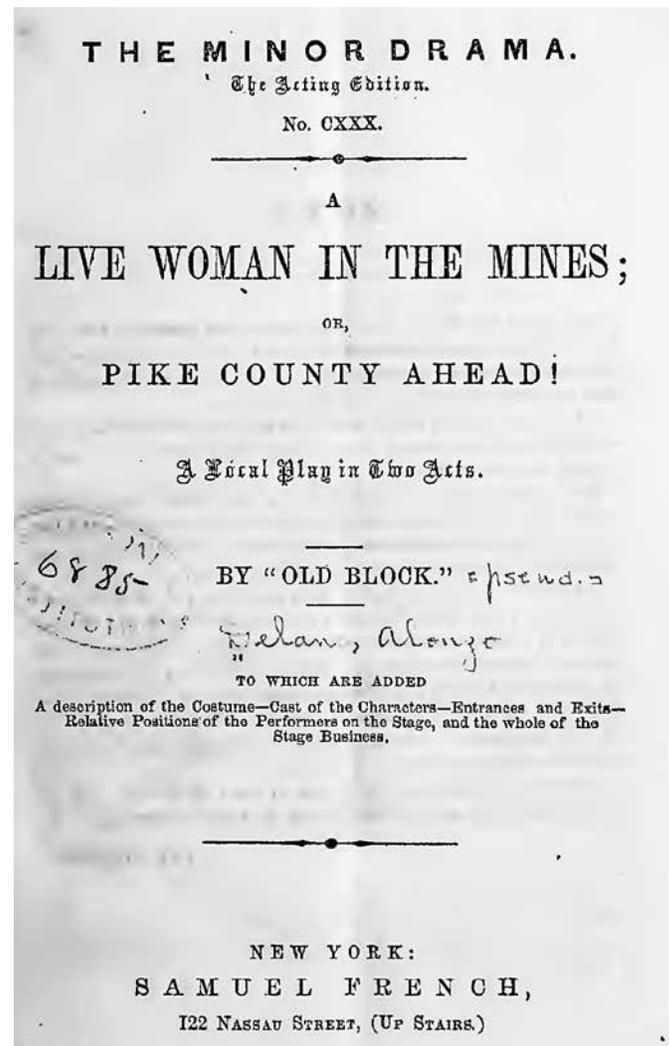
Meanwhile, Betsey and Sluice are working their way out of the canyon. Sluice shoots at someone he thinks is an Indian. The “Indian” is a Chinese individual who runs to the nearby Springtown to warn the miners, “Me help! Me help! Shooty me bank me shooty! One, tree, five hundred Indians! O! O! O!”

The miners gather up and leave camp to fight the Indians. Betsey and Sluice are approaching but they’ve been traveling hard and look like Indians. The miners look like thieves because they are not dressed decently either and they have guns. There’s going to be trouble when Jess (Pike) recognizes Betsey as his “High Betty Martin” or “Carolina Betsey.” The lovers are back together. Sluice is in a place where, with hard work, he can recoup his fortune. The audience has been lectured on the evils of gambling and drink. John and Mary are happy and living well with the appreciation of the camp. The miners are happy with their “live woman.” But that’s not the end. There is still Cash and Dice.

Just then the Sacramento paper arrives identifying Cash and Dice as murderers. There are drawn guns. Betsey and Pike identify the pair as the ones who cheated Sluice. John and Mary identify them as the attempted kidnappers. There’s going to be a hanging but then everyone decides to follow the law and send Cash and Dice to Sacramento for justice, after they get forty lashes as the Bible mandates. Note that the names “Cash” and “Dice” are not just random.

That’s still not the end. Mary’s half claims turn out to be rich, “piles of gold.”

There’s a lot of 1850’s humor. Betsey needs a spelling book to know the order of letters so she can find the Post Office on “K” St. A mule lost a tail to a grizzly.

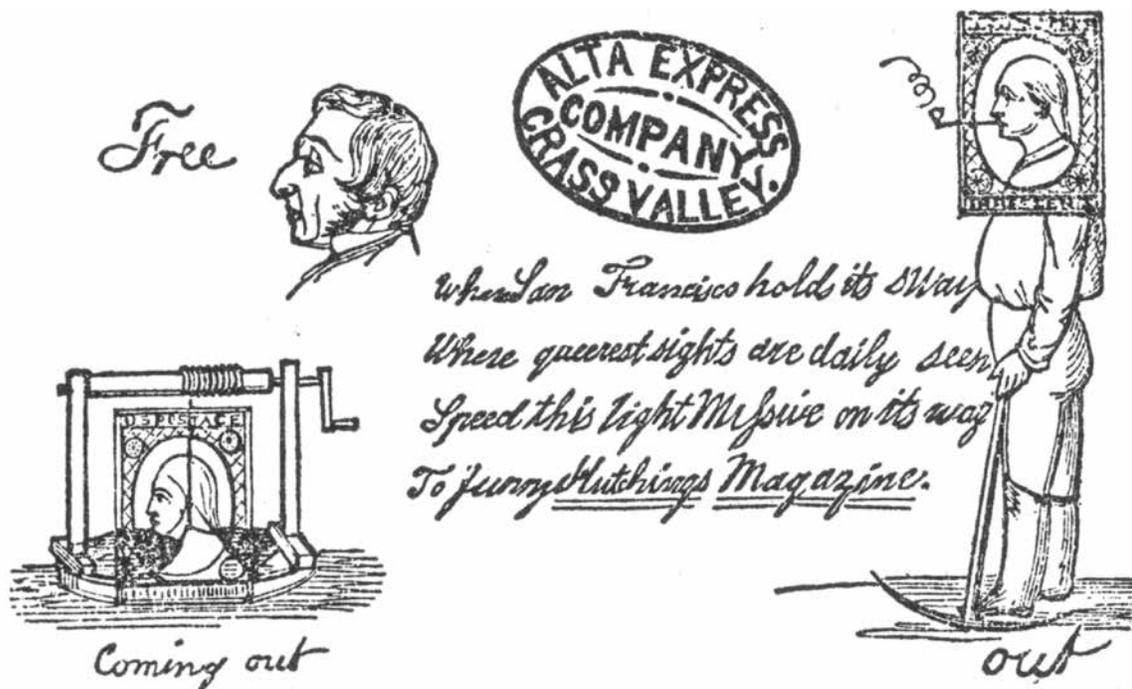


One longer humorous passage comes from the Express Rider who arrives in Springtown with the mail, “Up to time and a leetle ahead, madam. Run the gauntlet between a pack of cayotees, three grizzlies, and a whole tribe of Digger Indians-killed two horses and jumper! a ledge an hundred feet-hung myself by the heels in the hushes-turned forty somersets down a cañon-slept three nights on a snow bank-froze three legs stiff, had 'em amputated and climbed the hill next morning on crutches, and have brought lots of letters for the boys, and newspapers for the old ones. Please take the bags, and give me a glass of brandy and water without any water in it.” Life was clearly tough in early California.

You can find this melodrama on the web or you can contact the editor of this fine [Heirloom](#) publicaton for a PDF version. If you put on the play, send us some pictures.

Copyright Sold. — [The Truckee Republican](#) learns that Old Block, of Grass Valley, has sold the copyright of his drama , the “Live Woman in the Mines,” to an Eastern theatrical celebrity for the sum of \$500. The piece was written some fifteen years ago, but was not brought conspicuously before the public until recently. The sum of \$500 is not bad for even a “Live Woman in the Mines.” We believe, however, that the purchaser has made a better bargain than Old Block, but the latter having had the “Woman” on his hands for fifteen years, like many other men, became tired of her and concluded to sell.

[Grass Valley Morning Union](#) April 9, 1873



[One of Old Block's illustrated addresses with self-portrait]

This comes from [A Sojourn with Royalty](#) which is a 1936 book of a few Old Block stories put together by George Fields.

In corresponding with John Phoenix, AKA Squibob AKA Lt. Derby "Old block" and Lt. Derby would playfully address their letters. The addresses were pictorial, poetical, or both and the stamps were “turned into soldiers, miners or various ludicrous [sic] characters” The post masters “were vastly tickled at the addresses on the envelopes.” If a letter came addressed “simply to a profile with a very large nose, it never failed in being delivered properly.” The visage upper left is "Old Block" and his most disintinguishing feature.

Derby was a topological engineer and was sent to Calif in 1849 to make maps and reports of his explorations. He died in 1861 at age 38. He wrote humorous pieces under the pen names John Phoenix or Squibob. His works were published in 1856 in [Phoenixiana](#) and after he died in [Squibob Papers](#) in 1865.



Alonzo Delano, “Old Block” was interested in the world around him and fortunately for us, he wrote about a lot of what he explored. Here is a newspaper article about his trip to Independence Lake. It appeared in the [Sacramento Daily Union](#) on July 19, 1862. The original version is 3638 words long but our DSHS department of abridging historical documents for modern sensibilities shortened it to 1388 words. Although some delightful descriptions have been left out, the prose here is very evocative and the advice at the end is profound. The knob, just left of center at the top of the mound above is the "tower" in this story.

Independence Lake Or Scenery of the Sierras [sic]

In July of 1861 "Old Block," Alonzo Delano, took a trip with his daughter and some friends to Independence Lake. With him was Gus Moore, a one-armed bold mountaineer. Moore was one of the best rifle shots, a wild horse rider, and an Indian and grizzly fighter. Regarding the missing arm, sometimes Moore said it was bitten off while he was asleep. Other times he just ignored the questioner. We also don't know whether, when he killed the grizzly with just a knife, he had one or two arms. Sometimes old documents are lacking important detail.

The traveling party camped at Webber Lake, “one of those mountain gems which lay embosomed at intervals” in the Sierra. “It was a beautiful encampment — fairy land. The

waters of the placid Webber lay before us; broad, green meadows extended miles to the south ; evergreen pines and shrubs covered the gentle slope from the hills on the western summit... we were living in a little world of our own.” After a few days they were joined by some friends who suggested a trip to a lake “where the fishing was glorious and the scenery sublime. We needed no persuasion, and we at once decided to go there... away... from the haunts of civilized man.”

They traveled where “there was neither road nor trail, and where all nature was, rejoicing in true deep solitude of primitive wilderness ; it was only on the fourth of July, about two weeks previous to our visit, that Moore and a companion

or two, in roaming over the hills, made the discovery of the lake which he very appropriately named Independence Lake, by which it is known." Eventually they arrived at "the shore of this beautiful mountain gem. How shall I describe it? Where can I find language to express its beauty, and the sublimity of its surroundings. We approached it at its foot. Here was low level ground easy of access, with the flowers of Spring blooming around us ; before us lay a calm, beautiful sheet of water, at least five miles long, by a mile or more in breadth at its widest part, while all around on both sides, and the northern end, huge lava mountains, capped with eternal snows raised their grand peaks to the clouds. Immense piles of black lava rocks projected perpendicularly in places from the sides of the mountains, some of which could scarcely be less than two thousand feet high, and presented in contrast with the bright snow peaks above them, glistening in the sunlight, a cold, forbidding, awe-inspiring look. There was no pretty gravel beach or smooth sand to to [sic] line the shore between the placid water and frowning hills, but the mountains rose at once in their own dark sublimity from the waters, and the interval between the lake and their bleak summit was only the debris of rocks which had fallen from their steep, and in many places perpendicular sides."

They found a good encampment "with a sufficient growth of musketoes [sic] to keep up the circulation in brushing them off. Yet the ladies of our little party made light of all these dangers and annoyances and entered with a zest into this rough introduction of mountain life." The tent was pitched and the horses picketed "in the luxuriant grass..." Just a few minutes fishing at the inlet "returned with half a dozen speckled trout, and we sat down to a feast which an epicure might envy." "On the western side of the valley... arose the highest and most prominent peak of all, estimated by us to be not less than twenty-five hundred feet high ; its conical peak covered by everlasting snow. About half way up its precipitous sides, an immense outcrop of dark brown lava protruded, somewhat resembling the tower or an antiquated gothic church. At the base of this tower we could discover in the dim distance a black spot, apparently two or three feet in diameter, which we justly concluded to be a cave." They decided a visit was in order especially after some local Native Americans said even they had never been up there. "We mounted our horses, picked our way through the morass, and rode up the steep sides of the mountain as far as we could, when tying the animals securely to the trees, we continued our ascent on foot. This we found extremely laborious."

"Passing over fields of snow, we had a glorious snow-balling frolic on the 26th of July. In several places the brooks and rills were covered with snow five or six feet deep, and we passed safely over them on snow bridges, while we could hear the roaring, tumbling waters beneath us. And then there were perpendicular ledges, where one, climbing up, assisted the others by the hand ; and at other times the sides were of yielding shale (see the photo on page 22), the debris of the rock above, when the utmost care was necessary to prevent

sliding immense distances below."

After a couple of hours they arrived at the small black hole which turned out to be a cavern, "thirty feet wide at the mouth, and penetrating the hill thirty or forty feet, and perhaps fifteen or twenty feet in height [sic]. There we stood, certainly the first civilized beings who had ever been within its gloomy portals. A little stream of water runs trickling through the rocks on the back end ; and, weary and thirsty, we sat down to rest, and taste the icy cold liquid that came from the snow overhead." The ladies were quite tired but the three men went off rock climbing with some spots so steep "a misstep would have hurried us into eternity..." They arrived at the top of a rock tower some five hundred feet above the cave.

"The lake itself looked like a pretty pond (see page 20), and the horses scarcely larger than sheep. For miles around us high cones, broken mountains, a strange yet grand and sublime upheaval of creation met our wandering gaze ; and oh ! I could not but feel in looking upon this awe inspiring scene, the littleness of man and the greatness of Him who could take the earth in the hollow of His hand and mould [sic] mountains and lakes, huge rocks and mighty peaks of snow like these. Everlasting praise to the Almighty Architect of the World. Amen!" Back at the cave the party used the charred ends of sticks to put their names on the rocks.

"It was near night when we regained our camp, tired and hungry, but an excellent supper of delicious trout awaited us, and the following morning found us recovered from the fatigues of our interesting ascent. I have but little more to add. We remained at the lake four days, and until we had eaten up all our bread, meat, sugar and salt, and our last two meals were fish alone, and for salt and pepper we used white ashes. The day before we decided upon leaving, Col. Moore and the boys built a large and strong raft. We fitted a couple of blankets for a sail, and the next day, while one of the boys led our horses to the foot of the lake, we launched our raft upon the deep blue waters, and a good breeze wafted us gaily to the Southern end, where we mounted our horses and left this gem of the mountains."

"Poor dweller of the burning valley, thou slave of business, and the almighty dollar, you need rest for your weary brain, and recreation for both soul and body. In two days ride you can be amid scenery as grand as the world can boast. No need of Alps or Italys here. We have them of our own. Leave lolling sleepily over your counter, or yawning in your office, and get upon the grand old hills of California ; my word for it, you will come back recuperated, revived, and charmed with your trip. Go and eat speckled trout of your own catching; go and see the glories of your own mountain land ; and, above all, or with all, go and see for yourself the beauty of Independence lake, and enjoy the originality and manly courtesy of Our... one armed mountaineer."

Old Block
Sacramento Daily Union July 19, 1862

About the pictures accompanying this article.

We were hard at work abridging the original "Old Block" article about his trip to Independence Lake when someone suggested we ought to have some pictures to illustrate the article. The call went out and we continued working. Then the computer started beeping. First there were contemporary pictures by George Lamson - see page 24 - and then there was a succession of beeps in about a dozen emails from Art Clark. Art found a collection of Carleton Watkins photographs of what "Old Block" and his friends saw on their excursion. Art has also climbed Mt. Lola and he produced the Then/Now pictures you see here too.

Watkins named the tower that "Old Block" and friends climbed, "Sphinx Head" but the name apparently didn't stick, although it's in the titles of some of his pictures.

The Watkins pictures are large format photographs of Western landscapes by C.E. Watkins (See the December, '18 and June, '20 [Heirlooms](#) for Carleton Watkins), collected by George Davidson. Watkins views include Mt. Lassen, Mt. Shasta (1870?), and Mt. Lola (1879), and various Yosemite views (1861-1869.) You can access the collection at <https://calisphere.org/collections/24207/> The originals are at the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley.



View "Old Block" and friends would have had from their climb of the tower.



Looking north from Mt. Lola. Donner Summit's Castle and Basin Peaks can be seen upper right. Below, Independence Lake is to the left. Sphinx Head is the knob at the top of the right right of center



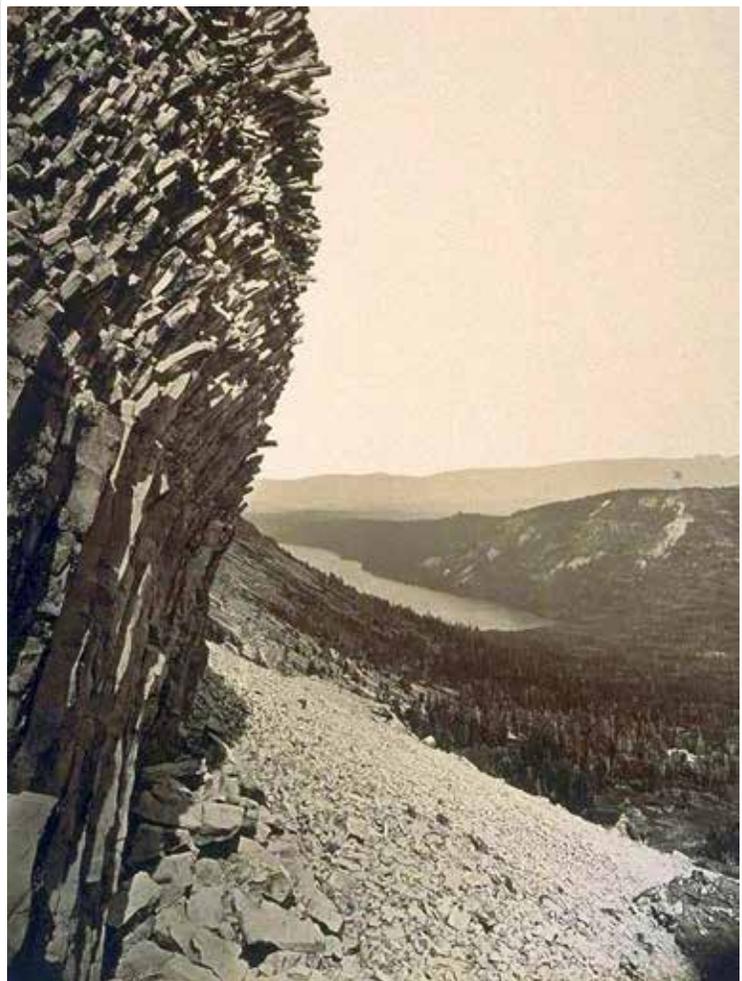
Then & Now with Art Clark



Lake Independence
looking eastward from under Sphinx Head and
showing lake Independence 2,100 ft. high.

This photo of Sphinx Head by Carleton Watkins was taken looking east toward Independence Lake. As the rock cooled, it crystalized into vertical columns. These have resisted weathering more than the surrounding rocks, leaving them exposed. Each column is 4 to 6 inches across.

Photo location 39° 25.933' N 120°
21.599' W





Carleton Watkins traveled to Mt Lola in late July 1879 as part of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey and took a number of photographs. At that time access to the peak was from the north end of Independence Lake. His mammoth-plate camera, which used 18 by 22 inch glass plate negatives, was transported up to the peak along with a portable darkroom and all the necessary chemicals.

This scene is from the east end of the peak and shows an outcrop of columnar rock which he called "Sphinx Head." A small part of Independence Lake can also be seen.

Photo location 39° 25.961'N 120° 21.894'W

Art likes to make 3d versions of his Then/Now's which is what's to the right. He has a large collection on the DSHS website.



Independence Lake Today



Independence Lake is a wonderful destination today for hiking, fishing, and boating. You cannot bring your own boat there but the Truckee Donner Land Trust has canoes and kayaks for you to use - free. The pictures here are from George Lamson



an old building



The Truckee Donner Land Trust acquired the ridges to the North and South of Independence Lake in 2008, and transferred them to the USFS. The Nature Conservancy is the organization that acquired and owns Independence Lake Preserve, the lands immediately surrounding the lake. The TDLT is a partner in managing the preserve with the Nature Conservancy, but they are not the owners.

Reader Update

Rainbow 2 or Soda Springs 2641

In our May issue's "From the Archives of the DSHS" section we included part of a brochure for selling the Rainbow Tavern in 1951. The article included the phone number at the Lodge, Rainbow 2 or Soda Springs 2641. Milli Martin is a long time member of the DSHS and her uncle and aunt, Herb and Lena Frederick, owned the Norden Store and Lodge for a long time. The lodge and its owners have been the subject of a number of [Heirloom](#) stories (see our [Heirloom](#) article and picture indices on our website). The brochure's phone number got Milli thinking about the old days when she spent summers on Donner Summit with her aunt and uncle. Here is a little of what she remembers about phones on Donner Summit.

"The monthly news letter often brings wonderful memories. . The May issue was no exception. The article about Rainbow Lodge, noted the short phone number. Phone service at Donner Summit, in the early years of the 1940's and early 1950's was vastly different than today and conjured the memories. Those were good and happy times that I spent at Norden. The Norden Store had a phone located at the top of the stairs to the basement, just behind the counter, and the short swinging gate between the store counter and the Post Office counter. The phone would ring long and short rings, 2 longs and a short was Norden and they would run to answer. As I recall it was an old fashioned wooden phone with a handle to turn, to get the operator and tell her the number you wanted. She would then "dial" it for you – this was before dial phones. Anyone remember the black ones? I still have one, and it works just fine. My grandson has no clue how to use it. Lena and Herbert knew exactly who got the other calls, and being very curious, aka nosy, Herbert would love to listen and hear what was going on. Gossip at the Store was a ritual. They had a second old phone in the storeroom, the door just past the built-in fridge, and that was connected to the railroad station. If they had an emergency, they could call there for help. Often it was the Chinese cook calling to ask Lena to provide him something, and bless Lena she had such a hard time understanding him. I do not recall the year they got the dial phones (that ended the party lines), but I do know Lena had it on a small desk in the living room, and it was there she would take orders in the morning from homeowners in the Sugar Bowl. She neatly wrote everything down in the little receipt book, and after we had it all packed into boxes to transport via the Magic Carpet, she and I would see who could add the dollar columns the fastest (no machine, just us). She always won.

Milli Martin, their niece.

Carleton Watkins,
1879, the hotel at
Independence Lake.



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Donner Summit Historical Society.org

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NAME(S) _____

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MAILING ADDRESS _____

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

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50 interpretive signs along Old 40
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