

The Donner Summit

Heirlooms

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society and the most historically significant square mile in California.

March, 2024 issue #187



Cisco Revisited II

Last month we introduced a binder compiled in 2015 by Brianna Ryan at the Placer County Archives. The binder is a repository for all things about Cisco and Cisco Grove that Placer County Archives has. You can imagine how rich it must be given how much history went through Cisco and Cisco Grove. It was once the population center of Donner Summit. Kelsey Monahan, who is in charge at the archives now, lent us the binder for last month's and this month's [Heirlooms](#).

Last month we covered our initiative at Gould Park, the Lamson-Cashion Donner Summit Hub, the transcontinental railroad and Cisco's being the end of track, and Meadow Lake. There were a lot of pictures too. This month we continue with the binder and Snowshoe Thompson, Auburn Ski Club, Red Mountain, and Cisco Grove. There are, of course, lots more pictures, many from the Placer County Archives. That won't take care of the pictures though. There will be more next month.

The land that was the modern Cisco Grove, along Old Highway 40, was purchased by James L. Gould from the railroad at least in part to build a ditch to carry water to hydraulic mining at lower elevations. There were two motivations for what came next. James L. Gould Jr. (also James L. Gould III, depending on how confusing four generations of James L. Gould gets) had been studying to be a stockbroker but the crash of '29 put an end to that. Needing something to do with the coming of the Depression, James and his father, James L., decided a resort at Cisco Grove would be a good idea. There would be a lot of travelers on the new all-weather highway in the early 1930's and they wanted to take advantage. There were (and still are) cottonwoods along the river so the Goulds named the resort Cisco Grove. Over time the Goulds built a gas station, restaurant and bar, store, cabins, "steam heat accommodations", sixty units, three housekeeping cabins, and other amenities for travelers, along with the stone buildings above right. There was also a ski club called Sit-Ski which had a rope tow which is not to be confused with the



Top: on the north side of Hampshire Rock Rd./Old Highway 40 these two buildings sit. They were the Forest Gift Shop catering to highway travelers before the freeway.

Bottom: some of the many ruins of buildings at Cisco Grove. The buildings were torn down to reduce taxes and since there were no visitors after the coming of the freeway

Story Locations in this Issue

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Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We're closing in on two hundred issues of the Heirloom: thousands of pages, thousands of pictures, and hundreds of subjects. You've probably begun to realize that you cannot keep all the history in your head. Even if you remember it all, retrieval is difficult.

Fortunately one of the choices we made back at the birth of the DSHS was to index all our Heirloom articles and pictures. We've diligently kept up the indices so that they are many pages long, full of alphabetized titles and subjects. Go to our website and to any of the Heirloom pages (one for each year) and you'll find links to the Heirloom indices.

One of the strengths of the DSHS is the incomparable historical photograph collection. The collection is thousands of pictures and again the sheer number makes finding anything in particular, difficult. Avoid the long URL by going to our website and clicking on the "photographs" link and then to the "historic photo collection link." A third link, to the Flickr URL will take you to those thousands of searchable historical photographs of Donner Summit. Have fun.

Find us on the the DSHS YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJenAxPCb47Y14agmVGI-zA>
Find us on FaceBook where we place a new historical picture daily.

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Auburn Ski Club which moved in nearby in 1932 after buying land from the Goulds. The first gas pumps were oil barrels with hand pumps but over time things would modernize.

I-80's arrival was the death knell for the many little communities that had sprung up along Highway 40. Cars were more reliable and traffic could travel much faster on the multi-lane freeway. People could go further and were aiming for Lake Tahoe and Reno non-stop. The Cisco buildings were surplus and James Gould Jr. had them destroyed to save on taxes. The foundation remnants of many of the buildings are still there. There were also two stone buildings (see page 1). They were the Forest Gift Shop, that sold souvenirs and juice to travelers. They still exist on the north side of Hampshire Rock Rd./Old Highway 40 and serve as a remembrance of what was. In 2004 the Gould family donated fifteen acres to Placer County for a park site. The County, the Donner Summit Association and the Historical Society would like to improve the site to attract people to what would be the gateway to Donner Summit. One day there will be signage telling the stories of the area: geology, skiing competitions and public skiing, the Dutch Flat Rd., the railroad, the highways and of course the old Upper and Lower Ciscos. There will be maps, paving for ADA access, and maybe even a bridge over the Yuba River to make getting to the restrooms and picnic tables easier. Stay tuned.



Dramatic example of ruins at Cisco Grove.

Cisco Grove was also the home of the Auburn Ski Club from 1932 until I-80 arrived in the 1960's. It had purchased 65.8 acres of land for \$10 from the Gold Run Ditch and Mining Co. which was owned by the Goulds. The eldest Jim Gould thought the ASC would "add to the draw and would enhance" the Gould properties at Cisco. The club built a club house, ski jumps, and ski runs and was a force in making downhill skiing a participant sport rather than just a spectator sport. Red Mountain, on the north side of the road also served as a race course during competitions and was a lookout for Southern Pacific. The gorgeous view from the top also allowed the spotters to keep an eye on the miles of snowheds which had a habit of burning. Once a fire was spotted a call was made to Cisco which then telegraphed the fire trains, always kept with full heads of steam which would race to the fires.

In 1963, after I-80 went through the Auburn Ski Club the club purchased Boreal Ridge which is today their headquarters and also the site of Boreal Ski Area which opened in 1964/65. See the story about the Auburn Ski Club later in this issue. Look also at our [Heirloom](#) article index on our website for more about Cisco, Cisco Grove, and the Auburn Ski Club.

James L. Gould

There were four generations of James L. Goulds. In his oral interview, included in the Placer County Archives binder James L II talked about his father being a deputy sheriff and his capturing a couple of murderers during his time as deputy sheriff. Gould would stop the Greyhound bus when he heard someone wanted was coming through. He'd search the bus and take away the criminal. One fellow got out of the bus and ran off. Eventually he was found up to his waist in the willows in the Yuba River. Gould snuck up and cuffed him putting one of the cuffs on his own wrist. He immediately realized he shouldn't have done that because the guy was a foot taller than Deputy Sheriff Gould. Gould warned the fellow about trouble in Auburn if he gave Gould any trouble – the people there "would kick the hell out of you." The guy came quietly. Had he just pushed down on the deputy sheriff's head he could have easily drowned James Gould.

Another Gould story

"In the bar, my father had three stuffed deer heads looking in different directions and in the far western corner of the bar he had a wildcat that was stuffed. And it was laying down on the bar, and he had rigged a ...some sort of an air bladder, and a squeeze a hose and then a ...something you squeeze and would force the air into the wildcat and the wildcat would look like he was alive. So my dad has this wildcat and if you get somebody who has had a little bit to drink and well, for that matter, people who had nothing to drink. But if you watch that wildcat, and it was glaring right at, down the bar so it looked like it was looking straight at you. And my dad would activate this squeeze thing and the air would make the wildcat move and people would, and make some comment on it. Is that cat alive? It had a chain on it too, it had a chain and that chain was secured, dad said yeah, but don't pet him. Don't get, you know. He was kind of a character." Verbatim transcript from an interview by Placer Co. with James. L. Gould. What fun they had in the old days.

The Auburn Ski Club

The Auburn Ski Club has done much to popularize that sport in northern California and is now the largest club of its kind west of the Mississippi. Their "hill" is located a few miles east of Towle, on the Auburn-Tahoe highway. Here, within a few steps of his car, the ski sportsman is afforded fast runs over an open course. [The area was also referred to as Cañon Creek.]

On tournament days the spectator can see the ski jumpers in the most spectacular feature of all winter sports. Sig Vettestad, the 1930 California amateur champion, is a member of this club. The amateur is by no means excluded, however; scores of youthful Californians are gamely trying to learn "how to fly like the wind" on skis. On the week-ends when tournaments are not being held, ski tours into the mountains, over the old trails of the pioneers, are on the program. For visitors who do not care to ski, the Club has a fast toboggan slide, 1000 feet long.

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

Placer Herald
January 3, 1931

So they moved up the hill when Highway 40 was improved and rerouted. The changed route went through the club's ski jump area.

Winter sports were for spectators until the 1930's and clubs like the Auburn Ski Club began to encourage spectators to participate. Here you will want to take a look at Challenging the Mountains which is the story of Wendell Robie who probably is most responsible for the popularization of winter sports in California. It was reviewed in our 4/20 Heirloom.

Spectators arrived in droves at the club's winter sports area at Cañon Creek. The Placer Herald (3/11/30) said, "On Sundays there would be as many as 2,500 cars parked in the area... many people from Sacramento, Marysville and the Bay district hold memberships in the Auburn Ski Club."

The next year the Herald (1/3/31) said, "Last year 28,000 motorists visited the Auburn winter-sports area, single Sundays breaking all records for travel on the Auburn-Tahoe Highway."

Those are just two of many news articles extolling the fun of the Auburn Ski Club's Cañon Creek location, just a few miles up what is now I-80 from Baxter. Spectators watched slalom races and ski jumping and Wendell Robie and the Auburn Ski Club capitalized on that interest to entice people to come and ski and toboggan as well as watch. The club offered a ski hill, jumping hill, and toboggan run. They offered lessons and Robie's Auburn Lumber Co. sold skis. Given the number of newspaper articles about "doings" at the Auburn Ski Club we can imagine a robust P.R. program. That's aside from special ski jumping events they held in Berkeley (hauling down summit snow for the fun) and during the 1939 exposition at Treasure Island (this time on manufactured snow).

Improvements to Highway 40 ran right through the Auburn Ski Club's ski area but it was on PGE property anyway which also necessitated a move. The Club moved up to Cisco and bought land from James L. Gould. Mr. Gould thought the club's arrival would enhance the value of his property. He was probably right. .

At Cisco everything was in place by 1932. There the Club built ski hills for different levels of skiers, slalom runs, jumping

Access to the Canon Creek location of the ASC was provided last year all winter by the California Highway Commission. On Sundays there would be as many as 2,500 cars parked in the area "many people from Sacramento, Marysville and the Bay district hold memberships in the Auburn Ski Club and find this area most easily accessible for winter sports."

Placer Herald
March 11, 1930

Auburn Ski Club's articles of incorporation November, 1931

The club will promote interest in winter sports, including but not limited to, skiing, tobogganing sleighing ice skating, and other forms of winter sports and recreations...

To hold athletic contests pertaining to any or all winter sports;

To provide facilities for the teaching and training of participants in winter sports

To establish facilities for the use of those engaged in winter sports

WINTER SPORTS AWAIT FIRST HEAVY SNOW

Auburn Ski Club Prepared to Inaugurate One of
The Largest Winter Sports Programs
Ever Attempted

AUBURN TO BE MECCA FOR THOUSANDS

World's Record Jump Possible at New Auburn ski
Hill at Cisco; Victory Highway Will be
Kept Open

Auburn Journal 12/8/32

hills for different levels of jumpers, a toboggan run and had their club house (called a shelter house) moved from Cañon Creek up to Cisco. There were also accommodations in the club house. They even built a bridge over the Yuba River. At Cisco there were slalom and jumping tournaments on the ski hill and ski races even on Red Mountain. Cisco Grove was the perfect location, being on the highway and the railroad with good hills at a higher elevation than Cañon Creek.

The new jumping hill was apparently something special. The Auburn Journal (10-27-32) said the Auburn Ski Club had finished a new class A ski hill designed for jumping up to 300 feet. "The new Auburn Ski Hill exceeds by 100 feet the ski hill built for world record distance by the Los Angeles Recreation Department at Big Pine several years ago." Roy Mikkeslen, a member of the US. Olympic Ski Team, looked at the hill and said it is the "most spectacular" he'd seen. It was equaled only by the 100 meter hill in Norway. The hill was built for those aiming for world record distances.

Formed in 1928 under the leadership of Wendell Robie membership in the Auburn Ski Club took off. There were about one thousand members two winters later. Memberships were fifty cents. The Cañon Creek facility had the first "modern" (because it had been engineered) ski jump. Access was sometimes difficult requiring members to shovel the road. Snow fell lower in those days; Cañon Creek is 4500 feet.

The most famous story about the Auburn Ski Club was a plot hatched by Robie to get Highway 40 plowed in winter. In order to popularize winter sports the club needed access to the higher elevations where more snow was. Up higher there would be more snow but the highway was only cleared as far as Baxter. People had to walk or ski up to the club's site and conditions were not the best. If only the road could be cleared. People could drive right up to a better site. The club enlisted the help of state legislators and on January 18, 1931 legislators and State officials were ferried in 56 cars to Cañon Creek. Hundreds of other automobiles followed bringing along spectators. "Many had no knowledge of snow or winter sports. They were treated to exhibitions ski jumping food and refreshments." State officials saw the increasing popularity of winter sports and its possibilities. "They saw thousands of people skiing on one packed hillside; they saw 2,461 automobiles jammed into the dead end of a highway blocked with snow. The lawmakers borrowed skis from ski club members and descended the slope in a manner unbecoming senatorial dignity. They put on the Auburn Ski Club sweater and posed for snapshots." They also enjoyed Prohibition era "mountain dew". There was a huge traffic jam. Legislators voted to keep the highway open in winter. The next winter the road was only closed for thirty-five days due to storms rather than all winter as had been the case.

Robie later said the legislation clearing Old Highway 40 in winter was, "the most vital development in all of California skiing." Just look at the cars parked here.

When Interstate 80 came along in the early 60's the Auburn Ski Club again found their ski hill disrupted and the club bought land on Boreal Ridge some miles east and at higher elevation. There they are today.

FIRST SKI EVENTS PLANNED FOR LARGE CISCO HILL SUNDAY

Cross Country and Slalom Races to
Feature

Auburn Journal 12/29/32

Jumping practice on the big new ski hill will be a spectacular continuous performance...



This gives us a good idea of the popularity of winter sports in California. This is a 1934 picture of the Auburn Ski Club's Cisco Grove location. This is Hampshire Rock Rd., Old Highway 40. The picture comes from the Auburn Ski Club and then the Placer County Archives via Sierra Heritage's February, '99 issue.



Auburn Journal February 21, 1935. An example of the public relations conducted by the Auburn Ski Club

OFFICIAL SKI SONG (Tune of "KATIE")
 Sk-k-k-il-il-ing
 Wonderful skiing
 You're the only sport That I adore.
 When the sn-no-ow falls
 Over the mountains,
 I'll be bumping down the hill
 Until I'm sore.

Sk-k-k-11-11-ing,
 Wonderful sking,
 You're the sport we brought
 From Northland's rocky shore.
 When the m-m-oon shines
 O'er Tahoe Ski Hill
 Think of days we spent with you
 And ski some more.

Placer Herald 3/1/30

Cisco Buildings On Freeway Path To Be Auctioned

The State Division of Highways will conduct a public auction tomorrow, July 14, beginning at 10:30 a.m., for the sale and removal of buildings and equipment located near US 40, about one-half mile east of Cisco Grove.

The properties have been acquired as right of way for future freeway construction, and buildings must be removed by September 14. They will be auctioned on their respective premises in the following order:

- 1 Concrete block cabin and pump and pressure tank; formerly owned by Lloyd C. Perkins.
- 2 Frame cabin; formerly owned by Bernard V. Butler.
- 3 Lunch room, ski shop, storage shed, and other sheds; formerly owned by Auburn Ski Club.
- 4 Ski tow building, French-type ski lift, and an Austrian-type ski lift and shed; formerly owned by Auburn Ski Club.
- 5 Fairbanks - Morse gasoline motor, Auburn Ski Club. Must be removed within 30 days. No bond required.

Full purchase price, plus sales tax, must be paid at the time of sale on items selling under \$100. For those selling for over \$100, no deposit less than \$100 can be accepted.

For additional information, contact Division of Highways, 703 B Street, Marysville; 5187wood 3-5471, extension 308.

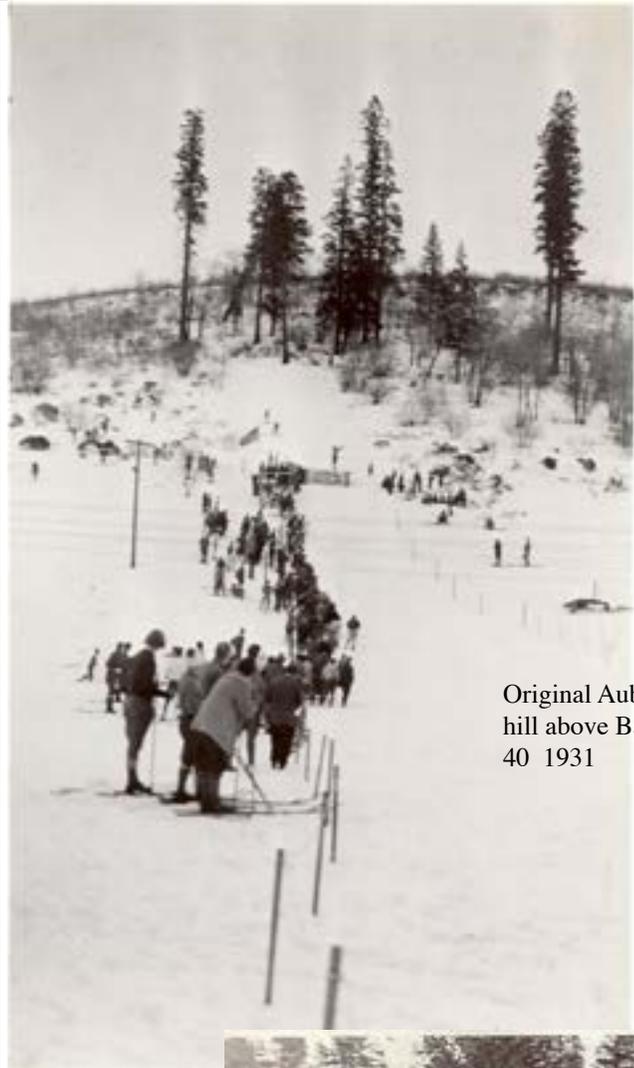
With the coming of the Interstate through Cisco Grove the Auburn Ski Club moved up the hill to Boreal Ridge, about a thousand feet higher in elevation and right on the new freeway.

This article tells us what happened to the Cisco Grove facilities.

The Auburn Journal 7-13-61

Another example of Auburn Ski Club public relations to increase the popularity of winter sports: On December 21, 1931 the Auburn Ski Club was going to sponsor a snow sports festival near the Summit. Included in the festivities was going to be a flying machine enthusiast who was going to take off the summit in a glider and attempt to land somewhere around Donner Lake. "Wallace Polson will take a picture of the event," said the Placer Herald (12/20/31)

From the Placer County Archives



Original Auburn Ski Club's
hill above Baxter on Highway
40 1931

Auburn Ski Club

Cars parked at the Auburn Ski Club (see sign on the right side) on Highway 40 in 1937. This gives us the idea of how popular winter sports were becoming at the end of the 1930's





Auburn Ski Club club house at Cisco Grove in 1938.

Below: looking up at the "A" hill at the Auburn Ski Club 1938. The freeway closes at the bottom of the hill today.



Below undated, Auburn Ski Club

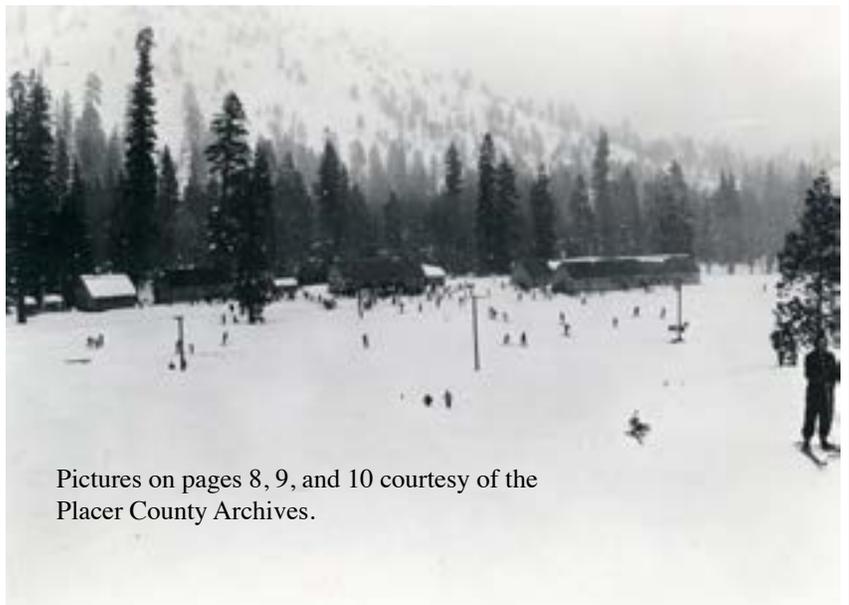


Auburn Ski Club



Above; skiers at the Auburn Ski Club.

Right Auburn Ski Club 1939 slalom races



Pictures on pages 8, 9, and 10 courtesy of the Placer County Archives.



Dramatic picture of a ski jumper at the Auburn Ski Club at Cisco.

Before downhill skiing became popular winter sports were spectator events as people watched ski jumping and slalom races.

Auburn Ski Club



Above: from the top of the ski jump looking down at the clubhouse on Highway 40. The printing on the sweatshirt bottom center says, "Mt. Lassen." 1938



Left someone going off the ski jump 1935



Snowshoe Thompson statue at Boreal

SnowShoe Thompson

The [Heirloom](#) has avoided writing about Snowshoe Thompson even though he was very famous for carrying the mail across the Sierra for a couple of decades. There is a statue at the Western States Ski Museum at Boreal (above) and he's highlighted in the museum. The statue will depart along with the museum when the new building is done at Palisades (formerly Squaw Valley). Snowshoe Thompson primarily plied his winter mail delivery trade on the route from Placerville to Genoa in Nevada but there was one winter he worked the Cisco to Meadow Lake route as a Cisco resident, Clarence Wooster, remembered. Since Meadow Lake went bust the next year that may be why Thompson went back to the Placerville route. Apparently he also got married and bought property near that route. Unfortunately the Placerville people can claim Snowshoe and his colorful experiences as their own. Since he did work that one year at Cisco and since he's in the Placer County Archives binder, we can hit him quickly including what Mr. Wooster remembered of that very heavy winter and Snowshoe Thompson.

Snowshoe Thompson answered an ad in the [Sacramento Union](#) asking for a mail carrier for the U.S. Government. Thompson came to the United States from Norway and settled in the Midwest until Gold Fever struck. He drove a herd of milk cows to California in 1851 and began mining and then ranching.

In 1856 he answered the ad thinking Norwegian "ski-skates" would be just the ticket to win the mail contract. His skis were ten feet long and weighed twenty-five pounds. For twenty years Thompson traveled the route over

the Sierra delivering mail. It was three days from Placerville to Genoa in Nevada with bags of mail sometimes weighing as much as one hundred pounds.

Thompson could make his east run in three days at thirty miles per day and the west run in two days at forty-five miles per day. Keeping to the ridges gave him long downhill runs on the west leg.

There is a myriad of stories about Snowshoe Thompson's exploits beyond just delivering the mail. He once came across a man with badly frost bitten feet in a cabin. He started a fire and went to Genoa for help where he helped make skis for the rescue party. The man was brought to Genoa and needed amputation but there was no anesthetic, so Thompson skied back to Placerville then went on to Sacramento. Then he went all the way back to Genoa with the chloroform.

Clarence Wooster remembered Snowshoe Thompson from that one winter in his reminiscences.

"Snowshoe Thomson^o passed us daily [apparently in the winter of 1866-67], carrying the mail between Meadow Lake City and

Cisco. After each storm he would carefully make his track in the soft snow. Starting at the top of Red Mountain he

"He flew down the mountainside. He did not ride astride his pole or drag it to one side as was the practice of other snow-shoers, but held it horizontally before him after the manner of a tightrope walker. His appearance was graceful, swaying his balance pole to one side and the other in the manner that a soaring eagle dips its wings." [see the depictions of the different ways of using the pole while skiing on the next page.]

Dan de Quille
[Virginia City Territorial Enterprise](#)

“Thompson always wore a Mackinaw jacket, a wide rimmed hat, and covered his face in charcoal to prevent snow blindness. He carried no blankets, but he did carry matches to start fires, and his bible. He snacked on dried sausage, jerked beef, crackers, and biscuits. When a storm kept him from proceeding he would find a flat rock, clear it of snow, and dance old Norwegian folk dances until it passed, then he would continue on his way. He rested but briefly, and usually only long enough for a crust to form back over the fresh snow, for easier passage.

(from snowshoethompson.org/thestory/)

would glide along the mountainside on a consistent grade. A frosty night would freeze the track, which would thereafter guide him as the steel rails do the locomotive. We would watch him sail down this four-mile course at a great speed, cross the ice frozen river, throw out mail toward the house, and glide out of sight, up and over a hill, by the momentum gathered in the three-mile descent. A three-mile toboggan slide was a burning temptation which we resisted for some time; but finally the lure outran discretion and we trespassed on sacred grounds. We skied alongside Thompson’s track half a mile up the grade. His track was about six inches deep and frozen hard. We sat ourselves in it, squatted, holding our poles at right angles and let loose of our tree-limb hold. We shot out like rockets. The skis held to the track, but the three kids went tumbling down a steep mountain side, head over heels, a hundred yards before sprawling out limp and seemingly boneless, scratched, and bleeding more or less profusely.

“Several days later while we were out on the opposite side of the great canyon and near Thompson’s trail, he came along and called us over to where he was. Three kids then and there received a spanking which they never forgot. We did not repeat the adventure.

Check out the coming Snowshoe Thompson Expedition on page 22.



Snowshoe Thompson graphic at the Western States Ski Museum at Boreal



From Clarence Wooster's Reminiscences. Note the different techniques above and below compared to Thompson's technique to the left and described in the sidebar on the previous page.



Snowshoe Thompson medal at the Western States Ski Museum at Boreal This shows Thompson as described in Dan De Quille on the previous page and as opposed to the usual method of skiing above right.



"John A. Thompson was the father of all the race of snow-shoers in the Sierra Nevada Mountains; and in those mountains he was the pioneer of the pack train, the stagecoach, and the locomotive." -

Dan de Quille, *Overland Monthly*, 1886



Red Mountain

Red Mountain at the top. The stone building was the lookout for the railroad hoping to spot snowshed fires.

Red Mountain is mentioned in the Placer County Archives binder about Cisco and Cisco Grove. We've addressed it a couple of times in the [Heirloom](#) (see July and August, 2010 and July, 2022). It's also the subject of one of our 20 Mile Museum signs. Its history goes far back as the North American tectonic plate has been moving against the Pacific tectonic plate Red Mountain got scraped off the sea floor instead of being subducted (gone underneath) under the North American plate. What had been an island in the Pacific 65 million years ago ended up at the top of the Sierra once the Sierra began to rise five or so million years ago. Indeed, the red rock of Red Mountain is very different from the granite that forms the great granite batholith that rose to make up the Sierra.

Closer to our time Red Mountain was a lookout for the railroad. Two men lived there when fire was a danger to the snowsheds. Spotting a fire they would telephone Cisco on the first telephone in California. Cisco would telegraph the fire trains that would race to the fire. The view from the top of Red Mountain is spectacular and takes in almost all of the snowsheds.

That spectacular view has also been attractive to hikers. It's a wonderful hike with such a nice reward at the end.

Red Mountain was also used for downhill races by the Auburn Ski Club'



Below: the view from inside the stone building.

Above: Red Mountain lookout circa 1911



Hiking Red Mountain



Hike Red Mountain - Hard, but amazing views and well worth the trip.

This is an ambitious hike. It's difficult but the end is well worth the price. Red Mountain, Signal Peak, has fantastic 360 degree views of the Sierra peaks and lakes. It's obvious why the Central Pacific chose Red Mountain for its lookout in the late 19th century. Red Mountain is great for history. First, 65 million years ago it was an island in the Pacific. On the south peak, you can find some interesting rocks, some of which look like they have fossils embedded.

Red Mountain's lookout was built by the Central Pacific to keep watch on its wooden snowsheds. Indeed, you can see miles of snowsheds from the top. You can learn more about the snowsheds and Red Mountain at the Donner Summit Historical Society's site, their 20 Mile Museum Red Mountain interpretive sign and their July, 2010 newsletter.

It's a tough hike to the top. Take water. Take lunch. Take a snack. You can approach from either the west or the east. The western route is 3 miles long and rises 2100 feet, 900 in the first mile. It follows mostly a very rough road that used to be a stagecoach route. You reach the start from the Eagle Lakes turnoff from I-80. Follow the paved road north and around. You will come to the Indian Springs USFS campground on the south, river side, of the road. A little further along on the north side you will come to the turnoff for Signal Peak OHV. Drive in a quarter mile to the staging area. Take the road up which is the right fork. If you decide to try driving, be sure you have really high ground clearance.

The Eastern route is a tougher climb, rising 1696 feet in 1.8 miles. It is virtually all uphill, some very steep. Take the Cisco Rd. exit from I-80. On the north side of the freeway take Old 40 west to just before the private campground. Turn right, the second road, on Fordyce Rd. . The road goes up eventually to Meadow Lake, Fordyce Creek, and a couple of camps. Two miles up the road from Old 40 is a wide spot in the road where the trail takes off. This is the same trail used to build the lookout on top which is still there and which was used to provision the lookout. If you have a GPS the take off point is 39 19.501, 120 32.344.

From the DSHS Archives

Heroism on Donner Summit

If you've been following Donner Summit history you know the stories of heroism from the 19th Century. There was the Forlorn Hope (see our December, '20 [Heirloom](#) and the booklet "The Donner Party and Donner Summit Heroism, Pathos, and the Human Spirit" on our website) and the rescuers of the Donner Party (see our February, '22 [Heirloom](#)). So we have our heroes for the 19th Century.

Moving to the 20th Century there was a Donner Summit heroism story that made news across the country, "John Vanderbilt Awarded Carnegie Medal for Heroism."

On November 27, 1938 Vanderbilt and two friends were ice skating on Lake Van Norden. James Myers and friends were ice skating on the other side. On seeing Vanderbilt Myers skated towards him but broke through the ice mid-way across. Vanderbilt and his friends tied their sweaters together to make a rope and Vanderbilt made his way towards Myers to throw him the "rope." Vanderbilt also broke through the ice.

Oscar Jones was called from the Soda Springs Hotel and he and a number of guests tried over and over to get ropes and planks to the two men but they were too exhausted to help themselves, their hands too frozen to grip the thrown ropes. Two of the would-be rescuers also broke through the ice and had to be rescued.

Vanderbilt's heroism gained the attention of the Carnegie Commission which investigated and awarded the medal posthumously to Vanderbilt's father.

John Vanderbilt Awarded Carnegie Medal For Heroism

Award Granted In Recognition Of Valient
Attempt To Save Life Of
James B. Myers

MEDAL SENT TO PARENTS

Attention Of Carnegie Commission Called
To Courageous Act By
S. M. Barooshian

[Auburn Journal](#) November 2, 1939

TWO SPORTSMEN DROWN IN LAKE

Pair Crash Through Ice While
Skating; Two Others Have
Narrow Escape

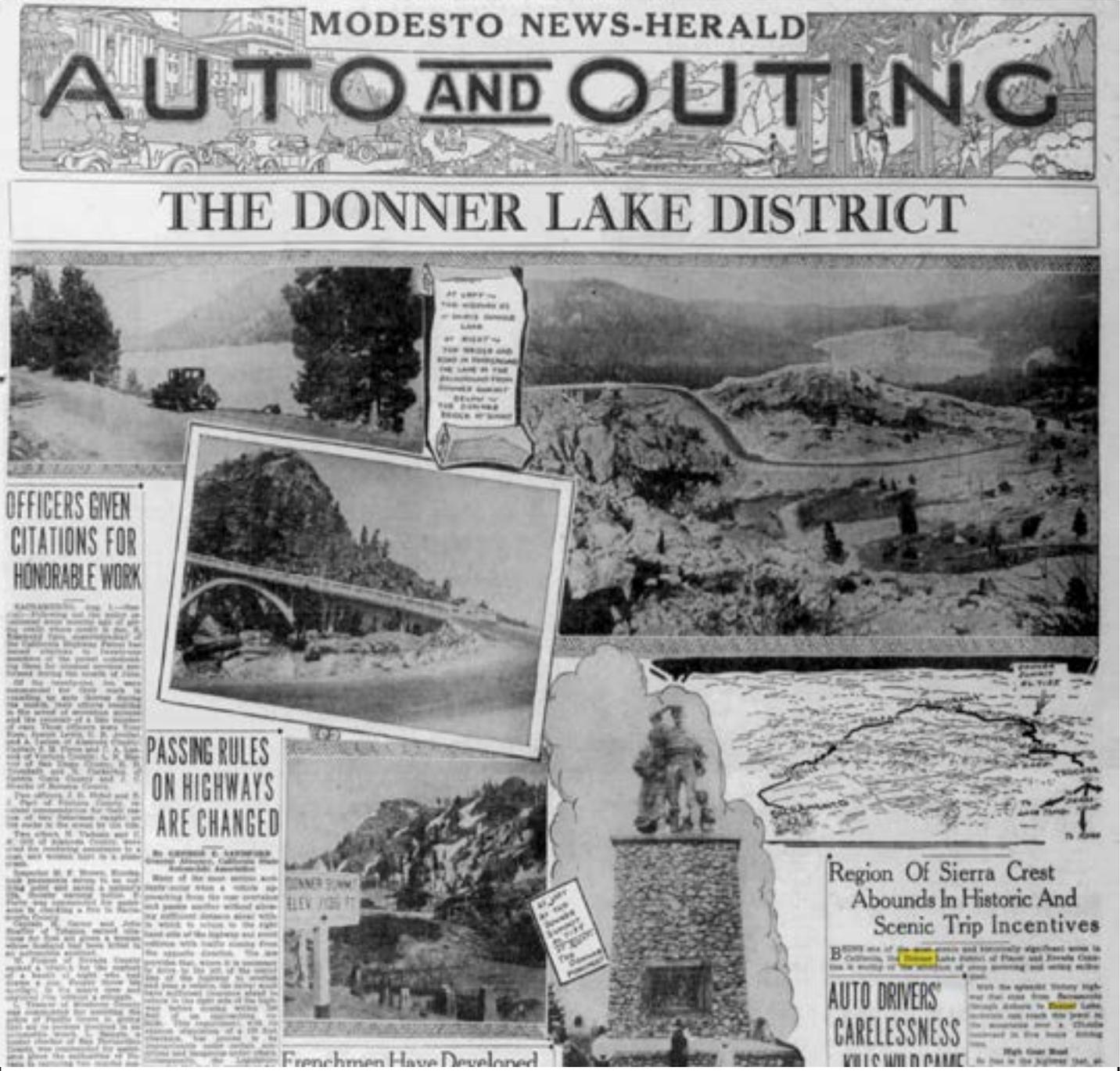
AUBURN, Nov. 28.—(AP)—Death

[Modesto Bee](#) November 28, 1938

From the DSHS Archives

Our editorial staff prides itself on its accuracy and went to double check some dates by searching in a newspaper archive. The archive works by providing little snippets of articles in response to searches. One little snippet came from the Modesto Bee dated August 2, 1931. The snippet was in response to a search term, Donner, and said "historically significant." Everyone knows Donner Summit is the most historically significant square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States. So we had to follow the snippet to its validating article.

People were enjoying the relatively new freedom of automobiles and newspapers obliged and encouraged auto travel with articles about places to travel. This article extols the wonders of Donner Summit which shows the good taste the Modesto Bee editorial office personnel must have had. Look at the magnificence of the place. We'll put the text on the next page.



Region Of Sierra Crest Abounds In Historic And Scenic Trip Incentives

The Modesto Bee August 2, 1931

Being one of the most scenic and historically significant areas in California, the Donner Lake district of Placer and Nevada Counties is worthy of the attention of every motoring and outing enthusiast. **[note: they've almost got it by saying "one of the most... " A little more research on their part would have left out "one of the."]**

With the splendid Victory highway that runs from Sacramento through Auburn to Donner Lake, motorists can reach this jewel in the mountains over a 170-mile boulevard in five hours driving time. **[that's 34 MPH]**

High Gear Road

So fine is the highway that, although you climb to an elevation of 7135 feet, most cars will make it in high gear. The route is one of beauty all the way, with the views at the Donner summit climaxing a marvelous trip.

Lake Van Norden, Donner Peak, the aviation weather bureau house atop a rock 7310 feet high, Donner summit bridge, Donner Lake and the scenes surrounding the Donner party tragedy combine to provide history, scenery and recreation.

Donner Lake

Donner Lake is one of the rarest sights in the country, as viewed from the Donner Summit. Down to its shores, it offers swimming, fishing and outings.

Between the lake and Truckee is the Donner Monument, which marks the spot where the Donner party tragedy occurred in the Winter of 1846-47, when an emigrant party became snowbound while attempting to reach the Sacramento Valley from the East. All suffered terrible hardships and many perished.

Startling Contrasts

Leaving Sacramento, one speeds up toward the Sierra summit, at first a level stretch through farms, dairies and orchards: then begins a gradual climb up U. S. Route 40 through the foothills.

Tipping your motor's nose a bit higher, then the pines, the peaks and streaks of perennial snow.

Emigrant Trail

Roughly speaking, this is the old emigrant trail, except that modern engineering has chosen a more gradual ascent.

"Before you reach the absolute summit, your gaze falls upon a high cottage, perched several hundred feet above the highway on a solid granite rise. The boys aloft in the cockpit of the mail planes know the meaning of each signal or radio wave from this aviation weather bureau. **[Check our Heirloom article index for stories about the transcontinental air route's Donner Summit weather station. See a picture on the next page.]**

Less than a century ago the oxen and covered wagon made this trail westward but no beacon had they and some of them never reached the goal.

Skirting this granite mass, we tip over onto the east slope of the divide. Here a scene of grandeur meets the eye. It takes one's breath.

Donner Lake

There is Donner Lake, named in honor of the ill fated Donner party.

There lies the Truckee Basin with Donner Creek and Cold Stream racing to join the Truckee River near Truckee.

The Donner bridge, just above the lake, spans a chasm of great depth. It is one of the most wonderful and beautiful highway bridges ever designed, With a vast arch it was built on a curve on up grade and tilted for speed by out sile [sic] elevation.

A view from Its lookout balcony eastward toward Donner Lake is a sight never to be forgotten.

Here a scene of grandeur meets the eye. It takes one's breath.

Winding through granite cuts we reach Donner Lake. Its three mile length presents one of the beauty spots of the trip.

Donner Monument "Past the lake we arrived at Donner Monument, erected by the Native Sons, in memory of this valiant group of early pioneers. Here was fought the greatest battle of early gold rush days. An early Winter, deep snows exacted the inexorable toll. A tablet nearby lists the names of those who gave up their lives on this expedition, as well as those who survived and pressed on westward.

One feels that the ground is hallowed by the dead and rededicated by those who pressed on to win a new empire and paradise.



Book Review

John A. "Snowshoe Thompson" Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra

Frank Tortorich
301 pages 2015

There are many heroes of the Sierra crossing, all with compelling stories of their treks. Most of those, however, crossed only once. "Snowshoe" Thompson crossed many times and although carrying the mail is pretty prosaic activity, Snowshoe turned his travels into heroism with his many adventures and the stories of what carried for people. John A. "Snowshoe Thompson" Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra will give you a good introduction to the man and if you are ambitious you can use chapter eleven to go off in search of all the memorials to Snowshoe Thompson that exist.

One may wonder why the Heirloom is carrying a book review of Mr. Thompson since his travels were not over Donner Summit. As you can see from the story in this issue on pages 11 and 12 Mr. Thompson did spend a winter on Donner Summit and too, Mr. Thompson's travels are the subject of this month's historical reprise by the historyexp.org people (See pages 22 and 23) of his route. These are the same extreme athletes who did the reprises of the Forlorn Hope and the Donner

In the nineteenth century, there was at least one mailman who made mail delivery an exciting romantic, and incredibly important profession. That man, of course, was John "Snowshoe" Thompson.

Frank Tortorich

Party Rescue Expeditions in 2020 and 2022. The Heirloom carried those stories so we have a connection. Mr. Thompson is also an interesting story.

Mail delivery in the middle of the 19th Century came in many ways: by ship, freight wagons and stagecoaches, Pony Express, telegraph, and the railroad. Snowshoe has a place in the list too. For years he carried mail over the Sierra where or when other methods were not viable.

Snowshoe was born in Norway in 1827. He and his mother emigrated to the U.S. in 1837. There are a lot of unknowns about mother and son and the rest of the family, which came later to the U.S., after it came to America and when their last name was Americanized from Torsteinsson.

In 1851 Snowshoe headed west with his brother to the Gold Rush maybe with milk cows to sell. Here again there is almost

no information about preparation for the cross country travel or how they got to California. There's not even information about what happened to the cows. Then there's very little about how he supported himself during his first few years in California.

Thompson did try searching for gold but that didn't work out. In 1855 Thompson read an article in a Sacramento paper ru-

ing the fact that no one had stepped forward to deliver mail over the Sierra. Thompson took the job.

Exactly what Snowshoe's skis looked like is unknown because various descriptions exist and many museums have purported pairs of his skis. Descriptions say the lengths were from five to ten feet long, four to six inches wide, one and a half inches thick and weighing as much as twenty-five pounds. What stamina the man must have had to maneuver those things whatever their exact dimensions. There was more lack of clarity about his route or routes from Placerville to Genoa, how much he was paid or even whether he was ever paid, how often he was contracted to carry mail, or even for whom he ultimately worked. We do know that the first mail he carried was in January of 1856.

Carrying mail over the Sierra in winter was fraught. A newspaper article noting that Thompson was carrying the mail also noted that two men who crossed the Sierra the month before ran into trouble in the deep snows. One man's feet froze. The other man and the animals simply disappeared.

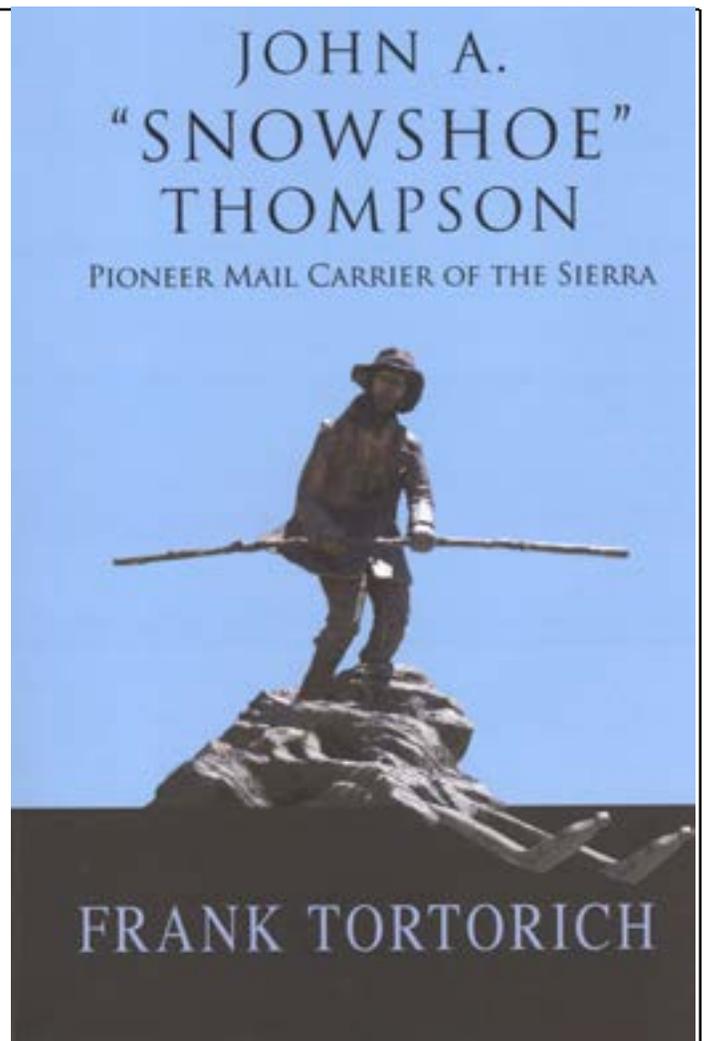
There are many stories about Snowshoe's Sierra crossings. In one he arrived at a wilderness cabin after traveling a couple of days from Placerville. He found a man with frozen feet who had been there several days. Snowshoe made a fire, gathered firewood, and made the man comfortable. Then he took off for Genoa traveling all night. There he enlisted the help of six men. They made some skis and headed back to the cabin. There they constructed a sled and brought the man to Genoa. Unfortunately the man's feet had to be amputated but there was no chloroform. Snowshoe got on his skis and went back over the Sierra to Sacramento for the chloroform. It was estimated he'd traveled four hundred miles to help the man.

The book tells of other adventures in the Paiute War, exploring Lake Tahoe, and taking Comstock ore samples to Placerville for example.

Besides carrying mail in winter on his back Snowshoe also carried freight and passengers in wagons. He bought a farm where he grew oats and barley.

The book gives the reader a lot about Snowshoe Thompson and one comes away from the book with a deep appreciation for Thompson's heroism and stamina. There are many footnotes both numbered and asterisked which give explanations and references, for example for the poem here. There is a set of appendices which give more explanations and pictures to illustrate the text.

There are also many many excerpts from newspapers and other sources which become tedious and sometimes repetitive. They could have categorized and summarized. For example in the chapter on plaques, monuments, resolutions and celebrations, the author lists many recognitions of Snowshoe Thompson starting in 1926 and going to the present over sixty pages. A better strategy would have been to summarize the collection.



Instead of wearing the ordinary snow shoes, the mail carrier uses long wooden skates, common in the north of Europe. These skates are five or six feet in length, turning up in the front like a sleigh runner; the foot is fastened to the board by a leather band, with a ridge under the hollow of the boot, which prevents it from slipping back. Thus prepared with a strong pole to guide him, he slips along over the Archives snow with astonishing speed; on the down grade he rests himself partially on the pole, and slides down on his sled. ²⁵ the hill as swiftly as a school boy can on his sled. [sic]

Weekly Calaveras Chronicle
February 15, 1862



Thompson Skiing Downhill With a Pole

...With his balance-pole in his hand, he dashed down the sides of the mountain at such a fearful rate of speed as to cause the many to characterize the performance as fool-hardy. Not a few of his old friends among the miners begged him to desist, swearing roundly that he would dash his brains out against a tree or plunge over some precipice and break his neck. But Thompson only laughed at their fears. With his feet firmly braced, and his balance-pole in his hands, he flew down the mountain slopes, as much at home as the eagle soaring and circling above neighboring peaks. Snow-shoe Thompson did not ride astride his guide-pole, nor trail it by his side in the snow, as is the practice of other snow-shoers, when descending a steep mountain, but held it horizontally before him, after the manner of a tight-rope walker. His appearance was most graceful when seen skating down the face of a steep mountain, swaying his long balance pole now to this side and now to that, as a soaring eagle moves its wings.

Overland Monthly
October, 1886
Dan De Quille

Poem title noted in a footnote sent the DSHS historical research team looking and came up with this poem commemorating the extraordinary four hundred mile travels of Snowshoe Thompson to rescue a man he found freezing in a cabin and his trek to get chloroform to amputate his legs.
The Pony Express May, 1952

Down Genoa's Peak Descending
(Snow Shoe Thomsen brings Chloroform)
Flying Eagle of the Fifties
Soaring Bird man of the West
Sailing through the virgin forest.
Scaling, high, Sierra's crest.

Down Genoa's Peak descending.
'Round the crags, and 'tween the pine.
Clouds of snow. like smoking engines.
Trailing in the serpentine

"Down! Down! Fast there comes a-falling
Like a streak of lightnine's ray.
Swinging, bending. leaping. swirling.
See the comet wend its way!

"Hail, ye Mormon Saints and Gentiles!
Elzy Knott shut down your mill!
Snow Shoe Thomson! Ho: He's coming!
Sisson's legs will soon be nil.

"Dargett, Chamberlain and Waters,
Chloroform is on the way!
Get your cleavers, saws and cat-gut!
Go to work and save the day!

"Sisson's ends are mortifying.
Thirty days they're frozen stiff!
Doctor Luce, with Pony whiskey
Take your turn at every sniff!

W. F. SKYHAWK-
- Pony Express Histories Series No. 17

"There is nothing much more terrible than a winter snowstorm in the Sierra. Yet, Snow-shoe would go out into them like they were nothing out of the usual.

Harold Moore 1976

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

In our November '23 [Heirloom](#) we reviewed [The Ditches of Nevada City](#). Ditches carried water to be used for hydraulic mining, irrigation, and city consumption. It was interesting to see the huge number of ditches. It might have made us on Donner Summit feel a bit jealous since we don't have the plethora of ditch remains the lower elevations have. Still, some of the dams on the lakes on Donner Summit provided the water for many ditches.

Then we came across the Cisco Grove binder put together by Placer County Archives. It contained an oral history, an interview with James L. Gould Jr. (or sometimes the third - the four generations of James L. Goulds are confusing.)

Mr. Gould noted that the land the family owned around Cisco Grove had been bought from the railroad by a ditch company with the land ending up in the Gould Family as part of the Gold Run Ditch and Mining Co. by 1867. The land had a ditch on it which Mr. Gould described the location of:

"Yeah, it's right across from the campground, the ditch is, has been, there's little pieces of the ditch still there, and, ditches and excavations I should say. Flumed and ditched. The freeway when it was put in, in 1960 overcrosses in a number of places and so you can find remnants of it. So if you went southwest, southeast 100 yards up from the swimming hole at the campground, that was the headwaters there."

"right across from the campground is pretty easy. Take the Eagle Lakes exit from I-80 and take the road down to what is now called the Indian Springs Campground. Across the street over a swale you'll find the location of the pictures here. Someone may want to map out the remnants.



"Across from the campground" are the remnants of the Gold Run Ditch and Mining Co. Left is looking west and right is looking north from the spot directly across the street from the campground entrance.

Ditch remnants



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.

2024 Snowshoe Thompson Reprise

Who knew what it would all lead to.

In December of 2020 four intrepid adventurers left the Donner Memorial State Park in a quest to repeat the grueling journey of the Donner Party's Forlorn Hope. Their hundred mile or so trip, ending at Johnson Ranch, celebrated the heroism and sacrifice of the original participants. You can read all about that in the December '20 and January '21 [Heirlooms](#). Then there was a follow up regarding an axe head (you have to read the stories) in the January and February '23 [Heirlooms](#).

The adventurers had barely celebrated their success when they began casing about for the next adventure which turned out to be a reprise of the Donner Party rescue expeditions from Johnson Ranch to the Donner Memorial State Park. You can read about that adventure in the February and March '22 [Heirlooms](#) Like the first reprise they used meticulously researched original routes.

Next the group decided on another reprise, this time of the Grosh Brother who left Virginia City and headed to California to register their claims. The [Heirloom](#) did not cover that because Virginia City and the route had nothing to do with Donner Summit.

Along the way these adventures spawned a couple of books, a number of speaking engagements, the building of an extensive website (historyexp.org), quite a set of fans, a set of logos (see the next page), a popular FaceBook page (History Expeditions) the popularizing of "Demisemiseptcentennial" (you have to read the article in the 2/22 [Heirloom](#), and the desire to keep at the reprise business.

Now we are in 2024 and the History Expedition participants are aiming at a new reprise with some additional members. Snowshoe Thompson, as you read on pages 11-12 was an interesting character and his life taking the mail over the Sierra is worthy of exploration and celebration. On March 6 the enhanced History Expedition group will leave Placerville for Genoa Nevada. If all goes well they'll reach Genoa on March 10 having taken only a few days longer than Snowshoe did for the same route. On the way they will see Snowshoe's and his family's grave site as well as his homestead. You can see the map of their route below or go to historyexp.org. Again, we'd expect nothing less, the route has been extensively researched. It's about one hundred miles long with 17,000 feet of elevation gain and 15,000 feet of elevation drop. That's rough. They'll camp along the way near Ice House, Meyers, Woodford's, and Job's Canyon. The graves are in the Genoa cemetery and the homestead is in Diamond Valley.

You may be interested in reading some more. Author Erica Mailman has written an article on the Historyexp.org website featuring Thompson but with an emphasis on his wife, Agnes Singleton (Thompson) Scossa. Then there is Frank Torrich's seminal book on Thompson, [John A. "Snowshoe" Thompson, Pioneer Mail Carrier of the Sierra](#). There are some excerpts on the website. By the time you read this there should also have been a livestream about the coming events and it should have been placed on the website as well.

If you'd like to join in the fun and get regular updates join the History Expeditions FaceBook group.

Map of the 2024 Snowshoe Thompson Reprise route and which matches the actual route Snowshoe Thompson used.





The Snowshoe Thompson group left to right: Elke Reimer, Hal Hall, Tim Twietmeyer, Bob Crowely, and Jen hemen

If you want to join in on the fun there are a couple of opportunities:

See them off at 7am from Cary Hotel in downtown Placerville. There will be a brief ceremony.

At the end, as of this writing, the group is working with Genoa, Alpine and Douglas County Historical Societies to plan a ceremony and possibly a speaker panel back in Genoa central after arrival on Sunday. More details to follow on place and times at historyexp.org.

A detailed map will be published on historyexp.org, showing possible places for folks to come out and meet the group along the route.



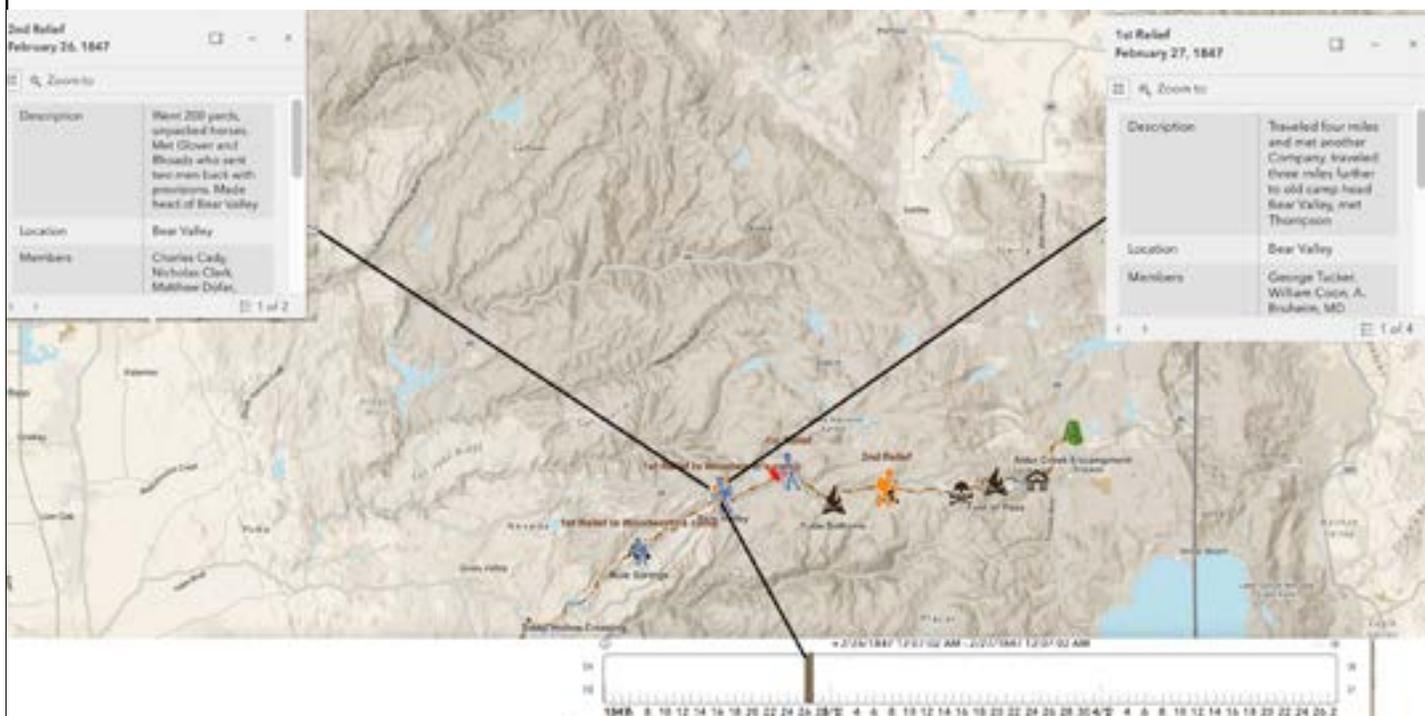
Donner Relief Parties: Mapping The Heroes

Donner Rescue Expeditions Interactive map

The Donner Party was more than just two wrong turns and a bad guidebook. Delve into the story and we find tragedy, bad luck, bad decisions, ignorance, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror, and unbelievable hardship. That's the bad. The Donner Party was also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit. All of that is worthy of remembering and celebrating, which is why four extreme athletes did a reprise of the Donner Party rescue expeditions in 2022. They hiked and snowshoed from Johnson Ranch, near Wheatland CA. to Donner Lake celebrating the extraordinary feat of the men who went into the mountains to rescue the Donner Party. In order to do their trek they had to have a map of the route and that has grown into an extraordinary interactive map that tells the story of the original rescuers as well as serves as a guide..

The Donner party arrived at what would be called Donner Lake on October 31, 1846, two years before the Gold Rush. After a couple of attempts to get over the pass it was clear they were going no further and after their animals were

lost in the snows it was clear, too, that food would run out. Help was needed or it might be that no one would survive the Sierra winter. Fifteen members of the party, called the Forlorn Hope, set out on December 16, heading for California. They were taking a huge risk traveling over the snow with little food and no maps; but there was risk in staying at the lake too and they had families to save. To get to California they to slogged through the snow on Donner Summit and endured storms with no shelter. They went without food and bore unimaginable hardships. What is it like to sleep in the snow in soggy and sodden clothing fearing what might come overnight, fearing what the weather might bring? What is it like to hike through the snow, sinking into it with each step, and to do it to exhaustion with no food or warmth at the end of the exertion? What is it like to starve slowly and be forced to eat each leather shoelaces? What is it like to know you have to keep going, you have to survive, not just for yourself but for the children or family members you've left behind at the lake and who are counting on you? How can you possibly give up – as long as you live? What is it like to be forced to eat human flesh?



Here we have a slice of the Donner Party Relief expeditions map with the route laid out as researched by Tim Twietmeyer and Bob Crowley. The timeline at the the bottom scrolls until stopped and takes the reader to a date during the expeditions. In this case February 26 is the stopping point where there are two icons of hikers in two different colors representing the first and second reliefs. At the top left and right are the notes that pop up at that point for that day for those two relief parties.

It took the five survivors of the Forlorn Hope thirty-three days to get to Johnson Ranch. They had barely survived. When William Eddy knocked on Harriet Ritchie's door at Johnson Ranch, she burst into tears at the emaciated and staggering man held upright by two Indians. Bloody footprints marked his trail which others followed to find his companions. The Forlorn Hope's heroism would save about half of the people trapped at the lake.

News spread about the fate of the Donner Party trapped in the mountains. Rescue parties were formed. People who could have easily stayed comfortably in California, with plenty of food, endured the hardship of carrying heavy packs uphill through the snow over the Sierra to Donner Lake, almost one hundred miles. They endured hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake. This is heroism but the story is not generally known or celebrated.

The rescuers were in a rush heading east to Donner Lake but unfortunately for people today who are interested, the rescue parties left no maps or pictures. There are people interested in more than the outline of the story and want the details. There are those who want to celebrate the heroism and the best of human nature.

When four extreme athletes decided to follow up their 2020 reprise of the Forlorn Hope trek with a celebratory reprise of the rescue expeditions in 2022, they had little to go on. So there followed a year of intense research into books, journals, articles, and websites. There were many on the ground reconnaissances to develop the route, piece by piece. Then, prior to the January 2022 departure, there was trip organization, logistics, and property owner permissions to obtain.

In 2023 there was another reprise, this time of the Grosh Brothers of Virginia City.* Meanwhile work started on an extraordinary tool which people would be able to use to immerse themselves in the heroism surrounding the Donner Party rescue expeditions.

The tool, which would become a day-to-day interactive map of the Donner Party rescue expeditions route from Johnson Ranch to Donner Lake, was an outgrowth of the need to catalog the research that two of the four extreme athletes had done. Tim Twitmeier and Bob Crowley began their route research almost immediately after they and two partners finished the reprise of the Forlorn Hope route. They were hooked by the history and the heroism.

The research came from contemporary authors J. Quinn Thornton (who interviewed the principles in 1847) and Edwin Bryant (who wrote [What I Saw in California](#) and who had been part of the larger party that included the Donners until he broke off, trading his wagon for a mule). Then there was Patrick Breen's Diary (member of the Donner Party), William Eddy's diary (which has disappeared into history but which was referenced by James Reed and Edwin Bryant), James

Reed's diary (member of the Donner Party who was exiled, arrived in California long before the rest of the party, and who led one of the rescue parties), and Reason Tucker's and the Rhodes brothers diaries (members of the relief expeditions). Those sources provided eighty percent of what Twitmeier and Crowley learned. The other twenty percent came from other participants like Virginia Reed (James' daughter and one of the rescues).

As research continued the amount of information was almost overwhelming and needed some organizing but the names of the sources only skates across the surface. Each source was full of stories. There were four relief parties over the first part of 1847 and each of those parties splintered making more entities to follow, more day by day events to catalog. Some of the parties were simultaneous, at least in part. Bob and Tim first used Excel spreadsheets to organize information but that quickly proved unwieldy. There had to be a better way and a way to combine the repository of stories with a map that would be interactive. First Bob and Tim brought in a Donner Party expert, Dan Rosen the author of [The Donner Party Diary](#), to vet their research and help organize things. He really accelerated the research adding to the physical map with his encyclopedic knowledge of the Donner Party and his organizational skills. Then there began a world-wide search, digitally, for mapping software that would not just designate a route but would give people access to the stories of the relief expeditions in an organized fashion. Ironically the software Bob and Tim found, Esri, which was the most sophisticated, was also California-based. Esri is GIS (geographic information system) mapping and spatial analytic software used by NGO's (non-governmental organizations) and governments around the world to organize information by location. In short, Esri is software which blend maps and databases. Coincidentally, Tim's son works for Esri. Esri is not cheap but it has attractive pricing for non-profits which was available to Bob and Tim, having hooked up with the Donner Summit Historical Society which is a 501c3.

Esri is like learning a new language, but once learned with the help of experts, it provided a way to organize all of the research Bob and Tim had done into a usable form. It's easy in a time of superlatives to describe this effort to make the interactive map as the best or most wonderful but it really is a tour de force.

Just working with the map the user gets an appreciation of the effort that went into its production. A timeline scrolls along the bottom of the screen which marks each of the days of the various expeditions. As the days change icons pop up along the route to Donner Lake. Click on the icons and up pops short descriptions of what happened on those days. Click again on "view" and you're drawn into the whole text of the research.

The story told by the map is engrossing as it invites viewers to immerse themselves in one of the most heroic feats in American history. It's more though. Besides being a geographic

organizational system, the Esri generated map Bob and Tim made is a new kind of literature. When we read a book about a subject we do it linearly with the story unfolding through prose. The attention span of people today is diminishing though. The average American only reads two books a year. This interactive map of the Donner party rescue expeditions invites readers/viewers to approach the subject in any way they want at the moment in large pieces or small – linearly but also randomly or personally. You can stop the timeline wherever you want and then connect to the notes for the day and move around any part of the story you want. We've had hyperlinks for decades but this is richer than hyperlinks. The consumer (rather than reader) can zoom in and out exploring details or absorbing the overall view.

Here are links to the interactive map, an introcuton, and a "how to."

URL for map: <https://historyexp.org/donner-relief-parties-mapping-the-heroes/>

Link to Mapping The Heroes map sizzle reel: <https://youtu.be/XfSj-Don7T4>

Link for "how to" video: <https://youtu.be/uznsptlXAdk>

*In the fall of 1857, two brothers named Ethan and Hosea Grosh planned a trek across the Sierra Mountains from south of Virginia City, NV to Last Chance, CA. From there they aimed to go-on to Sacramento.

Their mission was to raise capital to fund their mining discovery, a major vein of silver in the Washoe Valley and surrounding mountains, which could lead to tremendous fortune. Indeed, their discovery became the Comstock Lode.

Donner Summit Historical Society
www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

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Photo by Greg Dahl



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