

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

July, 2019 issue #131

## "America's Greatest Wonder The Pacific Railroad"

The Pacific Tourist, 1877

# Riding the Transcontinental Railroad

We take cars and planes and go hundreds of miles quickly. We pick up cell phones on the spur of the moment to call people a thousand miles away. With the internet we can see what is happening on the other side of the world as it's happening. Life goes really fast. It's easy to forget that life was not always like this.

150 years ago life went at a much slower pace. It went three or five miles an hour, the speed of a horse or what people could do on foot. A trip to San Francisco from Truckee took a week where now it's a couple of hours. For emigrants to California in 1869, once people left their friends and relatives back east, they probably never saw them again.

People's relationships and expectations must have been very different from today. So imagine how amazing it must have been to experience the rapid change in travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Imagine how the world opened up with the coming of the railroad and its incredible speed: maybe 22 MPH. The railroad enabled people to see what they'd only heard about.

During the Gold Rush a clipper ship took 3-4 months to go from New York to San Francisco. In the 1850's a wagon train traveled 10-15 miles a day and took 4-5 months to get to California from Missouri. In 1858 the stagecoach could travel 6-15 miles an hour and the trip from Missouri to California took 25 days. The building of the transcontinental railroad was a wonder. Three thousand miles over and through mountains, deserts, ravines, and rivers. When it was completed in 1869 the train traveled at the incredible speed of 22 miles an hour and the trip, all the way across the country, took only 10 days!

It was an age of wonder and experiment. What would come next? (See "Age of Wonder" in the April, '19 Heirloom.)

The train was expensive. A trip from Sacramento to Promontory Point, Utah (where the Central Pacific joined the Union Pacific for the rest of the trip across the country) cost \$50 first class and \$25 (about \$469 today) second class in 1869. That was too much for many people. Into the breach stepped newspaper reporters and others who wrote about riding the train. They had mixed experiences. In the context

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for Sesquicentennial information go to [goldspike.org](http://goldspike.org)



**150 Year  
Truckee-Donner  
Transcontinental  
Railroad  
Sesquicentennial  
Celebration**

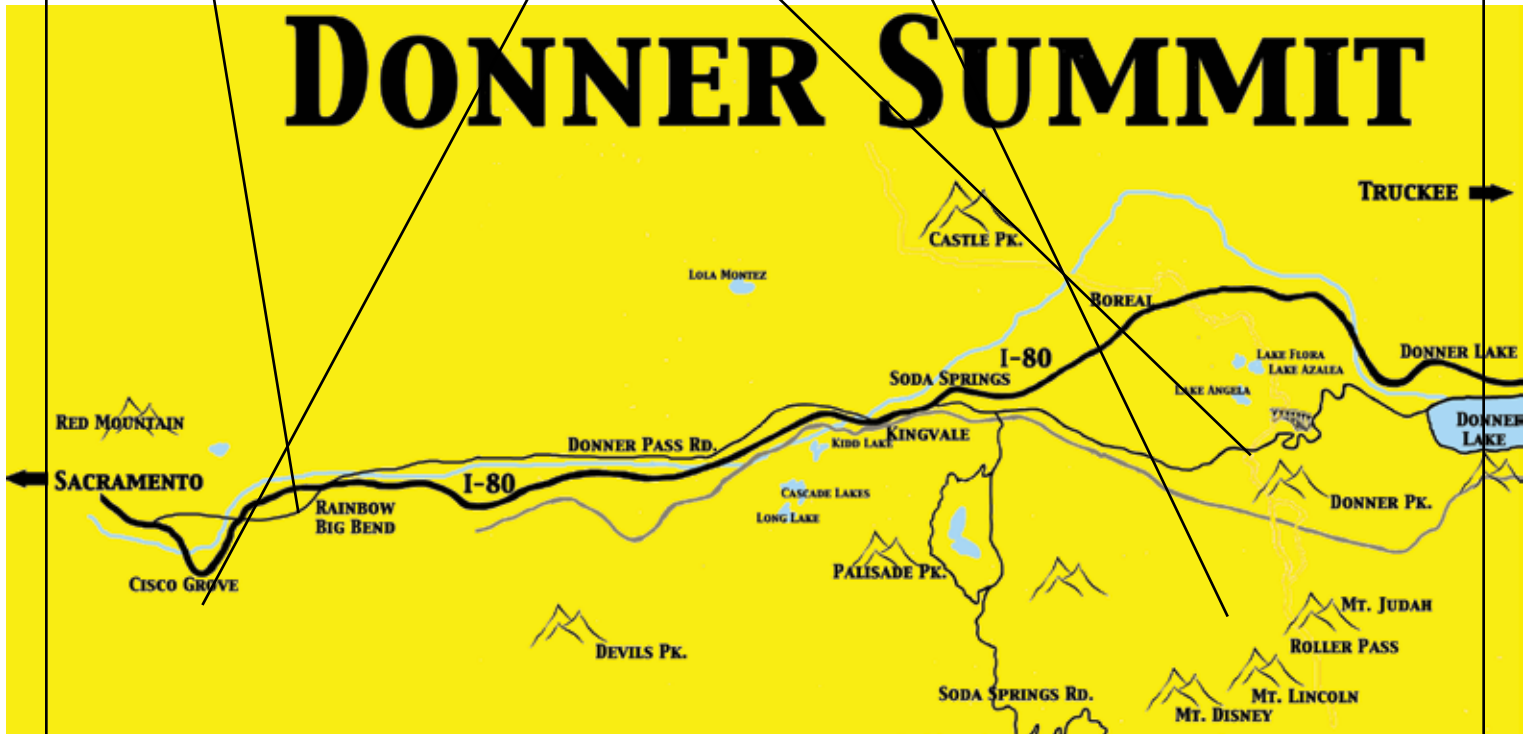
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## We Need Your Help

Last month we included our annual fund raising letter. The annual letter is our only source of income for rent, insurance, and printing. Please help so we can continue to deliver the very best of Donner Summit history to you.

There is a contribution form on page 18.

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Find us on 

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THE DISCOMFORTS OF TRAVEL.—WEARY PASSENGERS RESTING FOR THE NIGHT.

of the times riding the train for a long distance was an exciting but difficult event.

According to the *Pacific Tourist* (1881) guidebook for travelers, the best way to travel was by Pullman Car, “Palace Car Life on the Pacific Railroad.— In no part of the world is travel made so easy and comfortable as on the Pacific Railroad... with absolutely no fatigue or discomfort. One lives at home in the Palace Car with as much true enjoyment as in the home drawing room, and with the constant change of scenes afforded from the car window, it is far more enjoyable than the saloon of a fashionable steamer. For an entire week or more, as the train leisurely crosses the Continent, the little section and berth allotted to you, so neat and clean, so nicely furnished and kept, becomes your home. Here you sit and read, play your games, indulge in social conversation and glee, and if fortunate enough to possess good company of friends to join you, the overland tour becomes an intense delight.” The train gives “an appearance of strength, massiveness and majestic power, you can but admit it is exceedingly beautiful and impressive ... it seems the handsomest work ... The slow rate of speed, which averages but sixteen to twenty miles per hour, day and night, produces a peculiarly smooth, gentle and easy motion, most soothing and agreeable.”

Trains stopped three times a day for food for 25 minutes per stop, “Usually all the eating-houses on both the Pacific

Railroads are very excellent indeed. The keepers have to maintain their culinary excellence under great disadvantages, especially west of Sidney, as all food but meats must be brought from a great distance. Travelers need to make no preparations for eating on the cars, as meals at all dining-halls are excellent, and food of great variety is nicely served; buffalo meat, antelope steak, tongue of all kinds, and always the best of beefsteak.”

That guidebook was targeted at tourists and attracting customers. Correspondents wrote about the actual travel.

William Meluishish took the train from San Francisco to New York in 1870 and described his experience. Meluishish thought the meals were pretty good and reasonably priced. He suggested that getting a reservation in a sleeping car was imperative since the first class carriages were constructed “so as to prevent any person from lying down...” Train cars were packed with passengers two people sitting on each seat with a central aisle down the center of the car. “Sitting upright for seven days and nights, in the motion, is beyond endurance,” he said.

In the sleeping cars it was better. Double seats were slid together and folded down by a “darkey” to make a sofa six feet long by three wide, “on which he puts a good thick



hair mattress [sic], feather pillows, clean sheets and rug.” Overhead a hinged shelf was let down making a ship-berth. Heavy curtains were hung giving privacy and the occupants had a looking-glass, a lamp, a portable table, and a spittoon. The seats were covered in velvet and the floor was carpeted. There were separate dressing rooms for men and women that had washstands, clean towels, ice water, “&c.” Baggage could be checked the whole distance, and access had to it at all times — train in motion or not. Only a small bag was allowed in the car.

"The ride is most delightful. The scenery changes from the grand and sublime in the wild Rocky Mountains to grassy plains, dreary desert, smiling homesteads, pretty farms, orchards, gardens, villages, towns, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, &c, &c, like a kaleidoscope ; something fresh every minute, and never tiring. Very little risk is run ; the drivers are extremely careful ; the ascents and descents are gradual and easy, every bridge, cutting, and embankment is slowly gone over at the rate of four miles an hour. The greatest speed is 25 miles — the average 18."

Wm. Fraser, 1871, raved about the Pullman cars in "Westward by Rail". "No Royal personage can be more comfortably housed than the occupant of a Pullman Car..." One of the cars on his train had staterooms, a kitchen with "every appliance necessary for cooking purposes," water tanks, a wine cellar, an ice-house and orders for five kinds of bread, four kinds of cold meat, six hot dishes, eggs cooked seven ways, seasonable vegetables and fruit are taken.

This was another ride on a Pullman Car, "a combined drawing-room, dining-room, and bed-room on wheels." The springs "are so well adjusted that the oscillation,... is reduced to a minimum." Double windows eliminated noise, dust, and cold. The cars "revolutionize train travel." During the day one sat in a seat and at night "the seat is folded down...blankets, clean sheets, and pillows are arranged...a curtain is drawn in front and a sleeping berth is thus formed."

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previous page: [The Pacific Tourist](#), 1876

Passengers had to change trains at Promontory, going from UPRR trains to CPRR trains to continue on to California. They moved their luggage, got new sleeping berths and got a meal. They also had time to stroll through the town and see the sights in the town made "partly from canvas or wood" because initially the railroad companies did not coordinate their trains. Passengers waited up to fifteen hours at Promontory to continue their journeys. So there was lots of time to explore. The sights were less than picturesque although one wooden dwelling that attracted notice had muslin curtains "within the window." That house had "two or three smiling females" ready to welcome all who would enter. It turns out that was a "characteristic of all these rude settlements... the abode of women with few scruples to overcome and no characters to lose..." There were many saloons but only one gambling "hell."

To help the town economy agents were sent up the rail lines to take the trains back to Promontory. On the trip they would talk to the passengers and upon arrival at Promontory the agents would take their new friends to try their luck at games of chance. That gambling hall was an open-air affair only a few yards from the rail line. Then Fraser described Three Card Monte and how it was conducted to the disadvantage of the train travelers. Fraser said the game could be considered perfectly fair if fairness consisted of uniform winning on one side and uniform losing on the other.

Fraser was taken with the Sierra scenery. "The glimpses one gets are just sufficient to tantalize and not prolonged enough to satisfy. The view of Donner Lake is the most charming of them all." Above Summit Station "the peaks of the mountains tower cloudwards. The scene is one of unprecedented grandeur."

From the Sierra Summit to Sacramento "The velocity with which the train rushed down this incline, and the suddenness with which it wheeled round the curves, produced a sensation which cannot be reproduced in words... The speed... seemed terrific. The axle-boxes smoked with the friction, and the odour [sic] of burning wood pervaded the cars. The wheels were nearly red hot. In the darkness of the night they

Palace Car Life on the Pacific Railroad.— In no part of the world is travel made so easy and comfortable as on the Pacific Railroad. To travelers from the East it is a constant delight, and to ladies and families it is accompanied with absolutely no fatigue or discomfort. One lives at home in the Palace Car with as much true enjoyment as in the home drawing room, and with the constant change of scenes afforded from the car window, it is far more enjoyable than the saloon of a fashionable steamer. For an entire week or more, as the train leisurely crosses the Continent, the little section and berth allotted to you, so neat and clean, so nicely furnished and kept, becomes your home. Here you sit and read, play your games, indulge in social conversation and glee, and if fortunate enough to possess good company of friends to join you, the overland tour becomes an intense delight.

Pacific Tourist, 1881 edition

resembled discs of flame.”

The Sacramento Daily Union (September 9, 1870) wrote about taking the train to the summit. Apparently the Central Pacific for day travelers was not so comfortable. It took all day for the trip and so there was “no fun.” “...a ride all day long in crowded cars in the hot sun, as is almost always the case, furnishes no great amount of pleasure or healthy recreation.” That said, once the misery was forgotten, the “gratification of seeing grand scenery” was what stayed in one’s mind.

“But to enjoy a visit to the sublime scenery of our mountain chains, as it ought to be enjoyed; to drink in the beauties of the region, and cultivate the aesthetic, which Americans too much neglect, the eye needs more than a casual glance. Time, sunset and sunrise, to give shade and coloring to the objects in that grand lacustrine region among our high mountain peaks, are requisite, and these the common excursionist does not have. To educate the sense of the beautiful and grand in the people should be one of the objects of an enlightened eye. To give respite to toil and recreation in its intervals is one thing and good, but to extend and cultivate these oases in the life of the toiling millions is something better.” “The constant motion, crowded cars, and summer heat” provide no gratification in the round trips. “...greater benefits would accrue to the world, if not to the railroad company, by giving an opportunity to excursionists to see the sun rise and set on Lake Tahoe and tint the glories of our Alpine region.”

For Samuel Bowles in Our New West (1869) "THE Pacific Railroad unlocks the mysteries of Our New West. It opens a new world of wealth, and a new world of natural beauty, to the working and the wonder of the old." He went further in another book, The Pacific Railroad Open, How to Go, What

to See (1869). “It is the unrolling of a new map, the revelation of a new empire, the creation of a new civilization, the revolution of the world's haunts of pleasure and the world's homes of wealth.”

Robert Louis Stevenson traveled to the U.S. in 1880 and wrote about his experiences in Amateur Emigrant. In New York RLS boarded an emigrant train heading west, “There was a babel of bewildered men, women, and children.” “It was a tight jam; there was no fair way through the mingled mass of brute and living obstruction... we stood like sheep...

and... the porters charged among us like so many maddened sheep-dogs;...” Travel in the small cars was hard. People were separated into cars by category. The Chinese were in one car, single men were in another, and families were a third. Passengers shared benches and if they did not have traveling companions they were paired up with a partner, which Stevenson called “chums” to share a plank on which to sleep. They prepared their own food except when there were stops along the way. Trains could leave with no warning.

"At Omaha, as you view the long Pacific train just ready to leave the depot for its overland trip, (often over 600 feet in length), giving an appearance of strength, massiveness and majestic power, you can but admit it is exceedingly beautiful and impressive ; this feeling is still more intensified when a day or so later, alone out upon the upland plains, with no living object in sight, as you stand at a little distance and look down upon the long train, it seems the handsomest work of science ever made for the comfort of earth's people. The slow rate of speed, which averages but sixteen to twenty miles per hour, day and night, produces a peculiarly smooth, gentle and easy motion, most soothing and agreeable. The straight track, which for hundreds of miles is without a curve, avoids all swinging motions of the cars ; sidelong bumps are unknown."

Pacific Tourist, 1881 edition

**19th-20th Century Travel Times:  
chart below from <http://donsnotes.com/hist/calif/i80-hist.html>**

Mode	Destination	Speed	year
Sailboat (via Cape Horn)	New York to Calif.	3-4 mos.	(1840)
Wagon Train 10-15 mi./day	Missouri to Calif.	4-5 mos.	(1845)
	New York to Missouri	3 weeks.	
Steamship-overland (via Panama)	New York to Calif.	30 days.	(1848)
Steamship-Rail (via Panama)	New York to Calif.	21 days.	(1855)
Stage Coach 6-15 MPH	Missouri to Calif.	25 days.	(1858)
Pony Express 200 mi./day	Missouri to Calif.	10 1/2 days.	(1860)
Train 25-40 MPH	New York to Calif.	10 days	(1869)

Being on time was not a priority and conductors were rude and uncommunicative. The railcars were long narrow wooden boxes "with a stove and convenience, one at either end..." The benches were narrow and short.

RLS complained about the travel but also included a letter by an 11 year old from twenty years previously to put things in perspective. The child was part of a wagon train that was attacked by Indians. His family was killed and the child had a much more difficult time getting to California than RLS and his traveling companions.

Travel was hard but RLS was enchanted by the scenery. "I stood on the platform by the hour;... I began to exult with myself upon this rise in life like a man who has come into a rich estate." "The Great Plains – rich and various, and breathed an elegance... it was a sort of paradise."

Isabella Bird in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 1872 wrote letters to her sister. Letter III was about train travel. She embarked on the train at Truckee at 11 PM. The conductor "conducted me to my berth—a luxurious bed three and a half feet wide, with a hair mattress on springs, fine linen sheets, and costly California blankets. The twenty-four inmates of the car were all invisible, asleep behind rich curtains. It was a true Temple of Morpheus. Profound sleep was the object to which everything was dedicated. Four silver lamps hanging from the roof, and burning low, gave a dreamy light. On each side of the center passage, rich curtains, green and crimson, striped with gold, hung from silver bars running near the roof, and trailed

on the soft Axminster carpet. The temperature was carefully kept at 70 degrees. It was 29 degrees outside. Silence and freedom from jolting were secured by double doors and windows, costly and ingenious arrangements of springs and cushions, and a speed limited to eighteen miles an hour."

Eight hours later a pure, pink dawn divulged a level blasted region, "All through that day we traveled under a cloudless sky over solitary glaring plains, and stopped twice at solitary, glaring frame houses, where coarse, greasy meals, infested by lazy flies, were provided at a dollar per head."

"By evening we were running across the continent on a bee line, and I sat for an hour on the rear platform of the rear car to enjoy the wonderful beauty of the sunset and the atmosphere."

A correspondent for the New Zealand *Hawke's Bay Herald* (January 28, 1870) wrote about the food in an article "From Chicago to San Francisco by Train."

"We breakfasted at Cheyenne, and had tea, coffee, antelope, beef, mutton, trout, ham, eggs, &c. This is the current bill of fare on the line. The chops were generally as tough as hunks of whipcord, and the knives as blunt as bricklayers' trowels. One of our hosts told me that he kept three fishermen and two hunters to provide food, for the trains. I told him I wished he would keep his meat a little too. No wine or beer was seen till we reached Promontory, when Californian claret made its appearance. We had weak tea with our dinner."

### **Hints for 19th Century Transcontinental Train Travel - from the Pacific Tourist**

Bring a good companion so you don't run the risk that your "compagnon du voyage" is less than agreeable. "There is an "indescribable mixture of races in the same car..."

Wait a day in Omaha so you can "secure the most desirable berths" and not be assigned something less.

Tip your porter: he "is attentive and obliging, give him a dollar. His attention to your comfort and care of your baggage and constant watch over the little articles and hand-satchel, against loafers on the train, is worth all you give him."

A little lunch-basket nicely stowed with sweet and substantial bits of food will often save you the pain of long rides before meals; when the empty stomach craves food and failing to receive it, lays you up with the most dismal of sick headaches; it also serves you splendidly whenever the train is delayed. To be well on the Pacific Railroad eat at regular hours, and "never miss a meal."

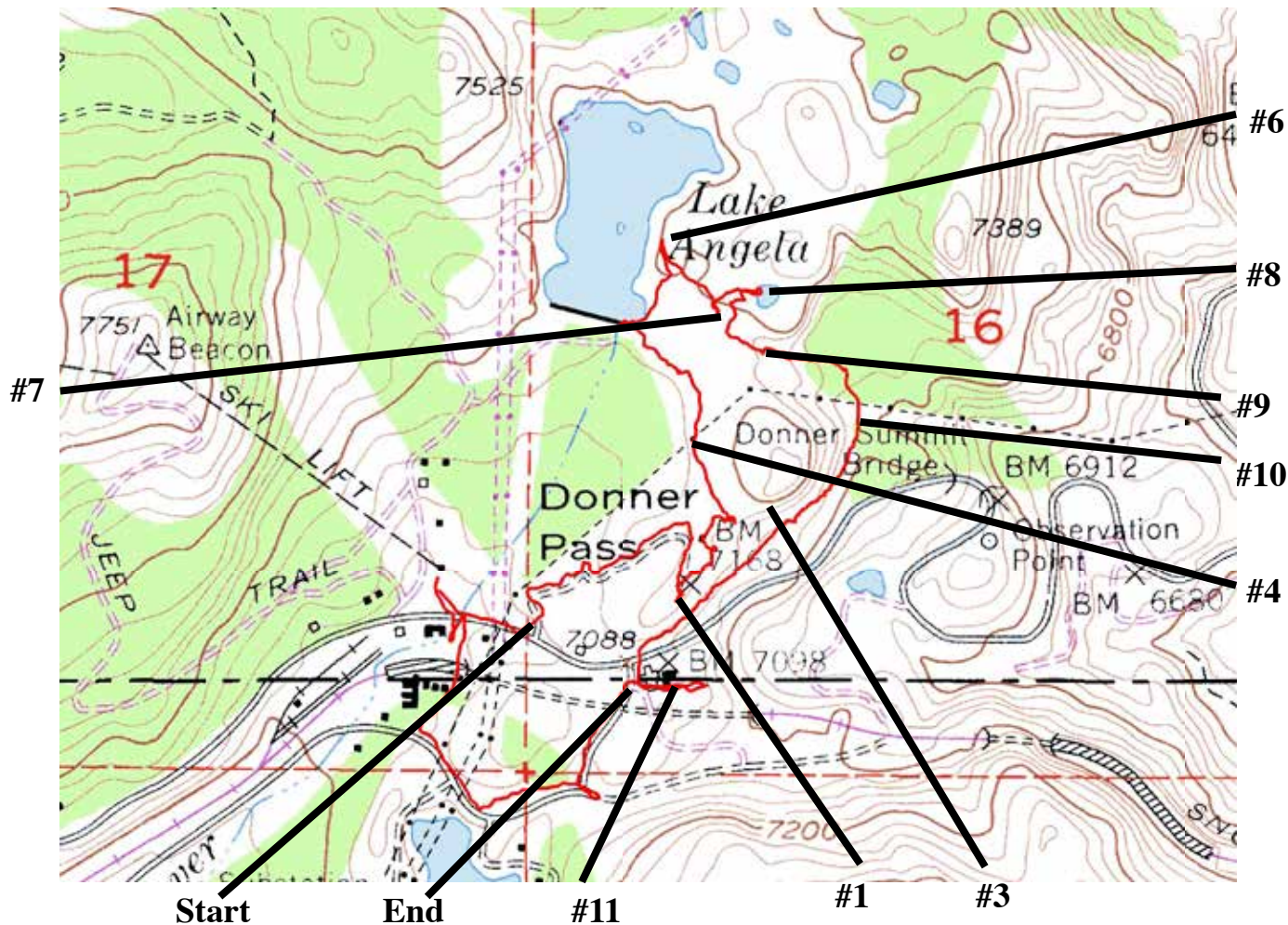
"In packing your little lunch-basket, avoid tongue, by all means, for it will not keep over a day or two, and its fumes in a sleeping-car are anything but like those from "Araby the blest." Avoid all articles which have odor of any description.

"Buy your tickets only at known railroad offices, and never of agencies. In the West, railroads have offices at the principal hotels. These are usually perfectly reliable."

"If traveling with ladies, it is good policy, when within 100 miles of each city, where you expect to stop, to telegraph to your hotel in advance, requesting nice rooms reserved, always mentioning that you have ladies."

Check your baggage. Over 100 lbs 15 cents/pound

# History Hike on the North Side of Old 40



map by Art Clark, Chief Cartographer of the DSHS

This story is not as good as going on this hike with a guide who will have pictures, quotes, dramatic reading, and good stories but if you can't go with a guide, this is a good start. Just follow the route, traced in red and follow along with the text. A larger map is at the end of this [Heirloom](#)

Almost all the snow is gone and it's hiking season. Last year we devised a new hike for the Donner Party Hike event (this year: September 14/15 –information at [donnerpartyhike.com](#)) which proved to be popular. We also used it for the Margie Powell hike a few weeks before. It's got a lot of history and since the [Heirloom](#) is an unparalleled historical publication we thought it would be a good story. Use the map here to guide yourself along the 2.84 mi route (560' elevation gain/loss). The numbers here will connect you to the stories.

Opposite the last house on the south side of Old 40, Donner Pass Rd. up from Sugar Bowl Rd. (the house with the stone figures in the yard) there is a wide trail that used to be a jeep road. That's where to start. The road will go uphill winding around until you see the knoll off to the right (#1). Walk over to it and up to its top. There's a great view. You'll note the foundation remnants. This was the weather station for the first transcontinental air route that was taken out of commission in the early



1950's. When pilots flew by sight they used the number on the weather station's roof, 15, to be sure they were in the right place. Also painted on the roof was SF-SL for San Francisco, to the west, and Salt Lake, to the east. Turn and look at Donner Ski Ranch's Signal Pk. (the mountain with the antennae and the top of the ski lift) Under the red tower there is a large concrete arrow pointing east which also guided pilots. The red tower was a beacon that helped guide pilots as well.



#1

Come down from the knoll and go looking for Sierra Juniper trees (an example at #2). They grow in only the harshest places on Donner Summit. Some are two thousand years old. Poke around a little more looking for (#3) which is a Sierra Juniper painted by Mary Ann North in 1884. Her painting, reproduced here, hangs in Kew Gardens outside London, in England. It's a little off the red line route on the map off towards Mt. Stevens.

Now head over to Lake Angela. On the way see if you can spot the grove of trees (#4). Here some people think was Starved Camp of the Donner Party. See our June, '18 [Heirloom](#) for that story and our opinion.

Lake Angela was named for Angela Starr King who was a dramatic reader in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and visited California. Her brother, Thomas Starr King, was very famous. Signal Pk. (Donner Ski Ranch mountain with the antennae) used to be called Mt. King in his memory. He saved California for the Union during the Civil War through his speeches. Each state has two statues in the Hall of Statues under the Capitol building in Washington D.C. Until Ronald Reagan replaced him, Thomas Starr King was one of California's two statues. Who is the other one today in the Capitol building?

Lake Angela was the site of brief ice harvesting and supplied water for the railroad. Today it supplies the domestic water for Soda Springs on Donner Summit. One day the water stopped flowing through the pipe and the railroad men rushed to see what the matter was. The lake was still full. Eventually someone thought the ice cap was creating suction that prevented the water from flowing. They broke the ice (#5) and the water flowed.

See if you can find the site of the old cabin (#6). Look for a long Sierra Juniper about fifty yards southwest of the Catfish Pond (#8). Look high in the tree for a remaining Sierra Crest Trail sign (#7 next page). The USFS defined winter ski trails on Donner Summit placing these signs along the routes to guide skiers back to Highway 40 especially when weather was bad. There are many dozens still in trees around Donner Summit. See our December, '10 [Heirloom](#) for one article.

Come back from Lake Angela and find Catfish Pond (#8). It was an article of faith among people on Donner

#2



#4



#3



#6



#5



#8



Summit the catfish in the pond (throw in some bread crumbs and they'll rush to the surface) are descendants of those planted by Chinese railroad workers. See our May '19 [Heirloom](#) for the truth.

Look east and you'll see a low spot. Head downhill and towards the notch. The emigrant marker (#9) is just about where you'll start going sharply downhill. Some people think the Stevens Party (1846, the first wagon train to come to California with wagons) came up here. Take a look over the edge and see if you think wagons could make that. See our October, '11 [Heirloom](#) to consider that.

Follow the map down and you'll run into the PCT (#10). Take the PCT all the



#7



#9



way back to the top of Old 40, to Sugar Bowl's Summit Haus (#11 - building on the left below). Behind the shed building on the right is the central shaft of Tunnel 6. 88 feet down is the center of Tunnel 6. In 1869 the site looked like (#12). Chinese workers worked for two years on Tunnel 6 from the outside in and from the inside of the shaft out, making progress of only 14" a day. In the parking area here used to sit the garage (#13) for the Division of Highways Maintenance machinery. The large building on the left was the workers' dormitory. Behind that building is a trail that goes to the knoll (14) where you can get a spectacular overview of Donner Pass history.

#11



#13

#12

You are about back where you started. The house with the stone figures is just down the road on the left.



#14

# From the DSHS Archives

## **AUTO THIEVES WERE CAPTURED AT SUMMIT** Verne Ford, Wm. Hoffman and J. P. Bollinger Make Arrest

Last Friday William Worthington, Wilbert Hadley and J. E. Homo, aged 20, 19 and 21 years of age respectively, were captured by Deputy Sheriff Wm. Hoffman, Verne M. Ford, and J. P. Bollinger as they were crossing the Summit of the Sierras in a stolen automobile.

Deputy Sheriff Hoffman had accompanied the latter two men to the summit to attach an automobile which had been sold by Verne Ford, and been taken to that place. While up there they received word from Sheriff Gum that a Dodge automobile had been stolen from Roseville Thursday night and that the automobile thieves had probably gone up that way. While the three were on their way they passed the Dodge car, but it had number plates that seemed to be O. K., so the party did not stop the trio. However, on the way home Verne Ford detected a difference in the licenses on the Dodge car and as they passed it just below the Summit Hotel, he told Hoffman that he was sure that was the car. While one car raced down the hill, to get a place to turn, the other raced up to get away. Just before the subway was reached the Dodge car was passed and the party was commanded to throw up their hands.

This they did and were brought back to Auburn, where they are still resting waiting until federal officers come up from Fort McArthur, San Pedro, where they broke from the guardhouse on July 18. They were originally deserters from the army and serving a term in the federal prison when they broke jail.

After breaking jail, the trio stole a Studebaker and drove it up as far as Fresno, when it broke down. Then they stole an Overland, which was found beside a river, and came as far as Roseville, when it ran out of gas. It was left beside the road, the number plates taken off it and placed on the new Dodge touring car which was stolen from Roseville, and once again they were on their way.

Due to the keenness of Verne Ford their pleasure trip was nipped in the bud and they are now awaiting return to finish their terms for desertion.

Truckee Republican July 29, 1920

Auto on a bridge  
over the Yuba River  
between Big Bend  
and Cisco about 1910



# From the DSHS Archives

## SKI MEET SET FOR HOLIDAY

AUBURN, June 28.—Sigurd Vettestad, for three years champion of California ski jumpers, announced today the complete program arranged for the Auburn Ski club midsummer champion ski tournament to be held July 4. It will be as complete in all respects as a midwinter event and staged on snow ten feet deep, he said.

The Fourth of July ski tournament will be held in the easily accessible "Sugarbowl" at Summit, in Donner pass, on the Auburn-Lake Tahoe highway where the deep snow of the Sugarbowl offers a spectacular setting for the first California midsummer ski event.

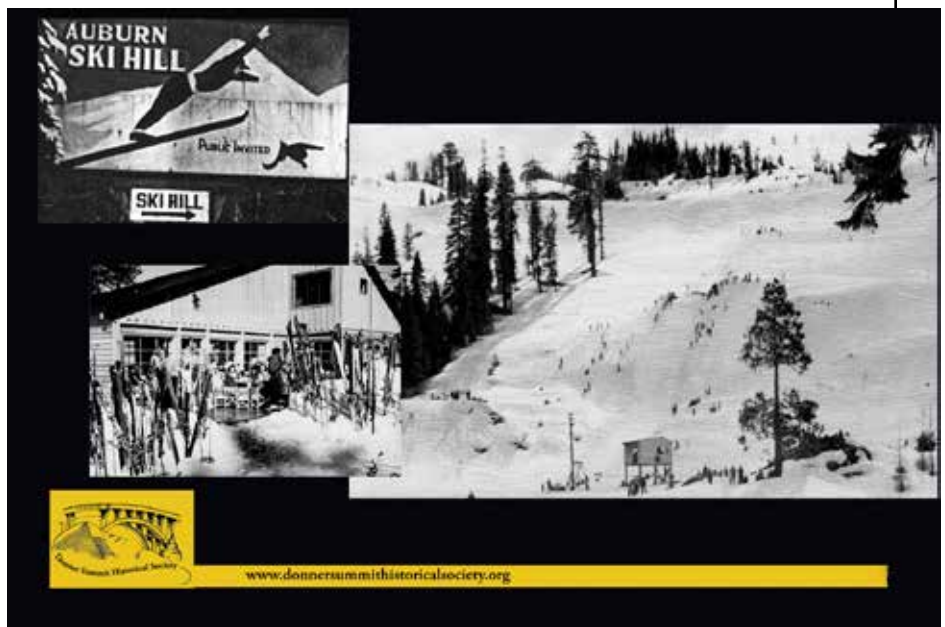
Three classes of ski jumpers will ride the ski jump from the slide under the bluffs of the Sugarbowl for the competition in classes A, B and C. Among the riders entered in Class A ski jumping are famous jumpers from the east and California including Roy Mikkelsen, whose great jump of 226 feet at Lake Placid was the longest of any member of the American Olympic team; Rolf Wigard, a star rider of the Middle West; Sig Vettestad, for three years the state champion of California; Orrin Ellingson, Hans Haldorsen and other California experts.

The meet will include jumping in class A, B and junior, Slalom and downhill races, a cross country race and women's cross country race. Judges of the ski tourney will be Wendell Robie of Auburn, vice-president of the National Ski Association of America; Olav Blodjer, Sacramento, and J. G. Hansen, Los Angeles.

## Skiing Sugar Bowl in July

This article comes from the Oakland Tribune on June 28, 1932 and talks about the time before modern skiing. Before modern skiing, downhill skiing was a spectator sport and meets would bring competitors from all over the nation to ski jump and race slalom courses. People would come and watch the ski jumpers and the racers. There were ski meets on Donner Summit but not at what would become Sugar Bowl in 1939 and certainly not in July. Many meets were held on Red Mountain which is at the Cisco exit from I-80 and at what would become the Auburn Ski Club headquarters at Cisco in 1931. That spot is now taken up by freeway. It was a ski meet that induced the State Legislature to begin plowing Old 40 in winter. The Club invited members of the legislature to come to Cisco and see the meet. The public also came in 4,000 automobiles and the resulting traffic jam convinced the legislature that winter sports were popular and should be supported by enabling people to get to the snow. Then came new instructional techniques, better ski equipment and lifts. Modern skiing was born.

Below is a collage showing the Auburn Ski hill at Cisco, their lodge which sat just across the river from Old 40 and a nearby sign. The freeway covers the lodge site and runs across the face of the ski hill. The Club moved to Boreal with the coming of the freeway. The Club had a unique ski lift, an "Up Ski" or "boat tow" and one of the sleds is still on the mountain below Tunnel #3 (See the December, '11 and February, '12 Heirlooms).



# Book Review

## Deceived The Story of the Donner Party

Peter Limburg

1998

249 pages

There are so many books about the Donner Party (see our book review web pages for examples) that one can hardly imagine how another book could add to the telling of the story. Nevertheless our editorial team saw the title, Deceived, and thought maybe here was another variation with a different emphasis - something new, and the title certainly grabs you and raises your expectations.

There follows the prologue which cements the grab. Titled, "Christmas Day 1846" it takes the reader into the camp of the Forlorn Hope. Only twelve are alive of the fifteen who started for California. They were going for help and were the strongest of the Donner Party but they were hungry, exhausted and despairing. Their leader had died four days before and two others had just died. A man became delirious pulling off his clothes. The others tried to restrain him. He lapsed into a coma and died. The survivors partly cannibalized him.

What a start.

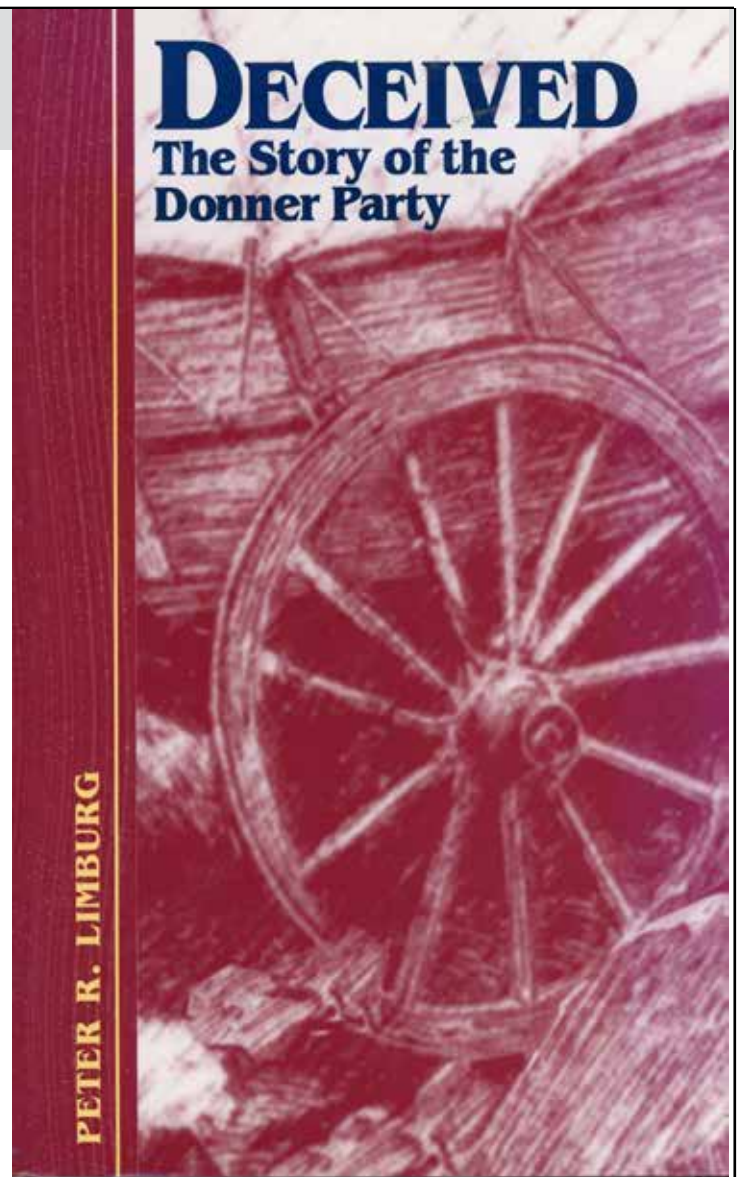
Just before the prologue is a nice series of maps to orient the reader to the story and especially see the Hastings Cutoff which is central to any retelling of the Donner Party. Part of that series is printed here on the next page put together as one map.

There follows a retelling of the story with no new analysis such as other modern books like Donner Party, Weathering the Storm, Donner Party Chronicles, or Desperate Passage (see the book review page on our website or the April, '16, February, '17, and May, '14 Heirlooms respectively). There is a list of Donner Party members, a section on going to California, an introduction to main characters, a summary of Lansford Hastings' book, Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California, background to the Black Hawk War in which some characters participated, general information about how wagon companies worked, general routines, wagon types, how people lived on the trail, etc. There are some useful tips in case you go traveling, like how to cook with buffalo chips and what to do when your wagon wheels shrink in the dry climate.

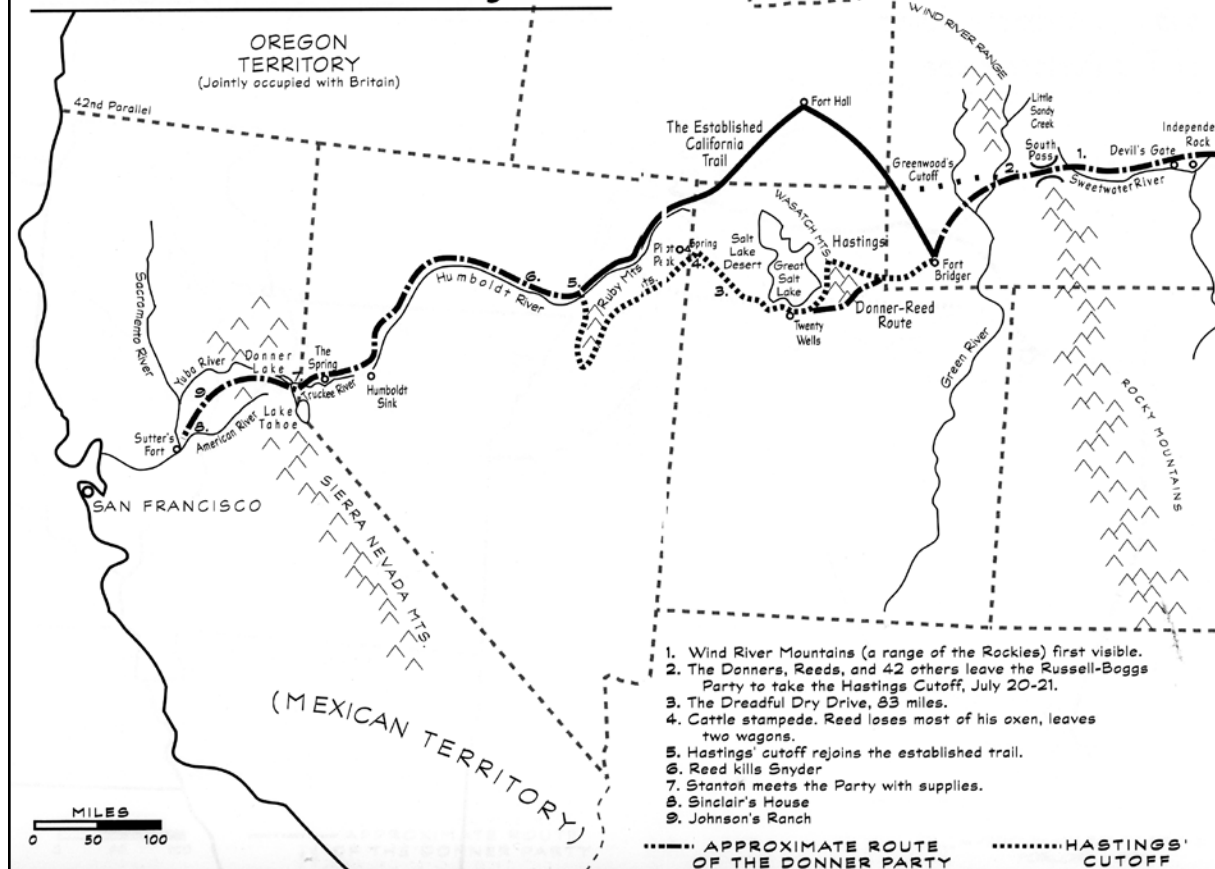
Some of those details are not to be found in other books. There is also a nice collection of photographs and drawings. At the end Virginia Reed's letter to her cousin is printed and there is an extensive bibliography which is useful in case you want to do your own research.

Even though we know the story, it's still compelling reading as the Party struggles through the Wasatch Mountains and then the desert; has oxen run off or shot by Indians; makes bad decisions; abandons wagons; and experiences bad luck, perfidy, personality issues, murder, accident, bad faith, etc. It's an amazing story and Limburg chooses good quotes from various sources to illustrate the story, some of which you can see here.

Given that the book is called, Deceived The Story of The Donner Party the reader would expect to see deception as a major theme in the book. Certainly one would expect a comparison of the various causes of the tragedy that would point to deception



## The California Trail and the Hastings Cutoff



as a major cause. There is none of that though. Deceptions are just one of many causes. Certainly there was deception with Lansford Hasting's deceptions at the top of the list. Those are followed by other deceptions but in Deceived... those are given no more attention than any of the other elements that went into the tragedy. So the title is kind of a deception too.

There are errors. Limburg has apparently not been to the area and confuses Donner Pass with Roller Pass (pg 102) and because of that got the process of crossing the pass wrong. Limburg has the Donner Party, or parts of it, trying to go up what is clearly Roller Pass when in actuality the Donner Party attempted to go up Donner Pass. Later Limburg has one of the rescue parties camping at the headwaters of the Yuba in Summit Valley five miles from the pass and five hundred feet below it. That might be true if the Donner Party was using Roller Pass but not Donner Pass. It's not five miles and Donner Pass is not 500 feet above Summit Valley. It's a small thing but one of the great heroes of the Donner Party tragedy was John Stark, not John Starks. It's not a simple

Tamsen Donner "was uncharacteristically sad, gloomy, and dispirited, in view of the fact, that her husband and others, could think for a moment of leaving the old road and confide in the statement of a man whom they knew nothing, but who was probably some selfish adventurer." [sic]

Jesse Quinn Thornton quote from Oregon and California in 1848. (page 47 quoted from Thornton's book)

"typo" because the error is repeated a number of times. To be fair Jesse Quinn Thornton in Oregon and California in 1848 refers to Mr. Stark as "Starks" but that just goes to show Limburg's over reliance on Thornton (see below). A careful checking with other sources would turn up "Stark" however.

A larger complaint beyond deceptions and some errors is offhand comments Limburg makes. For example when talking about the rescues being led along Donner Lake, "This day, too, the survivors took their time, as if they were on a pleasure outing." There is no evidence for the "pleasure outing" slight at the end of the sentence. The survivors did move slowly but they were tramping through snow and must have had little energy because they were starving (pg 182). At what would

become Starved Camp in Summit Valley Limburg delves into the rescues' inner thoughts, "The parents moaned about the cold but didn't lift a finger to help get firewood. Why should they? The rescuers were getting paid to do it, weren't they? Chances were, that smart alecky rich man Jim Reed, with his superior ways, was getting more

money than all the rest of them!” Really? The storm was howling, the people were starving, exhausted, and exposed to the elemental fury of the storm. They had no energy having expended what they had slogging through the snow climbing a thousand feet from Donner Lake to the pass. Would the survivors really refuse to help gather firewood to save their lives to spite James Reed and the rescuers? They were not thinking clearly as happens with hunger which can be validated by the fact that some stayed behind when James Reed led part of the group on after the storm passed. Would they have put so much thought into analyzing things and then refuse to help save their own lives? Just a bit later Limburg says, “Reed lay unconscious and near death.” Really? This is the same guy who would get up later and lead the group out of the mountains.

How close to death could he have been? Reed did go sonw blind for a time. Perhaps part of the issue is Limburg’s heavy reliance on Jesse Quinn Thornton’s book [Oregon and California in 1848](#) which, along with his booklet [Camp of Death](#), were among the very first tellings of the story. Just being first and a primary source does not mean accuracy. Just a bit further down the page from the above, Limburg, in an unattributed quote from Thornton’s book has a hysterical Mrs. Breen going into a “vicious tirade” accusing Reed of luring her family away from their comfortable cabin at the lake to freeze. This is the same Mrs. Breen who would refuse to leave Starved Camp with Reed to save her life. Was Thornton’s rendition correct that Mrs. Breen would rather really freeze? Mr. Thornton did exaggerate things a bit for the sensational. So his writing should not be taken completely literally.

In Thornton’s short book, [Camp of Death](#) (reviewed in the July, '17 [Heirloom](#)) Thornton accused Keseburg of “devouring a child before morning” rather than eat beef. Then he devoured another child before noon the next day. Quinn continued saying, “A man is a fool who prefers poor California beef to human flesh.” Keseburg did eat human flesh but could he have devoured one child one day and another the next? That strains credulity,

“it would have taken a determined man to induce the party to leave the fire. Had I been well, and able to push ahead over the ridge, some, if not all, would have followed, As it was, all lay down upon the snow, and from exhaustion were soon asleep. In the night, I felt something impeding my breath. A heavy weight seemed to be setting upon me. Springing up to a siting posture, I found myself covered with freshly fallen snow. The camp, the cattle, my companions, had all disappeared. All I could see was snow everywhere. I shouted at the top of my voice. Suddenly, here and there, all about me, heads popped up through the snow. The scene as not unlike what one might imagine of the resurrection, when people rise up out of the earth. The terror amounted to panic.”

Lewis Keseberg (pg 109) quoted about the Party at the west end of Donner Lake at the bottom of the pass and why they did not immediately attempt to cross upon arrival.

puts into question a lot of other things he said and shows that primary sources are not necessarily the best sources.

Then there’s a just plain stupid quote about Starved Camp, “Bones and other repellent remains of a human dinner lay scattered about, for Mrs. Breen’s housekeeping had become very lax.” If one was writing a tasteless parody of the Donner experience that sentence might have a place but in a serious work?

There are quite a few other problematical quotes or “insights” such as (pg 213) saying the John Sutter started a joke about Lewis Keseberg’s boat passengers being afraid he’d eat them if they went aground. “It was the kind

of thing that was his idea of a joke.” Another insight has Keseberg eating Tamsen Donner “in some warped spirit of admiration, hoping to gain her good qualities by devouring her.” There’s no evidence for that.

Then there’s a final insight about why more men died than women (pg 220). The men were indoctrinated with the philosophy that a real man should be able to conquer every obstacle and provide for his family. When it became painfully clear that they could not do this, many lost self-confidence and the will to live.” That kind of “analysis” should be backed up with analysis of who died when. It’s not and other authors have noted that the men who died first were all single with no families.

I still think [Desperate Passage](#) is the best Donner Party book (reviewed in our May, '14 [Heirloom](#) and on the book review page of our website).

## Note:

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

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

You might even want to do a review for us.

# CALENDAR OF EVENTS, DONNER SUMMIT-TRUCKEE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD SESQUICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION MAY-AUGUST 2019

July 2019

- July 4, Town of Truckee Annual Parade. Theme: Transc. RR 150th Anniversary. Starts 10:00am at the High School
- July 6 Truckee River Railroad for Kids and Adults Truckee Regional Park 11-3PM
- July 18, Historical Talk, History of the Construction of the Railroad, Tahoe Donner Giving Fund Dinner  
Tahoe Donner Lodge 12850 Northwoods Blvd. 5:30 PM
- July 20, Historical Talk, Lincoln Highway. Donner Memorial State Park, Visitors Center. 5:30 pm
- July 20 Truckee River Railroad for Kids and Adults Truckee Regional Park 11-3PM
- July 27, Historical Talk, Logging Railroads. Truckee Tahoe Airport Conference Room, 7:00pm
- July 28, Trestle Tour Drive/Walk. Meet at 9:00am at the Railroad Museum, 10075 Donner Pass Road, Truckee  
Driving/Walking Tour of old Logging Trestles.

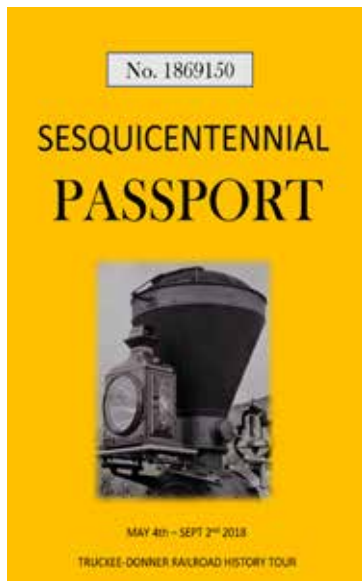
August 2019

- August 3 Truckee River Railroad for Kids and Adults Truckee Regional Park 11-3PM
- Aug 3, Historical Talk. Truckee Lake Tahoe Railway. Truckee Tahoe Airport Conference Room. 7:00pm
- Aug 10, Historical Walk, Jibboom Street, History of the Red-Light District. Time Pending
- Aug 10, Historical Talk, Art Truckee, Red-Light District of Truckee, History of the Women, Time Pending
- Aug 17, Historical Talk, Vigilantism. Donner Memorial State Park, Visitors Center. 5:30pm
- August 17 Truckee River Railroad for Kids and Adults Truckee Regional Park 11-3PM
- Aug 24, Historical Talk, Henness Pass, Truckee Tahoe Airport Conference Room. 7:00pm
- Aug 31, Final Picnic, Truckee River Railroad, Regional Park Truckee, 11-3PM.

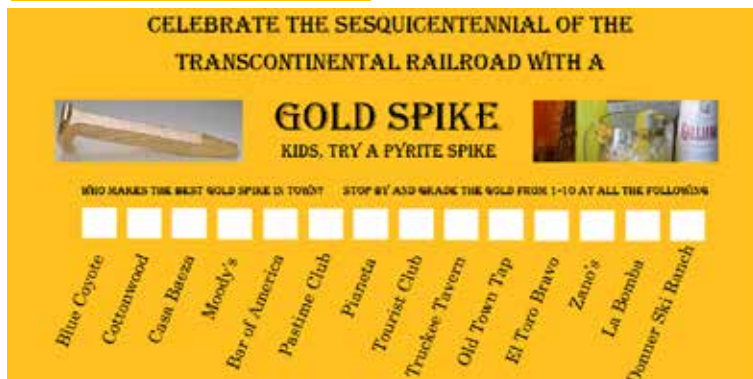
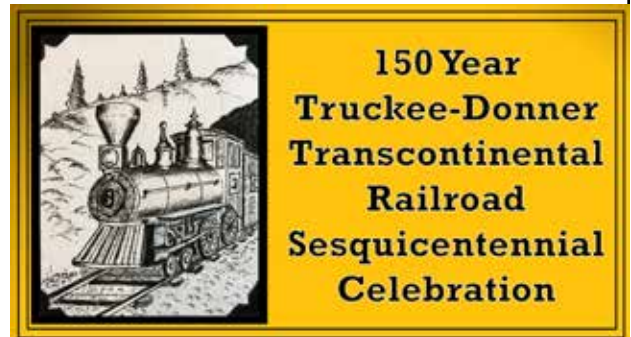
- Sept. 14 Truckee River Railroad for Kids and Adults Truckee Regional Park 11-3PM
- Sept. 14-15 Donner Party Hike event (Mt. Judah Lodge Sugar Bowl and the State Park) [donnerpartyhike.com](http://donnerpartyhike.com)
- Sept. 28 Truckee River Railroad for Kids and Adults Truckee Regional Park 11-3PM

Updated listed available on Facebook: "Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration" Or via: <https://www.goldspike.org/>

Subject to change. Updated March 29, 2019



Pick up a passport and travel among our 22 different sesquicentennial exhibits. Passports available at the State Park, the visitors center in Truckee, the DSHS and establishments hosting exhibits.



Choose the best Gold Spike drink at various establishments in Truckee and on Donner Summit.



# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Cisco was a thriving community of thousands during the construction of the transcontinental railroad's summit tunnels. Up to 57 car loads of freight were unloaded each day and put on freight wagons over the summit. Once the tunnels were done Upper Cisco slowly disappeared. Here are remnants of the Cisco turntable by Art Clark.

These remnants are just across the tracks above the gas station at today's Cisco Grove.



Below is a picture of Cisco about 1869. There is nothing today to suggest the booming little town. The forest has reclaimed everything.



This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, "Odds & Ends" of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes\* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we've been collecting them. Now they're making appearances in the [Heirloom](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass them on to the editor - see page 2

\*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

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

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME(S) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ New Membership

MAILING ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Renewing Membership

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Individual Membership - \$30

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

\_\_\_\_ Family Membership - \$50

\_\_\_\_ Friend Membership - \$100

\_\_\_\_ Sponsor - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Patron - \$500

\_\_\_\_ Benefactor - \$1000

\_\_\_\_ Business - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Business Sponsor - \$1000

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_



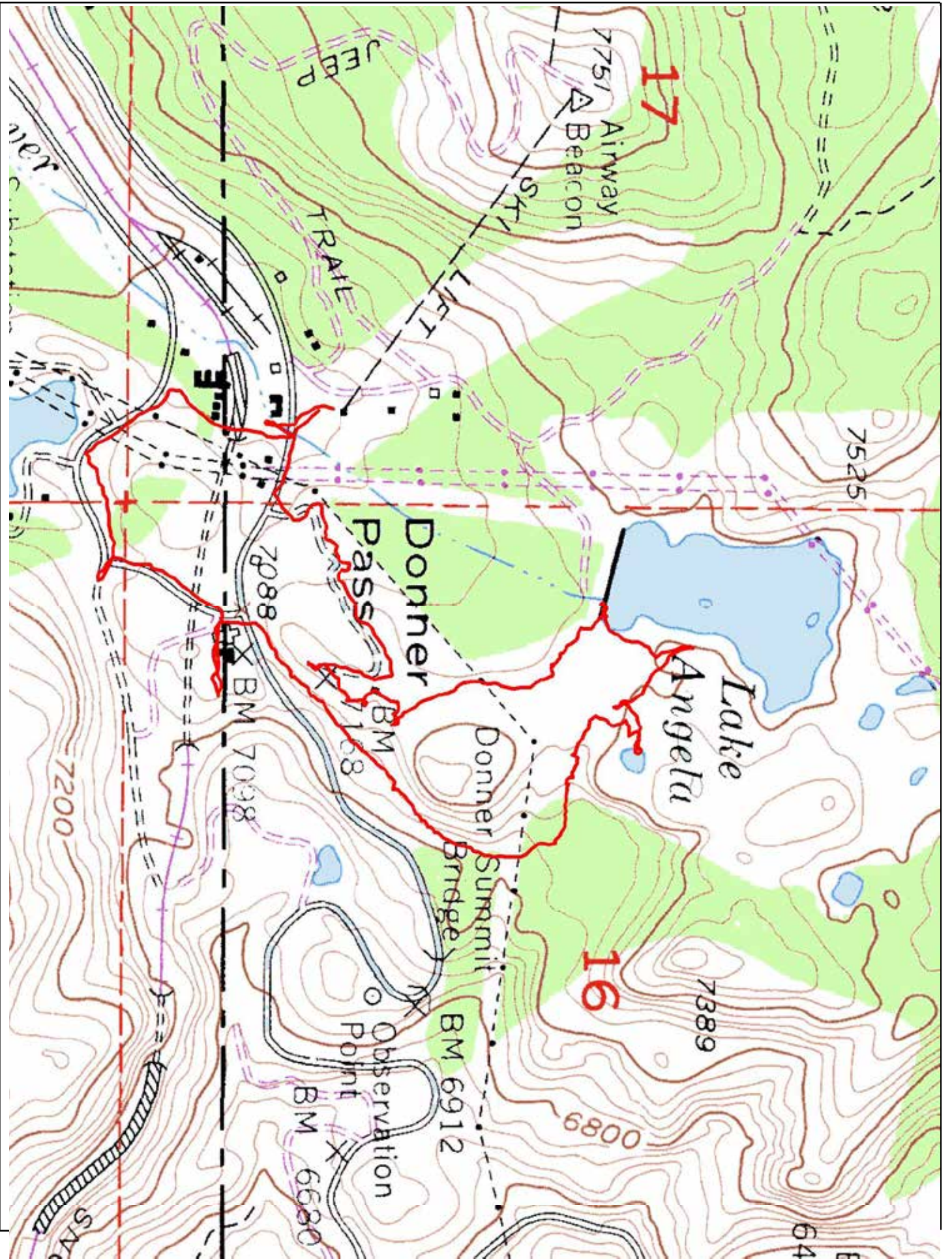
## Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



Pick up or download the brochure at the DSHS at <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>



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





# DONNER PARTY HIKE

September 14 & 15, 2019



© ERSKINE PHOTOGRAPHY.COM



## Donner Party Hike

SEPTEMBER 14 & 15, 2019

QUESTIONS? CONTACT:  
Bill Oudegeest 209-606-6859  
info@donnerpartyhike.com

For more information and to sign up:  
www.donnerpartyhike.com



PRODUCED BY DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



See this beautiful trailer (video) for the Donner Party Hikes done by George Lamson:  
<https://vimeo.com/332905330>

# Margie Powell Illustrated\* Hikes, 2019 August 10 & 11 9:30 AM each day

Margie Powell was the inspiration for the Donner Summit Historical Society. She was also the energy behind the founding. In her memory we've held annual Margie Powell hikes in August.

On this, our eighth year, we're going to go down Summit Canyon:

This hike is all downhill. We will park some cars at the end and then shuttle back uphill. This hike will start with an overview of Donner Summit history - the most historically significant square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States. That overview has the most magnificent view! We'll talk about the firsts: first transcontinental railroad, first transcontinental highway, first transcontinental air route, first transcontinental telephone line, and the first wagon trains to California. We'll see ads painted on the rocks 100 years ago and we'll see petroglyphs incised into the granite 2-4,000 years ago. We'll have great views and lots of great stories. The hike is illustrated so there will be lots of old photographs.

Bring: lunch, snack, sunscreen, good shoes, a hat, a camera, and whatever else you need to go hiking. It's the same hike both days.

Although the hike is downhill there are rough spots and the route is three miles long.

Do not consider going on this hike unless you are nimble because there are parts where we'll have to scramble over some rocks since there is no trail.

**The dates: August 10,11 9:30 AM each day. Meet at the Donner Ski Ranch parking lot.**

\*meaning lots of pictures

**Bring Hat, good shoes,  
sunscreen, water, camera,  
lunch, curiosity.**



Above: Margie Powell, 2011

Below: The first Margie Powell Hike in 2012 at the petroglyphs.

