



Donner Summit Historical Society

Newsletter

April, 2009 issue #8

## Johnny Ellis – Vision for the Summit

Donner Summit's varied history is really a series of episodes: the geologic history, the Native American presence, wagons trains, the coming of the railroad, early twentieth and late nineteenth century industry (dairy, ice, lumber), and the modern era (currently tourism and skiing). Throughout it's history interesting and energetic people shaped Donner Summit. They explored routes, built the railroad and roads, stretched the telegraph wires, developed the different industries, and pioneered. In the modern era one of those exceptional people who helped make the modern Summit was Johnny Ellis.

Johnny Ellis, Dartmouth class of '35, headed for the Pacific Northwest after college graduation. He wasn't ready to go to traditional work despite this being the depression. With a little confusion in direction he ended up in California and decided to check out Donner Summit. After helping to construct the Sierra Club's Clair Tappaan Lodge, he elected himself "major domo and floor sweeper," the first custodian. He built a little cabin in the yard for himself (see the picture here), which he called the "Booby-Hutch." With that building he showed a flair for design and expenditure of energy that would help change Donner Summit. That little cabin had some novel design features: The front was entirely of glass to allow sun to enter. The roof overhung the door, there were ladders up the side for entry when the snow was high and the bunk, which sat in the back, was big enough for five people. Apparently it was so well designed the Forest Service was interested in constructing copies.



Working at Clair Tappaan as "major domo" meant having varied duties: "Fireman in the morning, plumber in the forenoon, steward, cook, doctor, ski instructor, snow-shoveler, or washroom scrubber in the afternoon, and the night cashier, fourth at bridge, or winder of the Victrola... It was a grand job." Working his "grand job" but Johnny was also casting about for other activities. He thought it would be a good idea to copy the east coast Dartmouth Outing Club that he knew about. So he began a campaign to get California Dartmouth alumni interested and he started looking for a suitable site on Donner Summit.

# The Summit's First Rope Tow

“The first manila rope tow in the entire west – that I ever knew of – was my big electrically-driven rope town on section 21 [Lake Mary] ---starting up the slopes of Mount Judah in the winter of 1937-38. In the next couple of years I added length to it, and I build two Model-A- driven tows on section 17 (Donner Ski Ranch – Signal Hill), and the Sierra Club added a rope tow of their own a mile west of the Pass. Others followed; and low cost, widely popular “downhill only” skiing spread rapidly around California from Donner Pass...I’d like to add...that my concept was learned form Bunny Bertram’s first rope tow at Woodstock. He is progenitor of the western movement....” See the picture on page 1 of Mr. Bertram’s tow used with permission of the Vermont Ski Museum. We know of no pictures of Johnny's rope tows.  
[for some information about the first rope tows: <http://www.vermontskimuseum.org/exhibit02.htm>]

“The country is wonderful...Bigger trees and more open than New England. More varied skiing, more snow, and more soft snow...In the winter you can be in untracked wilderness in the Sierras [sic] a few miles off the highway.”

As Johnny explored the Summit he probably tried out every skiable area. He found runs everywhere, including a hair raising run down the east side of Mt. Judah to Donner Lake that he thought could not be matched anywhere (see

the sidebar here). He did find a site, the club on Lake Mary, which was owned by the Southern Pacific railroad. He needed permission from SP to purchase the land and he needed money. When SP agreed to sell the land, Johnny borrowed money from Dartmouth alumni and purchased a piece of section 17 for \$3.50 an acre.

## First Rope Tow - April, 1936

“...on the practice slope by the lodge.  
Pay 50 cents.  
Keep your skis on.  
Grab a handle.  
Ride up and ski down all afternoon.  
We don’t count the rides.”

It was a “year round pleasant location, unusually pleasant. We get sufficient wind shelter without sacrificing proximity to the best skiing. And we add a little summer seclusion without losing winter convenience...The Donner Summit area is the most accessible ski area in California. Served all winter by both train and highway.”

While the Dartmouth Outing Club was forming, Johnny didn’t sit still. He had a vision of modern skiing and his

entrepreneurial instincts led him to implement the vision. He had “A plan to build a ski tow above Lake Mary and to sell ski-lodge lots around its base...a symbiotic arrangement where each would contribute to the well-being of the other...I was reserving most of my quarter section for grandiose plans for a very high capacity series of cable lifts (not chair lifts, but cars) to get to the top of Mount Judah and Donner Peak.”

Initially Johnny subdivided his land and began to sell lots. “This game of buying land for ten dollars an acre and selling for a couple of hundred works,” he said in a letter to a friend. Selling five lots paid for the whole quarter section and encouraged him “into enlarging the ski-tow, building a refreshment house, and maybe some more things...I really got into a little land boom up here...I’ve charged high prices for five lots – I can’t lose now – I’m going to hang onto the rest a year and see what happens. Fun!”

Johnny also had a vision of skiing much like that of Dennis Jones (see our February issue). 1936 was the last ski season in the west before manila rope tows began to spread and “downhill only” skiing became popular. For skiing to become popular, Johnny realized that there had to be a way to get the skiers comfortably up the mountain. Here

you can imagine him having that conversation with Dennis Jones who had the same philosophy a few miles away at Soda Springs. Maybe the conversation was over a beer at the Soda Springs Hotel, owned by Dennis’ father. Prior to the advent of tows and lifts, skiing had been a back country or spectator sport. Tows and lifts would change that.



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His first rope tow, built in 1937, was the first rope tow in the western United States. It wasn't the first ski lift however. Dennis Jones on Donner Summit had beaten him with his "Up-Ski" (see our February issue which talks about it and then our March issue where we printed a picture we'd just found) on Beacon Hill (today's Soda Springs ski hill) but that was inconvenient since it went slowly, could only take a few skiers at a time, and skiers had to take off their skis to use it. Johnny's electrically powered tow (see the sidebar here) stretched from close to the shores of Lake Mary. He'd borrowed the money to build the tow from a dozen friends and worked off the debt the next year at a gold mine near Highway 20. "A small log cabin at the base of the lift served as a warming hut and refreshment stand." The tow eventually reached 1200 feet up the mountain "and it served a really big down slope."

A version of the tow lasted until World War II when it was dismantled due to the war.

Since the west facing slopes of Judah/Donner were into the weather, Ellis also built two gas powered rope tows on what is now Donner Ski Ranch and which was called Signal Hill. Those faced east. At least one of the tows was powered by "a model 'A' Ford set on a platform up above the snow, with the two wheels on the rear axle covered with oak blocks grooved to carry rope...Normally, "low gear was used, but just to liven things up the operator could shift to high gear and this would spill all but the hardest!"

"...The three ski tows did a steady business. I think they served one purpose well. They started a lot of people seeing what growth skiing could have and what stimulation lifts could be to this growth." The rope tows were vulnerable to weather, there were safety concerns and there were high labor costs associated with them so Johnny began exploring alternatives. He had plans for a "first-class development of an area" like Signal Hill [present Donner Ski Ranch] and had some interested investors for high speed "car lifts" that would go up the mountain from the base at Lake Mary. Then the war broke out and Donner Summit was closed to protect the transcontinental railroad. The highway was still open but drivers were not allowed to stop (see the Wyoming story here).

Johnny headed east during the war. He worked in engineering picking up ideas for engineering improved lifts for the Sierra. After the war he moved on to plastics (remember The Graduate with Dustin Hoffman?) It never worked out for Johnny to come back to the Sierra and so his dream was left to others to bring to fruition.

"Perhaps I left a little mark or two on Donner Pass, where Theodore Judah made his mammoth contribution....it is nice to know that some of the things I cared about there are still growing."

# Donner Pass 1936

Johnny Ellis

This is the strangest combination! Three  
Dimensions become real to men who ski.

A skater's focus limits him to two;  
Swift point, he skims one icy plane of blue;  
Although his heel can feel the powered thrust,  
And feel the long smooth glide, a skater must  
Stay in his ponds, or lakes. Or rivers. We  
Drop down from higher than the last bent tree.

Mountaineers see them all but cannot feel  
The three dimensions changing to the heel.  
They lack the speed, they envy with the eye  
The clean, machineless flight when birds go by.  
Living geometry of three-way space –  
To know these large dimensions points must race!  
We ski. We know  
The swift descent, the swing, the stemming slow  
Control Swing left, curve right –  
The nighthawk's wings burr; steel ski-edges bite!

There was a time – and still there linger now  
Some slowly-swinging skiers – when the bow  
And curtesie [sic] of telemarks and of slow  
And carefully-steered Christies carved the snow.  
That isn't it. This game is worth the dare.  
Vivace music. Swing it! Ski tips tear  
The snow and bodies whip  
Lean, lean against the turn, let music drip  
From every motion fly in flung-out spray.  
And so we go.  
This body learns to do  
Complete new things. No thing can follow through  
At such a speed such track except a few  
Air-bourn [sic] and powerfully-shouldered birds.  
Oh not in words  
And not in music. No  
Beethoven's Seventh – different. We go  
On waxy boards, skid, fly our weight down snow.  
Faster every swing,  
Rejoicing fear, this rhythmic body sing  
With speed and with accelling power fling –  
Not in bone-cracking roll –  
Back at the hill astonishing control!...

Eat chocolate bars at Summit, ski, be glad....

Man whets his power on power, grace upon grace; we  
grow.

# The Dartmouth Outing Club on Lake Mary

Alumni of the Dartmouth began thinking about a Dartmouth Outing Club in 1936. The idea came from Johnny Ellis, a recent graduate who had come to work on Donner Summit in 1935 at Clair Tappaan Lodge. The Club was incorporated in 1939 with almost 30 members who signed up with \$10 for annual dues. It took some years to get money to buy their 88 X 60 foot lot (#7 of the Ellis subdivision) in the land that Johnny Ellis had purchased from SP and subsequently subdivided. The lot was just 20 feet from Lake Mary and about a quarter mile from Highway 40. Just as they were ready to build World War II intruded and the club became dormant. In 1946 the members began construction of a club house starting first on the subfloor. This they did without a permit, but then everyone was working without permits in those days. Because "lumber of any sort is way out of sight" they used railroad timbers from Southern Pacific snow sheds that were being rebuilt (see the pictures on page 5 and 7 to see the timbers).

On top of the subfloor they installed a surplus quonset hut. This would be their first cabin.

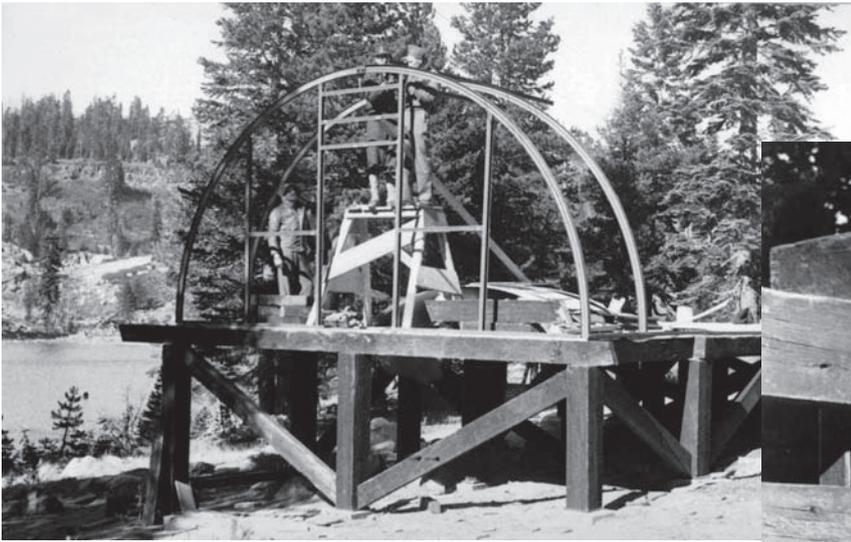
In 1946 the club had been reactivated after the war and had grown to 52 members. Work resumed on the cabin. Just as the members were getting ready to use their new quonset hut cabin for the winter a December wind storm blew a couple of large trees down, right onto the quonset hut (see the next page). The trees caused, according to a letter to SP on whose lands the trees had been anchored, \$3000 damage.

The next summer they tore down most of the hut and straightened the bent sheets of metal. They got more snowshed timbers and started a traditional type of dwelling on part of the subfloor they'd constructed the year before. You can see the results below. In 1948 a second floor and partitions for privacy were added to the dormitory type accommodations. Money was a continual problem with the club eventually taking loans at interest from better off local alumni. Improvements continued. Electricity and a toilet came in 1948 along with a building permit for the rest of the building. An addition was finished in 1950. 1954 saw curtains and a memorial fireplace. Running water came in 1958 so the members no longer had to carry water from Lake Mary or melt snow.

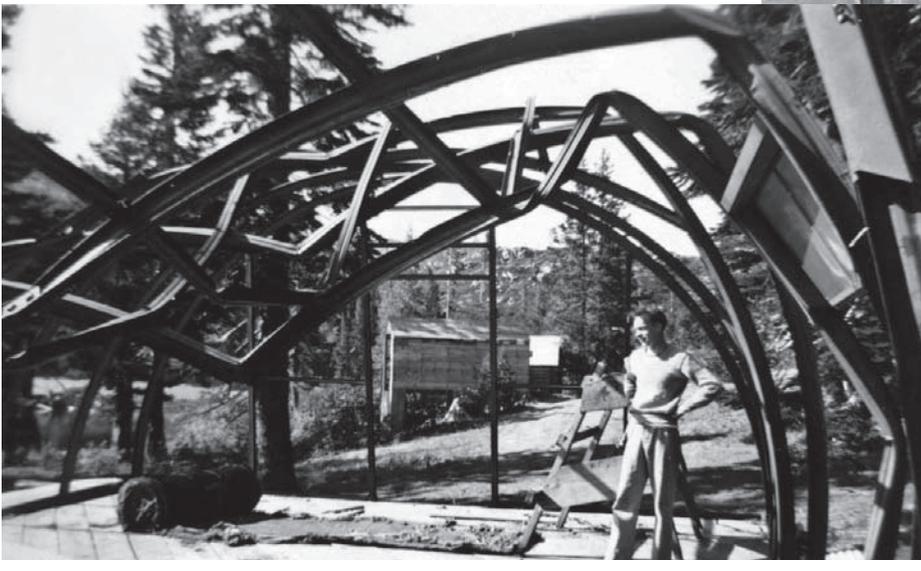
Once the building was complete charter members got 10 free nights and other members paid \$1.50 a night. Meals were \$1.75 a day.

Right: the original quonset hut and the addition built in 1950.





Above: the quonset hut under construction. Below: the quonset hut crushed and ready to be straightened. Bottom: the crushed hut. Right: the inside being constructed showing the snowshed timbers. Bottom right: running water did not come until 1958.



# Miscellany

I Don't Know Where Else to Put This Stuff

## Snow depth 1937

Skiing on the 4th of July

...the...average snow depth around Donner Pass that 1937-38 winter was 29 feet above the ground. I took a girl from San Francisco skiing – for her first time on skis – on part of the rope tow slope – by moonlight on the Fourth of July, 1938.”

Johnny Ellis

## Bindings 1936

Johnny Ellis in a card to a friend of his from whom he'd borrowed some bindings:

“I remodeled yours with hay-wire and bed springs to fit my skis and boots.”

## Sierra Ski Lodge Life 1958

From a letter in the Dartmouth Outing Club's collection

“I put an open box of Warfarin next to the chimney upstairs, & this should be renewed as consumed at regular intervals; as you doubtless know, this stuff is infallible, and will keep the rodents inactive. Speaking of which, I noted that the little bastards have been into the insulation. In order to preserve this useful investment of over \$40...”

## Lifts 1950

From a letter in the DOC collection

“...The Sugar Bowl ski lift is less than a mile south of our location; the Donner Ski Ranch T-bar lift less than a mile north; and the Soda Springs lift and two is about three miles west.” And reporting to their membership about the worth of the lot on Lake Mary, “the land is worth \$600 on today's market.”



Above: the DOC circa 1950 with Donner Ski Ranch in the background. Below: looking from the lake back at the DOC again circa 1950.



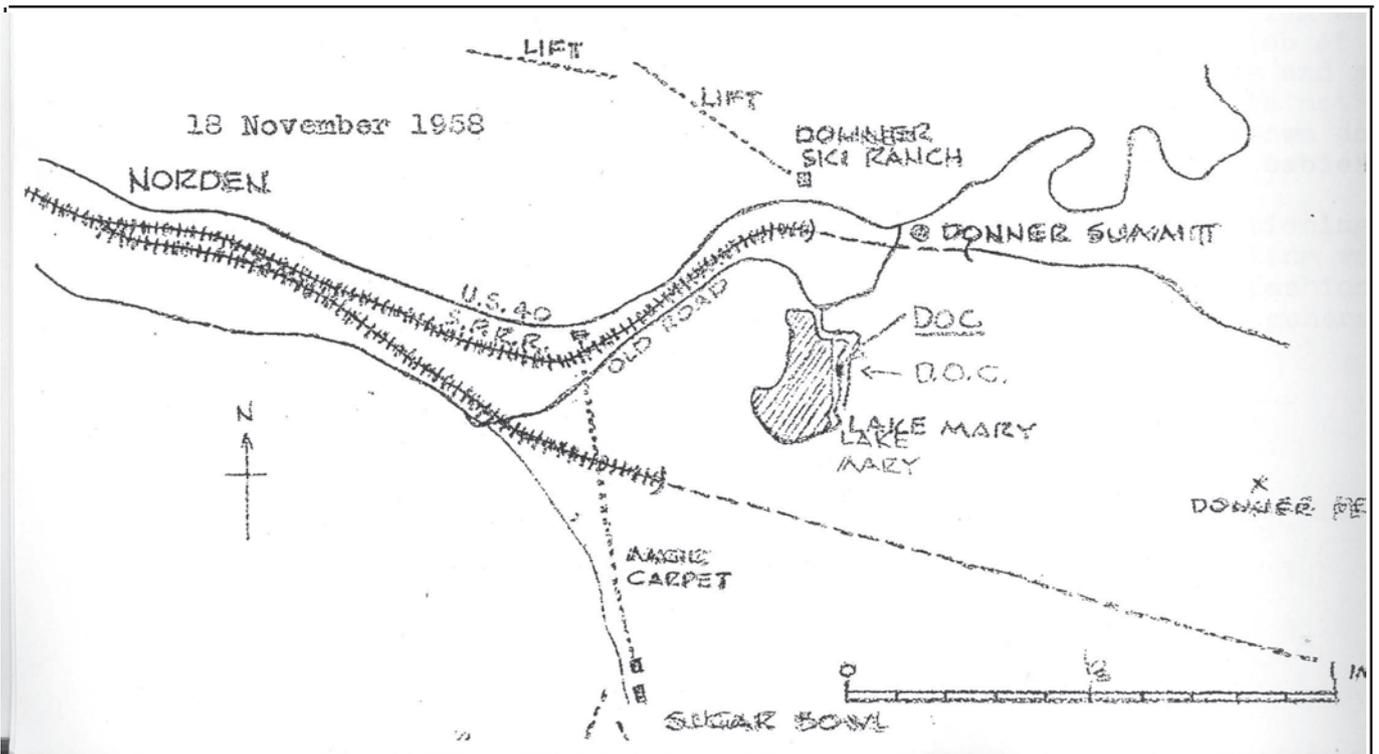
All of the pictures, except those on 1 and 7 are from the Dartmouth Outing Club's collection, contributed by Susy Struble, current president.

# Dartmouth Outing Club Today

The Dartmouth Outing Club is a couple of hundred yards off Lake Mary Rd. on the shore of Lake Mary. It is accessible in winter only over the snow. To illustrate this story I hiked in over the snow in January. No one was home. It was so quiet and standing on the lake shore it was so nice. I could see why Johnny Ellis had chosen this spot, as have the neighbors. It's a little inconvenient, but worth the inconvenience. Hiking out, a teenage group of cross country skiers, some just learning it looked like, were coming breathlessly up the trail. They skied out of their tracks to let an old man (me) go by so I wouldn't sink in the snow. I could imagine them reaching the cabin and hot chocolate and fun (there was smoke coming from the chimney) after their exercise. That's what it's all about.



To the left you can see a close up of the siding which is composed of Southern Pacific snowshed timbers made available when the snowsheds were rebuilt in the late 1940's.



1958 map of Donner Summit showing the location of the Dartmouth Outing Club

## Johnny Ellis' Run

"The west side of Donner Peak grades from nursery slopes to very long runs of intermediate class...From the northeast knob of the mountains is a run for experts, a run to become the Hell's Highway of the west. A place for experts to break ribs and records...drops 1500 feet in  $\frac{1}{2}$  miles and then keeps going down. 2000 feet of downhill per run, and your drive back half of it by car on the highway....with two cars to shuttle a party can ski downhill all day.

## Getting to Donner Summit 1937

"...You can take advantage of weekend Southern Pacific rates, (\$4.65 for round trip plus berth; upper \$1.60, lower \$2.00).

Train leaves S.F. Ferry 9:00 P.M. Friday.

Arrives Norden 5:30 A.M. Saturday.

Leaves Norden 11:47 P.M. Sunday

Arrives S.F. 8:12 A.M. Monday

OR: -

Leave Norden 2:00 P.M. Sunday

Arrive S.F. 9:30 P.M. Sunday

Or else join in making up a party to drive up, (only 5 hours from San Francisco over Highway 40, via Auburn.)"

# Sources - this month & What's Coming Next Month

Norm Saylor and I were sharing some of his stories and pictures. After I'd put away my notebook and was ready to leave, he handed me two thick plastic bound books. They were collections of hundreds of documents having to do with the Dartmouth Outing Club. I set aside the daunting task for some weeks. When I opened the books I discovered they had saved just about every piece of correspondence they'd ever received since the 1930's. See "A Window on the Past..." on page six. It was really quite something. There were no pictures however. That's where Pat Malberg, current DSAA president and six decades long visitor to Lake Mary entered the story. She is friends with the current president of the Dartmouth Outing Club who is Susy Struble. It was also Susy Struble who had given the books to Norm Saylor. Pat said she thought Susy had some pictures that she might be putting on a DVD. So she contacted Susy to check and encourage the project. I couldn't hold still, thinking about an archive of historical pictures that Norm did not have - yet and contacted Susy as well. She was very happy to send along a copy to the historical society as well. Just a few of the pictures are printed in this newsletter.

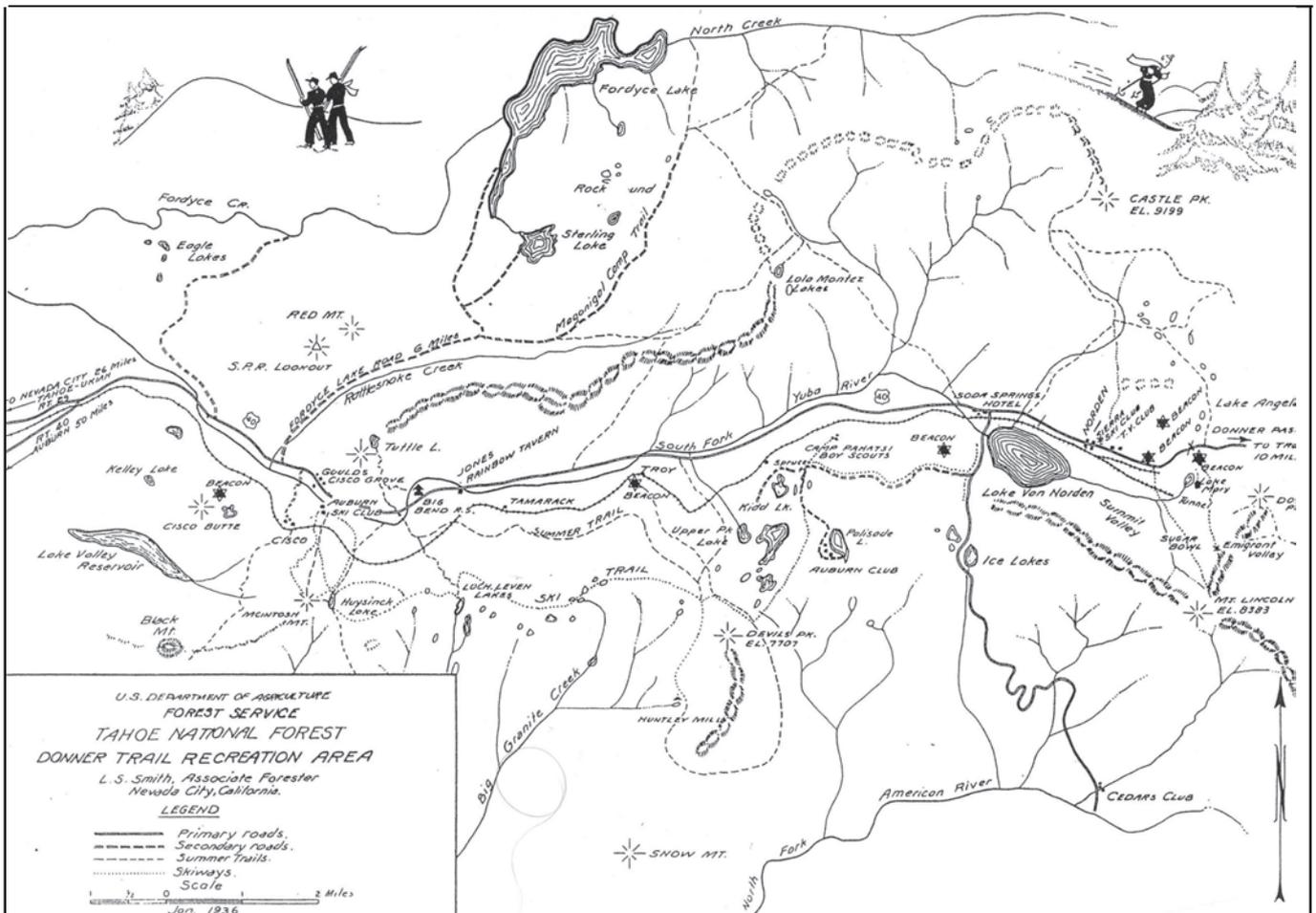
The pictures were bequeathed to the DOC "by Bob Allen, who was one of the original DOC'ers, passed away, maybe 4 years ago." Pat and I had been talking about Pat's childhood days on Lake Mary for awhile and eventually Pat consented to write next month's story - her reminiscences on Lake Mary. She then dug up some pictures to illustrate the story. You will enjoy the reading.

## A Window on the Past - A Meditation

The historical society received a large collection of Dartmouth Outing Club documents in two binders. The pictures printed here, along with many others, came later.

Reading through the volumes of materials of the Dartmouth Outing Club on Donner Summit was tedious at times. They put everything in letters. As I reflected on that I considered the differences between then and today. Today when we want to communicate with someone we do it quickly and sometimes in shorthand using quick telephone calls, email, instant messaging, etc. We never write letters. Mail volume of letters for the U.S. Post Office as dropped dramatically over the decades for example.

In the old days people wrote letters, volumes of letters. Most of the letters I perused for this issue were typed as well. There were letters about everything: I can't come to the picnic, a weather cover for the electrical service, cement for the fireplace base, I did not drain the sink trap, new double lift at Sugar Bowl in 1956, ordering cement delivery, accepting checks, and lots of thank you's. Often letters contained personal news in addition to the subject that occasioned the letters. It is really a window into the past when times were different, time went a little more slowly, and people communicated more fully. Consider any of those topics today. We'd dash off an email or make a quick phone call and go on to the next communication. We try to do so much more, but to what end? Maybe we've lost something.



# Donner Summit Recreation 1936

Courtesy of the U.S.F.S. "Donner Trail Recreation Area"

The Donner Trail Recreation area lies within the Tahoe National Forest adjacent to U.S. Highway 40. Through this historic area passed the survivors of the Donner Party in 1847, to be followed by other early emigrants who carved a rough crude road, now bearing markers to aid visitors in retracing this route. Through these game granite cliffs and following closely the old emigrant route, modern, all-year Highway 40 offers easy access to both summer and winter recreation seekers....

Langs [sic] Resort at Carpenter Flat offers accommodations, skis and toboggans,.

Goulds [sic] Cisco Flat resort has cabins, an eating place, and service station. Skis and toboggans are for rent.

The Cisco Hotel has accommodation and serves meals. This place is on the railroad and cannot be reached by auto in winter. Fishing supplies can be obtained in these places.

Big Bend Service Station furnishes meals and groceries.

Jones' Rainbow Tavern has a garage and mechanic, and accommodations for 40 to 50. Skis are for rent there.

The Soda Springs Hotel, 8 miles East on Route 40, has accommodations for a larger number, a garage and a service station. They have skis for rent in winter, and a good slide and cleared hill about 1/4 mile south, which runs out into Lake Van Norden.

Then there follows a list of summer trail trips, campgrounds, and "Ski Ways:" See the next page for trail trips.

# WWII on the Summit

When World War II arrived Donner Summit closed down except to through drivers. Sugar Bowl closed and John Ellis shut his enterprises and headed east, never to return. This article, from the *Sierra Sun* in May, 1942, "Wyoming Tourists Discover Army Means Business After Close Call" tells of two Wyoming tourists who had been taking pictures at Rainbow Bridge. They didn't stop when motioned to do so by army troops who had been instructed to prevent picture taking. "Twenty shots from a 'tommy' gun" failed to stop the car. The tourists were chased to Reno before they stopped. The *Sierra Sun* warns drivers to heed the rules.



## Editor's Note:

This month we ran the stories about the Summit in 1936, Johnny Ellis, and the Dartmouth Outing Club.

Next month we will run reminiscences of Pat Malberg on Lake Mary.

Previously, in our November issue we had a story about the first house in Kingvale.

There are lots of communities on Donner Summit from Cisco to Rainbow Bridge and we'd love to cover the history of them all. If you have stories, histories, artifacts, documents, please let us know: [info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

## 1936 USFS recommended "Trail Trips"

- Donner Summit Way (passes Devil's Peak \_ mile to north)
  - To Devil's Peak 9 miles
  - To Mt. Lincoln 18miles...
- Norden to Mt. Lincoln 2 \_ miles
- Soda Springs Hotel to Boy Scouts Lodge 2 \_ miles
- Soda Springs Hotel to Castle Peak 5 miles
- Norden to Castle Peak 4 miles