

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

October, 2015 issue #86



CREATING “SOMETHING WHERE NOTHING WAS”

George R. Stewart and Donner Pass

by Don Scott

George R. Stewart felt that destiny kept bringing him back to the Donner Summit area. Eventually, his books about the Pass were so well-known that the State Park System “gave” him Donner Pass. But when he looked into the gift, he discovered the Pass was only a hole in the sky, and thus nothing. He spent much of his life making something out of that nothing.

Donald M. Scott,
George R. Stewart Biographer

George R. Stewart, Professor of English at UC Berkeley from 1923 through his retirement in 1964, was a distinguished best-selling author who had a pioneering interest in ecology and geography. His literary accomplishments and his quiet, scholar’s reputation made for successful books and the friendship of other well-known authors. He counted Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, C.S. Forester (who wrote *The African Queen*), and Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Frost among his close friends. Stewart became the leading scholar and writer for the Donner Summit area, spreading its history and geography worldwide. One of the books he wrote about the area, a best-seller, even changed human culture.

Stewart discovered the area (both literarily and literally) during his early days at Berkeley. He studied the Overland Migration diaries in the Bancroft Library, located just across the street from his office in Wheeler Hall and he hiked the central Sierra with a fellow Princeton graduate named Harold Osmer.

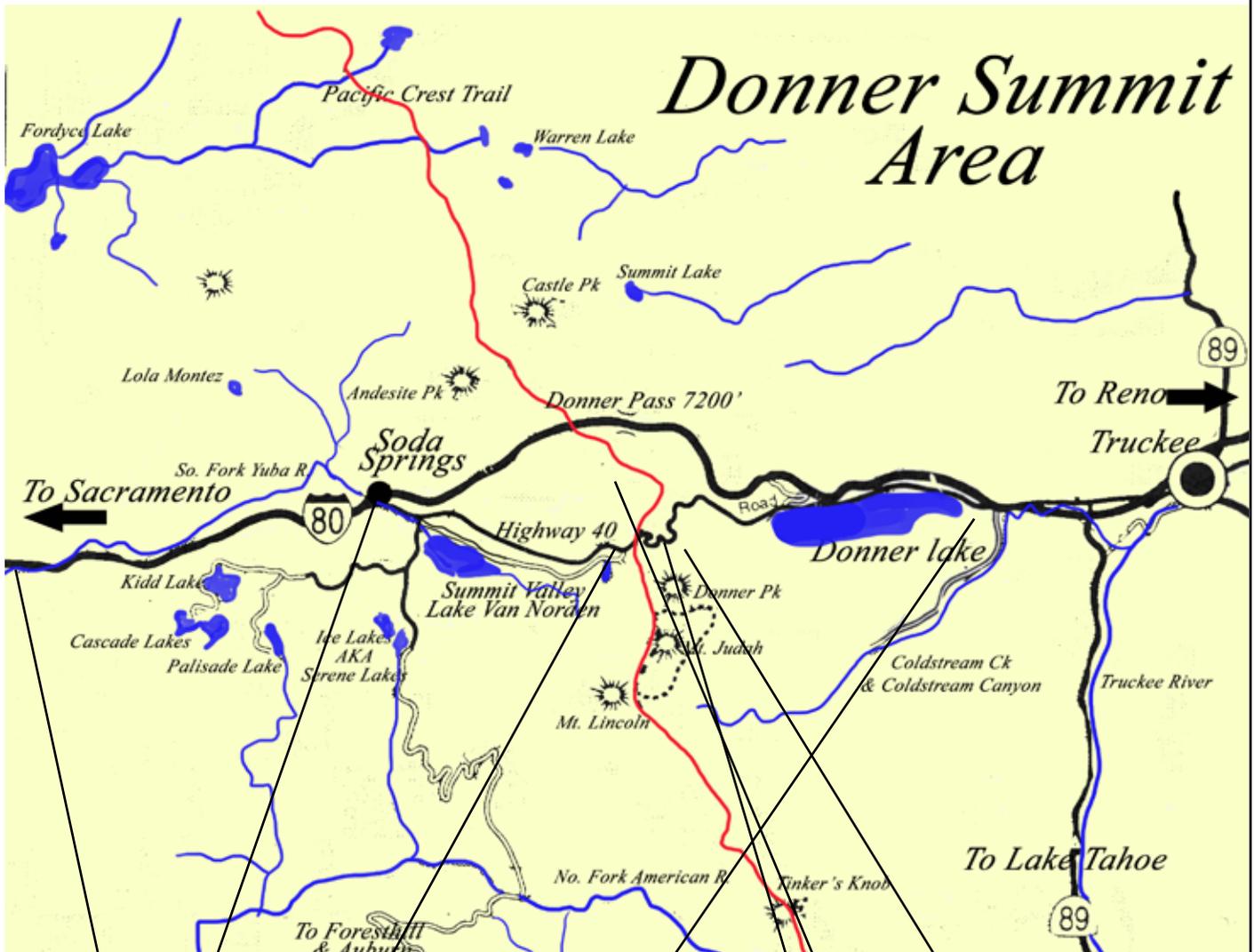
In the 1930s, Stewart’s growing interest in the history and geography of the area and his knowledge of the historic resources available for research helped convince him to begin writing about it. By then his strong interests in geography, history, and other disciplines not considered under the umbrella of “English” had put him at odds with a new English Department head. The new Head would not promote Stewart, and Stewart and his wife Ted had a growing family. So Stewart decided to write works outside the field of English, books simultaneously scholarly and popular, about California history partly as a means of supplementing his small salary.

"The Donner Summit Historical Society is to be commended for the fine work it's doing to interpret the summit area. Two of us traveled through recently, with Frank Brusca re-photographing scenes from George R. Stewart's U.S. 40. (<https://georgerstewart.wordpress.com/>) Since Stegner once said that GRS "made" Donner Pass, since several of Stewart's classic works are set there, and since a mountain at the Summit is name for GRS, I'm wondering if you plan to interpret his story?"

Cheers,
Donald M. Scott,
George R. Stewart Biographer
<https://georgerstewart.wordpress.com/>

The email above started things moving. Indeed, why has the DSHS not done something about George R. Stewart? Our editorial staff invited Mr. Scott to write an article for which he also supplied pictures. The the DSHS 20 Mile Museum Committee agreed a 20 Mile Museum sign for Stewart and Stewart Pk. would be a nice addition. The staff got busy and Mr. Scott solicited sponsors. You can see the results here.

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Unless otherwise noted, the photographs and other historical ephemera in The Heirloom's pages come from the Norm Saylor collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society

But what to write? At a meeting with Dr. Charles Camp at the Folio or Faculty Club Stewart said he'd become interested in the tragedy of the Donner Party, but the character of the participants was holding him back, though – “Why didn't they have better men?” he asked. Historian (and Paleontologist) Camp assured him they did have good men, telling him the story of the heroic Stanton who escaped but returned at the cost of his own life to bring food to the Donner camps. Convinced, Stewart began to research and write his epic history, Ordeal By Hunger.

Stewart bought a “vacation” cabin in Dutch Flat, and invited his colleagues in various disciplines to join he (and his family) there. Together, the Fellowship of Scholars walked the Donner route over the Sierra, making several discoveries along the way – the site of the Murphy fire, for example. Then Stewart sat down in his “scholar's tent” behind the cabin and began to write.

It proved a hard tale to tell. There were several locations, each with its own dramatic geography and history, so he had to keep moving back and forth in the narrative. He used the techniques of English fiction to make those transitions – and did that so well some readers think the book's a novel.

Along the way he made a great leap of thought. Stewart began to realize he was writing a book as much about geography as about the Donners. Their ignorance of the land created the tragedy. So in a literary move far ahead of its time he wrote the first “Whole Earth book.” He opened the book with the geographer's view of northern Nevada and the Donner Pass country from NEO – near-Earth-orbit – in 1936, mind you. (So accurately did he describe the region that when Astronaut Ed Lu of International Space Station Expedition 7 photographed it his image precisely illustrated Stewart's text.) Then Stewart moved down, into the ecosystem, to tell the story as an ecological tragedy.

At the end of his book, Stewart wrote one of the most important (and overlooked) statements in American literature: “I have in the telling often stressed the scene until the reader has, I hope, come to feel the land itself as one of the chief characters of the tale.” That is, decades before Earth Day, Stewart made the ecosystem – the “land” – a chief character in human drama.

The book was a best seller. It won the Commonwealth Club of California's Silver Medal. It has been republished several times. It's required reading along the California Trail. Most important, Stewart's focus on “the land” helped begin the process of thought-change which would ultimately lead to the Environmental Movement.

It was only the first of several major works by George R. Stewart to spotlight Donner Pass country. His first novel, *Storm*, is largely part set at Donner Summit. *Fire*, although not set at Donner Pass (in fact, not set in a real place at all) describes area local fire ecology as precisely as if it were set there. The California Trail, *An Epic with Many Heroes* and several shorter books about the westward movement detail the efforts of early wagon pioneers to surmount the difficult pass. 1953's *U.S. 40*, a landmark book which used U.S. 40 as a geographic guide to the central United States, has a page and photo devoted to the Pass. *Storm*, the first ecological novel, is an important book for the Donner Summit region. Stewart used the parallel story-telling of different groups of characters that he'd developed for *Ordeal By Hunger* moving back and forth between Division of Highway people, a telephone repairman, and a young couple traveling from Reno, among others. As the storm builds to a peak, there is real drama on US 40 as the highway Superintendent and his men work to keep the highway open, the telephone man tries to fix a downed transcontinental line, and the couple battles the snowy road.

Storm had world-wide influence on human culture, because it gave us the practice of naming storms. In order to make his point that the ecosystem, represented by the storm, is the chief character in the book, Stewart named the storm. He named his storm “Maria,” pronounced with a long “i,” thus also giving the wind its name.

Another book that highlights Donner Pass is *U.S. 40*, Stewart's non-fiction geographic book which followed the old highway from coast to coast, with photographs and typical regional geographic scenes along the way. The 92 locations and their descriptions were folded into a book which also essayed American trails, roads, and highways, described the sensations of driving in the mid-twentieth century, considered what makes a “road,” and examined road signs and names along the way. The brilliant maps of Edwin Raisz were sprinkled appropriately throughout the book, adding that dimension of the cartographer's art to the



George R. Stewart on the fire line somewhere in the Sierra researching for Fire

book.

The book contains several photographs and descriptions of “Stewart Country,” that area of the Sierra centered on Donner Summit, including one of “Donner Pass.” The Donner Pass photo was taken from a ledge above the current rock climbers’ parking lot just east of the Donner Memorial Bridge. Central to the photograph are the bridge, the pass, and a small but distinct mountain peak then unnamed. Looping gently up and around the mountains and over the bridge is historic U.S. 40.

Less dramatic but as important geographically, “Snow Scene” shows cars of the era parked in snow along old U.S. 40 just west of the summit and past Sugar Bowl resort. Several other photos interpret the geology along the old road between Truckee Canyon and the western Sierran foothills.

U.S. 40 has had a major influence on literature, even giving birth to one “descendant” work – Vale and Vale’s U.S. 40 Today. U.S. 40 also helped inspire William Least Heat-Moon’s American classic, Blue Highways. Several chapters in another Least Heat-Moon book, Roads to Quoz, are devoted to Stewart and U.S. 40 (although not the Sierra sections). German filmmaker Hartmut Bitomsky’s film, U.S. 40 West, often has a copy of Stewart’s book in the frame. The book is mentioned by Larry McMurtry in his Roads. (McMurtry calls Stewart a “much under-appreciated writer.”)

Frank X. Brusca, who’s profiled in Roads to Quoz, is currently re-photographing Stewart’s original locations, including Donner Summit, using today’s imaging technology. To learn more about the project, and Stewart’s book, visit FXB’s Kickstarter video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKM2Cscy97Y>. The project didn’t get funded, but Brusca is proceeding none-the-less. He re-photographed the Donner Summit area in June of 2015.

After Stewart died in 1980 his son Jack – distinguished US Geological Survey scientist Dr. John Stewart – led a movement to name a peak for his father in the Donner Pass country. He chose that small but distinct unnamed peak just to the north of the rainbow bridge. GRS’s name had been put on a trail near San Francisco, but after he died the trail was abandoned by the state parks. Jack, who knew how much place-naming meant to his father and how much the trail-naming pleased him, invited several people to submit letters of support for the idea of naming the mountain for him. The writers included a California Supreme Court Justice, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, a California State Park Ranger, and others. Wallace Stegner, who once called Stewart “a much more important writer than the general public knew,” wrote in his letter that “he [GRS] practically invented Donner Pass.”

The members of the USGS Board of Geographic Names were convinced, and the mountain was named for Stewart.

“George R. Stewart Peak”: Peak, elevation 2,252 m (7,389 ft.), 0.8 km (0.5 mi.) NE of Donner Pass and 2.4 km (1.5 mi.) W of Donner Lake; Nevada Co., Calif.; sec. 16, T 17 N, R 15 E, Mount Diablo Mer.; 39° 19' 26" N, 120° 19' 07" W.

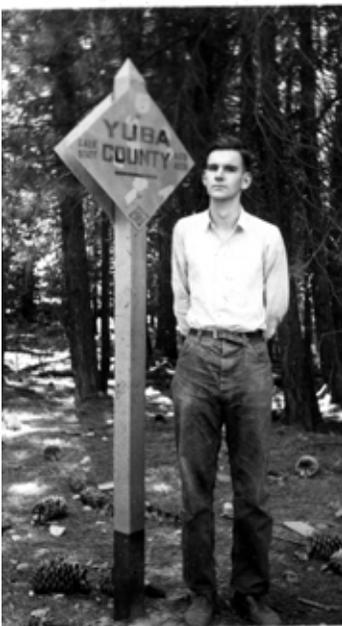
<http://geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnis> website of the USGS Board of Geographic Names

Stewart’s name is in good company. Nearby Donner Peak honors those he wrote about so eloquently in Ordeal by Hunger. McGlashan Point is named for he who first wrote of the Donners (if too sensationally). Mt. Disney is named for Walt Disney, a great fan of Stewart’s who filmed both Storm and Fire for his TV series. Stewart will now be, if not for eternity, for a time that seems eternal to humans, among giants like himself.

If you live in or love the Donner Summit area, I recommend a hike to the top of the Peak. It’s an easy; a saunter, really. Start at the Pacific Crest Trailhead on US 40. Hike a short distance



C.S. Forester (author of Horatio Hornblower and The African Queen) shares a picnic with Ted (Theodosia) and George Stewart. Ted’s in the white blouse; GRS is in the shade wearing dark glasses.



Jack Stewart photographed by George Stewart

north. You'll see a slight side trail heading east. Follow that to the top of George R. Stewart Peak. Sit for a while, and contemplate the country Wallace Stegner tells us GRS invented. "George R. Stewart Country."

I also recommend reading Stewart's books – especially those set in the area. *Ordeal by Hunger*, *Storm*, *The California Trail*, the wonderful guide *Donner Pass* and *Those Who Crossed It*, and *Fire* are the most Donner Summit-centered. Most have been reprinted many times, so they're easy to come by. (If you find a good first edition, buy that! GRS is becoming collectible.) The *Donner Pass* guidebook is still as good a guide as you'll find, although it predates the Interstate era.

George R. Stewart was a ranger of the mind, climbing ahead over the passes of thought, then leading others there. At Donner Summit, he did the hard scholarly and field work to make "nothing" into "something." Along the way, he wrote some fine books, introduced the Whole Earth/ecological perspective and the practice of naming storms, then gave his name to a mountain. Read the books and climb the Peak and you'll follow in Stewart's footsteps, blending good physical activity in the beauty of Donner Summit Country with the mental stimulation from his remarkable stories. In the best sense of the original meaning of the word – and George R. Stewart was passionate about the meanings of words – you'll know true re-creation.

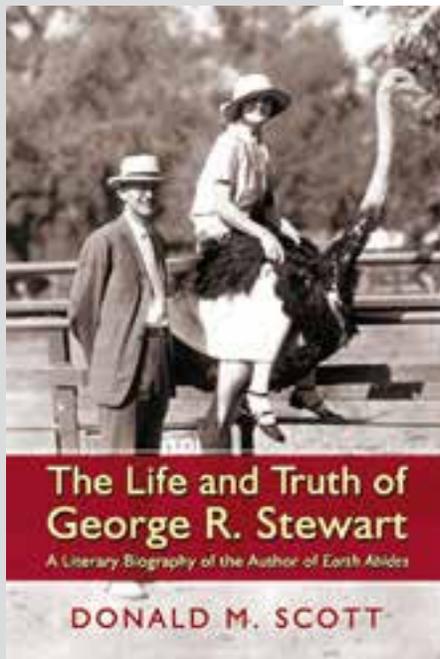


Stewart family car on Kingsbury Summit - photo by George R. Stewart.

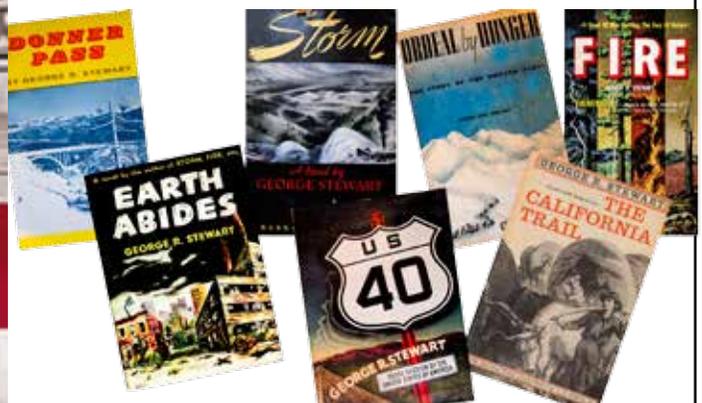
Donald M. Scott is the author of the Stewart biography, [The Life and Truth of George R. Stewart](#) (below). He has taught in high schools, adult schools, and in community college. He has worked as a National Park Ranger-Naturalist in several national parks. He was also the NASA aerospace educational representative for several western states, working with NASA astronauts and scientists to develop educational programs, which he presented to students and teachers. His home base is in Arroyo Grande, California, where he is working on his next book.

Mr. Scott would be happy if you buy his book but does not necessarily recommend that because, as a limited scholarly edition, it's expensive. Instead he suggests that your local library buy or you buy it for your library and take the tax donation.

Mr. Scott's website about George R. Stewart is: <https://georgerstewart.wordpress.com/>



Link to the George R. Stewart Collection at the University of Nevada at Reno:
<http://knowledgecenter.unr.edu/specoll/stewart.html>



Some of Stewart's books.



Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass

George R. Stewart Pk. ●

“He practically invented Donner Pass.”

Wallace Stegner

History

The distinctive dome-shaped peak to your north is “George R. Stewart Peak,” named for the “leading scholar and writer about the ...area, who spread its history and geography worldwide.”*

George R. Stewart’s best-selling epic *Ordeal by Hunger*, the story of the Donner Party, combined human history with geography from space and Earth. It has been called the first “Whole Earth book.” Much of the research for *Ordeal by Hunger* was done in the Sierra; after scholarly hikes, he would retire to his “scholar’s tent” behind his Dutch Flat cabin to write.

Storm, the first ecological novel; *Fire: The California Trail*; *Donner Pass and Those Who Crossed It*; and *U.S. 40*, were also about or included Donner Summit. Even *Earth Abides* mentions Donner Summit. In *Storm*, Stewart named his storm Maria (long i) as the chief character, which gave the wind its name and led to the naming of storms.

Stewart considered the land – the ecosystem – a character in any human story. That idea, “taught” through his best-selling books, helped inspire the modern environmental movement.

“George R. Stewart Peak” was named in 1984 by the U.S. Board of Geographic Names.

*Don Scott, author of *The Life and Truth of George R. Stewart*

A Good Story

George R. Stewart believed in vigorous field research. Daughter Jill (Jill Stewart Evenson) remembered her father’s hikes from their Dutch Flat cabin in search of the Donner Party Trail, (and his disappearance into the “scholar’s tent” to write when he returned). Son Jack (Dr. John H.) Stewart recalled joining his father’s wanderings over the Donner Summit and Yuba Gap country, seeking evidence of covered wagons; and how excited he was when they found traces of rust on the Sierra granite from iron-clad wagon wheels.

Wife Ted (Theodosia) remembered how much she worried over the chances he took. To get the feeling of a Sierra storm for *STORM*, for example, George Stewart once rode a locomotive cowcatcher through a snow flurry to the top of Donner Pass. Ted, who had driven to the Pass to meet him, found him almost frozen. But it paid off. By the time the research for his novel *STORM* was finished, he could feel the storm in his soul.

Later, George Stewart took his grandchildren, Anna, Edward, Eric, and Willie, on expeditions to exotic places, thus carrying on the family tradition.

Things to do right here

There’s lots to do: climb Stewart Pk. – take the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) and turn off just after the switchback. Watch the rock climbers. Explore the Native American petroglyphs at the turn below the bridge. Walk the Lincoln Highway. Explore the other 20 Mile Museum signs.

Climb Donner Pk. (from the PCT on the south side of Old 40) and look straight down 1000 feet to Donner Lake.

This sign sponsored by:

Willie Stewart
Joyce Colbath-Stewart
Steve and Carol Williams

Beth Lapachet & Brian Byrne
Bob Lyon
John and Angela Lucia

Denise and Milt Barney
Paul F. Starrs
Alan Kaplan

Top and bottom pictures Donner Summit Historical Society, center picture, courtesy of Anna Evenson

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Top: the view from Stewart Pk. looking south. The Donner Summit Bridge is in the center. Donner Pk. and the snowsheds are above.

Center, George R. Stewart.

Bottom, a few of Stewart’s books.

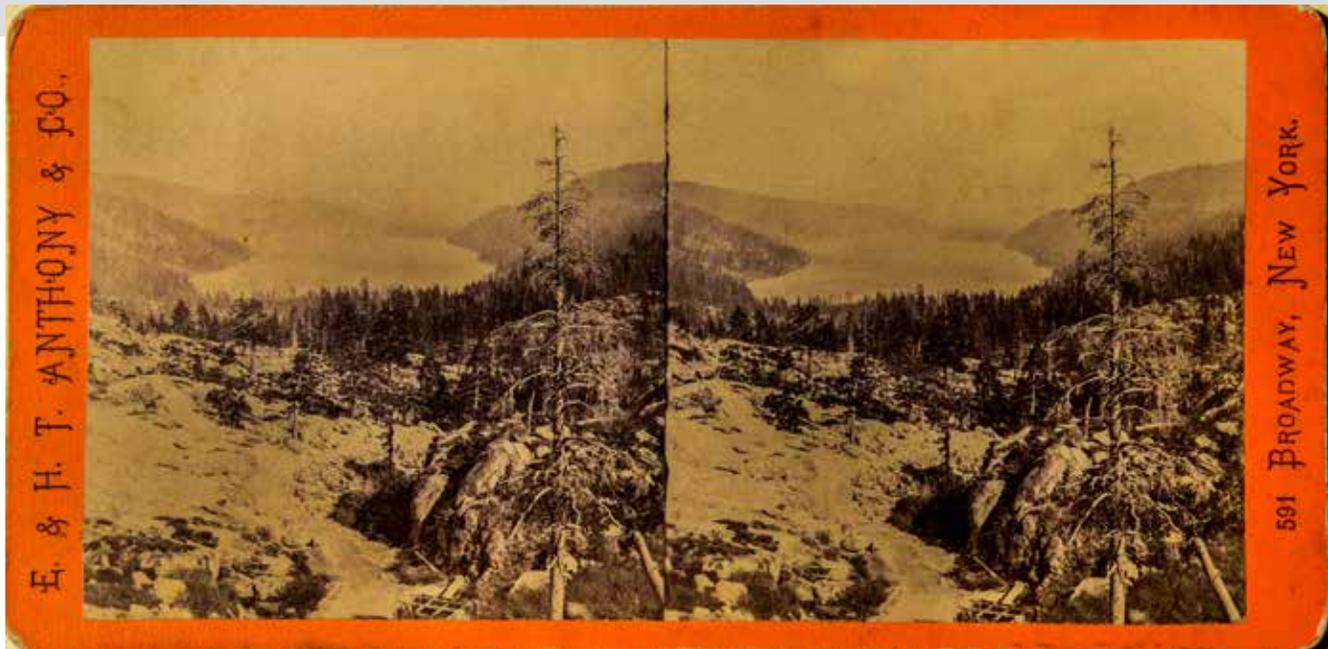


At the instigation of Don Scott, biographer of George R. Stewart, the DSHS 20 Mile Museum committee began work on a new 20 Mile Museum sign, one of two new ones being done in 2015. With the permission of Nevada County, this sign will sit in the pullout on Old 40 just above the Donner Summit Bridge. Since sign production at the sign factory takes six weeks or so, the sign will probably be installed in 2016 after snow melt. Most 20 Mile Museum signs are stored in winter to prevent damage by snow machines. This sign is being sponsored by fans of George R. Stewart and like all the 20 Mile Museum signs, is two feet square.

Interesting little facts:

Stewart Pk. is the 1273rd highest peak in California and the 12492nd highest in the U.S. Its GPS location is 39 19 N 120 19 W

Looking for the Ledge



Marshall Fey is an eminent Emigrant Trail historian. He wrote [Emigrant Trails](#) which we reviewed in our April, '11 [Heirloom](#) and his articles have appeared in the [Heirloom](#) from time to time (see the [Heirloom](#) article index on our website and find "Fey, Marshall"). One day last summer he received the picture above* of Donner Lake in the distance taken in the late 19th Century. The road in the foreground is the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. As Marshall looked closely at the picture he got to thinking.

No doubt the builders of the railroad, who built the Dutch Flat Rd. to help with railroad construction and serve as a toll road, followed pretty closely the Emigrant Trail up Donner Pass. That "trail" was used by emigrants in 1844, 45, and even in 1846 until emigrants began using Roller and then Coldstream Passes just to the south. The wagons that used this Donner Pass would have taken the least difficult route. Likewise, thought Marshall, so would have the road builders. That being the case it might be possible to follow the route of the Dutch Flat Rd. and find the spots that gave the emigrants so much trouble, the ledges where they had to haul up the wagons using logs as slides or ropes and winches as memorialized in the Harold Von Schmidt painting which is at the Donner Memorial State Park and on the next page.

The first party to successfully travel through Donner Pass with wagons was the Stephens-Murphy Party (read [Truckee's Trail](#), reviewed in our 2/09 [Heirloom](#)) which crossed in 1844 with half of their wagons. Moses Schallenberger, age 17 was left at Donner Lake to guard the other wagons and stayed there alone most of the winter. His reminiscences laid out the difficulty of the ledge.

Schallenberger said, "The snow on the mountains was now about two feet deep...." The party reached the head of the lake and started up. "All

The main party then started to cross the mountain, flowing the north side of the lake to its head at the base of the mountain, the emigrants unloaded the wagons, harnessed to them double teams, and started toward the summit. The contents of the wagons were carried in their arms. About halfway up to the top of the mountain a perpendicular rock ten feet in height was discovered lying across their path, and they thought they would be forced to abandon the horses and cattle and everything but the few goods that could be carried over on their shoulders. At length, however, a narrow rift in the rock was discovered, of just sufficient width to admit the passage of one ox at a time. The yokes were removed, and the cattle driven through. The latter were then stationed near the upper edge of the rock, the harness was replaced on them, and chains were attached to the tongues of the wagons below. The men at the bottom then pushed the wagons upward as far as they were able, while the oxen tugged at the chains, and thus one by one the wagons were all finally landed on the other side of the barrier.

Martin Murphy 1844

The wagons Were Unhitched Again and Pulled Over the Second Granite Ledge Martin Murphy was a member of the 1844 Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, was with the first covered wagon train to encounter the granite ledges and successfully cross the summit into California.



Harold Von Schmidt painting at the Donner Memorial State Park at Donner Lake.

When we reached Sierra Nevada mountains they looked terrible. There was no sign of any road or trail. I went up the mountain with others to look out the best way, and we all pronounced it impassable for wagons. But before we got back some of the wagons had passed some of the places we had considered impassable. So we hitched up our team and made a start, and when we came to benches of rock six and eight feet straight up and down we would unyoke our oxen, drive them around to some low place, get them above the bench yoke up the oxen. In the mean time some of us would cut some long poles strong enough to bear up the wagons and lay them up on the rocks. Then take enough chains to reach back to the wagons, hitch to the end of the lounge, and pull the wagon up, in this way we reached the top of the mountain.

David Hudson 1845

the wagons were unloaded and the contents carried up the hill. Then the teams were doubled and the empty wagons were hauled up. When about half way up the mountain they came to a vertical rock about ten feet high. It seemed now that everything would have to be abandoned except what the men could carry on their backs. After a tedious search they found a rift in the rock, just about wide enough to allow one ox to pass at a time.” The oxen were led up. Men and cattle then lifted the wagons up the rock face.

That quote comes from [The Opening of the California Trail](#) which is a short book of “the story of the Stephens Party from the reminiscences of Moses Schallenger as set down for H.H. Bancroft about 1885” and “now” edited by George R. Stewart, eminent Donner Pass historian, see page 1. Stewart notes in his footnotes at the end of the book that he’d tried many times to find the rock but without success. He wished “good hunting” to others. The main trouble was that there has been so much work for the railroad, roads and “pole lines” that things had changed too much to be certain. He did say he’d found rust marks down lower but nothing specifically determinative. Since Stewart’s investigation there’s been even more excavation for a fiber optic cable and a petroleum pipeline, destroying clues.

The picture Marshall Fey received in the summer renewed his curiosity about the “vertical rock.” Maybe it was worth another look so he sent out some invites and 11 people showed up (next page lower left) to look for the rock and get a little tour from Mr. Fey. The 11 included the DSHS Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) and some members of the Truckee Donner Historical Society.

The group met on Old 40 down three curves from the bridge at a wide spot in the road where the Lincoln Highway almost touches Old 40, where there is a 20 Mile Museum sign for the snowsheds and where there is a new Lincoln Highway marker.

We walked a couple of hundred yards down the old highway and then up hill for a view down, close to the spot from which the Donner Lake picture was taken. We got the “lay of the land” and then went down the old highway to a steep, almost vertical, granite slab that occupied the only way up the mountain. Wagons would have had to go over it since going around is not an option as you can see.

There are other vertical rocks but our particular vertical rock, above, is on the route up from the lake and the wagons would



The possible lower ledge. Walking is difficult. Taking wagons unimaginable except that the emigrants did it and somehow negotiated the rocks. The debris at the top shows some of the disruption of what was original that has occurred over the years making final determination fo emigrant routes hard. That's Marshall Fey in the red cap.

have had to negotiate it somehow. Someone with more knowledge or archeological skills, and maybe a metal detector, will be necessary to make a certain determination.

Thanks to Marshall Fey again, first for the hike, then the interpretation, and finally an email with quotes and pictures. The quotes are seen here.

*in the picture on page 7 look at the very bottom center right. What is the structure there?



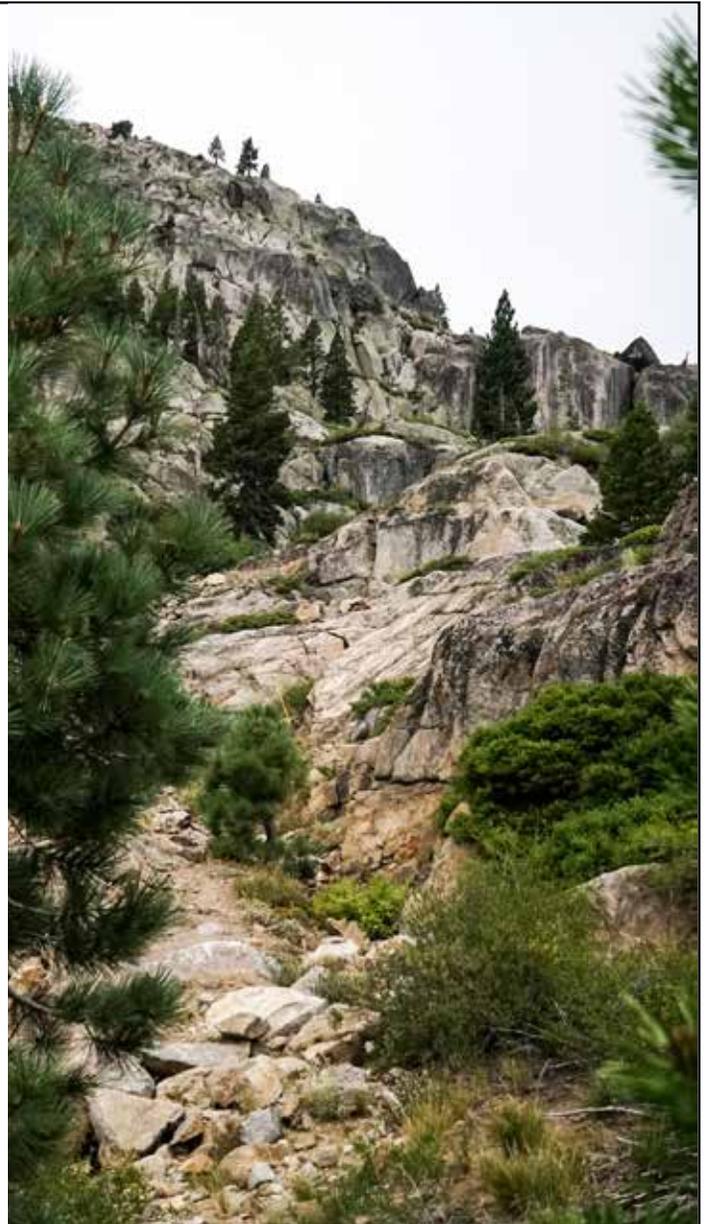
We camped at the foot of the mountains for several days, waiting for other emigrants ... 10 join us. After a day's traveling we came to a rim rock ledge where there was no chance to drive up, so the wagons were taken to pieces & hoisted to the top of the rim rock with ropes, the wagons were pm together again, reloaded, & the oxen which had been lead through a narrow crevice in the rim rock, were hitched up & we went o,i. Once again in the Sierras we came to a rim rock that could not be mounted, & repeated the process of hoisting the wagons up. It took us 4 days to reach the summit of the mountains.

Benjamin F. Bonney 1845

The lower ledge GPS
N39° 10.02T W120° 18.998'



Modern Lincoln Highway marker just off Old 40 below the 20 Mile Museum snowshed sign



Upper right, how did emigrants ever negotiate topography like this without giving up and going home?

Above, the upper ledge the group explored. Maybe it's the ledge?

Right, the group exploring a possible route up above the ledge in the picture above.





Someone had been there before us but who? There are quite a few trail Emigrant Trail markers to keep you on track.

Above right, looking towards Donner Lake from the upper ledge.

The lower ledge and then the lower ledge closer up to the right.

Below, the area around the lower ledge showing how difficult travel was and how maybe the only route was over the lower ledge and so that may be the rocks Moses Schallenger and others were talking about.

Unfortunately people in the old days were more concerned with getting to California than with leaving us complete records. Don't make that mistake. Write in your diary tonight.



From the DSHS Archives



Cisco Grove

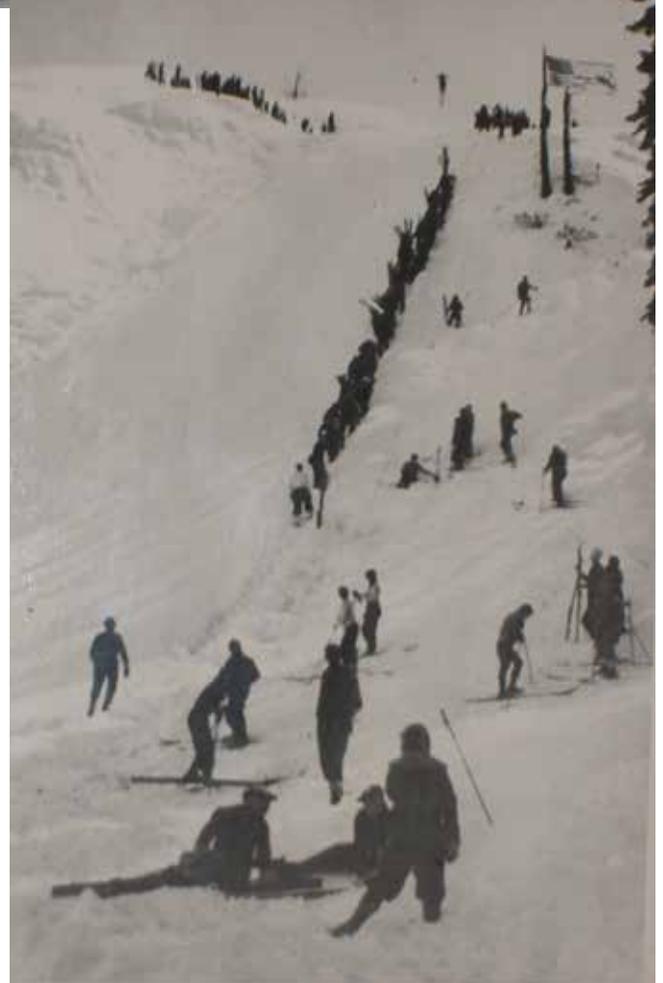
Today Cisco Grove is a sleepy community of second homes along I-80 and the Yuba River. In the old days it was a bustling little town serving travelers on Old Highway 40, the trans-Sierra route that was the precursor to I-80. There were lots of services for travelers along the old highway and Cisco was one spot. Above you see a gas station renting out cabins, the Cisco Grove Store and another building.

Take the Cisco Grove exit from I-80 and go to the north side and then turn right. You will find a couple of stone buildings and a 20 Mile Museum sign. Then look closely as you go up the road. There are stone foundations from old buildings that served tourists. They were removed to reduce the tax burden on the owners after the freeway came and people no longer had to stop frequently, could travel faster and further, and were not caught in slow traffic. Reno and Tahoe are only a little ways further. Why stop at Cisco?

The picture above is pre-WWII. The stripe in the highway is continuous. Road stripes changed to dashed lines with the war to conserve resources.

The Cisco above is the second Cisco. When Cisco was the end of track for the railroad a town of a few thousand people was up the hill from the current gas station on the south side of the freeway. Maybe we'll have those pictures next month.

Before the Auburn Ski Club moved to Boreal Ridge up the new freeway, their clubhouse and ski area was at Cisco. Their ski hill is to the right.



See the [Heirloom](#) for the Cisco Boat Sled in our 12/11 and 2/12 issues. Check the indices on our website for other photographs of Cisco.

From the DSHS Archives

Donner Pass in the Old Days – 1876 to be specific
A fellow takes a train ride over the Summit.

From 10,000 Miles by Land and Sea by Rev. W.W. Graves 1896

Donner Pass in the Old Days – 1876 to be specific
A fellow takes a train ride over the Summit.

From 10,000 Miles by Land and Sea by Rev. W.W. Graves
1896

From Truckee to the summit, in a straight line, is only eight miles, but the rise is nearly 1,200 feet the engineer knew right well that this Goliath could never be conquered by any straight ahead shot ; like a wily warrior, he overcame came by strategy. Harnessing to the train three locomotives of well-tried metal, he begins maneuvering in the mists of early morning ; now outflanking the foe by running along the base, now attacking from one side at an easy angle, and now charging full in the face, escaping the avalanche by stealing under snow-sheds, gradually gaining ground, until finally the iron horse, "rejoicing in his strength" and "mocking at fear," cleaves right through the solid granite for over 1,600 feet, and comes forth snorting on the summit of the Sierras. Oh ! it is a glorious achievement. The spirits that entered into the struggle now rejoice together. The excitement of the ascent, the bracing mountain air, and the magnificent scenery, can hardly fail to stir up the most stagnant soul.

Above us rise snow-capped peaks-hoary-headed sentinels of the ages on whose brow

" Summer and winter circling came and went,
Bringing no change of scene."

Off to the right, its deep gashed sides thickly clad with evergreens--as if to hide the scars of some great and sore struggle--is a vast gorge through which Yuba river, rejoicing in an opening, is laughing and leaping in numerous cascades and waterfalls. Ahead, and hiding the Mecca of our pilgrimage, is a broad mountain belt, over which the eye wanders conjecturing our course. Turn whichever way we will, there meets the eye some new object of beauty or sublimity--towering peaks stained and weatherworn, lofty



10,000 MILES

BY

LAND AND SEA.

BY REV. W. W. ROSS.

TORONTO :

JAMES CAMPBELL & SON,

1876.

ranges forest-clad from foot to crown
bluffs dark and defiant, moss-covered crags and naked granite glistening in the morning sun, yawning chasms cleft by Titan forces, sleeping lakelets, sparkling streamlets, foaming rivers and thundering cataracts - these are some of the features belonging to the marvellous scenery of the Sierras.

To thoroughly enjoy these enchanting heights one should spend a few days at the Summit House [Summit Hotel on Donner Summit – see the Heirloom for 7/13 (Art Clark Finds the Summit Hotel) and 2/11, 4/11, and 5/11 for Summit Hotel Parts 1-3]], where he will find ample and excellent accommodation.

The view from the car windows is much broken by the great extent of tunnel and snow-sheds. Still, by being on the alert for every opening, and by rushing out of the car at every station, the traveller may get more than passing

glimpses.

The snow-sheds, without which it would be quite impossible to cross the mountains in winter, will well repay a careful inspection ...when we remember the immense fall of snow on the Sierras - from 20 to 30 feet, sometimes as deep as 60 feet-, also the vast avalanches which, loosed by a spring sun, come sweeping from the summit across the track, then will be clearly seen the importance of strongly-built sheds. And they are of enormous strength. The frame is of heavy timber, sawed or round, and the roof usually of iron. There the line crosses a "divide," or level lands, not exposed to avalanches, the roof is sharp and steep, like our houses in Lower Canada. Where the track runs along the mountain side, exposed to slides, the roof is one-sided, sloping sharp up against the rocks. Hence, the avalanche passes harmlessly over on its way down the declivity.

Every possible precaution is taken against fires in the summer season. Stationed at the summit is a train of water-cars attached to a locomotive with steam always up, ready at a moment's notice to fly to any point of danger.

From the Summit to Sacramento is 104 miles, but the fall is 7,000 feet. Some idea of the down grade may be gathered from the fact that, a few days before I crossed, a runaway freight car struck a snow-shed in an advanced stage of construction, and knocked down 300 yards of it. From the Summit to the foot-hills we pass through the grand timber belt of the Sierras. ...

Thirty miles from the Summit we enter the Great American Canyon. Winding along walls 2 1000 feet high ; clinging to sides rising so steep from' the water's edge that even a footman is unable to pick a passage through; looking down upon the dark river, foam-flecked and writhing like a huge serpent hemmed in and tortured, is a scene seldom surpassed in the wild and thrilling.

[punctuated as in the original]

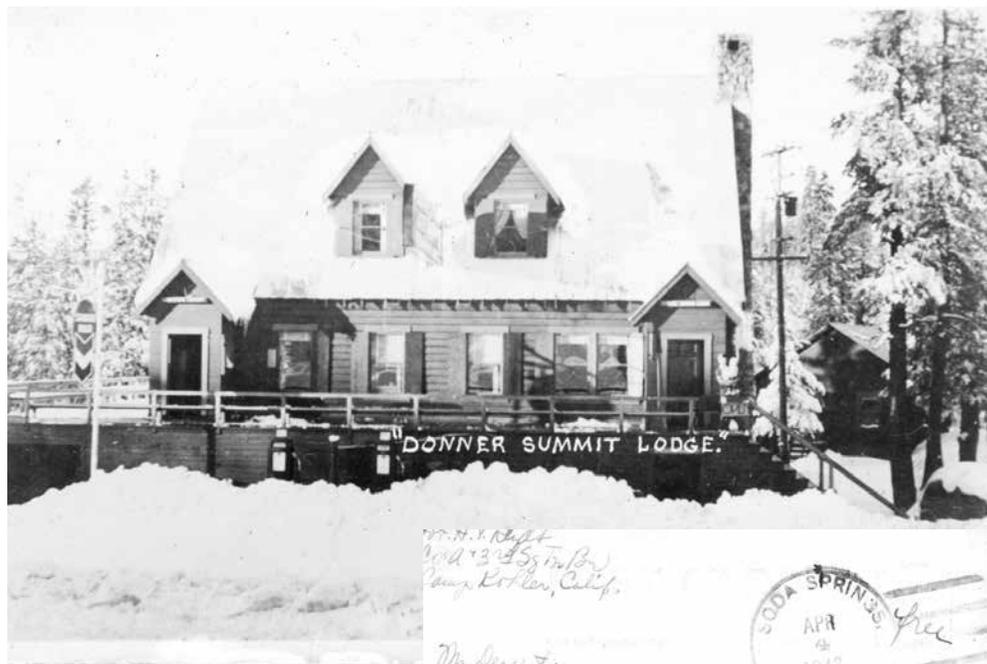
The Fox Farm & Haywire Ranch



I had a little extra space and so thought to fill it with a new acquisition, a rare picture of the Fox Farm in Soda Springs which you can see on the previous page. The Fox Farm and Haywire Ranch used to sit almost where Donner Summit Lodge (DSL) sits today, at the junction of Old 40 and I-80. Norm Saylor finds the proof in the pictures here. The telephone pole behind the Fox Farm looks a lot like the one behind the DSL, to the right.

So Norm suggested I add the picture of the old lodge. The building to the right, built in 1939, is the center section of the lodge today, additions having been added. Since it was a post card, I had to include the back. Norm also suggested that since the Lincoln Highway diverged at that point from what is now Donner Pass Rd. or Old 40, a picture of that should be included too. Below you have the scene across from the DSL of the Lincoln Highway route. Further up the dirt road it crosses the railroad tracks, goes through the Soda Springs Ski Area parking, crosses Soda Springs Rd., and goes along the north side of Lake Van Norden.

So, we end up adding space instead of filling a little extra. Why the Fox Farm was called the Fox Farm? Who knows?

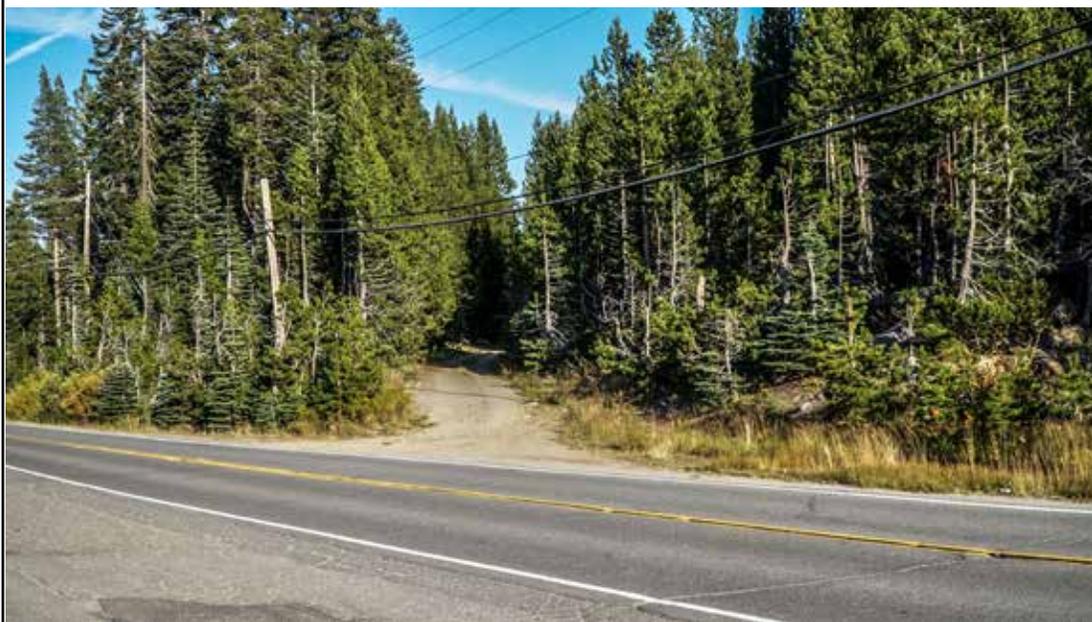


April 4, 1943
Camp Kohler, Calif

To Maria C. Rezdt
307 Hathaway
Houston, Texas
My Dearest

Our way up here in the mountains on a hitchhiking tour – over 7000 feet and snow all around. We drove through here last year. It's the Reno – San Francisco hi-way, a few miles from Lake Tahoe.

All my love



Across from the Donner Summit Lodge is the old Lincoln Highway. The road crosses the RR tracks, goes across the Soda Springs Ski Area parking lot, crosses Soda Springs Rd. and then goes along the side of Van Norden Meadow or Summit Valley.

Book Review

Ordeal By Hunger

The Story of the Donner Party

George R. Stewart 1936 305 pages

This is a good book – even if you know the story.

“The misadventures of the Donner Party constitutes one of the most amazing stories” of “what human beings may “achieve, endure, and perpetrate, in the final press of circumstances.”

No kidding, especially as George Stewart relates the story.

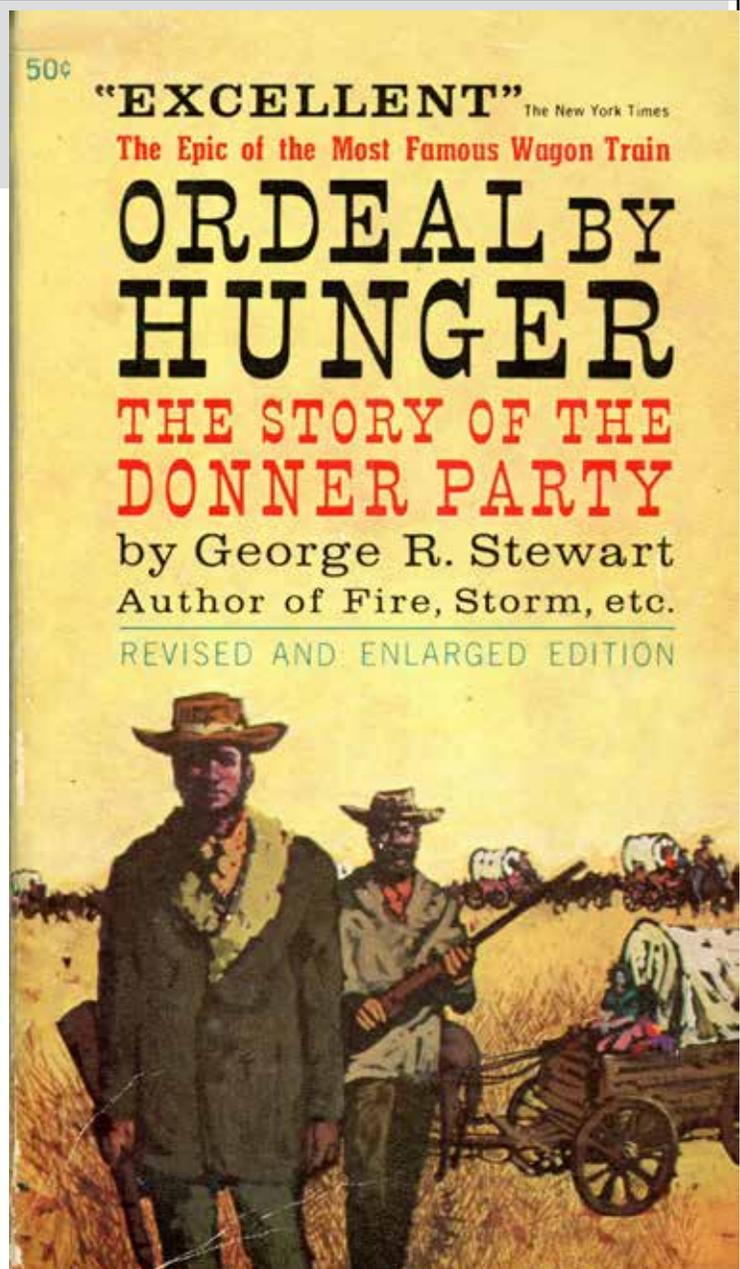
In 1936 George R. Stewart wrote Ordeal By Hunger which he started by having the reader imagine he was hundreds of miles above the center of Nevada. To the left is the Pacific Ocean and to the right the Rockies. He then zeroed in on the emigrant route describing the geography which will almost be a character in the book: “The Great Salt Lake...a brilliant spot of blue... a wide alkali desert... the arid country of the Big Basin... A monotonous succession of mountain ranges... treeless... empty sagebrush valleys... a thirsting land... dust storms... rivers are few... forty miles of desert...” And then “At the western edge of this arid country rises suddenly the sheer wall of the Sierra Nevada.”

“The only mark of civilization is a tenuous trace... a faint pair of parallel lines – the track of wagon wheels on the California Trail.”

What an introduction. It’s almost poetic in its description. The emigrants on the wagon train will have to navigate, survive and conquer the geography. Given the description, it’s almost a foreshadowing of things to come. Foreshadowing is a literary term and although the book is non-fiction, it’s literary and in the style of a fiction book. Stewart tells a good story. That makes for easy reading and even though we know the outcome, Stewart builds suspense just like a novel.

“It is a long road and those who follow it must meet certain risks; exhaustion and disease, alkali water, and Indian arrows will take a toll. But the greatest problem is a simple one and the chief opponent is Time. If August sees them on the Humboldt and September at the Sierra – good! Even if they are a month delayed, all may yet go well. But let it come late October, or November, and the snow-storms block the heights, when wagons are light of provisions and oxen lean, then will come a story.”

Indeed, here comes a story.



The story starts with characters turning left for California while the “greater number of the [1846] emigrants turned their wagons off to the right.” This was the fateful decision.”

The cause of the turn was a letter a fellow named Lansford Hastings had circulated among emigrants touting a new and shorter route he’d explored. He would wait for emigrants at Fort Bridger to guide them through.

What could go wrong?

The Donner Party decided to follow the new route. Hastings did guide emigrants and his train did get through to California but the Donner Party was a bit behind and so was not part of Hastings’ group. Hastings had not waited long enough for the Donners.

Stewart gives information about wagon trains, wagons, and how they all operated but the main focus is on the human element. The emigrants were farmers and business men “the strong timber of which commonwealths are built” but the qualities needed at home were not the qualities needed for a journey across the continent. The emigrants were used to comforts, not hardships. “Many had never seen a mountain.” They also lacked the requisite skills: trail reading, finding water, or dealing with desert and snowstorms.

At Ft. Bridger the Party’s route choice was validated. They heard the new route was much shorter, among other things, and their spirits were buoyed. Edwin Bryant, though, (author of What I Saw in California, 1846 –see the Heirloom for July, ’12) had left a letter for James Reed, a member of the Donner party. He said don’t take the Hastings Cutoff. Reed never got the letter. Hastings was not waiting either, but the Donner Party pressed on. They thought they had good advice. Now we know something bad is going to happen.

“For five days they struggled as if still in the nightmare, to open about six miles of road, cutting timber and hacking through brush, digging down sidehills, rolling out boulders, and leveling for creek-crossing... now they were lacking confidence. The way which they cleared was merely a passage strewn with boulders and ugly with stumps; the wagons took the chance in coming through. By a crooked and steep road they got to the top.... The emigrants were completely wearied....” They went up the “steep north wall... It was a gamblers’ chance.... By pick and shovel they had beaten the Wahsatch [sic]; literally by the edge of the ax they had cut their way through...” but morale was low, food was reduced, winter was coming. They had taken 23 days to go 36 miles. They were late. On that same day that they’d conquered the Wahsatch, Edwin Bryant had topped what would be later called Donner Pass. He was hundreds of miles ahead.

After the “Wahsatch,” there was the desert. It took six days to cross the desert. The emigrants were more tired. More oxen had been lost. Wagons has been left. Spirits were even lower. There was more cussing at Hastings. Two men went on ahead to Sutter’s Fort to get supplies.

Problems multiplied. A man was killed with a knife. James Reed was banished. An emigrant was left for dead. Horses were lost. Cattle were shot by Indians. Dissension among the emigrants grew. More wagons were abandoned and goods cached.

Stewart does a wonderful job conveying the unbelievable hardships and surmising daily life in the wagon train. Truly, how much can “human beings.... endure... in the final press of circumstances”? But there was worse to come.

They came up the Truckee River towards the Sierra,

“Unfortunately the going was hard, double so for the worn-down oxen, many of them still suffering with arrow-wounds. The road ducked and dogged.... They had to ford the river more than once to the mile.”

The left hand turn was not the only wrong turn the Party made. As they got close to the Sierra the party missed the turn to go into Coldstream Canyon to Roller or Coldstream Passes that had been used by emigrants in 1846. Instead, half the group ended up at Donner Lake under the granite walls of what would be called

“Hell! If you pushed the teams too hard, they died on you; and if you didn’t push them hard you took too long and go caught in the snow or starved before you got that far – hell! And there were Injuns, too.. Wouldn’t a fellow like chance to boot that man Hastings!”

Donner Pass. The snow was five feet deep. The Donner family was miles away from the rest of the group.

Part II, the encampment, starts with another view from high above. To the left it’s all green and there is a valley. To the north and the east it is all white, covered with snow. Stewart describes the geology of the lakes, streams, mountains, canyons, and forests.

Then the story focuses on the emigrants’ camps, what life must have been like in the camp. . “All were unkempt and unbathed. Every one spent much of the time in bed, wrapped in blankets and quilts which had not been sunned in months. Even the cold weather failed to keep down the vermin. The sick looked haggardly at those who could still move around. The starved babies were too weak to cry. The smells mingled - boiling hides, babies, sickness, unwashed bodies, filth.”

Then there were the escape attempts; the activities of those who went ahead; and the rescue parties. Here Stewart splits the narrative going from James Reed’s diary and his work to get rescuers and Patrick Breen’s diary of life at Donner Lake.

Stewart tells the stories of heroes but does not focus on the heroism as remarkable. That’s left for the reader. Stanton and McCutchen were sent ahead for supplies. Stanton had no family in the train. He could have just escaped. Instead he came back and then died. McCutchen was enticed by the Hastings train, which the two came across far ahead of the Donner train. Friends there offered him food to just go back and get his wife and daughter and join them. He’d given his word. He could not. James Reed made an attempt to return with McCutchen and failed enduring hardship. The relief

parties slogged through the snow and across swollen rivers to bring supplies and rescue the emigrants. John Stark rescued a whole group all by himself [See Heroism on Donner Summit in the May, '14 [Heirloom](#)]. Luis and Salvador came with Stanton to bring supplies from Sutter's Fort. They died and were eaten. Few of the rescuers were mountain men. They gave up safety and comfort to be miserable, cold, wet, and endure unending trail breaking in deep snow and danger. Some died.

Stewart also covers the mendacity of some: the rescue party leader who would not push forward, the men who agreed to take the Donner children to safety for \$500 but just left them at Donner Lake and the "rescuers" who stole from the emigrants.

The cannibalism though, although sometimes almost graphic,

"That day was sheer horror. Across the heat-stricken sand of the sink naked mountains rock, luridly sinister in brown, red, yellow and poisonous green, leered out at the stragglng train like devil-haunted hills in a dream. The road was the mere scratching of wheel-tracks

is not something Stewart blames the emigrants for. Who, in the most dire circumstances, would not eat human flesh to stay alive?

Finally, rescue parties arrive,

"Are you men from California, or do you come from heaven?"

"Other human figures, ghastly and horrible sights, began to appear. It was as if the rescuer's halloo had

been Gabriel's horn raising the dead from their graves. Their flesh was wasted from their bodies. They wept and laughed hysterically. They cried out as well as they could in hoarse and death-like voices, confusedly: 'Relief, thank God, relief!'"

"Morning brought the rescuers a chance to see more fully the terrible conditions at the cabins. The snow was high above the roofs. Inclined planes led up from the cabins to the top of the snow, and up these slopes the dead bodies had been dragged with ropes which the starving people had not been able to lift them. Some bodies now lay upon the snow wrapped in quilts. Some of the hides which were being used for food were putrefied from having served as roofs of cabins...The emigrants were overwrought emotionally, and many seemed mentally unbalanced. ..."

With the end of the story there are a number of sections at the end of the book: notes, causes of the tragedy (not the emigrants), Patrick Breen's diary, James Reed's diary, Virginia

Reed's letter to a cousin summarizing the events, and a list of Donner Party members.

The power in Stewart's book is the writing in the fictional mode. He tells stories and his prose is evocative. There are stories of the "former Schoolma'am... Kneeling...to pick up the scattered tatters [of a letter left behind by previous emigrants maybe containing advice] and piece them together;" the Reeds leaving their wagons in the desert; the stories of the various escape and rescue attempts; and others.

Descriptions are especially strong such as that of the desert, "That day was sheer horror. Across the heat-stricken sand of the sink naked mountains rock, luridly sinister in brown, red, yellow and poisonous green, leered out at the stragglng train like devil-haunted hills in a dream. The road was the mere scratching of wheel-tracks

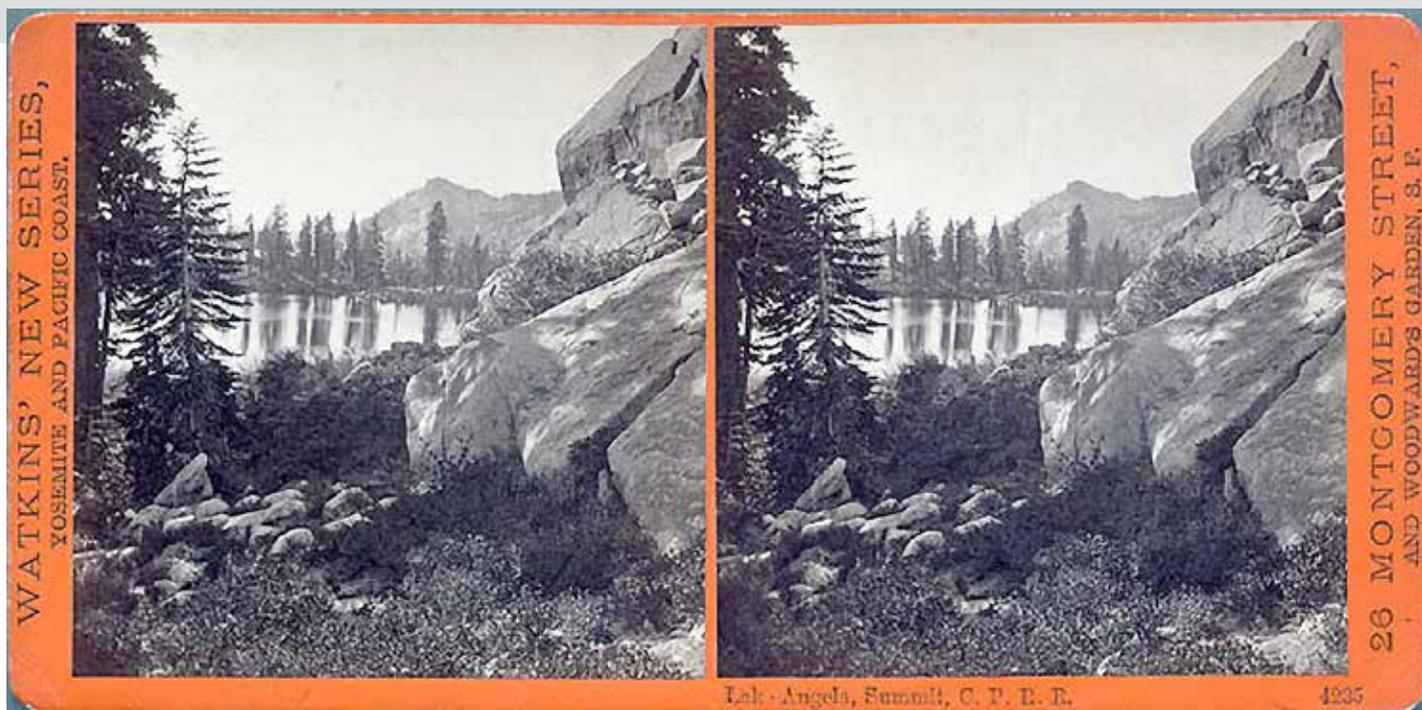
In describing "Starved Camp" on Donner Summit, Stewart builds suspense. James Reed had returned and after helping people (the descriptions of that are almost horrific too) at the lake led a group out across the lake and up the pass. As they got to the top and storm broke over the exposed emigrants. "From the children shivering beneath their poor blankets rose a steady wailing" from others there was "praying, weeping, and lamentation." The relief party rescuers has to work constantly. The fire had to be kept up. Snow melted from under the fire and the logs sank lower. The wind blew harder. Driving snow cut the skin. One could not see more than twenty feet into the wind. James Reed was blinded. Each person got a spoonful of flour. The children cried. "The wind was so cold, and they were so exhausted by now, that when they went away from the fire to cut wood, they could not stay more than ten minutes without returning to warm themselves." "Death was very close."

See a map of the route over the Sierra on page 21.

ERRATUM

How it happened we do not know. Phil Sexton of the California State RR museum in Sacramento noted that the photo at the top of page 13 in our last issue was mislabeled. It's Cisco Grove - OBVIOUSLY - and we regret the error.

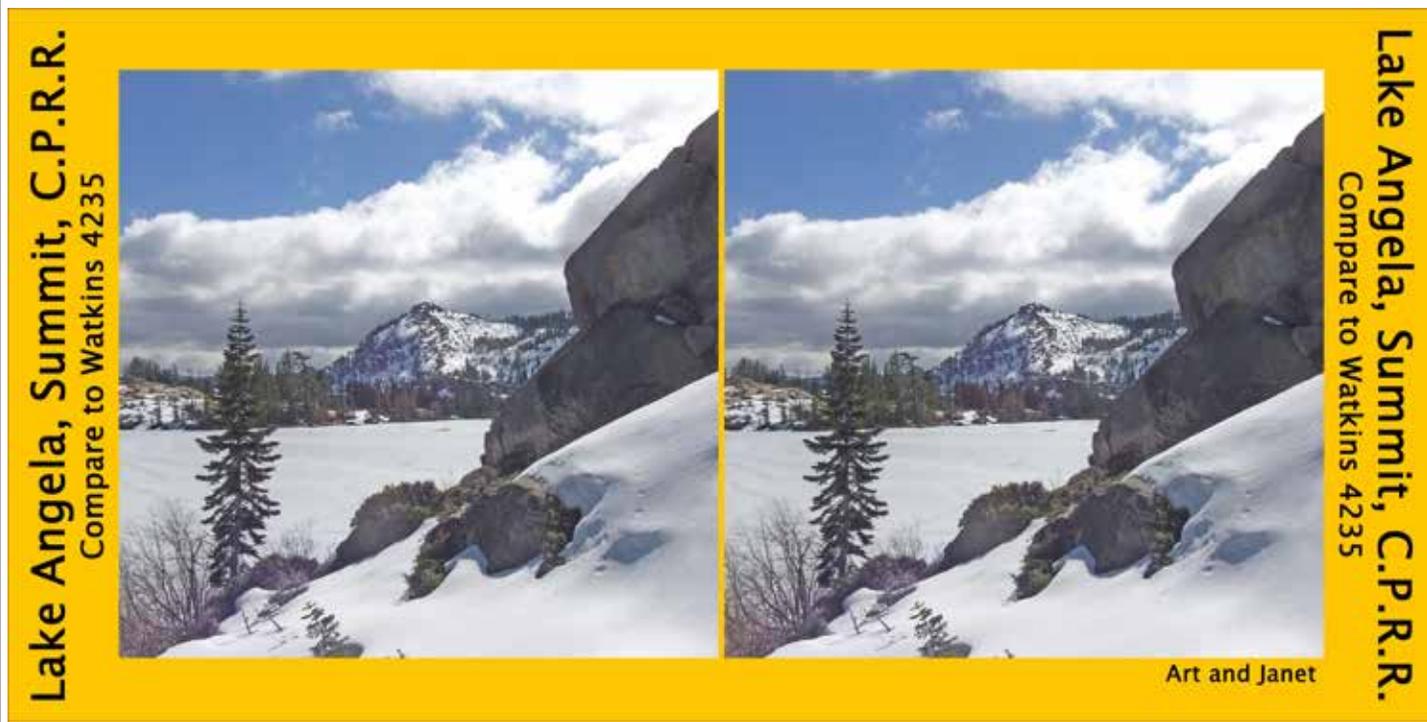
Then & Now with Art Clark



Carleton Watkins 4235 - Lake Angela

This scene is part of Watkins' New Series, shot sometime after 1875. It looks across Lake Angela from the Northwest with a view of Donner Peak in the distance. Photography in those days required a lot of equipment, supplies and chemicals. It's not known if he transported what he needed to the location by carrying it all around the lake, or if he came across in a boat.

Photo location 39° 19.525'N 120° 19.672'W



Art and Janet

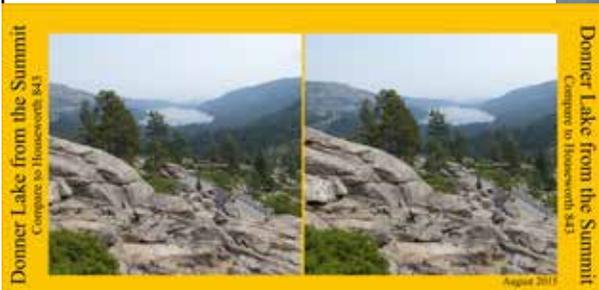
Then & Now with Art Clark



Lawrence & Houseworth 843

In the 1860's the San Francisco firm of Lawrence & Houseworth published several catalogs of photographs and stereographs. These came from a variety of photographers. This image was taken from a knoll above the Dutch Flat Donner Lake wagon road overlooking Dopnner Lake. Today Old Highway 40 passes around and below this spot.

Photo location N39 19.126' W12018.867'



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
www.donnersummithistricalsociety.org

Membership

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 _____

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

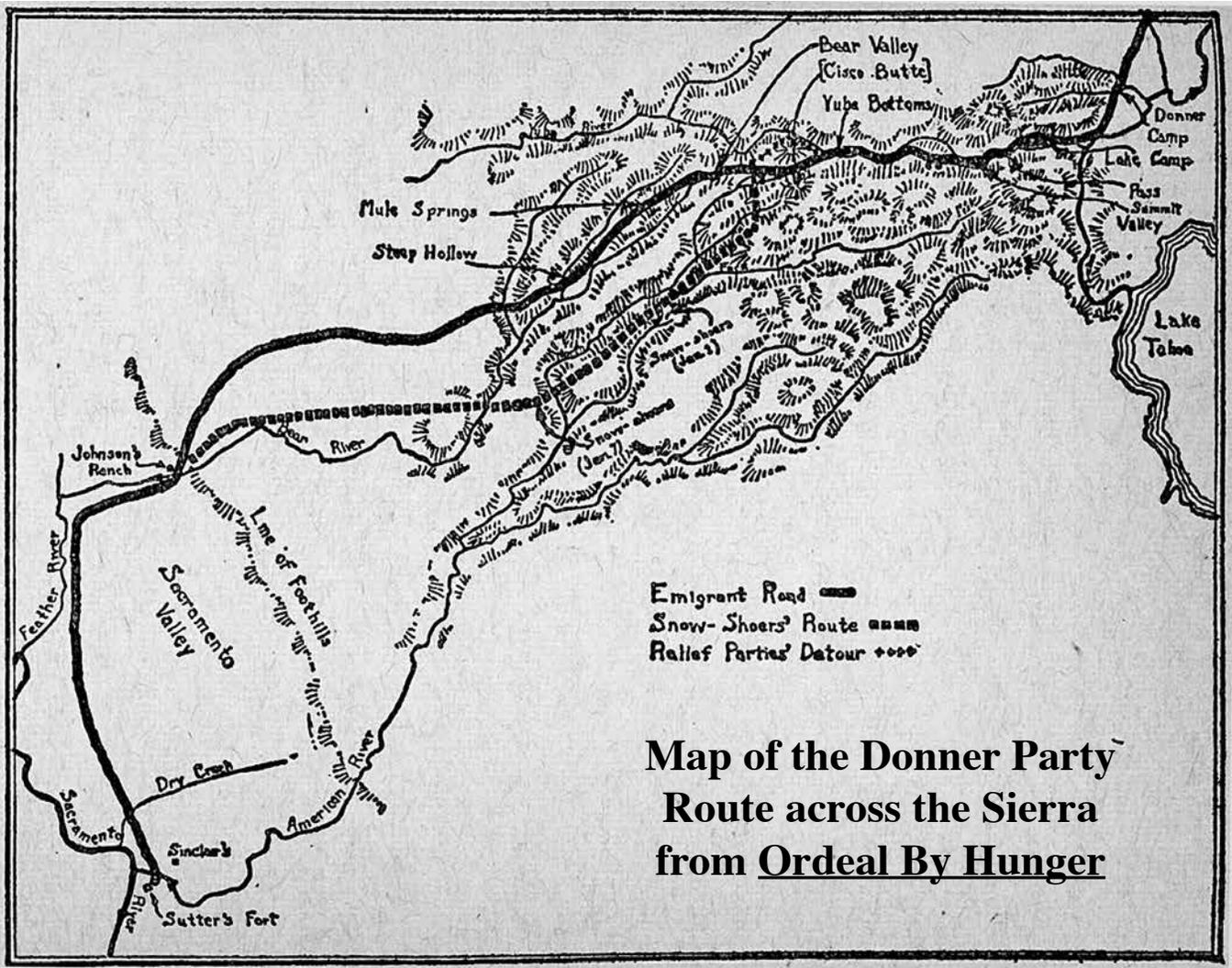
____ Individual Membership - \$30

____ 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.



**Map of the Donner Party
 Route across the Sierra
 from Ordeal By Hunger**

Volunteers at Work at the DSHS



Volunteer organizations rely on the volunteers to accomplish their missions. The DSHS is an all-volunteer organization.

Here we have from left to right, Gina Salomon, Judy Lieb, and Norm Saylor. Gina (also right) and Judy have been annotating Norm's enormous collection of pictures. This will help with cataloging.

Our officers are all volunteers as is our Heirloom staff including proofreaders, web page staff, publications branch, and 20 Mile Museum committee.

We can always use more volunteers: book reviewers, article authors, proofreaders, computer personnel, FaceBook editor, and people to help with various sundry things likg preparing for Heritage Trail.



And then Some other Things...

Changes at the DSHS

Even historical societies experience change. First we are sorry to lose a bit of Jim Hoelter (right at a Margie Powell Hike) who has been our treasurer for the last five years, ever since the passing of our founder, Margie Powell.

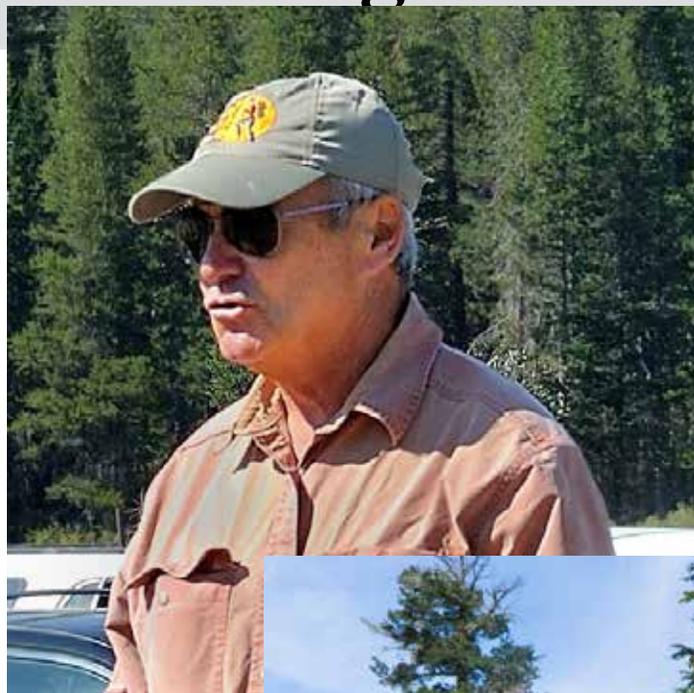
Jim has kept us on an even financial keel, tracking contributions and expenditures. It's an important job if we are to continue to fulfill our mission of spreading the rich story of Donner Summit history.

Jim is not gone though. He has agreed to serve on our advisory council so we can continue to benefit from his abilities, ideas, perspective, and common sense.

Sine Jim wanted to partially retire and wanted to move to our advisory council we thought it a good time to expand our advisory council to better help us continue to do what we've been doing, but also to grow and do more. Donner Summit is the most important historical area in California and maybe the entire Western United States. We've done a lot of good telling the story in the museum, brochures, website, [Heirloom](#), and 20 Mile Museum. There's still lots to tell and in the telling we can help revitalize the local economy. We need help through, and so we've enlarged our advisory council with some sterling individuals.

John Loll (bottom right) will take over much of what Jim Hoelter has been doing financially. Judy Lieb (previous page), has been helping Norm (also previous page) annotate his binders. Pat Malberg (left at Norm's 80th birthday party) is a long time Summit resident at Lake Mary and has been proofreading [Heirlooms](#) and 20 Mile Museum signs. Art Clark (right above at the Wedell Cairn at Donner Pk.) is our Then & Now guy in the [Heirloom](#) but he helps with on site explorations as part of the MHRT.

Our robust enlarged team should help us go forward. We are always looking for more volunteers however so if you have an interest in Donner Summit history, have lots of energy and ideas, talk to us.



Top and bottom right photos by George Lamson