

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

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

May 2025 issue #201



Last month we noted a coming change as we'll start reprising some favorite stories since after more than 200 issues there are not so many new stories. Last month's lead article was about heroism, which has not appeared in the Heirloom but which is a favorite. This month's lead story is Part II. The story, "The Donner Party and Donner Summit Heroism, Pathos, and the Human Spirit" is a favorite because it explores the title rather than the sensational elements of the Donner Party story that everyone thinks about.

Heroism on Donner Summit - Part II

Emigrants in the Mountains

It is probably not generally known to the people, that there is now in the California mountains in the most distressing situation, a party of emigrants from the United States, who were prevented from crossing the mountains by an early heavy fall of snow. The party consists of about sixty persons, men, women and children. They were almost entirely out of provisions, when they reached the foot of the mountains, and but for the timely succor afforded them by Capt. Ja. A. Sutter, one of the most humane and liberal men in California, they must have all perished in a few days. Captain Sutter as soon as he ascertained their situation, sent five mules loaded with provisions to them. A second party was dispatched with provisions for them, but they found the mountain impossible, in consequence of the snow. We hope that our citizens will do something for the relief of these unfortunate people.

California Star January 16, 1847

Heroes of this part of the story

A company of twenty men left here on Sunday last for the California mountains with provisions, clothing &c. for the suffering emigrants now there. The citizens of this place subscribed about fifteen hundred dollars for their relief, which was expended for such articles as the emigrants would be most likely to need. Mr Greenwood an old mountaineer went with the company as pilot. If it is possible to cross the mountains they will get to the emigrants in time to save them.

California Star February 13, 1847

Story Locations in this Issue

Gould Park/Cisco pg 17

Staved Camp pg 8 was somewhere in the neighborhood

Summit Camp pg 12

DONNER SUMMIT



Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We've done hundreds of 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/UCJenAxPCb47YI4agmVGI-zA> or better, use this URL, courtesy of Heidi Sproat of the Truckee Donner Historical Society

Find us on FaceBook where we place a new historical picture daily.

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

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit



Distressing News.

By Capt. J. A. Sutter's Launch which arrived here a few days since from Fort Sacramento we received a letter from a friend at that place, containing a most distressing account of the situation of the emigrants in the mountains, who were prevented from crossing them by the snow, and of a party of eleven, who attempted to come into the valley on foot. The writer who is well qualified to judge, is of the opinion that the whole party might have reached the California valley before the first fall of snow, if the men had exerted themselves as they should have done. Nothing but a contrary and contentious disposition on the part of some of the men belonging to the party prevented them from getting in as soon as any of the first companies.

California Star February 13, 1847

[The Forlorn Hope - last month's lead article]

Until last week, when a messenger was sent down from Capt. Wm. Johnson's settlement, with the astounding information that five women and two men had arrived at that point entirely naked, their feet frost bitten--and informed them that the company arrived within three miles of the small log cabin near Trucky's Lake on the east side of the mountains, and found the snow so deep that they could not travel, and fearing starvation, sixteen of the strongest, (11 males and 5 females,) agreed to start for the settlement on foot. Scantily clothed and provided with provisions they commenced that horrid journey over the mountains that Napoleon's feat on the Alps--was child's play compared with it. After wandering about a number of days bewildered in the snow, their provisions gave out, and long hunger made it necessary to resort to that horrid recourse casting lots to see who should give up life, that their bodies might be used for food for the remainder. But at this time the weaker began to die which rendered it unnecessary to take life and as they died the company went into camp and made meat of the dead bodies of their companions. After traveling thirty days, 7 out of the 16 arrived within 15 miles of Capt. Johnson's, the first house of the California settlements; and most singular to relate, all the females that started, 5 women came in safe, and but two of the men, and one of them was brought in on the back of an Indian. Nine of the men died and seven of them were eaten by their companions.

California Star February 13, 1847

RESCUERS and HEROISM

There were four rescue parties that set off to cross the mountains to Donner Lake to save the Donner Party at Donner Lake. From February to April almost half of the Donner Party was saved by the heroic efforts of the rescuers in the relief parties.

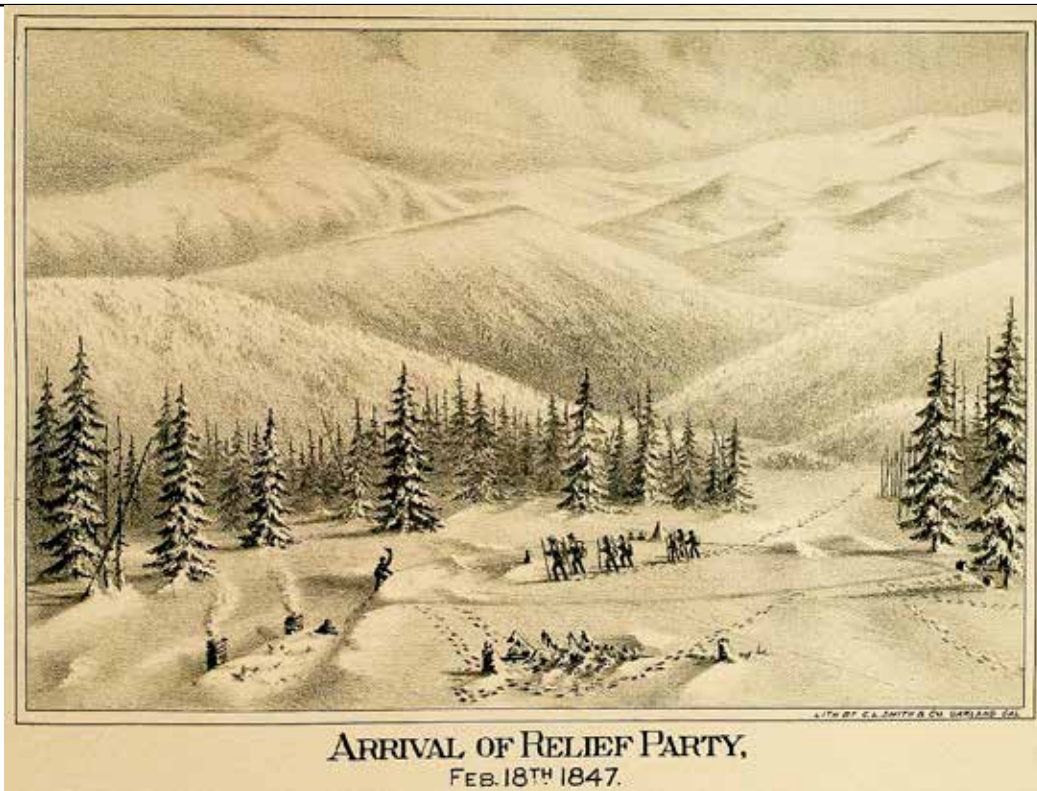
The first relief party arrived in Summit Valley on February 18. They'd traveled eight miles that day and five the previous day. It's hard going through the snow, uphill, with heavy packs. Snow was thirty feet deep on the summit. The next day they arrived at Donner Lake.

"Are you men from California or are you from heaven?" a woman asked Reasin "Dan" Tucker of the relief party. He wrote,

"At sundown we reached the Cabins and found the people in great distress such as I have never witnessed there having been 12 deaths and more expected every hour the sign of us appeared to put life into their emaciated frames."

On February 22 thirty people including the rescuers left Donner Lake. Two returned to the lake and 28 got to the top of the pass. The next day Patty Reed (9) and Tommy Reed (5) returned to Donner Lake with two rescuers. They were too weak to go on. Imagine their mother's choice; two of her four children could not go on. Should she continue with the other two or go back to the lake? Could the oldest two survive the journey without her? Could the youngest two survive at the lake without her? Patty said at parting, "Good bye, Momma. If I don't see you again, just do the best you can."

Days later two in the rescued party died. One was three year old Ada Keseburg. Her father was back the lake and could not travel. Two months later when he was rescued and camped at the same spot he reached into the snow to pull out a familiar looking pieces of cloth -- his daughter's dress.



A food cache left by the rescuers was found empty. Animals. About noon on the 26th they ate shoestrings. A little later they met four men with food and the party feasted on dried beef.

On the 27th the second relief party met the first. It was led by James Reed who had been banished from the Donner Party months before after a knifing. In the first relief party he found his wife and two oldest children. He said, "I cannot describe the death like look they all had Bread Bread Bread was the begging of every child and grown person except my wife. I gave what dare and left for the scene of desolation" at Donner Lake. There he found his two other children. They were alive. Mrs. Reed's gamble had paid off.

"I cannot describe the death like look they all had Bread Bread Bread was the begging of every child and grown person except my wife. I gave what dare and left for the scene of desolation"

James Reed on finding part of his family

Some miles further on the trip to safety near Bear Valley, Virginia Reed said "We camped that night and ate the bread my father had brought for us. We were out of the snow, could see the blessed earth and green grass again. How beautiful it looked. We stayed a day or so, getting the horses and mules ready to ride. No more dragging over the snow, when we were tired, so very tired, but green grass, horses to ride, and plenty to eat." (Across the Plains in the Donner Party)

Reed brought out more people from the lake on March 3 and led them up the pass to Summit Valley on March 5 to what would be called "Starved Camp." Reed said, "The sky look

like snow and everything indicates a storm god forbid wood being got for the night and Bows for beds of all, and night closing fast, the clouds still thickin terror terror I feel a terrible foreboding but dare not communicate my mind to any, death to all if our provisions do not come, in a day or two and a storm should fall on us, very cold, a great lamentation about he cold." [sic]

The storm did hit them. It was heavy, blinding, and the winds howled. People cried and prayed. The four rescuers kept the fire fed. James Reed became snow blind. The last of the provisions the rescuers had brought with them was eaten – one spoonful of flour per person.

"My dreaded Storm is now on us comme[n]d Snowing in the first part of the night and with the snow commen[n]d a perfect Hurricane in the night. A great crying with the children and with the parents praying crying and lamentations on acct of the cold and the dread of death from the Howling Storm the men up nearly all nigh making fires, some of the men began to pray several became blind I could not see even the light of the fire when it was blazing before me." James Reed.

The storm raged dropping another foot of snow. The men were up all night feeding the fire. There was no food.

"it has snowed already 12 inches, still the storm continues the light of Heaven, as it ware [sic] shut in from us the snow

blows so thick that we cannot see 20 feet looking against the wind. I dread the coming night.” (pg 300 Donner Party Chronicles) (James Reed pg 358 Ordeal by Hunger.)

The fire melted snow and sank into a deepening pit. “Freezing [sic] was the cry of the mothers... to their little starving freezing children,” “night closing fast and with it the Hurricane increases.” (James Reed page 300 Donner Party Chronicles)

“the cries and prayers continue all night of all the crying I never heard nothing ever equaled it” and then the fire almost completely died; only two men were able to do anything about it. “All might have perished had not Bill McCutchen (he’d accompanied Stanton to California for help but had

fallen ill and could not return) kept the fire going.” (Page 300 Donner Party Chronicles.)

The storm lasted for three days, during which Isaac Donner (5) died while lying between his sister, Mary (7) and Patty Reed (10). Once the storm was over the Reeds continued on, leaving thirteen people at Starved Camp in a pit that was getting deeper as the fire melted snow. Two more at Starved Camp died.

Almost all of the rescue party members were heroes (except for a few who went along to see what they could steal - see the bottom of page 7).

One of the rescuers particularly stands out: John Stark.

John Stark

“...The question was put to each man by name, and as the names were called, the dreadful ‘aye’ responded. John Stark’s name was the last one called, because he had, during the discussion of the question, strongly opposed the proposition for abandonment, and it was naturally supposed that when he found himself in so hopeless a minority he would surrender. When his name was called, he made no answer until some one said to him: ‘Stark, won’t you vote?’ Stark, during all this proceeding of calling the roll, had stood apart from his companions with bowed head and folded arms. When he was thus directly appealed to, he answered quickly and decidedly: “No, gentlemen, I will not abandon these people. I am here on a mission of mercy, and I will not half do the work. You can all go if you want to, but I shall stay by these people while they and I live.

“Stark was finally left alone. To his great bodily strength, and unexcelled courage, myself and others owe our lives. There was probably no other man in California at that time, who had the intelligence, determination, and what was absolutely necessary in that emergency, the immense physical powers of John Stark. He was as strong as two ordinary men. On his broad shoulders, he carried the provisions, most of the blankets, and most of the time some of the weaker children. In regard to this, he would laughingly say that he could carry them all, if there was room on his back, because they were so light from starvation.”

from the manuscript of Hon. James F. Breen
quoted in Charles McGlashan’s
History of the Donner Party, 1879



The third rescue party followed the second. It was led by William Eddy and William Foster who had left the lake three months before on snowshoes as part of the Forlorn Hope. They came across the second rescue party, the Reeds, somewhere near today's Cisco Grove. The Reeds had no food.

The third rescue party decided to continue on to Starved Camp and see whom they could rescue. Eddy and Foster at that point paid two of the other men \$50 each to accompany them on to Donner Lake. They were desperate to save their children. John Stark also continued on but without pay, "I will go without any reward beyond that derived from the consciousness of doing a good act."

The rescuers then found Starved Camp, on Donner Summit somewhere in Summit Valley. The location has never been ascertained. The eleven there had been just lying there with no food for seven days. There were also dead partially cannibalized bodies.

It was a horror.

There, eleven people were in a deep snow pit formed by their fire melting the snow down perhaps twenty feet to bare ground. Steps had been cut into the walls of the pit. The survivors had been there for days and it was amazing any were alive. William Eddy, describing that they'd found said, "The picture of distress was shocking indeed." Eddy and Foster continued on to Donner Lake to save their own children. When they arrived they discovered their children were dead and had been partly eaten.

The remaining rescuers discussed what to do and took a vote to save only two of the children in Starved Camp. That might have been all they could manage. The others would have to stay behind.

John Stark could not stand that. That meant that nine people, mostly children, would die on the mountain, exposed to the elements down in a very deep hole in the snow. John Stark decided he would save all nine, "Already shouldering a backpack with provisions, blankets, and an axe, he picked up one or two of the smaller children, carried them a little ways, then went back for the others. Then he repeated the whole process. Again and again. To galvanize morale, he laughed and told the youngsters they were so light from months of mouse-sized rations that he could carry them all simultaneously, if only his back were broad enough." Once they were out of the snow he would eat and rest he said, but not before. He saved all nine. That is extraordinary and that is heroism. It was also heroism he never got contemporary credit for.

James Breen later said, "To his great bodily strength, and unexcelled courage, myself and others owe our lives. There was probably no other man in California at that time, who had the intelligence, determination, and what was absolutely necessary to have in that emergency."

Elizabeth Graves was dead at Starved Camp. Franklin Graves, age 5, was dead and there had been cannibalism: "her little child about 13 months old, sat by her side with one arm upon the body of its mangled mother, sobbing bitterly, ma, ma, ma."

Wm. Eddy

J. Quinn Thornton interviewed Wm. Eddy in 1847 for his book,
The Donner Party Mountain Camp 1846-47.

The "... driving snow, which fell so thick as to make it impossible to see beyond a few feet. The cold was so intense as to make it impracticable to chop more than a few minutes without returning to the fire to warm. The party had all lain down, and were seeking to shelter themselves beneath their blankets. The driving snow soon covered them up... The men, women, and children, were all so cold as to be in great danger of freezing. Mr. Reed had become snow-blind... The children were all crying. One of the women was weeping - another praying. A portion of Mr. Reed's men were also praying. ... [Two men] were alternately struggling to save the expiring coals, and swearing at the others urging them to leave off praying and go to work for the purpose of saving the fire; assuring them that all would inevitably perish before morning. Mrs. Brinn's [Breen] voice was heard above the roaring of the storm, the weeping of the women and children, the prayers of some of the men and the swearing of others" exhorting the men to keep the fire going.

J. Quinn Thornton
The Donner Party Mountain Camp
1846-47

"With the storm came a perfect hurricane. The crying of half-frozen children, the lamenting of the mothers, and the suffering of the whole party was heart-rending; and above all could be heard the shrieking of the storm King. One who has never witnessed a blizzard in the Sierra can form no idea of the situation... Three days and nights they were exposed to the fury of the elements."

Virginia Reed Murphy
Across the Plains in the Donner Party.
1891

A more shocking scene cannot be imagined, than that witnessed by the party of men who went to the relief of the unfortunate emigrants in the California mountains. The bones of those who had died and been devoured by the miserable ones that still survived, were lying around their tents and cabins. Bodies of men, women, and children, with half the flesh torn from them, lay on every side. A woman sat by the side of the body of her husband, who had just died, cutting out his tongue; the heart she had already taken out, broiled, and ate! The daughter was seen eating the flesh of the father-the mother that of her children-children that of father and mother. The emaciated, wild, and ghastly appearance of the survivors added to the horror of the scene. Language cannot describe the awful change that a few weeks of dire suffering had wrought in the minds of these wretched and pitiable beings. Those who but one month before would have shuddered and sickened at the thought of eating human flesh, or of killing their companions and relatives to preserve their own lives, now looked upon the opportunity these acts afforded them of escaping the most dreadful of deaths, as a providential interference in their behalf. Calculations were coldly made, as they sat around their gloomy camp-fires, for the next and succeeding meals. Various expedients were devised to prevent the dreadful crime of murder, but they finally resolved to kill those who had the least claims to longer existence. Just at this moment, however, as if by Divine interposition, some of them died, which afforded the rest temporary relief. Some sunk into the arms of death cursing God for their miserable fate, while the last whisperings of others were prayers and songs of praise to the Almighty.

California Star of April 10th, 1847

“At night we would go asleep with our clothes all dripping wet from dragging over the snow all day. In the morning they would be frozen stiff as a board... I only wonder that we did not freeze to death.”

Virginia Reed

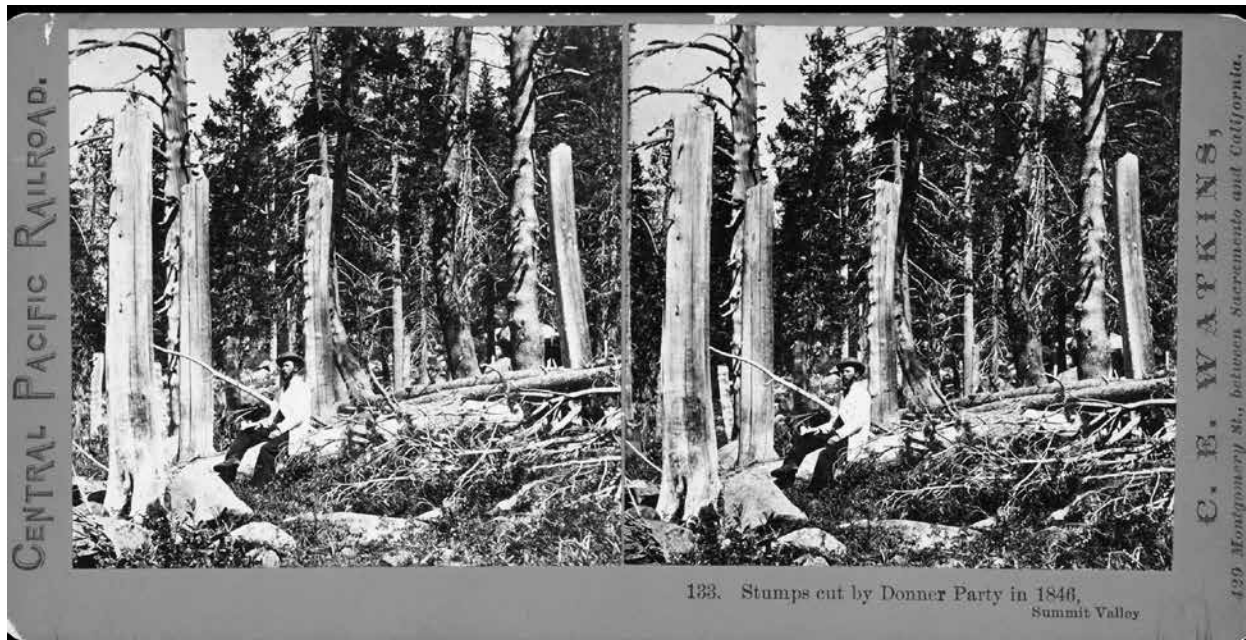
Across the Plains in the Donner Party

Virginia Reed describing the trip to Johnson Ranch.



Parenthetically, two “rescuers” Charles Stone and Charles Cady agreed that for \$500 they would take three of Tamsen Donner’s children to safety. The three girls said goodbye to their parents. Cady and Stone dropped the children off at Donner Lake and headed for Donner Summit with the money. They ignored Starved Camp – “their packs stuffed with booty.” (Donner Party Chronicles)

Where Was Starved Camp?



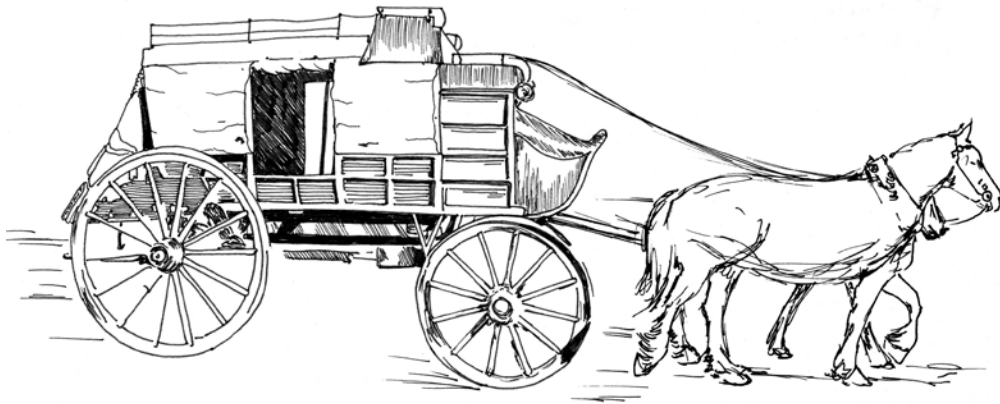
Picture above: Lawrence and Houseworth #778 "Stumps of Trees Cut by Donner Party 1846" in Summit Valley
Library of Congress LCUSZ62-27607

According to the original photographer, Alfred A. Hart (this is also his photo #133) the photo shows the depth of the snow when the trees were cut for firewood by members of the Donner Party. Whether those members were part of the Forlorn Hope, Starved Camp, or one of the rescue parties is a question. Where exactly in Summit Valley the location Starved Camp is, is unknown (see the June, '18 [Heirloom](#)). The stumps could still be seen in 1915 when the author of [Lake of the Sky](#), George Wharton James, drove his car up Coldstream Valley, up Coldstream Pass, and down to Summit Valley. He remarked that they were the stumps of the Donner Party.



The picture above is a stereograph. When placed in a device like the one to the left, called a stereoscope, viewers had a stereo view. These were the living room entertainment centers of the 19th Century which opened the world to viewers kind of like today's tablets.

By Stage Over Donner Summit February, 1868



A mud wagon

What was it like to ride a stagecoach over Donner Summit just a year before the railroad?

We were looking for something in the newspaper about a train excursion over Donner Summit that was mentioned in Picturesque California. Following up on footnotes or excerpts from old books can lead us to stories. This search was not successful for the train story but it did lead us to another..

Here we have Mr. Henry Boller who took a stage trip from Virginia City to Sacramento in february, 1866. We've taken out some little anecdotes, humorous asides, and general commentaries (where you see the ellipses, the three dots) to shorten things a bit. Mr. Boller starts off on the stage and then switches to a sleigh to go over Donner Summit. There he meets some horrible roads. In Dutch Flat he and his companions have to change to horses since the road is even worse. In Colfax they pick up the train and end in Sacramento. There are some interesting descriptions here.

Along with reading this you might want to look at our website's book review pages and see the review of Cavalry Life in Tent & Field. Mrs. Orsemus Boyd came west to meet up with her husband and she also too took a stage ride over Donner Summit in 1868. I'll just tantalize you with a quote from Mrs. Boyd in our July '14 Heirloom, "A pen far more expert than mine would be required to do justice to the horrors of that night." There's no need for a more expert pen since she did a pretty good job with her pen. There are a couple of other mentions of stage ride over the summit in past Heirlooms. Take a look at our article index, which can be found on each Heirloom page.

Sacramento Daily Union, , 20 June 1868

ACROSS THE SIERRA NEVADA.

By Henry A. Boller

From Lippincott's Magazine for June 1868

Very few of the present generation know anything of the pleasures and miseries of an old-fashioned journey by stage - of bumps and jolts, if the road is rough and the "fast line" has to make its ten miles an hour — of the provoking delays and the lordly indifference of the drivers. An old lady might run out anywhere and stop the coach to ask one of these autocrats to bring her a penny's worth of snuff or a quarter of a pound of tea on his return. If she had a brace of pretty daughters and owned a snug farm in her own right, it was nothing more than natural for the autocrat to indulge in a "few minutes" chat ; it gave him a chance to breathe his horses, during which one of the aforesaid pretty damsels was very apt to come after the old lady, ostensibly to remind her that standing on the damp

ground was very favorable to the "rheumatics," about which she complained so much. Vainly do the passengers growl among themselves and give audible expression to their impatience. The autocrat of the stagecoach is not to be moved until he is ready, and is generally sure to quietly revenge himself upon the malcontents by sending his team at their best pace over the worst part of the road, "just to bring 'em to their senses."

The box of a coach is my delight — a friendly cigar, a social "smile" at the inn while the horses are changing, and a few well-timed compliments about his team and stylish handling of the reins, invariably opened the autocrat's heart, loosened his tongue, and last, but not least, his whiplash...

Any one who wants a glimpse of staging in its traditional glory — to them, I say, go to California.

Nowhere, even in its palmiest days, has it ever been excelled,

and a stage-ride over one of the principal competing lines, with its wild scenery, wild horses, and, I was going to add, wild drivers, is an event to be remembered...

The drivers on these routes do not stop when and where they will to chatter to this old lady or exchange the compliments of the hour with that young one. For two reasons, however — one is, their orders against delaying are very stringent; the other, that the old ladies have no solid attractions to back them up, and the young and pretty single one are exceedingly scarce...

It was in February, 1866 while the roads were in this mixed condition, that I left Virginia City, Nevada, for the sunny land of California. The morning was cool and raw, the road hard frozen, and the "mud wagon" (as the Winter coach was elegantly termed) bounded behind its spirited team of six American horses as if determined, by its mad pranks, to break up all formality among the occupants.

And a word about those fellow occupants — or sufferers. There were but five; and as the wagon load not sufficient load to steady it, the rough state of the road, the lively rate at which we were driven, and the unceremonious manner in which we were pitched about, made us very sociable in a short time. I said there were five of us — true; but then I had forgotten the baby, an Irish institution in this case, and blessed with an unusually sound constitution.

The lurches of the wagon constantly interfered with the dear baby's breakfast, and baby objected to this very same interference in the most vociferous manner...

The coach was rattling along at a merry pace, and for no other reason but just to prevent that embryo Democrat's valuable brains from being bruised against the sides did I hold him carefully from me, supporting him, not in mid-air, like Mohammed's coffin, but between the roof and floor of the coach. All things must have an end, and Madam at last announced her willingness to receive again her son and heir. My traveling companions were convulsed with laughter at the woman's assurance and my awkward discomfiture; and one suggested that I seemed quite au fait at the nursery business...

By this time our Jehu had accomplished his first change. Six fresh horses were ready with their harness on, and in a very few minutes we were off again.

I took the opportunity to get out by the driver, to enjoy the splendid scenery and be at the same time rid of those unfeeling fellows inside, who could not sympathize with my humane efforts in behalf of distressed maternity.

At the next station we found breakfast ready, to which ample justice was done. Here our female compagnon de voyage left

us. The parting was entirely without tears on either side...

"The old Sierras look cold this morning," remarked the driver to me; and the long, dark range of mountains, with their summits thickly covered with snow, loomed majestically before us, and seemingly presenting an impassable barrier to the warm and sunny lands of the Golden State. The road began to ascend the foothills, and was so rough and cut up as to render a faster progress than a walk impossible.

"We'll strike snow directly," said the driver, who now found time to enjoy a cigar, with which I cemented our friendship upon climbing to the box, "and then I'll show you what a sleigh ride across the Sierra Nevada is."

Soon we were winding through forests of lofty pine trees, whose fragrant odor reminded me pleasantly of a similar region, but in a distant land. At last the station came in sight a large wayside inn, with ample stabling. Here we were to be transferred from the uncomfortable mud-wagon to a large and commodious sleigh; and here was to begin our exciting ride across the frowning, snowy mountains.

While the horses are changing, and while our fellow travelers take a hot drink together, let us briefly review the magical (for no

other word so fitly expresses it) change that has taken place in the last twenty years.

From a dreamy, sunny land, with an indolent, shiftless race of inhabitants, has arisen the Golden State of California, teeming with wealth and enterprise. Stately cities have been reared within her limits, the chief of which, at no distant day, when the iron band of union from the Atlantic to the Pacific shall be completed, will proudly take rank with the famous cities of the world. In those twenty years how many new States and Territories have been created! How, step by step, but with sure progress, has the Star of Empire taken its westward way! Of the populous cities on its path, Denver in Colorado, Salt Lake in Utah, Virginia City in Nevada, are stepping stones for the march of improvement. Think of the toils and sufferings of the pioneers to the new El Dorado and contrast them with the present easy, nay, almost luxurious mode of transit, its great prosperity and brilliant future.

"All aboard!" and, taking our seats, the grooms release the plunging horses, and off we dash, the excitement of rapid motion communicating itself to every one. This fresh team is composed of "bronchas" or half-breed American and mustang horses, unrivaled for fleetness and endurance. Pretty animals they are — closely matched and white as snow, with clean bright harness, they speed along, carrying us rapidly into the fastnesses of the once dreaded Sierras. The snow deepens but it is well packed in the road, which

Any one who wants a glimpse of staging in its traditional glory — to them, I say, go to California.

is carefully marked out by a continuous line of poles on either side, a necessary precaution to guide travelers when a fresh fall has covered up the tracks. Once out of that beaten path, and the snow is, in many places, deep enough to bury completely horses, sleigh, travelers and all !

Far above us tower the stately pines, and one is astonished at their gigantic proportions, and calls to mind the remark of an Oregonian, some years since, when talking of the comparative size of the pines of the Rocky Mountains and the Coast Range.

"Why, in old Web-foot," as Oregon is affectionately called by its inhabitants, owing to the incessant rains which prevail," there are plenty of trees so tall that I could never see the tops of 'em without lying on my back to look up.

A glance at the enormous trees we are passing by made me think that the Oregonian's figure of speech was not so extravagant after all.

We are indeed approaching a land of wonders, of magnificent scenery, of memorable trees, of the Yosemite, and of "Frisco." For if Boston is the hub of the universe, San Francisco is the hub of California.

The rapid rate at which we are going soon carries us over the intervening distance between stations. Fresh teams every eight or ten miles made our driver redeem his promise of giving us an exciting sleigh ride. "The next station is dinner, and the end of my route," said he, gathering up the reins in an artistic manner," and I am going to put you through lively."

Most certainly if the start was any indication. That spanking team of bays seemed to go as if for the very love of it. Down a steep hill like the wind, the driver bearing hard on the brake (with which all the sleighs are furnished as a very necessary precaution), when suddenly a passenger shouts out, "Driver, the brake's broke!" and the rattling of the iron work instantly confirmed his statement. We were speeding down hill when this happened, and the sleigh began to crowd the pole-horses pretty severely. I glanced at our driver. Not a muscle of his countenance changed expression; and deliberately, and without the slightest excitement in his manner, he put the whip to his animals and sent them along on a keen run. One of the pole-horses made a misstep, which was instantly noticed and corrected with a blow from the double thong, and the stumbling animal briefly enjoined to "mind where he was going."

In this seemingly reckless manner did we finish that drive', nearly all of which lay along the shores of the Donner Lake, where a party of early California emigrants were caught by the deep snows of Winter and miserably perished. A few survived by subsisting upon the flesh of their dead companions. But enough of these horrors; they can never be repeated. The lake, a beautiful body of crystal purity, lay embowered in leafy pines, whose dark forms strongly contrasted with the glaring whiteness of the snow on its frozen bosom. Around a turn in the road and we are at the station, where dinner is announced without loss of time; after which, under the auspices of a new but no less skillful driver, we continue our journey.

Next month we'll get over Donner Summit

let us briefly review the magical (for no other word so fitly expresses it) change that has taken place in the last twenty years.

From a dreamy, sunny land, with an indolent, shiftless race of inhabitants, has arisen the Golden State of California, teeming with wealth and enterprise. Stately cities have been reared within her limits, the chief of which, at no distant day, when the iron band of union from the Atlantic to the Pacific shall be completed, will proudly take rank with the famous cities of the world.

Donner Summit News

In December, 2024 the Secretary of the Interior named Summit Camp on Donner Summit as one of fourteen new historic landmarks. The designation marks Summit Camp as a "nationally significant place that best represent[s] the American experience. Landmark designation recognizes and encourages the preservation of places that have exceptional value for commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States for the inspiration and benefit of all Americans.... a designation that reflects the recognition of this property as an irreplaceable part of our nation's heritage."

Readers know that Summit Camp was the longest lasting and largest of the Chinese railroad worker camps during the building of the transcontinental railroad. Hundreds of workers were housed in the extended area in many cabins while Tunnel 6 and the other summit tunnels were being dug. At some points there was so much snow that workers went from cabins to tunnel work faces through tunnel dug in the snow.

Landmark status helps protect the site and ensures preservation for future generations. The site is also added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Summit Camp and Tunnel 6 have many entries in our article index – on each [Heirloom](#) page on our website.



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

H34 (7228)

December 16, 2024

Greetings:

I am pleased to inform you that on December 13, 2024, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland designated Summit Camp in Placer and Nevada Counties, California, a National Historic Landmark, in recognition of the property's national significance in the history of the United States. A copy of the official decision memo is enclosed for your records.

The Historic Sites Act of 1935 authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to identify and recognize nationally significant places that best represent the American experience. Landmark designation recognizes and encourages the preservation of places that have exceptional value for commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States, for the inspiration and benefit of all Americans.

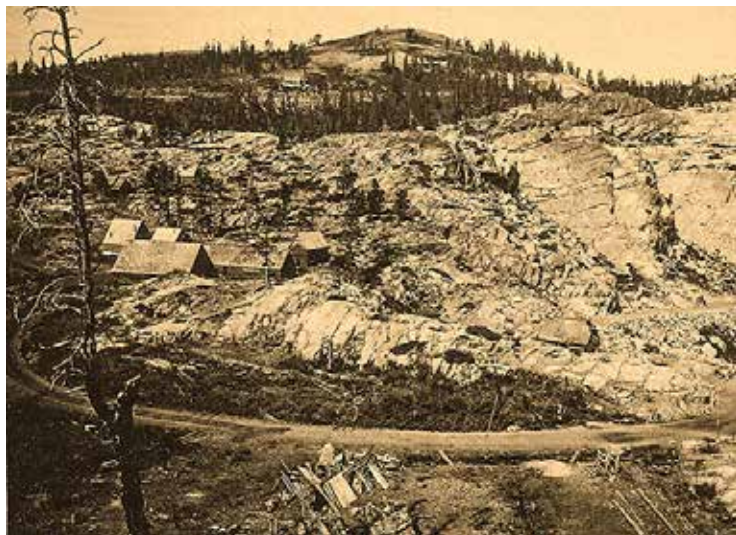
The Secretary of the Interior designates National Historic Landmarks only after careful study by the National Park Service, extensive opportunities for public involvement, and review and recommendation by the National Park System Advisory Board, in accordance with National Historic Landmark criteria set forth in 36 CFR Part 65. National Historic Landmarks are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, making them eligible for the safeguards and benefits provided by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and other federal laws protecting historic properties.

We are delighted to enroll Summit Camp as a National Historic Landmark – a designation that reflects the recognition of this property as an irreplaceable part of our nation's heritage.

Sincerely,

Sherry A. Frear, Chief
National Register of Historic Places
and National Historic Landmarks Program

encl.



Left is one view of Summit Camp about 1868. The road in the foreground is the Dutch Flat Rd. Donner Lake is off to the right. Mt. King (now Donner Ski Ranch) is in the background.

Below is the location of the cabins in the picture to the left.



From the DSHS Archives

Before there were groomed downhill runs racers would boot pack the snow. Here is a picture from a resident of Sugar Bowl showing what appear to be military men boot packing the snow. It is titled "patrollers grooming run at SBowl 1940s"

That's the caption to a picture of troops boot packing in the November '24 [Heirloom](#) (right).

Dave DePuy of the Truckee Donner Historical Society thought it looked familiar and looked at the 1960 VIII Olympic Winter Games Final Report. There was the picture below.

Then from Ingrid Wicken at the skilibrary.com
<https://www.skilibrary.com>

This article <https://eliteskiing.com/2017/11/15/slope-grooming-how-it-started/>
Slope Grooming How It Started in Ski History.org at eliteskiing.com



VIII OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES SQUAW VALLEY, CALIFORNIA 1960

FINAL REPORT

Published by the California Olympic Commission

Prepared and Edited by the Organizing Committee

EDITOR . . . ROBERT RUBIN



Foot-packing the courses was one of many duties performed by military personnel in assisting the Organizing Committee in staging the Games.

Book Review

Egbert, Sisson, Wallace, and Crocker Merchants, lumbermen and Chinese Railroad Labor Contractors

John L. Knox Placer County Historical Society
2024 157 pages large format

It's cliché to say today that the people who got rich during the Gold Rush were the ones who mined the miners rather than the ones who did the gold mining. The names in the title of this book, along with others, mentioned in the text prove the point though. They came west but did not go into mining or stay in mining. Instead they found success elsewhere. This book is their story told in a very different way.

Egbert, Sisson, Wallace, and Crocker is a book about the rise and fall of the various iterations of the Egbert company, with the various names, over the decades of the second half of the 19th Century. In an ordinary history book the story or events are told by the author with various kinds of illustrations. In *Egbert...* there is very little text by the author and the story is told via snippets of newspaper articles, entries in *The History of Placer County*, and some county records. Those various sources can make tedious reading, but they are easily skimmed.

Casually reading old California newspapers from the 19th Century one is liable to come upon ads for Egbert, Sisson, Wallace in some form or another particularly in towns along the railroad routes. Here (page 16) we include a part of the map of the first U.S. Government survey done in 1866. On this portion of the map from Donner Summit there is noted a 'Sissons,' (tip of the arrow) one of the many names that was started by Egbert. One then might wonder, who were these guys who had so many stores, supplied all of the Chinese workers to the transcontinental and other railroads, and supplied the Chinese with their needs. It appears that the stores were the Amazon of the day selling everything and even delivering.

There are short biographies of the men of the title and others and then the book launches into the story of the stores and other businesses the owners conducted: sheep, cattle, horses, livestock, cannery, meat packing, a resort, saw mill and lumber, water rights, real estate (including developing stops along the railroad and then selling them once developed), hot springs, freight, dairy, and charcoal manufacture. A major profit center was supplying Chinese railroad workers to the railroad and supplying the Chinese with their needs. Other stories cover the monopolistic activities, sales of

EGBERT, SISSON, WALLACE AND CROCKER MERCHANTS, LUMBERMEN AND CHINESE RAILROAD LABOR CONTRACTORS

A History and Sourcebook



"This company furnished the labor which built the Central Pacific Railroad, and have in fact supplied nearly all the Chinese labor on the coast during the past five or six years."
Daily Evening Herald, 1873

PLACER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
JOHN L. KNOX

property, and lawsuits, how the Chinese were cheated and exploited.

Through the newspaper articles and others sources the reader learns about a lot of specifics having to do with Egbert... but also wider issues such as Chinese railroad worker recruitment, pay, how recruitment worked, various strikes, how work gangs operated and were organized, the diet of the Chinese, and what was in the stores. We also learn what happened to the Chinese after May 10 1869 when the railroad was finished. They went off to other railroad building, mines, agriculture, and coal. Industry in and around Truckee which includes, surprisingly charcoal manufacture.

In only a few places does the author inject himself leaving the text to what was in the newspapers. The author does disagree, for example, with current methods of counting the number of Chinese workers and about the famous strike, which the author says was "not a genuine strike."

An interesting inclusion about Donner Summit is Tom Macaulay's ice harvesting enterprise in Summit Valley. It turns out one of the Egberts was involved and was Tom's bother

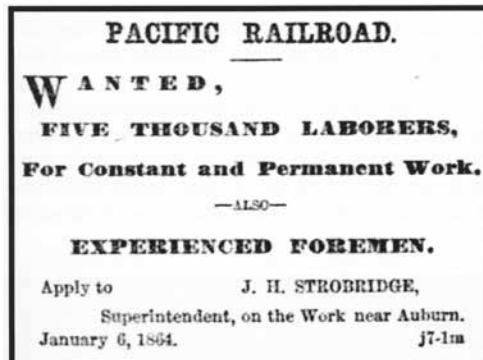
in law. (See the May '21 and May '13 Heirlooms) There is also a reference to the Heirloom as a source which is gratifying. (page 30).

Another interesting story was wood cutting. Of course we think of the snowsheds and the railroad ties which took a lot of wood but there was also the continual need of wood for running the trains. There are a number of newspaper articles about delivery of huge amounts of wood: 25, 30, or 50 thousand cords; two hundred men engaged in wood cutting with 25 and 30 teams; and putting \$175,000 to \$200,000 in circulation in the Truckee area. The Truckee Republican for example said in 1883 "The wood business of the Truckee Basin is no small portion of its source of wealth. As is natural in every country where sawmills abound, and lumber is made, cord wood forms a principal adjunct. Many large trees fifty to eighty feet high are cut down... as a result wood fuel is cheap and plenty. The Central Pacific, with its large number of engines, consumes vast quantities... The labor is principally by Chinamen, who receive an average of \$1.50 per cord for cutting, the wood when delivered at the track selling from \$3.75 to \$4.00 per cord."

Another interesting story is a big one which is the prejudice against the Chinese. Newspaper articles and other primary sources show some of the dark side of history.

The Truckee Method appears showing how the town was able to push the Chinese out through boycotts against Chinese workers and companies and boycotts against anyone who would do business with the Chinese. Here the Egbert... company shines, at least for awhile, refusing to cave in to demands to boycott Chinese.

An example of the Truckee Method in action was reported in an 1886 the San Francisco Examiner, "It was resolved to-night [sic] by the largest anti-Chinese meeting yet held in Truckee to boycott those parties and boycott all who do not boycott them. The bitter incendiary feeling which has heretofore existed against the Chinese has turned to an angry torrent against Sisson, Crocker, & Co., who are charged with



having brought the Chinamen here, and now persist in keeping them in defiance of the unanimous will of the community...." That's followed with a petition by Truckee citizens to boycott Chinese, "And we furthermore pledge ourselves to boycott and have no dealing with any person or person residing in this community who refused to boycott Sisson, Crocker & Co." A circular had been sent to every place where Sisson, Crocker, and Co. had stores appealing

to people to boycott "and withhold all patronage from Sisson..."

A newspaper article from January, 1886 reported that "All's well that ends well." The holdouts against boycotting the Chinese fell into line and joined the boycott. This was after tar and feathers had been talked about for the manager of the Sisson company.

The Truckee Republican followed saying "The Chinese have been crowded [sic] out of employment, and forced to leave town, by the fairest of all fair means. Truckee has kept her temper." The fairest of all means was the boycott. People were not hurting the Chinese, they were simply taking their

business elsewhere.

The story of the anti-Chinese sentiment is compelling reading as one reads the progression of anti-Chinese sentiment and actions as they really happened. The author's only including newspaper articles is effective showing how ordinary people actually thought and acted.

The reports of boycotts and citizen actions, meeting, and petitions was not the end. There are also included several articles about how the Chinese were cheated and exploited.

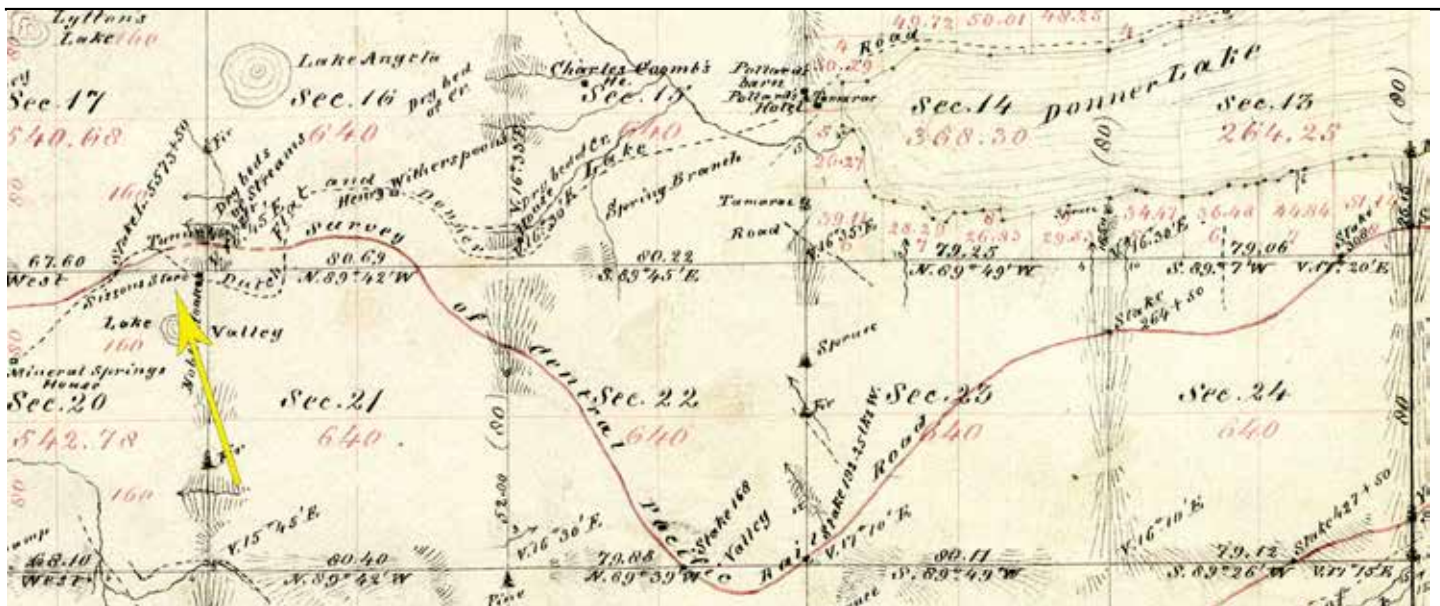
SNOW ON THE MOUNTAINS A friend, just from the Summit, informs us that the snow on the Sierras is from 4 to 100 feet deep. We looked rather astonished at the information, but, said he, where it is 100 feet deep it has drifted.

Placer Herald 12/29/66

"The work [of removing the Chinese] accomplished is simply miraculous... Other battles may occur ere this community is freed from the Chinese, but we firmly believe that law and order will give us the victory.

God speed the work."

Yerington Times March 1886



Map of the U.S. Gov't's first survey of Donner Summit done in 1866. Note the "Survey of Central Pacific Road" indicating the transcontinental railroad was not yet finished. The Yellow arrow shows Sisson's store.

Making History Colorful



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.



Written on front: "8 Old No 4 First Engine over the Sierra Nevada Mt."
Written on reverse: "The rail that accompanies this picture was laid in the 'Summit Tunnel' by the Central Pacific Railroad in the month of September, 1867. This piece of rail was part of the First Transcontinental Railroad. Summit Tunnel straddles the placer County/Nevada County Line, at Donner Summit, Cal."

From Placer County Archives

George Lamson

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Placer County's Gould Park sits on the north side of the freeway and on the south and north sides of Yuba River at Cisco Grove. Here we have the typical pictures of what the small forgotten park looks like. Above are the old Forest Gift Shop stone buildings. Right are the vault toilets. Below are what everyone used to be able to see as the ruins of Cisco Grove.

When Cisco was end of track during the construction of the railroad tunnels the community sat on the south side of what is now the freeway and extended up to the railroad tracks. It was a vibrant community of thousands. When the tunnels were finished and trains could get to Truckee Cisco vanished.

It was resurrected on the north side of the river and called Cisco Grove in honor of the large trees. It became a vacation home community and a commercial spot to serve drivers on



Highway 40 which is now Hampshire Rocks Rd. in that location going in front of the stone buildings and the ruins shown here. People don't stop although hardy bicyclists like to start or end their rides to or from Donner Lake here.

The Donner Summit Association got the idea to build a Hub West like the Lamson Cashion Donner Summit Hub (see the 8/21 [Heirloom](#)) at the top of the pass. The County was interested in the idea, which is in the planning stage now, and sent work crews to clear out the overgrown forest. That brought to light the much more extensive ruins on the next page. Stay tuned.

To find out more about Cisco and Cisco Grove check out our article and picture indices on our website.

The park lands were donated by the Gould Family who owned the businesses serving Highway 40. Tearing down the buildings saved on property taxes. They donated the land to the County in 2004.



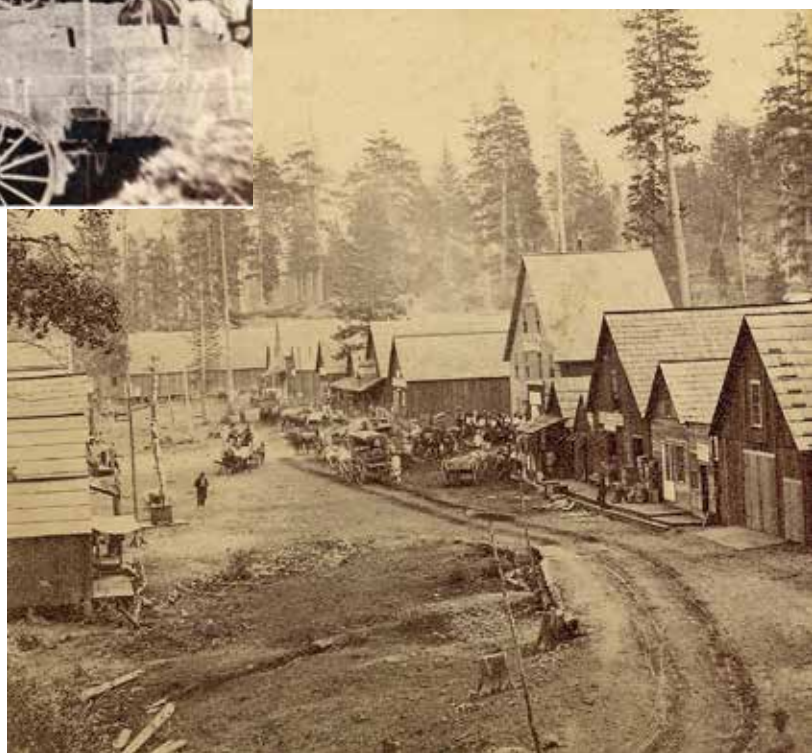
Today the Gould Park area, cleaned out by Placer County staff, is full of wall and foundation remnants. In the fall there is great color along the river (above left).

One day the park will have paths, interpretive displays, a bike repair station, more picnic tables, and other things to be determined during the planning process.





Above is Cisco Grove on the north side of the river ca. 1950's



These two pictures are of Cisco when it was end of track. Both are by Alfred A. Hart.

Membership

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

- ☐ new membership
- ☐ Renewing membership
- ☐ Individual Membership \$40
- ☐ Family Membership \$60
- ☐ Friend \$100
- ☐ Sponsor \$250
- ☐ Patron \$500
- ☐ Patron \$500
- ☐ Benefactor \$1000

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

Donner Summit Historical Society

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

Date _____

Name(s) _____

Mailing Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

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

You can also go to our website and use PayPal or a credit card.

If you would like monthly newsletter announcements, please write your email address below VERY neatly.



Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



Download brochures at:

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

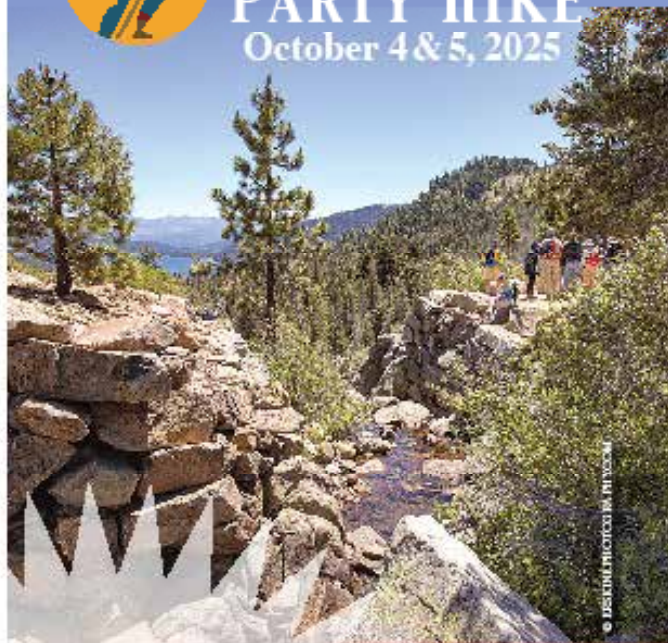


50 interpretive signs along Old 40
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>



DONNER PARTY HIKE

October 4 & 5, 2025



© JESSICA WICKS FOR INTRIGUE

*Learn secrets
of the Sierra
as you hike with
local historians.*

Saturday:
Scenery
Illustrated history hikes
Lunch at Sugar Bowl
Donner Party chautauqua
Reprise of Stephens Party
Sunday (optional extension):
The Donner party

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

info@donnerpartyhike.com
donnerpartyhike.com



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

info@donnerpartyhike.com **Register**
www.donnerpartyhike.com **early to save**

Explore Donner Summit with local historians on illustrated* interpretive walks and hikes. You'll discover why Donner Summit is the most historically significant square mile in California.

SATURDAY HIKES- Choose from one of eight hikes ranging from 3.5 to 6 miles with varying degrees of difficulty. Explore the trails, see petroglyphs and the China Wall. Stroll through meadows or discover hidden Sierra lakes. Price includes guided hike, hamburger lunch, afternoon chautauqua about the Donner Party.

Saturday Hike: \$65 per hiker (\$75 after September 19)

SUNDAY WALKING TOUR— Learn about the grueling mishaps of the Donner Party and the archaeological finds that remain. Then, it's on to Donner Memorial State Park to view the Murphy Cabin Site and Pioneer Monument. Price: \$20 additional (\$85 total - \$105 after September 19).

REGISTER TO SECURE YOUR SPOT IN TIME - Tour size is limited.
donnerpartyhike.com

*We bring along lots of old photographs



PRODUCED BY DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY & 501c3
www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org

Museum of Truckee History



2025 History Talks

Free to attend, donations appreciated

Truckee's Logging Railroads and Lumber Towns

April 8th at 6 p.m.

By Dan Cobb & Judy DePuy

Truckee's Chinese Railroad Story

May 13th at 6 p.m.

By Jerry Blackwill

Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party

June 10th at 6 p.m.

By Ron Grove

National Recognition Comes to Donner Summit

July 8th 6 p.m.

By Dave DePuy

Every Picture Tells a Story ~ TDHS Image Collection

August 19th at 6 p.m.

By Heidi Sproat

Talks held on the 2nd Tuesday of each month at the
Truckee Tahoe Airport, 10356 Truckee Airport Road

Info@MuseumOfTruckeeHistory.org

GPZ 2025-03-24