



Donner Summit Historical Society  
January, 2010 issue # 17 *Newsletter*

# Historic Plaque Back to Donner Summit (on loan)

On October 8 the Board of Directors of the Truckee Historical Society presented the Donner Summit Historical Society with the original plaque that was installed on Rainbow Bridge on Old Highway 40 at Donner Summit. The sign had been in storage for some years after having been "discovered" many years after it was stolen from the bridge. The story of the sign is a story for another newsletter.

Representing the THS was president Chelsea Walterscheid, Bob Bell, Judy Dunlap, Don Colclough, Billie Cornell, and Chaun Mortier. The plaque was received by Norm Sayler, Margie Powell, and David Africa of the DSHS.

The plaque was installed circa 1925 on the bridge and will be on loan, and on display at the Donner Summit Historical Society Museum in Soda Springs for at least the next few years.

Made of heavy bronze, the plaque depicts wagon trains, gold miners, Donner Lake, and other scenes from Summit history.

More pictures on the next page.

**In this issue:** Donations of historical items; longboards, movie reviews

**February:** Herb and Lena Fredericks and the Norden Store. Richard Bigelow, first US Forest Supervisor in Tahoe National Forest - circa 1908 to 1932. His life and times, as documented in his actual daily-work journal. Maybe we'll also get to Hitler's Last Soldier in America and start telling stories (that may or may not be true) about Donner Summit history.





Left: Chelsea Waltersheid and Norm Sayler take care of the paperwork.

Below from left: Chelsea Waltersheid, David Africa, Norma Sayler, and Bob Bell



# Thank You

## Donner Summit Historical Society Friends!

A big thank you to our Donner Summit Historical Society friends who so generously provided us with financial support during the past year, our first full year of existence! 2009 was marked by many accomplishments, most notably the grand opening of our museum during August, and the conception and launching of our 20 mile, Old Highway 40 museum. Without the support of our friends, much of this would not have been possible.

Jim Hoelter

Mike & Helen Abel  
David & Julie Africa  
Lawrence & Jane Baack  
Suzanne Bales  
Gene & Anne Bowles  
Cliff & Sue Busby  
Chuck & Kathy Cole  
John & Genevieve Colteaux  
Helen Conway  
Paul Craig  
Sandy Davini  
John Davis  
Joan Dedo  
Gordon & Ruth Steindorf  
Glenn & Nancy Johnson  
Walter & Murni Knoepfel  
Richard & Shirley Krug  
Bob & Nancy Link  
Edward & Judy Lieb  
Marline & Steve Mirasou/Houlihan  
Bill & Diane Zuendt

Bill & Nancy Oudegeest  
Shanna O'Hare  
Gregory & Bettee Palmer  
Jan Pisano  
Jim & Margie Powell  
David & Marianne Powell/McCarrol  
Jay Price  
Bob & Sharon Ruffner  
Norm Sayler  
James & Marjorie Schallau  
John Shaw  
Werner & Helle Siegert  
Richard Simpson  
Donald & Pat Malberg  
Bruce & Virginia Whittaker/Robbins  
Jim Wiggins  
Linda Zanetti  
Ralph & Melinda Mendelson  
David & Marsha Lose  
Chuck & Christina Oldenburg

Bradley & Pamela Ehikian  
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Robert & Donna Frassinello  
Brian & Karen Smith  
Michael & Sallie Smith  
George Spencer  
John & Bonnie Glover  
Bev Singer  
Evelyn Ellis  
Michael Fredrich Garth & Marcia Jocober  
Gary & Susan Harbison  
Richard Spickard  
Ray & Ann McClintock  
Daniel & Natalie Miller  
Patricia Lambres

Les Mielcasz

Ralph & Brenda Suter  
Truckee Donner Land Trust  
Linda Waddle  
Water Septic Service  
Dan & Emily Wexler  
Yoav & Robin Gal  
V & J Heffernon  
Jim & Denny Hoelter  
Donna Howell  
Starr Hurley  
Marcia Jocober  
Paul & Alice Minor  
Cheryl LaBel  
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# Donated Historical Items

The great strength of the historical society is its archive of historical pictures, pamphlets, postcards, posters, and other ephemera of the old days on Donner Summit. As I wrote that last sentence it occurred to me that maybe that is not the greatest strength. If you have visited the historical society's offices in downtown Soda Springs you have no doubt met Norm Sayler, historical society founder and raconteur when it comes to Donner Summit history. He loves the local history and he loves to share it. Get him started and the enthusiasm is contagious. But I digress.

We not only have a substantial archive of the above which includes Norm) but we are attracting the donation of historical items. We thought it time to begin to share that. The collage on the next page shows you just some of what has been donated. We hope that it will serve to encourage you to donate historical items that you may have and which you would like to share with other people.



Ultimately we are going to have a full size museum (see our museum goal on our website on the "goals" page) There will we be able to display all kinds of things - even machinery which has been promised. The donation to the left comes from Kathleen Dutra and Geraldine Hinkle. The chipmunk salt and pepper shakers and the postcard came from the Cisco Grove Forest Gift Shop. You have no doubt seen the small stone buildings across the street from Gould Park on Old 40 at Cisco Grove. It will be one of the stops on our 20 Mile Museum (see our website's "goals" page as well).

So, come in and enjoy our displays, then take a look in your archives to see what's there.

## Advice from 12/13/39

It is time to decide if you are going to use your own car, the bus or the train to get to and from the ski areas. If you use your own car, you will need a few new accessories: ski chains are required by law, and a ski rack and heater are desirable from the standpoint of comfort.

However, despite these slight additional costs (ski chains cost as little as \$2.95, ski racks run as low as \$3.98 and heaters as low as \$3.75, taking your own car is a pleasant way of traveling.

With our beautiful highways that lead into the mountains, the actual task of driving is much easier now than it was a few years ago when it was a good nine or ten hour trip to any of the ski fields. Now, it takes only about five hours to drive to any of the areas convenient to the Bay Region.



2 – 48 star U.S. flags; Dick Harmon, Alta, Ca (8)  
 "Long Board" skis made contemporarily; Dave Lose, Serene Lakes (2)  
 Donner Spitz Dining sign ca 1964; Jimmy Schuul, Norden (10)  
 RR sledge and peavey hook ca 1900; Darryl Patterson, Serene Lakes (3)  
 Display cases from I Magnin Department store in San Francisco; jim Gaston, Truckee (7)  
 Juke box and McGlashan butterfly case (one of the cases that held the McGlashan butterfly collection); R.C. Morton, Serene Lakes (5 & 11)  
 Desk ca 1890; Molly Breen, Soda Springs. The desk came from Bridgeport on the So. Yuba (6)  
 Summit 1956 Olympian "Mad Dog" Dick Buek's skis ca 1955; David Royer Donner Lake (4)  
 Sugar Bowl poster collection: Barry Cardwell  
 Royal Gorge posters and 1950's Serene Lakes pictures; David Ache, Royal Gorge  
 CD's of 1950's Serene Lakes pictures, old topos, and Ice Lakes Lodge brochures; Bob Olstad, San Diego  
 modern computer: Mark Himelstein, Serene Lakes  
 fax machine: Ken Hall, Serene Lakes  
 John Davis: printer, Serene Lakes  
 Jim and Denny Hoelter: skis/poles/sled, Serene Lakes  
 Judy and Ed Lieb, WWII army skis/poles, Serene Lakes  
 Charlie Houtz: old posters, Serene Lakes  
 Ursula Heffernon: ski garb, Woodland



# These are Really Neat!

These "longboards" as old skis were known, were donated to the Historical Society by Dee and Cathy Cullom in memory of Don and Betty Westcott of Lafayette. The Culloms found the skis in the house they bought in Soda Springs from the Westcotts. They were thinking about throwing them away, but decided on a better alternative.

The skis are interesting because they are so old and so long. Skis like that were called snowshoes in the nineteenth century and were used for the most prosaic of activities in Sierra mining camps: traveling over the snow in the daily course of business.

As you can imagine there was not much maneuverability with the long skis and the leather strap bindings so skiing was different from today. Besides the ski length the big difference was that a six foot pole was used in skiing instead of two shorter poles today. The pole was useful to push off and was used in stopping as well. The snowshoer pushed one end into the snow, held the other and "sat" on the middle.

If there's an activity there's a natural human desire to inject competition and longboard races followed in the Sierra. Racing was done on skis even longer than the ones donated. A pair more like racing longboards can be seen on page 4 up at the top of the page (and hanging from the ceiling in the DSHS building). Those skis, made and donated by Dave Lose of Serene Lakes, are about twelve feet long.

Racing was done over straight courses in groups of four racers. The winner of each heat would then compete against other winners. Town reputations and nice purses were at stake.

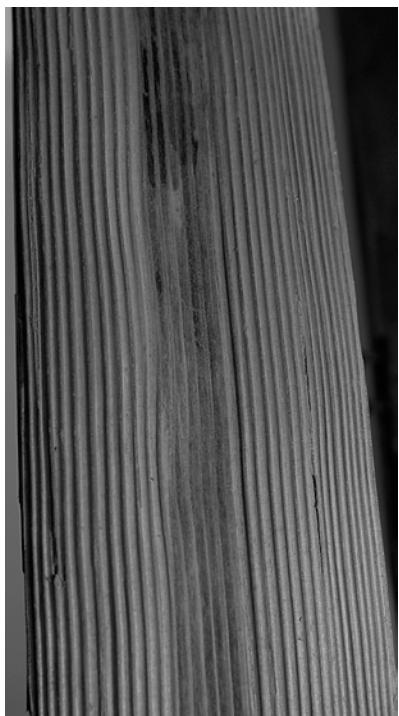
Dope was the key: The April 3, 1890 edition of Sacramento Daily Union said, "Dope is composed of different chemicals and drugs, sperm oil being the most important. There is dope for dry, dope for wet, for hard and soft snow. Each town, as a general thing, is the owner of a good recipe for making good race-dope, and guards it carefully against outsiders. A good recipe for dope, or a kind of dope which won previous races, is worth its weight in gold, and some men up here spend considerable time and money mating dope. The dope is rubbed on the bottom of the shoe and makes it as slick as ice."

The Daily Alta Californian 3/31/68 reports on "snowshoeing from Howland Flat" (in the Sierra near Poker Flat and La Porte) "Snowshoes are made of wood, are about twelve feet long, four inches wide, and one and a fourth inches thick in the centre.... The toes are turned up like a sleigh-runner. They are of the name width from end to end, and a "spring" is worked in so that without weight on they rest on the heels and points, but when the rider stands on them the weight is somewhat evenly distributed. A concave groove is made in the bottom... The bottoms are highly polished and then tar is burned in and rubbed until a fine mahogany-appearing finish is obtained... The rider stands a little back from the centre of the shoes, the feet being held by toe-straps of strong leather, that allow the foot to enter to near the ball, but that will not hinder it from slipping easily out in case of a fall. They are guided on the same principle as skates, but being so long of course are not near so easy to control. DOPE is the material for lubricating the bottoms of the shoes, and is intended to do away with friction at nearly as possible. So great has become the science in the manufacture of this article

that friction is now counted nearly nothing. The manufacture of dope requires both science and skill. The temperature of the snow is as variable as that of the atmosphere, and for every temperature of snow a different kind of dope is needed....

"**RACING TRACKS** Are chosen on steep side hills, and are generally about twelve hundred feet long, with an angle of depression of from fifteen to twenty- five degrees, being always in a direct line and as even as possible. The winning poles are set on comparatively level ground, in order to give the racers a chance to break up after passing through, which is done by dragging their pole....

"It will be easily understood that considerable velocity is obtained. In former races here and in other places the rate of speed has fully averaged seventy-five feet per second [51 mph], and at the time of passing through the poles been a little over one hundred feet per second [68mph]. Great steadiness is required in riding, and very perfect control over the shoes, but still, withal, the best riders sometimes fall, ploughing the snow and bounding in the air at a fearful rate. Seldom any serious injury is sustained from falling. The greatest danger lies in other riders coming in contact with one when falling, when there is great danger. During our races no accident happened to in the least mar the occasion, and I will venture the assertion that in no place but in California could so many men meet, contesting for prizes and the reputation of so many towns, and part in the utmost friendship



The April 3, 1890 edition of the Sacramento Daily Union says things had changed a bit or were never as good as the author above asserted: "Men have no idea how fast these runners go, unless they see them. It is more like flying, and the Lord helped the runner who gets nervous and falls, for it will kill him."

If you are interested in the subject some more, you can go to <http://www.plumassskiclub.org/> where you can get a little history and get information about modern longboard races. At Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmX7MSJXhk8> you can see old pictures and modern longboarding.

If you are even more interested, you can buy your own reproductions at <http://www.lightningboards.com/>

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## DSHS Gains New Associate

Sharon Ruffner has agreed to join the DSHS as an advisory board member.

Looking closely at the bottom of the skis above, you can see they saw a lot of use. The sap wood has been worn off leaving deep grooves. These skis were used a lot.

A third generation California native, Sharon and her husband Bob have been part time residents in Serene Lakes for 17 years. The Ruffners live full time in Carmichael where Sharon provides technical support to students and staff at the San Juan Unified School District. Sharon's mother-in-law was a Native Daughter of the Golden West and she shared her interest in Summit history. A more personal interest developed when she was invited by Margie Powell to help produce a 40th anniversary celebration of the Serene Lakes community. Sharon researched 4 decades of newsletters and spent hours with Norm Sayler digesting flyers, photos and clippings. Sharon realized that as a "youngster" it was her responsibility to absorb memories from the summit veterans and help to preserve them for future generations.

# Movie Reviews

## More Summit Movies

One quest our newsletter staff is on is to make our newsletter interesting by being eclectic. We've covered a variety of different topics from plain history and people to what could have been. In future we're working on an article about history UNDER Donner Summit. This time, our first movie reviews.

Serendipity is fun. As our research staff was researching material for Sugar Bowl's 70 anniversary which you've seen in the last three issues (October, November, December) we came across a lot which we did not use but which was fun.

One topic was movies set in Sugar Bowl (which is different from our March, 09 article about Summit movie making). We came across two.

The first was the 1941 tour de force, "The Art of Skiing," starring Walt Disney's renowned ski champion, Goofy. It is clearly set in Sugar Bowl because as you can see here the lodge is the "Sugar Bowl Lodge", top right. This movie only lasts a few minutes but the ingenuity and creativity of the Disney cartoonists is amazing particularly if you have not seen an old Disney cartoon in a long time. You can just imagine the brainstorming around the table as the cartoonists decided what Goofy should do next as he demonstrates skiing. This video is available in many places for you to watch on the internet, some versions are a little longer than others.

The second movie is a 1941 romantic comedy, "The Two Faced Woman," starring Greta Garbo and Melvyn Douglas. Most the filming was done in Hollywood but there are some ski scenes on Sugar Bowl slopes, filmed by doubles. Immediately as the film opens there are scenes of the first chairlift in California, the single chair Sugar Bowl lift, in operation. Late in the movie there are comedic ski scenes and if you watch closely you can see Castle Peak, Summit Valley, and Mt. Judah in the backgrounds. You can also see that the doubles are skiing from the very top of the Palisades (the area between Lincoln and Disney) not exactly where a beginner like Melvyn Douglas' character would be skiing.

Larry Blake, Melvyn Douglas, is a magazine publisher who has come on his doctor's orders to Sugar Bowl, called Snow Lodge, for a few days. He clearly doesn't like the cold and all of the injured skiers in the lodge are a "put off" for skiing. Looking out the window however, he sees Karin Borg, Greta Garbo, swooshing down the slopes. He has to learn to ski.

Larry ends up marrying Karin and plans to stay in Sugar Bowl to live simply, quietly and to write. That does not last long however when his New York partner shows up with bad editorial news about the magazine. Larry heads back for New York after a row with Karin. Larry has decided, after only a few minutes, that "simplicity as a steady diet would be a bore." There are now irreconcilable differences. Karin likes the simple life and says there something purifying about being rolled in snow. Karin felt badly however so she headed for New York too but when she arrives she sees Larry with a female Broadway director so she decides to pass herself off as a flashy twin sister of Karin. Mix ups, humor, and dramatic irony follow with a little parody of 1930's musicals. The comedic ski stunts are not something you'd want to





try anywhere except on flat ground.



Since this movie was made in 1941 you can see a slice of 1941 life: a fetching 1941 bathing suit, 1928 champagne, telephones and technology, fashion, décor, dancing, cigarettes, pay phones, and telegrams.



Besides the snow, lift, and scenery, there is another Sugar Bowl connection. Hannes Schroll, Sugar Bowl founder, was famous for telling people, “bend ze knees, bend ze knees.” As Melvyn Douglas first arrives at the top of the lift, Greta Garbo is exhorting the class to “bend ze knees” in a good Austrian accent.



The movie also stars Roland Young, Ruth Gordon, and Constance Bennett. The movie is available from Amazon.



**Pictured left from top:** Greta Garbo (her double) disembarks from the first chair lift in California at Sugar Bowl (note the single seat'); Melvyn Douglas is looking forward to skiing; Melvin begins his disembark; Melvin gets trapped by the ski lift and is carried away; he's being carried further away; getting on the lift with Greta watching as they ready to go up to ski (after the adventures in the previous pictures); and Greta watching Melvin on the lift.



## Too Much Competition? 1/19/40

Discussion at the Viking Ski Club in January 1940 revolved around “a new class of competition...class C, lower even than class B, taking in the novice and opening competition to almost everyone on the Slopes.

“The dangers of too much competition in skiing have been related several times. It has already been declared that if competition becomes too widespread among American skiers everyone will train assiduously toward the ultimate goal of being able to compete, never dreaming that there might be such a thing as skiing for the sake of the sport as relaxation.

“This condition has already come about in Europe. It came about simply because every skier heard nothing but competition from the very start, and it has resulted in the complete commercialization of the sport.

“There must be no unnecessary competitive fields opened if we are to keep skiing a sport to be enjoyed by all for its own sake.”

# Longboards to Olympics: A Century of Tahoe Winter Sports

by Mark McLaughlin

Award-winning Tahoe historian and author Mark McLaughlin's newest book, Longboards to Olympics: A Century of Tahoe Winter Sports is now available at local bookstores or at [www.thestormking.com](http://www.thestormking.com).

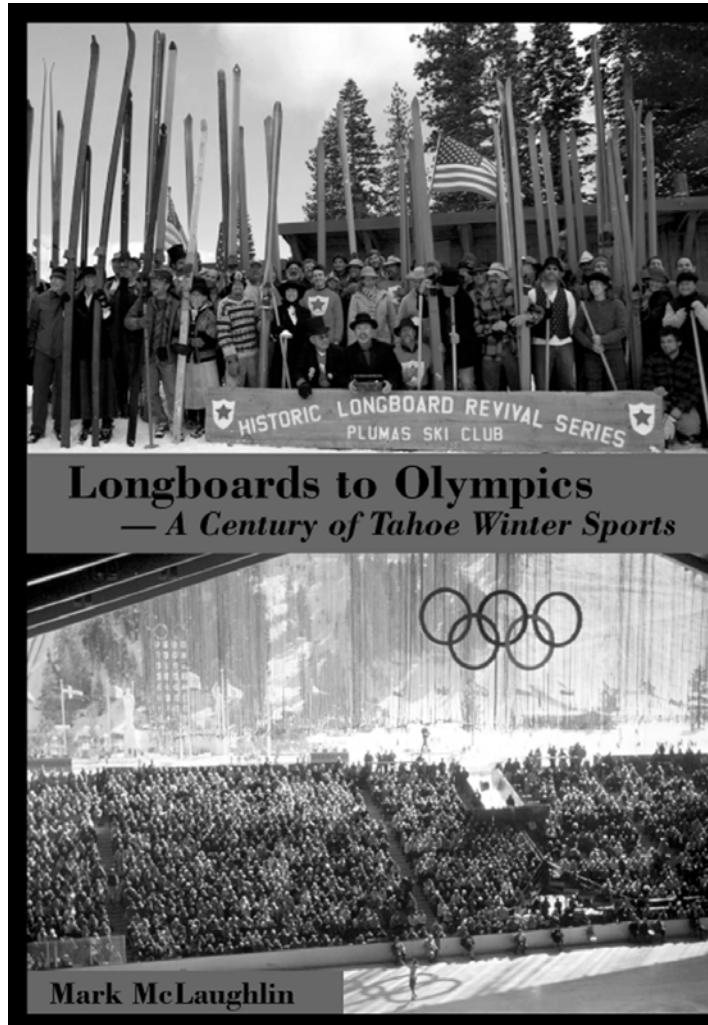
Longboards to Olympics is the only book that tells the fascinating story of how winter sports took Northern California by storm and captured the imagination of a nation. From the early exploits of skiing mailman Snowshoe Thompson, through the 1930s, a breakout decade for Skisport when thousands attended ski jumps in Berkeley and San Francisco. These well-illustrated stories conclude with the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley, the seminal event that launched Lake Tahoe into the international spotlight for world-class winter sports.

The book covers the world's first organized downhill ski races held in Plumas County where 19th century speed demons exceeded 90 mph on 14-foot long skis. Fueled by ego, money, and alcohol, these skiers were the fastest humans on the planet! Other chapters include the history of ski development in the Donner Summit region and the opening of Sugar Bowl in 1939. Recognition is also given to the veterans of the 10th Mountain Division who were largely responsible for the growth of the modern ski industry after World War II.

The 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics arrived on a wing and a prayer, but today are regarded as among the best Winter Games ever held. These Games embraced the hopes and dreams of the world's top athletes, while America's best amateurs proved that they too could perform miracles on ice and snow.

Illustrated with more than 180 images, many never before published, these uplifting and entertaining stories pay tribute to the character and accomplishments of the early pioneers who fired up western winter sports.

Longboards to Olympics: A Century of Tahoe Winter Sports, Mic Mac Publishing, 288 pages, softcover, \$24.95, [www.thestormking.com](http://www.thestormking.com) or call 530.546.5612. Books can also be purchased by mail. Please send check for \$28.95 (includes shipping and handling) to Mark McLaughlin, P.O. Box 483, Carnelian Bay, CA 96140



# **Thousands At Summit Over Last Weekend**

**Taverns Filled to Capacity  
As Cars, Trains Bring  
Throngs**

## **CONDITIONS IDEAL**

**Officers Busy As Autos Line  
Highways; Accidents  
Avoided**

Fully 5000 automobiles crowded the three mile stretch of Highway 40 between Soda Springs and the Donner Summit Sunday in the greatest single day movement of traffic ever observed in this section. Two state highway patrolmen were kept busy for ten hours convoying single lines of traffic over the three miles for 10 hours of the day.

Augmenting the many thousands who came by cars, the Southern Pacific ran a special train from San Francisco which carried many winter sport enthusiasts to the snow

With the exception of the tragic death of Frans Wiessman and six or seven minor hurts including one broken wrist, no accidents were reported. Dr. Bernard of Truckee has established an office at Soda Springs to be of assistance to anyone needing professional care in the summit area over the weekends.

The weekend was the first this year that afforded fans an opportunity to "strut their stuff."

Left from the January 18, 1940 Sierra Sun. Life was a little different for Summit visitors in those days, during the first month that there was enough snow that winter.

## **Placer County HAB Embraces DSHS**

Last month the Historical Advisory Board (HAB) of Placer County formally admitted the Donner Summit Historical Society to membership in their Historical Organizations Committee (HOC) by unanimous vote. The HAB advises and makes recommendations to the Placer County Board of Supervisors and the Department of Museums on all matters of historic, prehistoric, archival and museum planning and policies. The HAB has two committees that assist in this effort: the HOC and the Cultural and Historical Resources Committee. HOC membership also provides professional development, mutual support and networking opportunities. Margie Powell, DSHS Board Member and Secretary, will be representing our organization at their bi-monthly meetings. Margie pointed out that "this is an important step in the growth of our organization and we look forward to working with other the HOC members".

Beverly Lewis

# 20 Mile Museum

As this newsletter was coming to completion we had a great idea. Faithful readers will remember we've talked about the 20 Mile Museum before. We have been gathering sponsors, working on signs, and applying for grants (having earned one so far). You can see the idea outlined as well as a sample of the second sign at <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Old40.html> or you can see the first sign in person at the Summit Restaurant in downtown Soda Springs.

Below is the proposed text for history portion of our Tunnel 6 sign. It still needs work and we have to choose pictures, but maybe this will give you an idea of one of the projects we're working on while it's still in progress and maybe it will encourage you to join individuals and businesses who have sponsored signs so far. We were too close to deadline to include some pictures here.

Now that we've come up with this idea and we're working on a couple of dozen interpretive signs for the 20 Mile Museum, guess what will become a regular column here at least for some months?

## Tunnel 6 1866

Bam, bam, quarter turn; Bam, bam, quarter turn; bam, bam, quarter turn; all day long, three shifts a day, day after day, week after week. Chinese workers pounded away at the solid granite. One worker held a star bit, turning it a quarter turn as two other workers pounded the bit with 18 lb. sledges. Four teams at four separate faces making progress only inches a day, cut through 1659 feet of solid granite. Once a hole was drilled, it was packed with black powder, the fuse was set, and the workers ran. When the smoke cleared, workers hauled out the rubble - all by hand – no machines.

Imagine the courage holding a drill bit. Imagine the confidence in your friends. Imagine the accuracy of the sledge handlers; imagine their concentration, hour after hour.

That was Tunnel 6, the longest tunnel of the Sierra Crossing.

Working the solid granite went too slowly. They blasted a shaft straight down to open two more faces. Hauling the rubble by hand: too slow. A donkey steam engine was brought in to haul up the rubble.

When all four faces joined up, they were off by only two inches – after two years. Amazing.

Facing granite was not the only obstacle. The workers faced avalanches and heavy snows: 40 feet that first winter. Workers didn't see daylight for days at a time as they moved from their living sheds to the work faces through tunnel dug into the snow.

Nitroglycerine would speed the tunneling but still, work wasn't fast enough. The railroad hauled track, railroad cars and a steam engine over the pass above here, between Donner Peak and Mt. Judah, so they could continue building on the eastern side – to race across Nevada, to earn pay for miles, to beat the Union Pacific.

