

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

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

March 2025 issue #199



Riding The Transcontinental Railroad 1879

Across the Plains

Robert Louis Stevenson

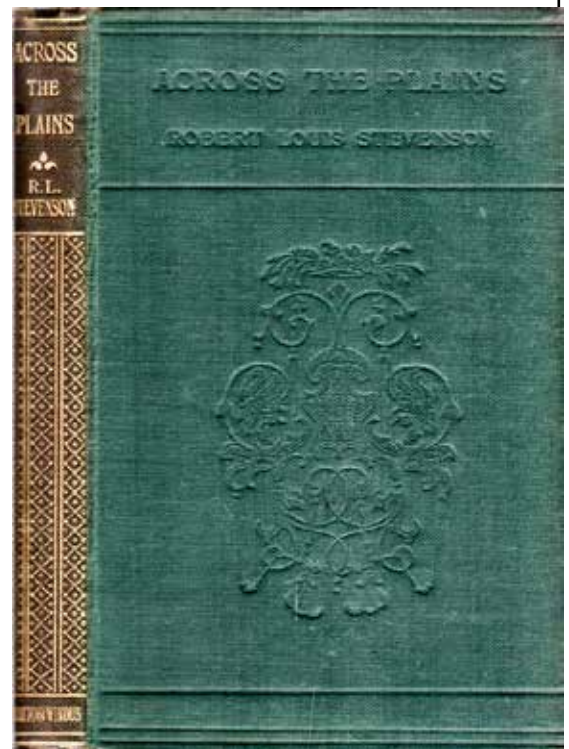
Robert Louis Stevenson arrived in the United States by ship in 1879 headed for the transcontinental railroad and a trip across the continent. The resulting essay described Stevenson's explorations of the continent and served as an outlet for his social commentary of the United States. For us the social commentary is interesting about a time long gone by. It's also interesting to read about what life was like in the "good old days." Then there are Stevenson's descriptions of what he saw. They are evocative and fun.

Stevenson's arrival by ship from England and waiting in the baggage room was one of discomfort while things got sorted out. In a foreshadowing of what was to come he said he traded the discomfort for "misery and danger" on his transcontinental trip. That's not a good start for a trip but it's a good start for the reader who now wants to see what life was like just ten years after the completion of the railroad.

Four ships filled with emigrants had arrived disgorging their human cargos at the same time. It was pure chaos in which Stevenson even saved a life preventing a child from being crushed by boxes. It was a "babel of bewildered men" "crowded thick with emigrants." The atmosphere was "rank with the atmosphere of dripping clothes" "open carts full of bedding stood by the half hour in the rain." Officials shouted at each other and "loaded each other with recriminations." "A bearded, mildewed little man" ran all over shouting and blustering. He was an emigrant agent. It was so crowded and there was no way through the "Mingled mass of brute and living obstruction." Porters "clove their way with shouts... and charged among us like so many maddened sheep-dogs." They charged into the crowd with their loads indiscriminately and when stopped just dumped the loads. The reader can see the chaos.

Eventually the "dense choking crush" and "evil dream" began to move in the pouring rain for the river boat to take everyone to the mainland. There everyone waited in the rain to be allowed to get on the train to Jersey City.

There was no food that first day. Stevenson had been able to buy half a dozen oranges, though, four of which he threw away because they had no juice. The next part of the trip was the embarkation on the emigrant train across the country.



Story Locations in this Issue

Cisco Grove pg 14

Roller Pass (emigrants used in 1849)

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DONNER SUMMIT



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 <http://bit.ly/418lhxN>
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As the emigrant train progressed the schedule had been disrupted and as a result there was still no food. At every stop the available fare was so meager compared to the horde of ravenous passengers that the coffee was always exhausted before Stevenson could elbow his way to the counter.

The trip across the country was an adventure and through Stevenson's notes we see what train travel was like in emigrant trains.

Breakfast was porridge, sweet milk, coffee, and hot cakes. There was a drunkard with a pistol. Stevenson had his first introduction to a "coloured gentleman." He discovered the difficulty understanding American English. He also came across the "incompletely civilized," a nice euphemism for those with whom it was hard to get along. Some people misbehaved even in the good old days."

Women and children were in the last of three cars. Unaccompanied men were in the second to last and Chinese in the third to last. Imagine the discomfort. The lamps in the cars shed little light, just a "dying glimmer". The benches were too short for anything but a small child. There was hardly elbow room for two people to sit. There was no space for someone to lie down. Sitting like that went on for hours. Then when it was time to sleep, when there was room, half the seat backs were folded back so the seats faced each other and boards and cushions stuffed with straw were sold to the passengers. The boards were laid between the seats. Male passengers then chose a "chum" with whom they would share the planks. Those who could not "chum together" had matches made by the conductor. Everyone was "bunking" with strangers.

Here Stevenson describes the train car at night: The lamps did not go out; each made a faint shining in its own neighbourhood (sic), and the shadows were confounded together in the long, hollow box of the car. The sleepers lay in uneasy attitudes; here two chums alongside, flat upon their backs like dead folk; there a man sprawling on the floor, with his face upon his arm; there another half seated with his head and shoulders on the bench. The most passive were continually and roughly shaken by the movement of the train; others stirred, turned, or stretched out their arms like children; it was surprising how many groaned and murmured in their sleep...

A great personage on the train was the newsboy who sold books, fruit, lollipops, cigars, soap, towels, tin washing dishes, tin coffee pitchers, coffee, tea, sugar, and tinned eatables, mostly hash and beans and bacon. Generally, it seems the newsboy was a friend to all, but Stevenson's first experience with one was not to be repeated. That newsboy was "dark, bullying, contemptuous, insolent," and "treated us like dogs." Good newsboys helped with information, where to get meals, how long the train would stop, made sure no one was left behind, etc. A good newsboy was a hero "of the old Greek stamp"

After sleeping it was time to wash up and "chumming on a more extended principle became the order of the hour." Chumming of two people was good for sleeping but washing and eating required three for optimum efficiency. Stevenson and his new two partners bought a towel, a bar of soap, and a washing dish from the newsboy. All three shared the purchases and when they were done there were plenty of other passengers who then shared the soap, towel, and dish. Washing was done on the rear platform, outside. There the person washing pressed up against the back of the railroad car and hooked an elbow around the railing. He then washed his face, neck and hands. It was cold and "insufficient" said Stevenson and made for a "somewhat dangerous toilet."

The train stopped for meals but only twenty minutes was given for passengers to order and eat. With no warning the train would start up, so passengers had to pay attention or they'd be left behind.

At each station the "natives" would come aboard with milk, eggs, and coffee cakes and soon there would be "little parties breakfasting upon the bed-boards. It was the pleasantest hour of the day."

At Ogden the passengers switched from Union Pacific cars to Central Pacific cars for the rest of their journey to California. The cars were better on the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific cars had begun to "stink abominably."

To get a sense of that olfactory experience Stevenson describes standing on the rear platform as the cars with people were maneuvered into the Central Pacific train,

"I have stood on a platform while the whole train was shunting; and as the dwelling-cars drew near, there would come a whiff of pure menagerie, only a little sourer, as from men instead of monkeys. I think we are human only in virtue of open windows. Without fresh air, you only require a bad heart, and a remarkable command of the Queen's English, to become such another as Dean Swift; a kind of leering, human goat, leaping and wagging your scut on mountains of offence. I do my best to keep my head the other way, and look for the human rather than the bestial in this Yahoo-like business of the emigrant train. But one thing I must say, the car of the Chinese was notably the least offensive."

The Central Pacific was a step up, The cars on the Central Pacific were nearly twice as high, and so proportionally airier; they were freshly varnished, "which gave us all a sense of cleanliness as though we had bathed; the seats drew out and joined in the centre, so that there was no more need for bed boards; and there was an upper tier of berths which could be closed by day and opened at night."

The people do not seem to have improved as the new cars had, They

“were mostly lumpish fellows, silent and noisy, a common combination; somewhat sad, I should say, with an extraordinary poor taste in humour [sic], and little interest in their fellow-creatures beyond that of a cheap and merely external curiosity.”

The people were all, with one family’s exception, emigrants from other parts of the United States not from foreign countries. They were looking for better land and wages, moving from hard times and to hope in the west. “Hunger came out of the east like the sun.”

As the emigrants traveled west they met emigrant trains coming east, their passengers having discovered that the West was not the El Dorado they’d been searching for. Stevenson discovered some truth to that after later arriving in San Francisco. He said San Francisco was crowded with the unemployed and people susceptible to demagogues.

Stevenson learned of American racism about the Chinese which he said were “stupid ill-feelings.” He said Americans saw Chinese as their enemies. The Chinese worked better and cheaper in hundreds of industries. Americans declared the Chinese “hideous vermin” and pretended to choke when they saw them. Americans saw the Chinese as dirty, but Stevenson says their cleanliness put everyone else to shame.

“Lastly, these very foul and malodorous Caucasians entertained the surprising illusion that it was the Chinese waggon [sic], and that alone, which stank. I have said already that it was the exception and notably the freshest of the three.”

Stevenson’s description of the prejudice against immigrants sounds a lot like today’s. After discussing the prejudice and his positive feelings about the Chinese, Stevenson described the prejudice against the Indians who were swept out with the coming of “civilization,” a term he was ashamed of.

After traveling almost all the way across the country Stevenson of course got to the Sierra, the description of which readers of this fine periodical have been waiting for. One of Stevenson’s companions woke him up to pull him out to the platform and see the “new country” at which they’d arrived – the Sierra.

“It was a clear, moonlit night [as the train waited on a siding]; but the valley was too narrow to admit the moonshine direct, and only a diffused glimmer whitened the tall rocks and relieved the blackness of the pines. A hoarse clamour [sic] filled the air; it was the continuous plunge of a cascade somewhere near at hand among the mountains. The air struck chill, but tasted good and vigorous in the nostrils—a fine, dry, old mountain atmosphere. I was dead sleepy, but I

returned to roost with a grateful mountain feeling at my heart.”

Nice descriptions like that make us want to read what he saw next of the mountains,

“When I awoke next morning, I was puzzled for a while to know if it were day or night, for the illumination was unusual. I sat up at last, and found we were grading slowly downward through a long snowshed; and suddenly we shot into an open; and before we were swallowed into the next length of wooden tunnel, I had one glimpse of a huge pine-forested ravine upon my left, a foaming river, and a sky already coloured [sic] with the fires of dawn. I am usually very calm over the displays of nature; but you will scarce believe how my heart leaped at this. It was like meeting one’s wife. I had come home again—home from unsightly deserts to the green and habitable corners of the earth. Every spire of pine along the hill-top, every trouty pool along that mountain river, was more dear to me than a blood relation. Few people have praised God more happily than I did.”

Clearly Mr. Stevenson had good taste.

That’s pretty good considering he only had a glimpse before going into another snowshed. The other passengers must have felt the same since they “threw off their sense of dirt and heat and weariness, and bawled like schoolboys, and thronged with shining eyes upon the platform and became new creatures within and without. The sun no longer oppressed us with heat, it only shone laughingly along the mountain-side, until we were fain to laugh ourselves for glee. At every turn we could see farther into the land and our own happy futures. At every town the cocks were tossing their clear notes into the golden air, and crowing for the new day and the new country. For this was indeed our destination; this was ‘the good country’ we had been going to so long.”

You can see why Mr. Stevenson was a famous author.

From there the book goes on to describe California which is not Donner Summit nor is there anything more about train travel. Stevenson describes things like man’s greed that was cutting down Redwoods and the problem of forest fires that can gallop faster than a horse. It seems sometimes he must be talking about today. There are descriptions of the fog, descriptions of the Mexican population and the multiculturalism of the State and various cultural aspects of California.

1849 Trip to California by Wagon Train

Merrill, Joseph Henry.

DIARY OF JOSEPH HENRY MERRILL

or

A TRIP TO CALIFORNIA WITH HIS FATHER WHEN HE WAS ABOUT EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD.

Typescript.

Merrill Mattes Collection. National Frontier Trails Center. Independence, Missouri.

Mr. Merrill crossed Donner Summit by wagon train in 1849. He ended up in Pleasant Valley which is somewhat south of Donner Summit. We include the diary because it's a good story about emigrant travel and about life in the old days..

This little gem came as a result of searching for something else. The title was a footnote in "Young Emigrants on the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails 1841-1866" by Molly Kizer. We highlighted the thesis in our November, '24 [Heirloom](#). The footnote led us to the Oregon California Trails Association and to some emigrant diaries. The easiest way to get access for yourself, rather than following the long URL, is to go searching for "a trip to California" "Merrill" and then you can download it.

Meanwhile, here's a much-shortened version of Mr. Merrill's journey to California from Boston over Donner Pass in 1849. It's interesting because Joseph includes a lot of detail in his almost daily entries and his perceptions of things in those entries. He identifies various plants that will alleviate fever and ague. He looks with "uncontrollable admiration" at beautiful little scenes which show his good taste. He pokes fun at himself, writes well, and even spells well in a time when spelling was not all that rigorous..

Before getting into the diary consider the context. Here is a teenager set to head west with his father to follow the news of the Gold Rush in California. Imagine what that's like to hear the news of the strike, to hear of gold just waiting to be picked up, to dream of riches and then take the biggest chance of your life. Imagine leaving behind everything and everyone you know. Imagine choosing the few things you have room to take with you. Imagine leaving the comfort of home for the discomfort of months of travel, weather and danger. How often over the coming months will they wish they'd never set out?

At the start Joseph says, "I have said good-bye so many times to-day I am half sick." His only regret so far was that he's left his girlfriend, Cate, behind and his "going is not approved by Cate."

Their journey started with the train which broke down "much to annoyance of the half-frozen passengers." Is that foreshadowing? Joseph notes too, that he apparently had a friend with him, Woodward, who changed his mind about going and went back home shortly after starting.

Then on to Philadelphia, Baltimore with little asides along the way. Father and son could not get lodgings in Baltimore because everyone was coming home from Gen. Taylor's inauguration. They passed the spot where a famous prize fight had been fought but because it was dark Joseph could find "no traces of blood." He was a teenager.

Then it was a couple of days of stagecoach ride over rough roads which left him frozen. Meals were occasional. Sleep was difficult. A couple of days later they were "Still in that miserable old coach with a drunken driver." Things got better as he booked passage on a steamboat to travel on the Ohio bound for St. Louis "one of the greatest business places in the west... it was confusion to perfection" due to the crowds. He also said the city "affords little to the travellers [sic] to admire... Streets narrow, dirty, and lumbered with all sorts of merchandise, etc."

In St. Louis they bought eleven mules which they then took to Independence. The mules were "troublesome."

St. Joseph came first though and Joseph reflects,

"On coming along shore we were cheered by the thousand emigrants already arrived and about to start for the Gold Mines in California. Shaking of hands, congratulatory exclamations and the like, together with the noise and bustle always attendant on the arrival of a steamer, made the scene one of enthusiasm to most, but only served to make me lonely and half homesick; had not the escape of one-half our mules on landing and a fruitless hunt till 9 in the evening in the rain kept my mind in another channel, I am sure there would have been no help for me here alone and unacquainted as I was; but no; I am in for it."

"The town is filled with emigrants, all parts of the states well represented in number at least, if not otherwise. All seem anxious to make a commencement of their long march to the

"What won't men do for Gold."

Joseph Henry Merrill.

was difficult. A couple of days later they were "Still in that miserable old coach with a drunken driver." Things got better as he booked passage on

Pacific. I learn some trains have already left, though so early a start is thought to be very unwise by men who are judges of the matter.”

Once can imagine the pent-up enthusiasm among the prospective emigrants.

Two weeks later and Joseph and those he’s now traveling with (this is unclear) bought their “wagons, guns, etc.” Mules run off, get found, his father is badly hurt breaking a mule, a pony runs off and is not found. There’s no cream for the coffee but Joseph is getting used to hard bread and bacon. A thunderstorm was so severe they didn’t get supper and went to bed “tired, cross and hungry.” He awoke the next morning lying in four inches of water and it was still raining. There are no trees for firewood. They have to drink bilge water or none.” Travel was not fun. They started out on May 3.

They join up with another train and by then have sixty “good and true” men. They will be able to fight off the Indians they think they will meet. The number of people in the party varies over the course of the trip, reduced sometimes to just a dozen or so with no explanation except once.

There are no trees and little water on the prairie. They come across fresh graves. There is daily drudgery. One must find new ways to amuse oneself given that there are no books, society and companionable men. There are rivers to cross. From time to time they throw away “dispensables” to lighten their loads. Roads are bad. Night watches guard against the “greatest thieves in the world (Indians).” The first sight of buffalo is exciting. An approaching storm leaves them half frozen.”

Mules drown at a river. Mosquitoes “waged a furious battle.” There were troublesome Indians.

Upon seeing the Sierra Nevada in the distance:

“Thursday, August 23rd

Upon unrolling myself from under my blanket this morning, the first object I saw was the sky high Sierra Nevada its many peaks mingling with the clouds and lost to vision by their height above us, in the valley, and so white with snow we cannot distinguish where the mountains and the clouds begin. The air this morning more balmy than heretofore and the sun shining so benignly on us, renders our view a pleasant one. Noon on good grass. In the P.M. were visited by a refreshing shower; we heard the thunder roaring far over the mountain cliffs, echoing from peak to peak, striking me with an awe akin to

fear and reverence.”

Wednesday, August 30th

As soon as possible this morning, we commenced the getting of the empty wagons up the mountains; this occupied our attention till 1 P.M. The view from the summit sublime; looking to the North and East I see a succession of beautiful hills and valleys, the former from my location seen but small bluffs and the latter like small ravines, with here and there a flat or perhaps a small pool of water, which were I near them, presume would prove ponds and lakes. From here the whole South is absolutely hemmed in by huge peaks of mountains rising one above another and West nothing but dense forest, while at my feet lays the lovely Red Lake we left this morning.

We find the way very difficult, yet all are forced to admire and amphiheater of scenery; though so tired of the trip and its fatigues, such views as we have seen for the last few

We find the way very difficult, yet all are forced to admire and amphiheater of scenery; though so tired of the trip and its fatigues, such views as we have seen for the last few days, is compensation enough for all.

days, is compensation enough for all. The road to Lake Valley [today on the south side of the I-80 freeway at Yuba Gap] we found rough, but made it without much difficulty by sundown

and encamped at the base of the dividing ridge twixt us and the long sought California.

Thursday August 31st

.... we were moving at 6 o'clock and soon began our ascent over the highest mountain we have to cross on the trip. We reached the summit about half past one P.M. While on the summit I still saw mountain upon mountain rising so high the eye could not discover their tops...” “Our way down the West side of this mountain we find extremely rough and rocky, making it very laborious for us as we were frequently obliged to lift our wagons about the rocks and other obstructions to prevent an upset...”

Upon reaching California Joseph went off to Sacramento and sold his and his father’s mules and wagon for \$1200. He paid a dollar for a meal of pork and beans. He tried mining and then “kept a sort of ranch” at which he charged boarders \$10 a week to sleep under the live oaks. He built an oven and sold bread at .50 a loaf. He also built the first bridge over the South Fork of the American River. Eventually he headed back home via the “Nicuragua [sic] Isthmus.”

Henry Abell's 1849 Trip Over Donner Summit by Wagon Train

To make up for the above interesting diary not being more about travel over Donner Summit here is a short excerpt from a diary in the OCTA Merrill J. Mattes Collection dated 1849.

Here James Abell went over Donner Summit in 1849 and on August 31 he and his party reached Donner Lake, a full month ahead of the Donners of three years before. Speaking of the Donners Mr. Abel notes that two of the cabins used by the Donner Party at Donner Lake were still standing and we come across a detail I've never read.

“There are but two of these cabins now standing. They are made of pine trees from Six to ten inches in diameter and in Size one measures fifteen feet square and the other fifteen feet by twelve feet these two cabin are connected the roofs were flat and the Shingles were pine boughs, and about Seven feet high. We Saw many Stumps of trees which were cut by this party from Eight to twelve feet from the ground to the place where they were cut on the Snow.” [sic]

Imagine the Donner Party living in one of those “cabins” crammed with a couple of families buried in the snow. Imagine the continual cold. Imagine the filth. Imagine the smell – which is something the rescuers remarked on.

Just before surmounting the Sierra:

“This valley is most beautiful having the Snow Summits of the Cierenevad [this is the actual word in the diary] Mts in plain view and only a few miles distant. We ... Encamped near the foot of the main ridge. The Scenery here is delightful! beyond description. here and there on the mountains could be Seen among the pines fires that had been lighted by Indians. As night drew near the Severe cold increased until thick overcoats were Scarcely warm Enough for comfort. [sic]

September 1st 1849

This morning was very cold. We left camp a little before Sunrise and proceeded up the dividing ridge to the Summit. After offering 25.\$ [sic] to have our wagon hauled about one fourth of a mile to the Summit we were obliged to unload our wagon and lift at the wheels in order to reach the Summit. after which we were obliged to carry our loading by hand which was very laborious for it was very steep.

[this is a description of going over Roller Pass]

At the summit and near where our roat [sic] mad [sic] the top was a windlass [actually a log that acted as a roller] which had been used by Colonel Freemont or Some other party to haul up their wagons and loading. The windless was Supported by two trees which were about 5 feet apart. After packing our wagon and taking a few moments to rest and view the Scenery which was sublime in the Extreme we proceeded about two miles and camped on the bank of a beautiful Stream with an abundance of good grass. [This is Summit Valley] The day was fine and very favorable for our hard days work. Nearly all the way from the Summit we were obliged ‘to rope down’ that is tie heavy ropes to the hind axles and rap around the trees have on only one pair of mules to guide the tongue. I found Several flowers which I pressed to preserve [sic] on and near the Summit of the mountain, Some of which were very pretty.

[Sept] 2d

We left camp Early. Baldwin having left Yesterday afternoon to look ahead a little and to day I took command of the team. We passed two beautiful lakes [probably today's Serene Lakes] and halted for rest and dinner. After which we crossed a young mountain that was some Steep on Either Side and after proceeding about five miles farther over the roughest and Stonyist road I ever Saw we camped in a thicket of pines many of which were of large Size being over ten feet in diameter and three hundred and fifty feet high. We Spread our blankets under the boughs of one of the largest trees and being very tired I went to Sleep and knew nothing more until Morning.[sic]

September 3d 1849

Morning clear and Cumfortable not as Cold as usual. Road rougher than the devil, used the ropes Several times to day in letting our wagon down precipicises [sic]. The bark of many trees were worn 3 and 4 Inches deep where ropes had been much used in ‘ropeing down’ Took our nooning in a beautiful valey [sic]- our animals Strayed while we were at dinner, Some of them went up the Mountain Sides to a considerable hithd [sic]and we was much troubled in getting them together. Our friends Channel, Burt, and Gris would [sic] with pack mules came down into this valey [sic] while we were here. One or two of their mules capsizeing [sic] in their discent [sic]. After dinner we wiht

sic] but a Short distance.

[Sept] 4th

Took an Early Start passed many trees that were five and ten feet through. To day we heard of Edward King and Daniel McClery of Warren Ohio. I measured a Cedar which was Nine feet three Inches in diameter this was the largest. [Imagine the forests in those days.]

Miscellaneous History

\$500 GOLD COIN REWARD!

WILL BE PAID BY US FOR

the recovery of

**Bar of Silver Bullion Marked 576,
savage Company, value \$1,785 27,**

Lost from our Stage between Coburn's and the Summit
on the night of June 1, 1868. j

e18 6t2p WELLS, FARGO & CO.

There were no reports in subsequent issues of the bullion being found. So maybe it's still there?

Sacramento Daily Union June 13, 1868

A military party left Fort Reno to destroy Indian grain crops in Green valley.

Sacramento Daily Union June, June 24, 1868

On June 19, 1868 the Sacramento Daily Union headlined from Reno that the previous day, "Railroad Train Crosses the Summit"

"The first passenger train across the Sierra Nevada arrived here ten minutes past 8 P.M., having been detained at the summit." This of course was a big deal. Less than a year later the whole railroad would be finished.

Elsewhere in the same paper there's another story of the previous day, this time from Sacramento. A construction train ran over a mule at the summit. The mule had been thrown from the tracks and "in consequence, injuring two of the cars." Time was spent replacing the locomotive and tracks. That held up the passenger train and made it late on, apparently, its very first day.

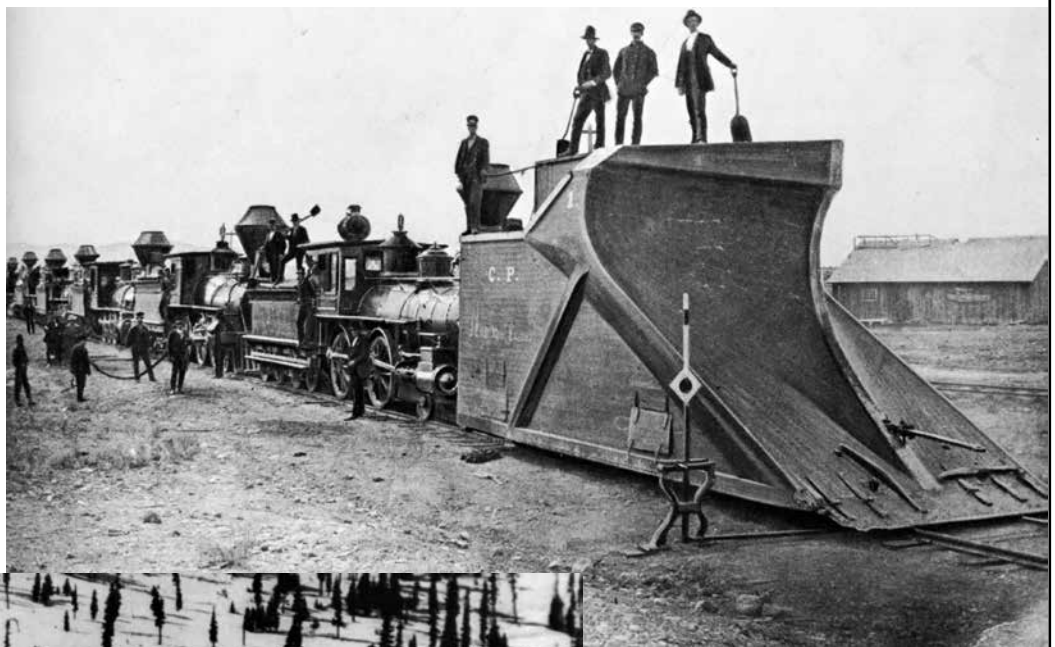
More Miscellany

Snow in the Sierra Nevada —The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser quotes from a letter of John Corning, of the Central Pacific Railroad We are now getting ready to open our line from Cisco to the Summit (thirteen miles). The snow on that portion of the track which was laid last Fall averages about ten feet in depth. We have about five hundred Chinamen at work now trenching it out and expect to increase the force to one thousand during the week. We shall after trenching it, leave it for a few days for the sun to operate upon, when we shall put one of the large snow plows with eight of our large engines behind it, and propose then to make quick work of it. I never saw snow (to speak of) until I came here. In the valley we are having uncomfortably warm weather. The flowers are in blossom in fact, flowers are in blossom here all the year round. The plains to the base of the mountains are covered with the most lovely wild flowers you ever saw, and are very fragrant; and yet, within sixty miles we find snow on an average ten feet, deep on the level ! I came in off the road today, and while the train was waiting on a side track made two of the most beautiful bouquets you can imagine. This is decidedly a great country, and, barring the accommodations, a delightful country for the tourist or pleasure, seeker.

John Corning of the Pacific RR
May 22, 1868
Sacramento Daily Union

Imagine the sight of 8 locos pushing a snow plow. Imagine a thousand Chinese digging a trench miles long to speed snow melting. And then the person is describing what a delightful country it is “barring the accommodations...” What were those like?

To illustrate our miscellany story above here are a couple of examples of many locomotives hooked to large snow plows. The engines would get up a good head of steam and charge forward up to sixty mile an hours slamming into the snow. Coming to a halt by the packed snow the assembly of engines and snowplows would back up and do it again and again. Eventually the tracks were cleared or the plow got stuck in the snow.



These two pictures are from

Snowplow Clearing Mountain Rails
Gerald M. Best 1966 119 pages large
format reviewed in our December, '17
Hekrloom and available on the book
review pages of our website [donner-
summhistoricalsociety.org](http://donner-summhistoricalsociety.org)

See also page 9

Book Review

Across America 1874

In 1866 General Rusling received a letter from the Quarter-Master's Dept of the Army which sent him on an inspection tour of the West and South. This would take him to San Francisco where he could do a "careful inspection throughout California..." This included traveling over Donner Summit. The General obeyed his orders "with alacrity". The resulting book the general wrote was a "rough record of it all, written at odd hours since, as occasion offered." Interestingly the general noted in the preface,

"The completion of the Pacific Rail road, it will be noted, made this long tour of mine, by stage-coach and ambulance, through the Great West and along the Pacific Coast, about the last, if not the last, of its kind possible; and, therefore, under all the circumstances, it has seemed not unfitting, even at this late date, to give these pages to the world."

The general's inspection tour sent him across the United States to Washington, down the coast to San Francisco, to Los Angeles, into Arizona, back to Los Angeles, up to San Francisco, off to Virginia City via Donner Summit, which is what we're interested in, then to Stockton and Yosemite, back to San Francisco and then by ship across the Isthmus and up to New York. When he was done he thought he covered 15,000 miles with about 2,000 by railroad which didn't include Donner Summit since the railroad was not finished until three years after the general's tour. Another 2,000 miles was by stagecoach, and 3,000 by ambulance or on horseback. The remainder was by steamer.

We've cut a lot of the text of Chapter XXVII so as to make the length more readable.

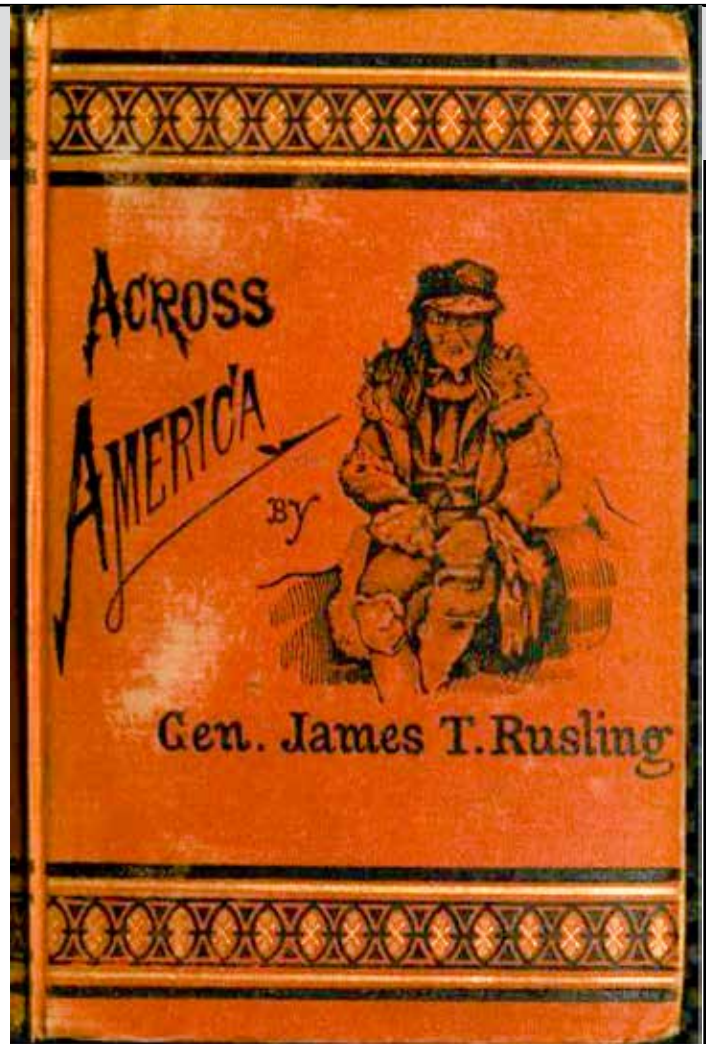
CHAPTER XXVII. SAN FRANCISCO TO VIRGINIA CITY.

This is how people traveled to Virginia City in 1866. The general took the steamer Chrysopolis for Sacramento, and thence on to Virginia City... We had a full complement of passengers, of all grades from New York cockneys to Nevada miners; but the proportion of ladies was small, as usually on the Coast. The few children aboard seemed general pets, and many eagerly seized a moment's chat with them... At supper, we had a substantial and excellent meal; at bed-time, we found the berths clean and sweet; and the conduct of the boat in general was all that could be desired.

In the following, General Rusling describes travel over the Sierra in 1866, three years before the transcontinental railroad. There is the snow, the snowsheds, Chinese workers on the railroad, and Tunnel 6.

We reached Sacramento City, one hundred and twenty miles from San Francisco, about 2 A.M. next day, and after an early breakfast and a short walk through the town, took the train at 6½ a. m. for Cisco, then the advance station on the Central Pacific Railroad. This ride, of about a hundred miles, was first up the rich valley of the Sacramento, and then through the foothills, and up the Sierra Nevadas. ...

As we advanced, the valley of the Sacramento steadily narrowed, but everywhere appeared rich and fertile. Broad farms stretched out on every side, and clumps of live-oaks, with their deep green foliage, everywhere relieved the golden yellow of





the ripening wheat-fields. The general lack of timber continued noticeable, but these scattered live oaks, sturdy and defiant, relieved the landscape, and they seemed preserved with commendable care. As we approached the foot-hills, the soil grew thinner, the lordly wheat-fields gave place to extensive vineyards, and soon the dense pines of the Sierras made their appearance. Here, too, we struck the mines, and on all sides saw evidences of the spade and rocker. In many places, there were only old placers abandoned, with the hills ragged and torn, and the earth generally topsy-turvy with past operations—cabins empty, ditches dry, sluice-ways falling to pieces; but, in others, the washings were still in full operation, and the hills and streams seemed alive with human industry and energy. Little mining hamlets were perched, here and there, on the edge of mountain torrents; and, where the water did not suffice, broad ditches, improvised for the locality, brought it from some far-off point and carried it wheresoever wanted.

Some of these water-ditches are among the wonders of the Pacific Coast, and deserve more than a passing notice. With surprising engineering, they wind down and around and among the mountains, leaping ravines, crossing ridges, and everywhere following the miner, like faithful servants of his will. Wherever necessary, the miner taps them, and either uses the water in his ordinary sluice-way, or else by his hydraulic pipes hurls it against the hills, and literally washes them to the plain. This hydraulic mining seemed to be most in favor there, and the power developed by some of these streams was immense. The momentum acquired by the water in its long

descent, sufficed to melt huge hills of clay and gravel very quickly; and instances were reported where men, and mules even, had been killed by being struck by the water, as it issued from the pipes or hose. The men engaged in mining were rough and hirsute, as miners everywhere are; but they looked bright and keen, and as if they believed in California and her future, come what might.

The change in the climate, as we plunged into the foot-hills, and felt our way up into the Sierras, was very apparent, and soon became disagreeably so. At Sacramento, the weather was close and warm; but hour by hour, as we ascended, the thermometer went down, and long before reaching Cisco, only about a hundred miles or so, we were shivering in winter garments. As I have said, this was then the "jumping off" place or terminus of the Central Pacific road, and is well up into the mountains. We reached there soon after noon, and I must say were surprised at the general excellence, as well as audacity of the road. Some of its grades are over a hundred feet to the mile, and in many places it literally springs into the air, over immense trestle-work bridges or along the dizzy edge of precipices, that seem fraught with peril and destruction; but we reached Cisco safe and sound, and sat down to a smoking dinner, with the snowdrifts still up to the eaves of the roofs of the hotel, and the houses round-about.

Cisco was then a scattered village, of frame tenements, only a few months old; but as the terminus of the road, and depot of supplies for all Nevada, it was bustling with business. The Overland Mail, for Virginia City and the East, left here

The sunset itself, that evening, was superb. The clouds became gold, the snow burnished silver, while a purple haze sifted down from the sky, and soon veiled exquisitely the lake and its far-stretching cañons. As the night gathered deeper, the lights and shadows became grandly sublime; and then, as a fitting sequel, came one of those glorious skies, ablaze with stars, for which the Coast is so famed. It was blackest marble, gemmed with silver. It seemed to uplift itself into eternity. The whole scene fixed itself indelibly in the memory, and though we saw Lake Tahoe afterwards I preferred this view of Donner Lake.

daily, on the arrival of the train; and, after a hurried dinner, we were off again with the mail. It was now May 17th, and though the advancing summer had melted the snow in the regular roadway, so that wagoning was practicable for some distance, yet the old snow still lay six and eight feet deep on the general level, and our road ran between solid walls of it. We set off from Cisco in stagecoaches (mountain mud-wagons), but soon had to surrender these for sleighs; and then came a long and dreary pull, through slush and mud and ice, for several miles, till we got well across the summit of the Sierras, when we again took coaches and rattled down to Donner Lake, where we arrived at 8½ P. M., having made only eighteen miles since noon. The most of us walked a good part of the way, and found it altogether rather a fatiguing march. The depth of the snow still left on the summit seemed surprising; but a gentleman I met in San Francisco assured me, that when he crossed the Sierras in December previous, he found the telegraph poles, even, in many places snowed under. The stage-people reported the snow as having been fifteen and twenty feet in depth on the level generally, and we could see where they had set up poles and "shakes" long before, to mark out the general course of the road itself.

It was these huge vast snows that the Central Pacific folks had mainly to provide against, and the problem would have appalled most men. But they quietly set to work to board the snows out, and since then have literally housed their road in for thirty miles or more. The surrounding forests furnished them cheap timber, and portable sawmills shifted from point to point soon converted this into the required lumber. But what a herculean job it really was! These great snow-sheds or snow-galleries consumed in all nearly forty-five million feet, board measure, of sawed timber, and over a million and a quarter feet of round timber, equivalent in the aggregate to fifty-two and a half million feet, board measure, of sawed timber; and nearly a thousand tons of iron and spikes. Two general styles of construction were adopted—one intended for localities where the weight of the snow only had to be supported, and the other for such places as were exposed to "slides," and the slower but almost irresistible "glacial movement" of the snow, as on the steep and rocky slopes near the summit. These galleries have proved a great success, and though frequently covered with drifted snow to a depth of ten or twenty feet, and in some places of more than fifty feet, they afford a safe passage for trains at all seasons, without noticeable detentions.

Near the summit, we came upon John Chinaman [an endearing 19th Century term for Chinese RR workers] again, in all his glory. Here was the "Heathen Chinee," five thousand strong, burrowing and tunnelling a way for the road, through the back-bone of the Sierras. It was a huge piece of work, nearly half a mile long, through the solid granite; but John was patiently pegging away at it, from four different faces, and soon afterwards completed it successfully. They all wore their pigtails, the same as in San Francisco, but usually had these sacred appendages twisted well around their heads,

ACROSS AMERICA:

OR

THE GREAT WEST

AND

THE PACIFIC COAST.

BY

JAMES F. RUSLING,

Late Brevet Brigadier-General, U. S. V.



NEW YORK:

SHELDON & COMPANY.

1874.

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instead of dangling at their heels; and, with the exception of the universal blue blouse, were dressed like ordinary navvies or laborers. Of course, they had American or English superintendents and foremen of gangs; but these all spoke well of the almond-eyed strangers, and praised them, especially, for their docility and intelligence. A more industrious or orderly set of workmen, were never seen; and though railroad-building was a new employment for Asiatics, they seemed to take to it very kindly. Subsequently, they pushed the Central down the mountains, and through to Ogden City; and the day is not distant, when they will push such roads, with their thousand civilizing influences, all through the Flowery Kingdom.

We crossed the summit just at sunset, and from that proud altitude—seven thousand two hundred feet above the sea—gazed down upon that gem of the Sierras, Donner Lake—a body of crystalline water, five miles long by over half a mile wide, in the very heart of the mountains. The crest of the Sierras lifts itself boldly along the west, but elsewhere the ridges slope down to the Lake, and the hoary peaks and cliffs seem to hold it in their lap, like a sleeping infant. The sunset itself, that evening, was superb. The clouds became gold, the snow burnished silver, while a purple haze sifted down from the sky, and soon veiled exquisitely the lake and its far-stretching cañons. As the night gathered deeper, the lights



MAP OF
UNITED STATES
MEXICO &
CENTRAL AMERICA
TO ILLUSTRATE
RUSLING'S "ACROSS AMERICA"

continued raw and chilly, well into the morning; but the roads had become dusty and superb, and we bowled along down the mountains, and up the wonderful Geiger grade, at a swinging pace, that brought us into Virginia City—seventy miles or more from Cisco—at about 10 A. m. Here we stopped at the International, then the "swell" house of Virginia City, and found excellent cheer, for the hungry and the weary.

Rusling's thoughts on the Chinese and Governor Low's remarks: There were indications, that the Coast had fallen to thinking seriously of all this, and somehow meant to deal more justly with the Chinese hereafter. The anti-Chinese mobs in the cities and towns were passing away, and even among the mining camps. Vigilance Committees were beginning to execute rough justice on thieves and murderers, when their treatment of John became too flagrant and notorious. Capital, always keen sighted, was getting to see the necessity for their labor and skill, and the culture and conscience of the Coast were already on their side. Gov. Low, (since Minister to China, most fittingly) presided at the Occidental Banquet, and in his remarks there took strong ground in their favor. He said, among other good things:

and shadows became grandly sublime; and then, as a fitting sequel, came one of those glorious skies, ablaze with stars, for which the Coast is so famed. It was blackest marble, gemmed with silver. It seemed to uplift itself into eternity. The whole scene fixed itself indelibly in the memory, and though we saw Lake Tahoe afterwards I preferred this view of Donner Lake.

In the midst of the falling shadows, we passed the snow-limit, and again betook ourselves to mountain mud-wagons,* which farther down we again exchanged for Concord coaches.

About 9 p. m. we halted for supper, but were soon on the road again, and striking the Truckee, followed it down until long after sunrise. Once out of the mountains, its valley rapidly broadened; but here was the rainless region, and sage-brush again prevailed, as in Idaho and Arizona. Here and there, we passed some fair farms; but irrigation was the secret, and without this, agriculture in Nevada, as elsewhere in the great basin of the continent, will seldom amount to much. The air

"We must learn to treat the Chinese who come to live among us decently, and not oppress them by unfriendly legislation, nor allow them to be abused, robbed and murdered, without extending to them any adequate remedy.

"I am a strong believer in the strength of mind and muscle of the Anglo-Saxon race, which will win in the contest for supremacy with any people, without the aid of unequal and oppressive laws; and the man, who is afraid to take his chances on equal terms with his opponents, is a coward and unworthy the name of an American.

"Were I to sum up the whole duty imposed upon us, I should say, let us be honest, industrious and frugal, be persevering and progressive, and remember Raleigh's maxim, that 'Whoever commands the sea commands the trade of the world, and whoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.'"

* see page 16 to see a mud-wagon

A Little Mystery



STAGE COACH AND TRAIN, CISCO (1869)

We at the DSHS [Heirloom](#) offices are always on the lookout for more historic pictures of Donner Summit – hence we advertise via occasional [Heirloom](#) “What’s in Your Closet” stories about what people have contributed.

Here is not a “What’s in Your Closet” story but it’s a Donner Summit picture story with a little mystery.

We reviewed the Works Progress Administration (WPA) [Guide to California](#) in the February '24 [Heirloom](#). It’s a comprehensive view of California in 1930 done by Franklin Roosevelt’s WPA, a make work program during the Depression. There are various reprints of this book available on the internet. We’re not going to re-review the book here but there are quite a few pictures of California in 1930, two of which are here because they have to do with Donner Summit.

One of our researchers was looking up something in the [Guide](#) and came again across the train and stagecoach at Cisco, above. At first view it looks just like Alfred A. Hart’s #217 (next page) “All Aboard for Virginia City” from about 1867 or the Houseworth version (also labeled Hart’s picture 217a), “1256 Arrival of Passenger Train at Cisco”

also from 1867. This was when Cisco was “end of track” for the transcontinental railroad while the summit tunnels were being completed and track laid. Travelers took the train to Cisco and then disembarked to take stages or sleighs over the summit and onward like General Rusling did in the previous story. This was also the jumping off point for stagecoaches to Meadow Lake and destinations northwest and northeast. (You’ll want to look up Meadow Lake in [Heirloom](#) article index on our website.)

We can excuse our initial researcher who opened the WPA book, saw the “Stage Coach and Train, Cisco (1869)” and didn’t think anything of it since it appeared to be a well-known picture and the copies in a couple of the WPA guide book are really inferior.

On closer look, though, there’s a mystery. Clearly it looks like Hart’s original was cropped. Note how the WPA picture has more to the left. Had we discovered a new picture of historical Donner Summit?

Let’s see.

First we tried finding a better original of the WPA version but

no luck. Then we closely studied both pictures. The same guys in the same positions are in both the Hart and WPA pictures. Look closely though. The perspectives are slightly different. Maybe Mr. Hart moved his camera a bit and took two of the same subject. (indeed, he actually did – see Hart 217a/Houseworthy 1256 here but that’s a very different picture). Look to the right of the roof peak and note the trees are a bit different.

Then look at the building again. In the picture we know is Hart’s (or Houseworth’s 1256/Hart 217a depending on the version you’ve got) the building had two windows. In the WPA guide there is only one. In PhotoShop that’s easy. In darkroom photography circa 1930 it’s not. Do we have an anachronism – something out of place in time?

Then there’s the date. In the WPA guide the picture is dated 1869. Cisco was no longer end of track and Meadow Lakes brief bid for fame and gold was defunct. There wouldn’t have been all the stages at Cisco ready to head for wherever. People were jumping on the new transcontinental railroad.

What do we make to this? How did the window disappear and why?

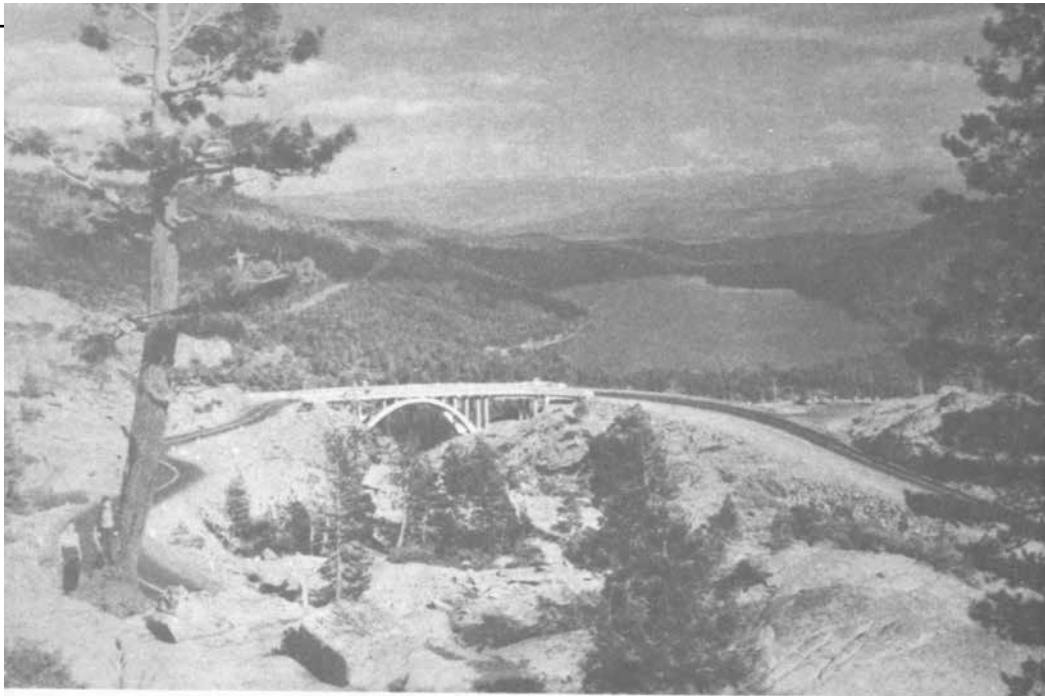


217. All Aboard for Virginia City,
Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express.



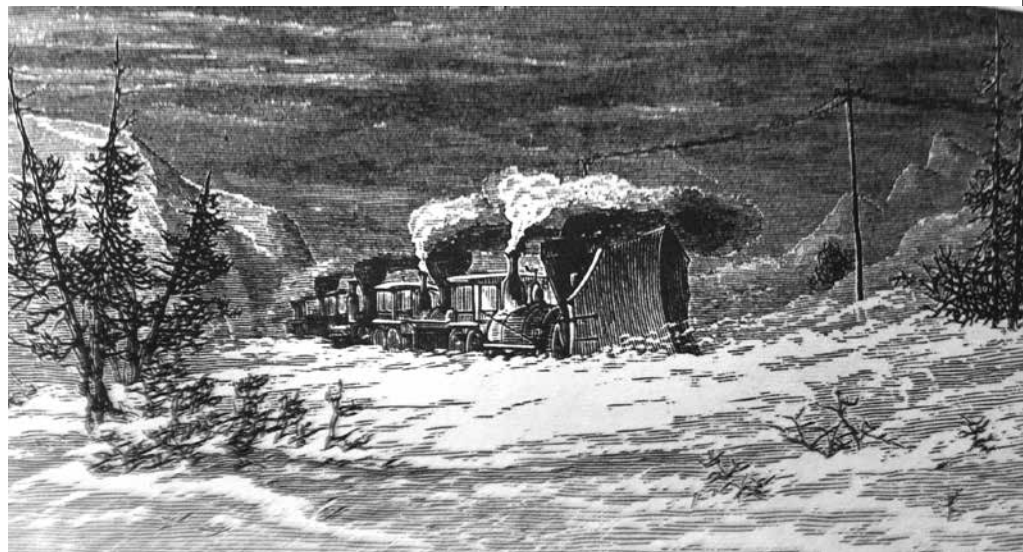
1256 ARRIVAL OF THE PASSENGER TRAIN AT CISCO.

Also from the WPA Guide in 1930. Note the solid line on Highway 40 on the left. We didn't get dashed lines until WWII to save paint for the military.

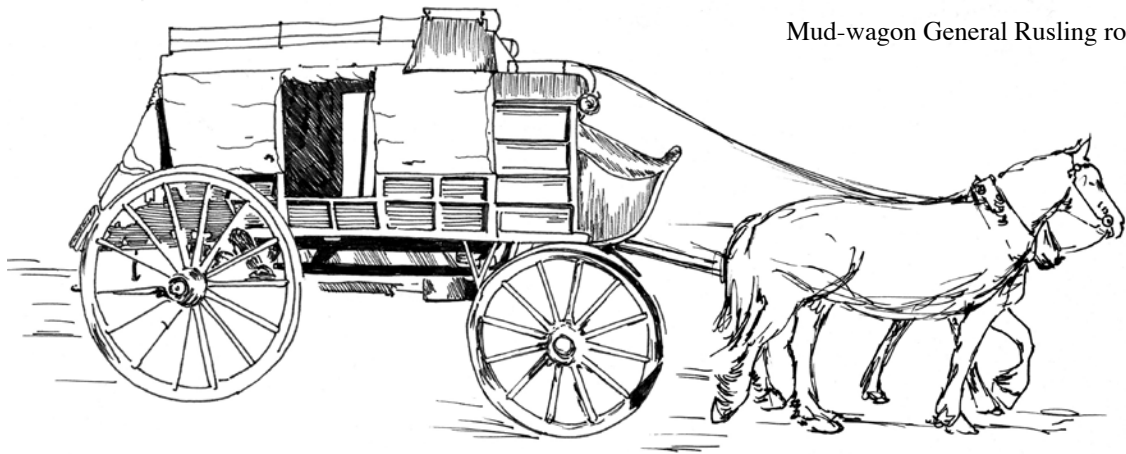


DONNER LAKE, FROM DONNER PASS

From Nordhoff's California for Settlers (1872) another version of a snow plow pushed by many locomotives. See page 9



Mud-wagon General Rusling rode in. See page 13



Nick Chickering Remembers

Dynamite and the City of San Francisco (Streamliner train) Freeing a Stuck Car 1962

Nick Chickering's family is one of the founding families of Sugar Bowl. The family owns the Mark Hopkins Estate at the Cedars on Donner Summit. Being associated with Donner Summit since childhood Nick often has reminiscences about Donner Summit. He sent this April 1, 2024 in response to the August 2024 [Heirloom](#) which had the lead article "Tunnel 6 Details" which included some things about dynamite

Bill, in the mid 1970's I became President of Alpha Hardware Company in Nevada City. At that time Alpha was also the largest explosives distributor in California, and had been in that business for decades. The owner of Alpha Hardware, Downey Clinch, told me about how they managed to open Old Highway 40 in the big winter of 1952:

The "City of San Francisco" passenger train became mired in deep snow at Yuba Gap (see our 11/08 and 11/21 [Heirlooms](#)), and the snow was so deep and ice-impacted on the highway, that no snow plows or snow blowers were able to dislodge it. As a result, Alpha sent explosives experts up, including Downey himself, who then used tamping poles to push dynamite down into the 20-30 ft. high snow banks and set them off. They did this for a week, which broke up the deep ice and allowed the plows and blowers to remove the snow.

I asked why the dynamite did not destroy the paved road, and he said that dynamite seeks its least form of resistance, so was never a threat to damaging the pavement itself.

When I worked at Sugar Bowl in 1962, Interstate 80 was still under construction and not completed until 1964, and there was no garage so all cars had to be parked on the side of Old Highway 40. That winter was a particularly big one, and I had a class to attend once a week in San Francisco, so had to head out to Highway 40, find my car (a Chevrolet Corvair) in the 10-12 ft. high snow banks and start shoveling. Due to the continuous snowfalls (it snowed every day for 45 days without more than a 24 hour break that winter), I first had to find the car by probing the snow wall alongside the highway, dig in by hand to see whose car it was so as not to scratch the rear end, and then begin with the shovel. I would clear the rear, then work alongside the driver's side till I got to the door. Often, I would take a break to eat dinner, go back out at dark and find that the plow had come by and covered up all the cars once again... so had to start over. (It took more than a week of trying to eventually free the car.)

When I got inside, it started up, but wouldn't back up, so I got Brad Board to come out and pull me out with heavy equipment. The day that happened it was 20 degrees below zero. After Brad freed the car, the wheels wouldn't turn, as the brake drums were frozen solid, so he told me to use highway flares and hold them up against the brake pads to free the ice, which I did and finally got the car going!

The next day it snowed in San Francisco, so I still had 2 ft. of snow on top of my car the following morning after parking it overnight and the next day in Union Square Garage. Seriously.... drove east on Hi 80 with snow on top the whole way.

Chain control that day was in Roseville! Took me 7 hours to get back to work!

Cheers!

Then Nick replied to the [Heirloom's](#) thanks and solicitation for more stories:

"No, but these reminiscences come to me from time to time, and your latest issue prodded this one. That year, 1962, Junior Bounous was ski school director, and assistant directors were Toni Marth (3 times Austrian Junior National Champion), and Alex Brogle. In his school, his expert instructor was Jim McConkey, who went on to found the Whistler Ski School and was father to Shane McConkey (RIP) the one time champion of extreme skiing. Shane's mother, Gwen Chamberlain, was the daughter of a Sugar Bowl householder. Junior went on to found the Sundance Ski School for Robert Redford, and then founded the Snowbird Ski School for Dick Bass.

3 years ago Junior broke the Guinness Book of World Records for the oldest heliskier (95), when he skied 7,000 vertical feet down from Mt. Timpanooga in the Wasatch Range. Apparently, he did it 3 times that day!! Junior is still skiing 3 days a week at 98 years old in Alta, Utah. Meanwhile, Jim McConkey is still living at 97, and according to a friend of mine who sees him every winter in Borrego Springs, shoots golf in the 60s!!!!

Making History Colorful



The picture below is courtesy of our friends at the Truckee Donner Historical Society. The plan is an interesting part of the transcontinental air route to which the building, the weather station belongs. George Lamson, producer of our colorized photographs went a step further in this edition not only colorizing but enlarging the biplane. We wonder, naturally, if a little larger version would show us the pilot.

Today, due to advances in computer graphics technology, there may be a solution to the color limitations of our historical black & white images. Computers are remarkably adept at manipulating photographic images. Algorithms developed for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning have been adapted to image technology to give almost magical results such as the colorization of black & white images. Algorithms are “trained” by looking at millions of color and black & white versions of photos to “learn” how to add back colors to a black & white image. The algorithms learn how to find a sky and make it blue, find a face and make it flesh colored, find a tree and make the leaves green. They develop highly sophisticated models that can do amazing transformations. Amazingly this technology is now available on desktop computers.

George Lamson



Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

We were up on Donner Summit checking out the route for one of the Donner Party Hike hikes (registrations open April 1, 2025 for the hike and history presentation dates October 4/5, 2025).

While up at the site of the former weather station of the transcontinental weather station we were reminded of all the hold downs drilled into granite on the Summit. In this case the examples here no doubt had to do with the various antennae of the weather station. Some were also for steel cables strung across the weather station to keep it from blowing away. Check out our [Heirloom](#) article and picture indices to see and read about the transcontinental air route.

Right, just a nice view from the weather station's knoll.



Stanchions that held the rope for weather station personnel to get from Highway 40 to the weather station. Below, Old Highway 40 and the Donner Summit Hub.



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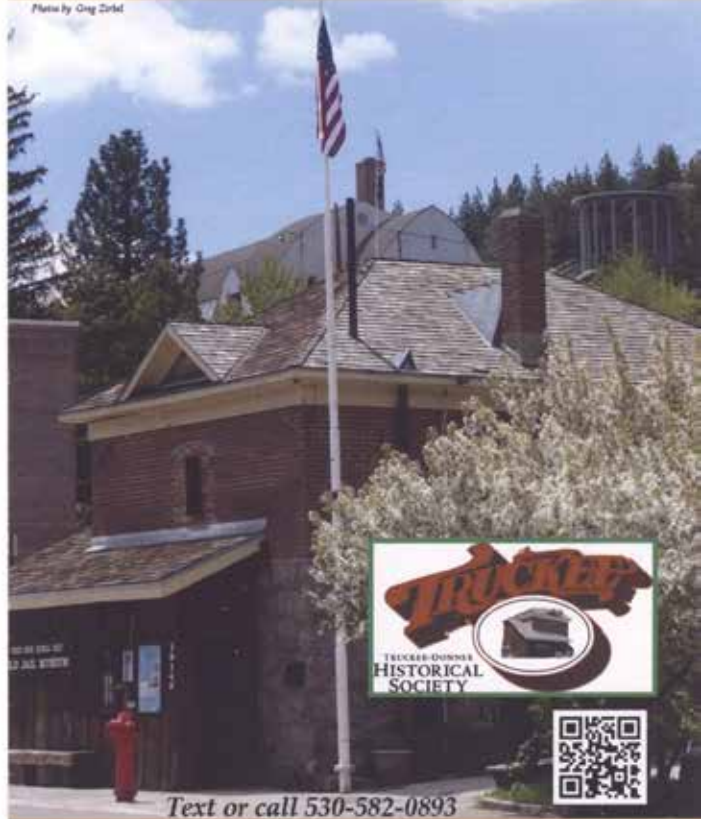
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DOWNTOWN TRUCKEE HISTORY MUSEUMS

Photo by Greg Zirkel



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