

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

August, 2015 issue #84

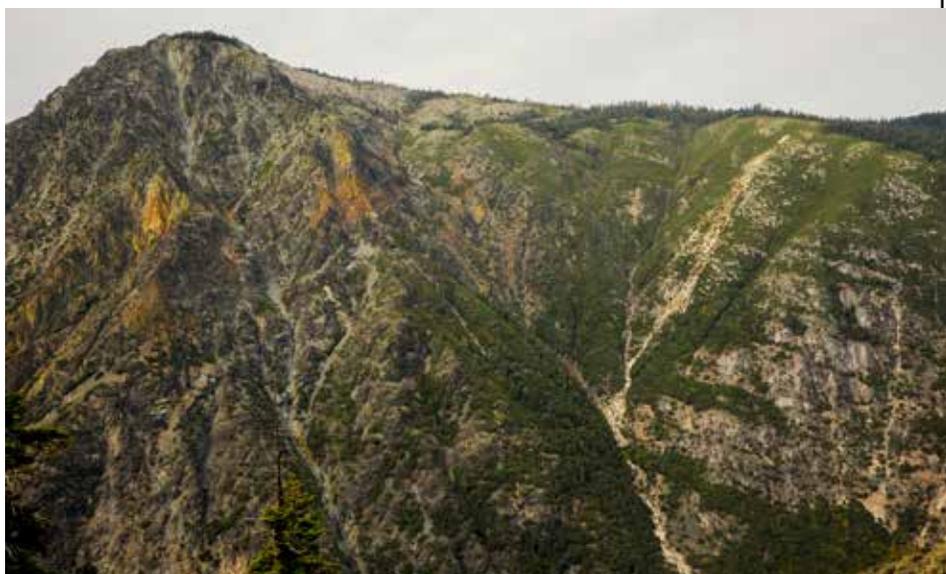
## Petroglyphs at Wabena Creek

In our June issue of the Heirloom we visited petroglyphs below Castle Pk. just off the Pacific Crest Trail. There were lots of pictures of the petroglyphs, mortars, a map, directions, and information about the "stone writing." None of that needs to be repeated. If you want to learn more about petroglyphs, who did them and what they mean, go to the June Heirloom conveniently archived on our website.

There are many petroglyph sites on or around Donner Summit but most are on private property with property owners strictly regulating access. There are others though, that are accessible to the public (see the June Heirloom) and one of those sites is at Wabena Creek, overlooking the Royal Gorge of the American River some miles west of Donner Summit.

To find these glyphs you need to drive the dirt road from Serene Lakes that takes off where the paved Soda Springs Rd. stops at the south end of the lakes. Parenthetically that's a very interesting drive to take all the way to Auburn. You pass interesting geography and geological formations, old town sites, Michigan Bluff, Foresthill, and then you get to Auburn at the Foresthill exit from I-80. The road is dirt until you get to Robinson Flat, about 26 miles. There you will find a nice picnic spot and a hand pump that pumps cold pure water. You might see wildlife too, hopefully at a distance. I biked from Serene Lakes to Auburn once and was accosted by a bear but that's another story for another time.

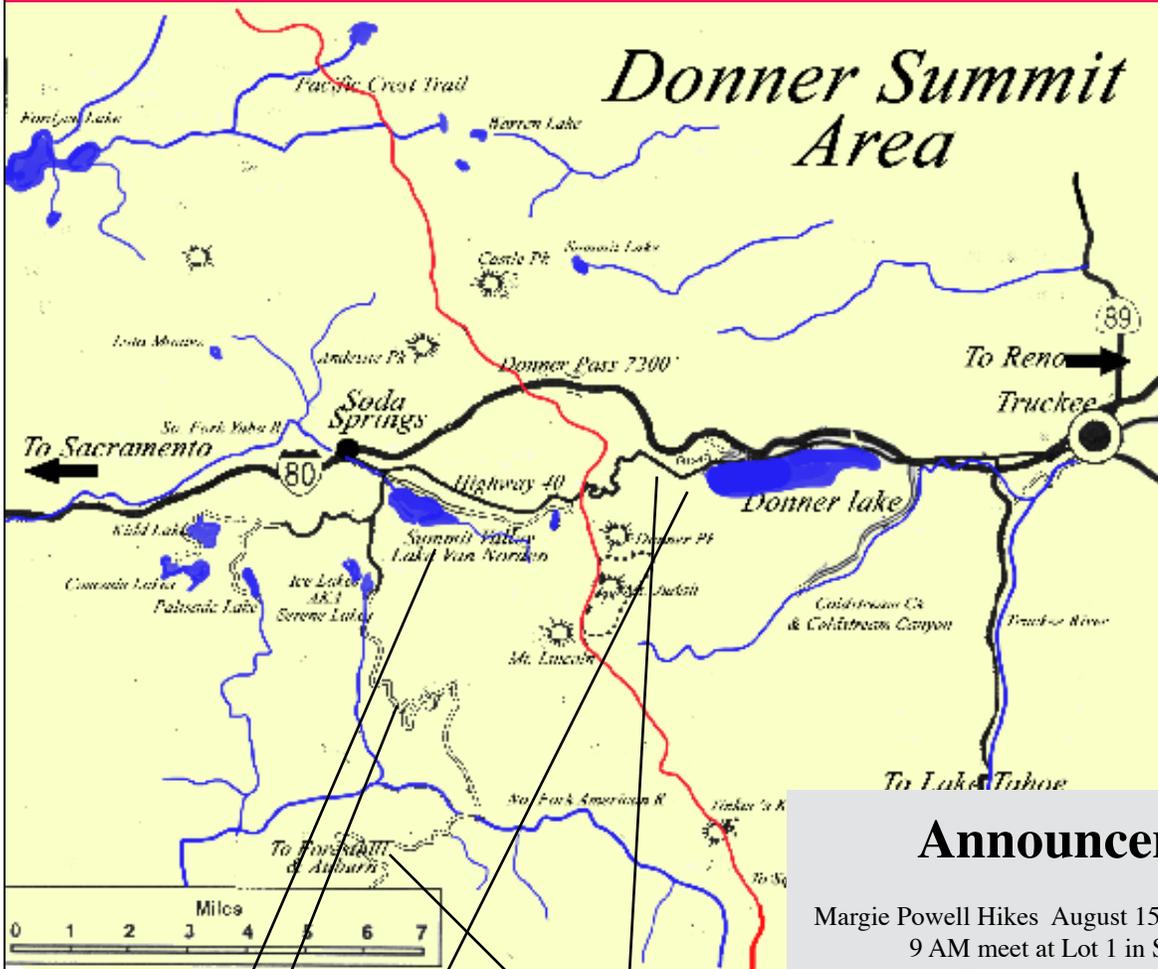
They are in a remarkable spot, more than a thousand feet above the American River overlooking the Royal Gorge. Colorful mountainsides, ancient Junipers, and rugged and spectacular scenery are everywhere. The Martis carved their petroglyphs into rock thousands of years ago



Above: the south side of Snow Mtn. across the Royal Gorge from the Wabena petroglyphs. Below: one of the glyphs



# Story Locations in this Issue



## In This Issue

Summit Soda Springs (The Cedars) pg 4 pg 6 and top of Pg 9

Summit Valley pg 6 Then and Now pg 13 Then and Now pg 14

Wabena Creek pg 3



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

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

## Announcements:

Margie Powell Hikes August 15 and 16  
9 AM meet at Lot 1 in Serene Lakes. (Take Soda Springs Rd. from Soda Springs to the end of the pavement. Turn right on Serene Rd., go 200 yards.)

3 hours, 2 miles, 300' elev. gain. Bring lunch, sunscreen, snack, water, sturdy shoes (we'll be on trails) Lots of stories.

Heritage Trail August 15, 16  
[www.theheritagetrail.blogspot.org](http://www.theheritagetrail.blogspot.org)

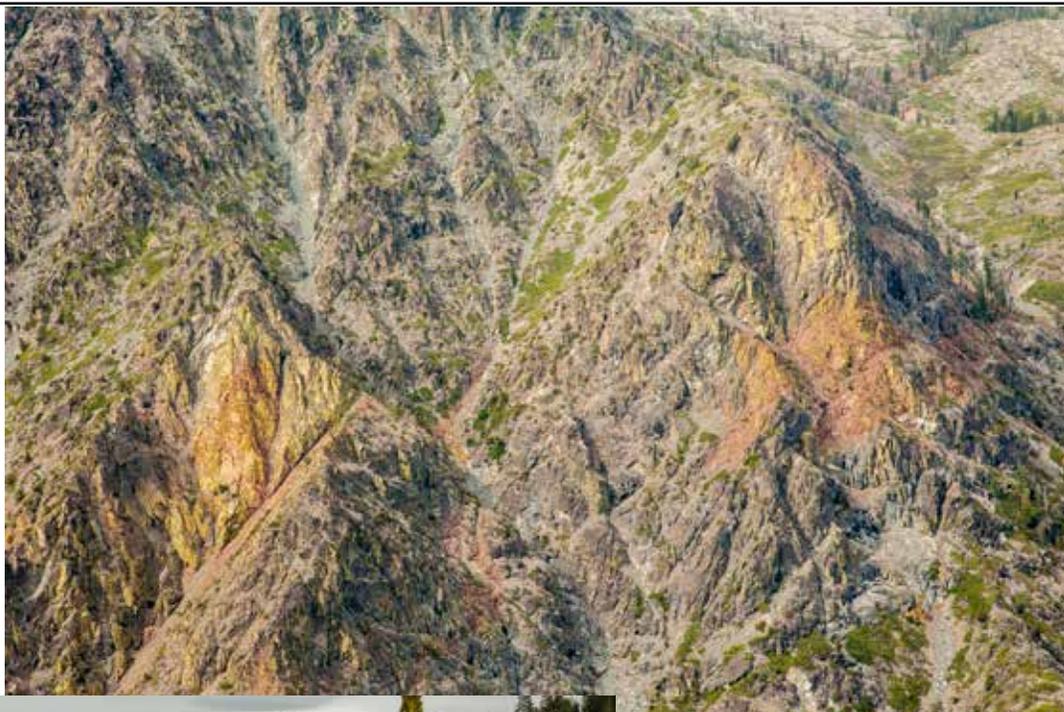
Donner Party Hikes October 3, 4  
[www.donnerpartyhike.com](http://www.donnerpartyhike.com)

There's a new museum at the Donner State Park - well worth a visit.

and chose each site for its orientation and view.

Having visited many petroglyph sites around the Summit, I don't think there is a more spectacular site than the Wabena Creek petroglyphs. It's an amazing spot.

And then there are the petroglyphs. We don't know what they meant but they must have been very important to the Martis to have spent so much time carving them and putting them in such special spots.



Above: the colorful rock formations across the gorge.

Left: one of the views - Castle Pk. in the distance looking north from the petroglyphs

Below: an ancient Juniper on the cliff near the petroglyphs.

Herewith, we follow with some photographs of the Wabena Cr. petroglyphs taken during a visit.





# THE OVERLAND MONTHLY

DEVOTED TO  
*THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY.*

VOL. XI.—DECEMBER, 1873.—No. 6.

## CHIPS FROM AN INDIAN WORKSHOP.

In our June issue we summarized modern research into the Martis, the Native Americans who carved the petroglyphs thousands of years ago. People have been exploring the petroglyphs and other remnants of the Martis Culture on Donner Summit ever since the European-Americans first arrived. In an article in Overland Monthly Magazine from 1873, Benjamin Avery gives us a view into the 19th Century.

Mr. Avery wrote articles and books about the West and California. Here he decided to explore the “evidences of Indian handicraft” in the Sierra in the vicinity of Donner Summit while visiting the hotel at the Summit Soda Springs, about 8 miles south of the current Soda Springs. The Summit valleys, lakes and at the sources of streams the “wild children of Nature” could find it “most convenient and pleasant to live” although not year round. The “summit region...furnished good fishing... Deer, and mountain quail, and grouse...Huckleberries, thimble-berries, wild plums, choke-cherries, gooseberries, and various edible roots.” The Indians also dined on “furry marten..., woodchucks, and squirrels.” The tribes from California and Nevada would fight over possession of a “picturesque valley by lake or river.” Presumably Soda Springs was one such point of contention.

The Native Americans did not leave much evidence of their presence on Donner Summit except for the many chips and arrowheads that could be found. At Summit Soda Springs the deer came to drink at the salt-licks, the piping quail could be heard continually as well as the scolding cry of the jays. At the rear of the hotel (which was built by Mark Hopkins so his wife’s society friends from San Francisco could visit and which burned in 1898) “the river tumbles in slight falls and cascades over slanting or perpendicular walls of richly colored granite, shaded by beautiful groves of cedar” the “Indians used to sit, chipping away with stone upon stone to make arrow-heads. This was their rude, but romantic workshop” and they left a lot of evidence of their work. Chips were everywhere apparently in 1873. One had to just rake one’s hand through gravel “to find many a curious specimen.” This got the hotel guests out looking and “kept them out of doors with Nature; it gave them a pretext for remaining in the air by a lovely scene; it aroused that subtle (sic) sympathy which is excited in all but the dullest minds ...”

Native Americans made all kinds of arrowheads at Soda Springs with obsidian being the most used. Most of the chips we find today in Summit Valley are basalt which is a local rock. Obsidian chips can be found but not often. Their presence



Sun type glyphs are a common theme in Martis petroglyphs.

indicates trading by the early Sierra peoples. The nearest obsidian is in Lake County to the west, or near Yosemite to the south. Mr. Avery found a “great number” of arrowheads that ranged from being only  $\frac{3}{4}$  or a  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch long to an “inch and a half to two, three, or four inches in length.” The Native Americans made arrowheads out of all kinds of rock. To Mr. Avery that indicated “a rudimentary taste for the beautiful” since rocks, other than obsidian, were uncertain. They were full of flaws and could be broken during manufacture. Obsidian was “much better adapted...” and “equally abundant.” The use of rocks other than obsidian was guided by “pretty mixture of colors, and the tints and markings...” It was interesting to note “an evidence of taste in these savages of the Sierra.” Avery also wondered about any “peculiar sanctity and potency” the Indians may have seen in the rocks they used.

“...at the Summit Soda Springs.... The Indians had chosen one of the most charmingly picturesque spots for an arrow-head factory. But here something else than an instinct for the beautiful moved them in their choice of locality. There is fine trout and salmon fishing in the river...”

“Going back to the days before the Pale-face invaded their land, one can easily recall groups of these aborigines, seated by the picturesque lake and river –spots they always chose for their homes or summer resorts sorting out the beautiful stones they had procured for arrow-heads, and chipping away slowly as they chatted and laughed, while the river sang, or the cataract brawled, or the pine woods sighed, as musically and kindly to them as to us.”

Today, Summit Soda Springs, or the Cedars, is a private community on Soda Springs Rd. south of Serene Lakes. It is all private property and monitored carefully by a caretaker. There are no public accommodations or services.



These petroglyph photographs have been digitally enhanced. After thousands of years they are today, quite faint.



Martis petroglyphs do not depict animals or humans. Their meanings are unclear although they were clearly important to the culture. One recognizable glyph is bear paws. Were they wishes for good hunting? Were they records of hunts? Were they just totemic? We don't know but there are a lot around Donner Summit. These are at Wabena.



# Summit Valley According to Theodore Judah

Theodore Judah, for whom Mt. Judah is named, was the chief engineer and chief proponent of the transcontinental railroad. He took the idea for a railroad across the country and sold it to investors and Congress. He laid out the route and started construction with a unique idea. His route did not, like other railroads, follow the river beds and river valleys. Instead he put the route right up the ridges from Sacramento to the Summit following the natural rise, which just happened to be just right for railroads. The idea of building a railroad from California east was also unheard of and impractical. California was thousands of miles by sea from supplies. Judah did not live to see his dream in action. On the way to New York he got sick and died upon his arrival. Mt. Judah was named for Theodore Judah in the 1930's when Johnny Ellis thought up the fitting tribute.

## From Theodore Judah's general engineering survey of the route of the CPRR 1863

Summit Valley is a beautiful valley, near the source of the Yuba, about two and a half miles long and three-quarters of mile wide, yielding excellent pasturage for cattle hundreds of which are driven there each summer. From the summit, looking easterly, you appear standing upon a nearly perpendicular rocky wall of one thousand feet in height.

Immediately below is seen a valley, from one to two mile wide, extending up from the Truckee river to nearly beneath your feet. Donner lake about three and a half miles long by one mile in width occupies the upper portion of this valley, and its outlet is seen pursuing its course down to a junction with the Truckee. Two long ranges or spurs are seen on either side, parallel with, and enclosing the lake, reaching from the summit to Truckee river. Immediately beyond the river is seen the second summit of Sierra Nevada; while still further in the distance, the Washoe mountains are plainly visible.

Respectfully submitted  
THEO. D. JUDAH,

## UP IN THE MOUNTAINS. Happy People Near the Summit of the Sierras

A correspondent writing from Summit Soda Springs says: "This is really one of the loveliest and most enchanting spots on the face of the earth. The season is only just opened, but there are quite a number of guests already here, and many more have engaged cottages or rooms in the hotel, and will be here after the Fourth. The stage makes regular daily trips between here and Summit Station, and the road is now in good condition. A week ago there was considerable snow on the road near the Ice Lakes.

The service at the hotel this year is even better than in past seasons, and all here are well pleased with the accommodations. We have plenty of nice fresh trout, taken from the North Fork of the American River, which runs by the door, but the 'speckled beauties' have not yet commenced to 'take the fly' very eagerly. The three Merrill boys have gone for a two days' camping trip over on the Middle Fork, under the guidance of Mr. Derrick, the well-known guide, hunter and fisherman, who knows every foot of the mountains, and can entice the wary trout out of his element when all others fail. They expect to make a big catch.

Following is a list of arrivals up to date: J. G. Schroth, Sacramento; Arthur S. Cbeesebrough, Paul Cbeesebrough, Helen Cbeesebrough, Mrs. Bennett, Susie Le Count, Henry C. Merrill, John S. Merrill, and Ralph D. Merrill, San Francisco; Mrs. Chas. Mason, Miss Winifred T. Mason and Mable T. Mason, Sausalito; Mrs. E.B. Willis, Clarence M. Willis, J. H. Wiseman, Sacramento Mr. And Mrs. J.G. Allen and son, Oakland.

Rev. J. H. C. Bonte and family are at the Summit, but will probably go down to the springs later on..

Sacramento Daily Union July 3, 1895

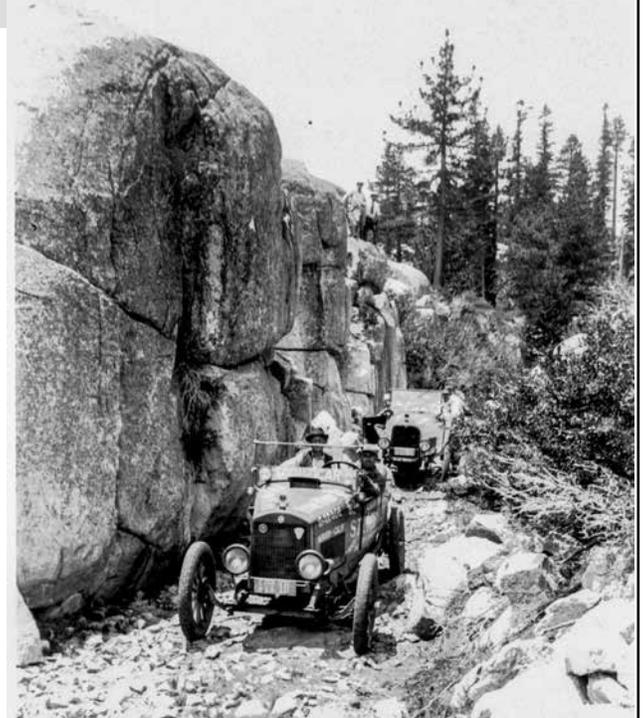
Editor's note: this was a common kind of article in 19th Century newspapers listing those in residence at local resorts.

# From the Archives of the Soda Springs General Store

Our editorial staff is allowed out of the Heirloom construction offices from time to time and allowed to mingle with the local population. On one of those mingles to the Soda Springs General Store, finding that business was such that a small wait was in order, time was taken to look closely at what was on display and for sale. That's more interesting and sociable than just running in for a deli sandwich or orange juice.

On this visit a display of historic photographs off in the corner attracted interest which led to the opening of some vaults deep within the store and the appearance of more photographs. Here and on our Then/Now pages we share our find. None have labels and all are supposed to be of the Donner Summit area. So your analysis may be a good as ours.

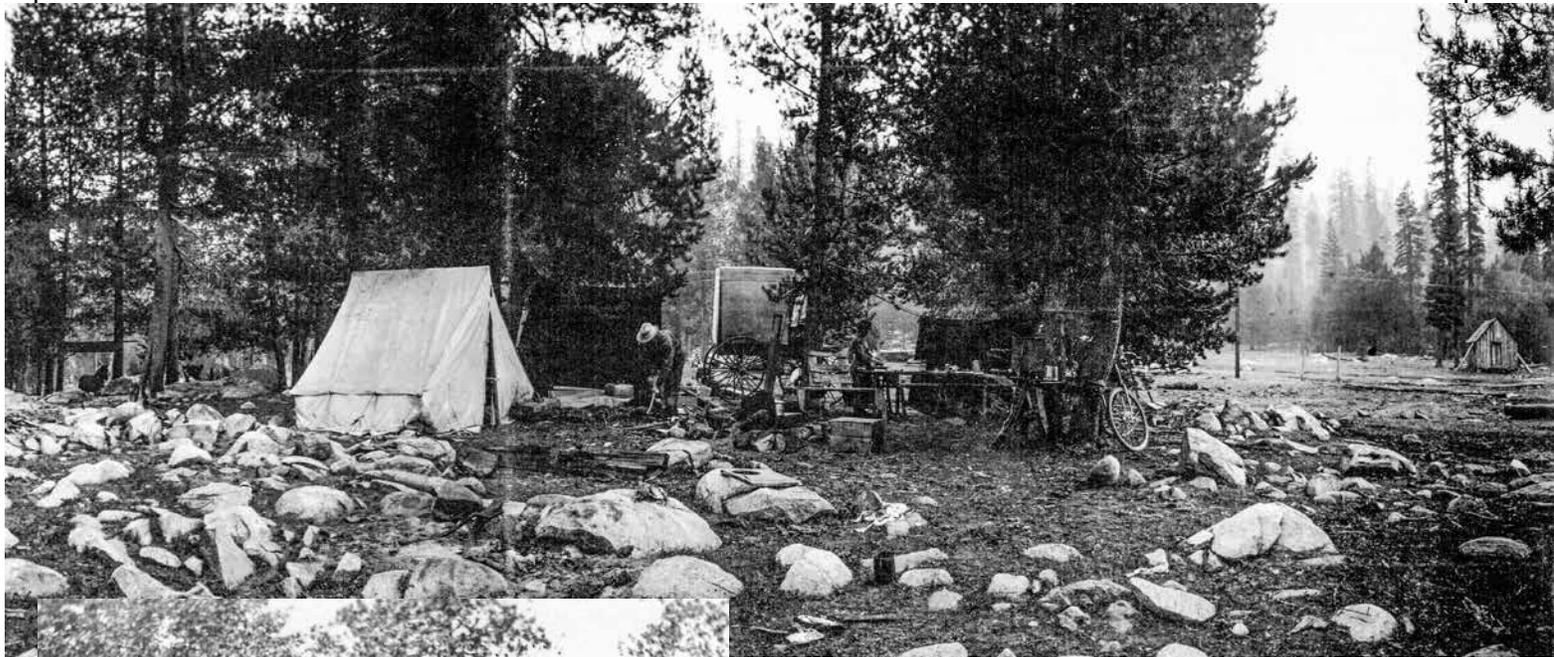
The two pictures here and the one at the top of the next page hint at a good story. The automobiles are painted with, "Studebaker," "Auburn Garage," "Chamber of Commerce," "Firestone Tires," "General Gas," "First Car Over Donner Summit April 22, 1926," etc. Something is going on here. Fortunately we've been accumulating stories and pictures of Donner Summit history and a quick search of the computer



turned up the results of a visit to the Placer County Archives and some pictures collected there of some other autos on the same trip. The first auto to cross the Summit each year until the road was plowed in 1932 was a big deal. It meant some isolation was over, tourists would be visiting, and commerce not using the train could continue. It was such a big deal that merchants tried to speed up the process by having snow shoveling bees, hiring men to shovel snow, spreading soot and ashes, and offering a silver cup to the annual winner. See our Heirlooms for 5/15, 6/15, and 7/14 for examples.

In the case of the pictures here, the Chamber of Commerce was celebrating the first autos over the summit in 1926 and then the continuation of the trip to Salt Lake City. They were advertising sponsors just like today: Firestone Tires, General Gas, and the Verne M. Ford Garage in Auburn.

We don't know who the fellows were or whether they reached Salt Lake City. That will probably have to wait until someone can access the [Sierra Sun](#) archives in Truckee.

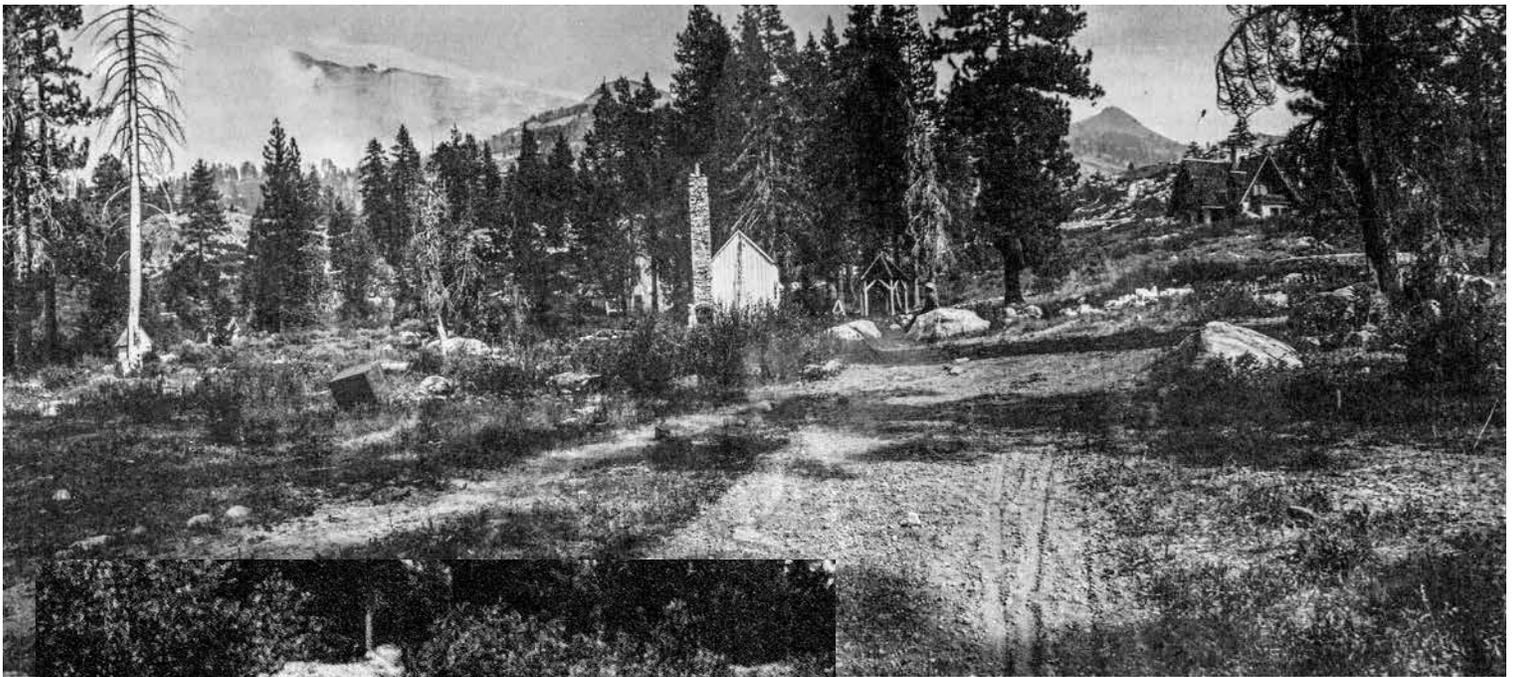


These pictures have stories too. But what are the stories? Who is the fellow camping above? What's the bicycle doing there? Did he carry all his camping equipment on the bike or did he put it all in the wagon and use the bike when he stopped? Where was he going and when?

Left are some people in a wagon. Where are they going?

Looking closely at enlargements, it may be that the wagon in both pictures is the same one. There is a man and woman in each picture. Was the wagon an RV?





Above is at the Cedars, the Old Mark Hopkins Estate with Mt. Anderson and Tinker's Knob in the distance.

Below is an idyllic scene of a woman and three girls fishing. The central part of the picture below is enlarged to the left. Is the scene in Summit Valley? We've searched and scratched our heads for an answer. Is the hill in the distance Soda Springs ski hill and is that the Yuba River in the foreground? In the middle distance there is a clear structure of dirt. Is it a dike or low dam of some kind? Do the people look familiar?

The wide pictures on these two pages are each almost 18" wide.



# Book Review

## Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada (A Guide)

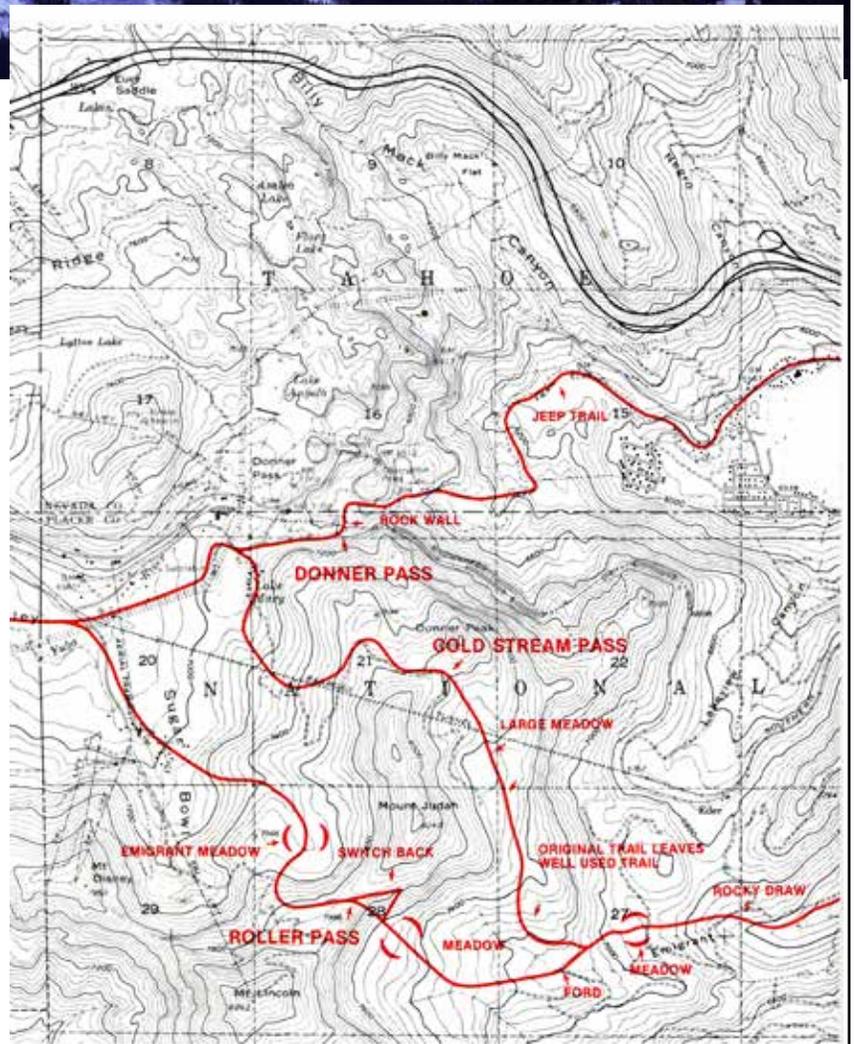
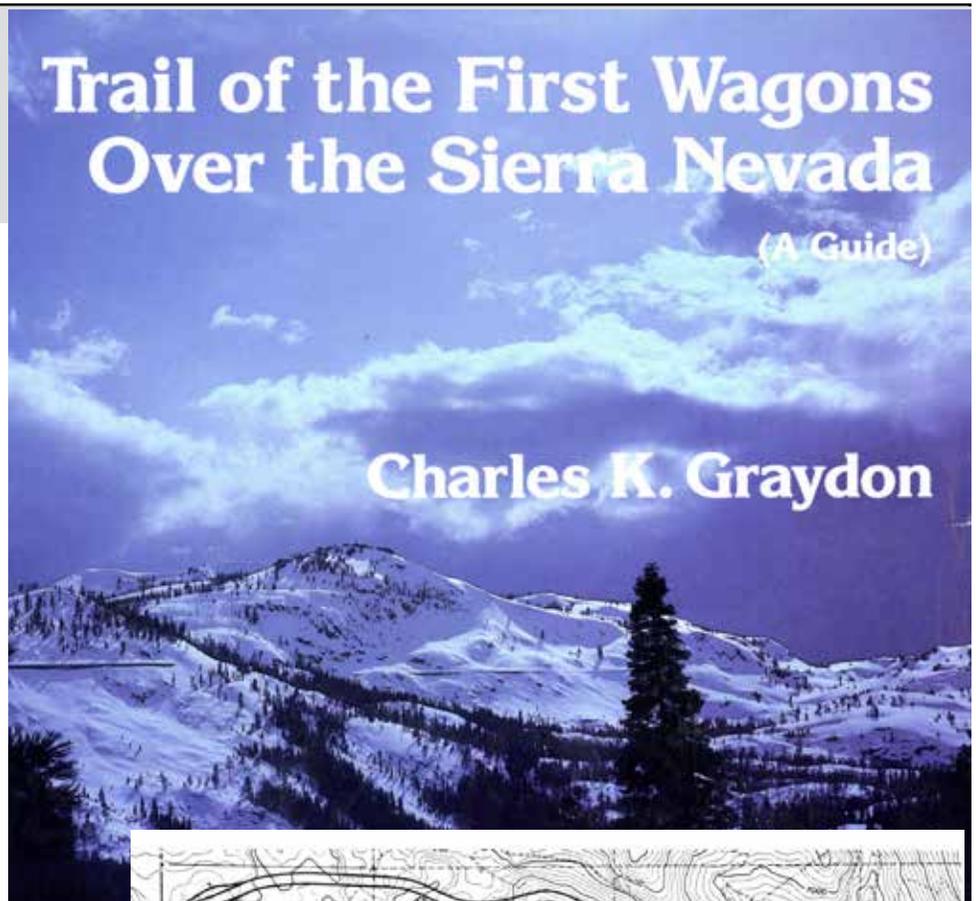
Charles Graydon

Most books are about the text and maybe some pictures. The purpose of this book is not the text, although there is some. The purpose of this book is the maps.

If you've always been curious about how the wagon trains got over Donner Summit to get to California because you'd like to vicariously enjoy the routes or if you've always wanted to explore the actual routes, then you will like the Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada. Charles Graydon has mapped every section of the trail starting at the Nevada State Line and going to Dutch Flat. Each map is accompanied by a short text which may include emigrant quotes and which explains that particular section of the route. You don't use the book for the text though, although the directions are helpful. You use it to see the actual routes.

Unfortunately in 1986 when Graydon wrote his book there was no GPS so there are no coordinates. If you are handy with topo maps though, or know how to put Graydon's routes into your GPS device, you will have no troubles following the portions of the route in which you are interested.

The map to the right is an example of the many maps in the book. This one shows three emigrant routes over Donner Pass: the first route (1844) at the top; the second route, Roller Pass (1846) at the bottom; and the Coldstream Pass route (used after 1846 and until the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. came along).



# Video Review

**California Straight Ahead, 1937 John Wayne 67 minutes** (available for purchase on the internet)

In our continuing quest to find movies that used Donner Summit as a setting (see our Heirloom indices, "Videos of Donner Summit") we came across a classic John Wayne story, "California Straight Ahead." Wayne is not a cowboy here unless you count truck drivers as modern-day cowboys but it's classic Wayne in temperament, fighting bad guys, and coming out winning with the girl at the end. Some of the movie was filmed on Donner Summit too and that's the key to getting into the Heirloom.

The movie is set in the time when trucking was a new industry and apparently a lot of money could be made. John Wayne plays a happy-go-lucky school bus driver named Biff who does not have much ambition. His girlfriend, Mary, has greater ambitions for him though.

Charlie Porter is a friend of Biff's and brother of Mary. He is a trucker and has gotten a small contract to Chicago. If he had two trucks instead of one he'd "really be sitting pretty." There is competition and skullduggery in the trucking industry though, and Padula sabotages Charlie's one truck. The truck being out of commission, they decide to use Biff's bus but that gets Biff fired at Mary's instigation. (She wants to see Biff do more than drive a bus.) Biff buys the bus from the company on the way out the door and now Charlie's company has two trucks once the other truck is fixed.

The new Porter and Smith Co. has the opportunity to carry nitroglycerin for \$500 and that would be an entry into chemical transportation. Mary wants them to forgo that nitroglycerin opportunity but Biff decided to take it because they need the money. Biff will drive. There is riot at the trucking dispatch center after Biff tries to get revenge on Padula. Biff is in jail. Now Charlie has to carry the nitro or they lose business. Biff had forbidden Charlie to carry it. Padula removes a road block hoping Charlie will get stuck and have his chances ruined for transporting chemicals. Charlie is killed when the nitro goes "off" just as Biff arrives. Mary blames Biff.

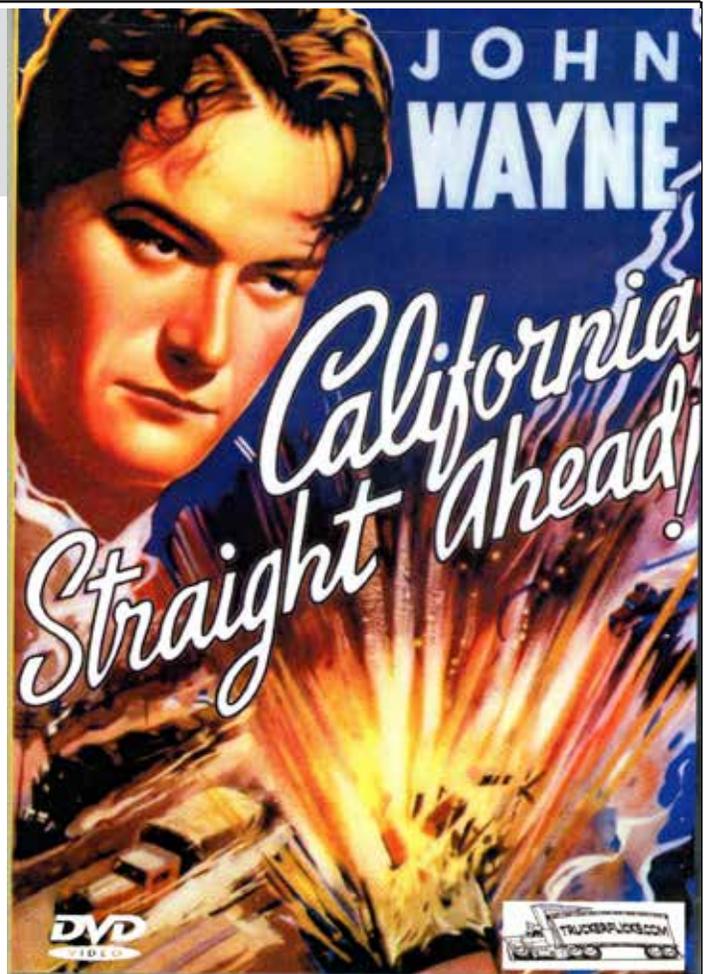
Biff joins McCorkle Trucking and a Corrigan truck runs into his truck. It's damaged and the Corrigan official says reimbursement will come but it will take awhile. Biff wants the money now and heads to Corrigan's main office to press his \$3 claim. His direct action impresses Corrigan and gets him a job.

The trucking business is so lucrative Corrigan tells Biff that he should be able to make enough in five years to retire. Biff replies that he thinks two years will be enough.

Time goes by, the company is successful, and Biff becomes an executive.

The railroad is the competition for trucking although trucking has taken over all short-haul operations. Mr. Gifford, who also likes Mary and wants to marry her, is in charge of the railroad. Padula has been driven out of business by Corrigan and gets a job with the railroad.

There will be a strike at West Coast ports and a shipment has to get to a particular ship before the strike. The railroad can't do



it and refuses. Biff takes the challenge. There is also some interplay between Gifford and Biff and Biff bluffs Gifford but then ends up getting fired by Corrigan. Mary goes to work for Gifford but does not marry him.

Biff decides he can get the shipment to Los Angeles on time using Corrigan Trucks. He gives a rousing speech to the drivers and they are all for Biff and the challenge. Just as the trucks are loaded news comes that the railroad had also taken a shipment to Los Angeles and so there is now a race but Biff's trucks are four hours behind the railroad's shipment.

The Press picked up the story and headlines scream about the race between the truck caravan and the railroad.

Here is where Donner Summit comes into play. Even though the maps clearly show the route is directly to Los Angeles through the southwest, the train and the truck caravan go over the Sierra at Donner Summit. The snow is strong and deep. There are scenes of workers digging, bucker plows and snow plows on the engines pushing snow, highway snow clearing equipment in operation, and some equipment we've never seen before but which looks interesting. Examples are to the right with the Donner Summit Bridge at the top.

If only the railroad can stop Biff's caravan before it gets to the California border with a restraining order the railroad can win. Apparently the movie makers did not know the Sierra and its snow are on the California side of the border.

It's a million dollar contract that is at stake.

Corrigan finds out his trucks have gone to L.A. and he heads out with the shipment's owner. Padula, Gifford, and the RR people head out too with Mary who is still not married.

It's a race.

The snow puts everything at a stand-still.

There is an accident and Mary is hurt. So is Padula. Just then Biff drives up with the caravan which happens to have an accompanying ambulance. Padula recovers consciousness and discovers he's paralyzed and done for. He admits that Charlie's death was his fault. Mary forgives Biff.

The caravan and the train converge. It's neck and neck. They're going 50 MPH.

The trucks race into the depot. The train has disappeared. The ship is loaded and embarks. Corrigan shows up and is ecstatic.

Biff gets Mary or Mary gets Biff.  
Trucking can be exciting.



# Then & Now with Art Clark

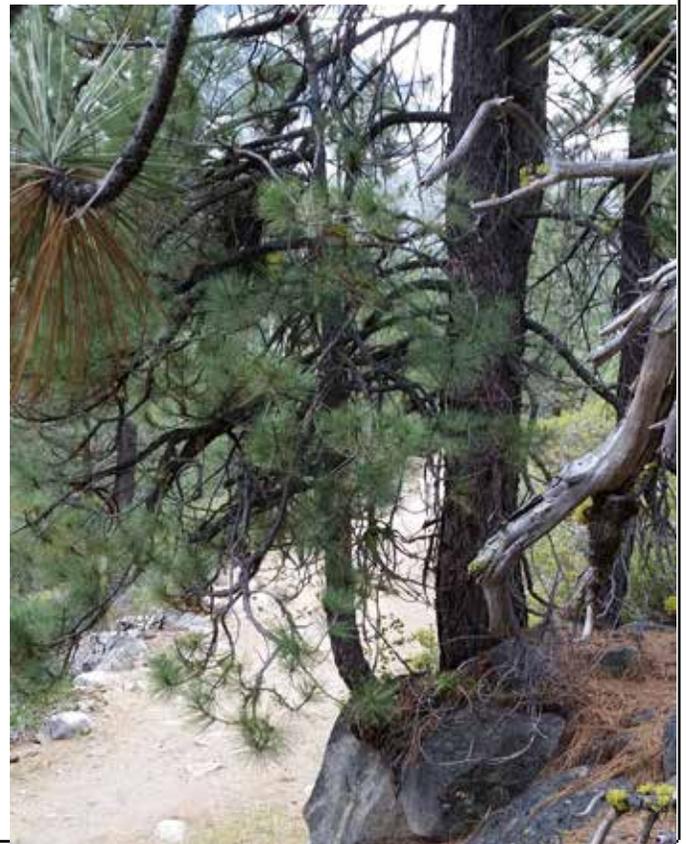
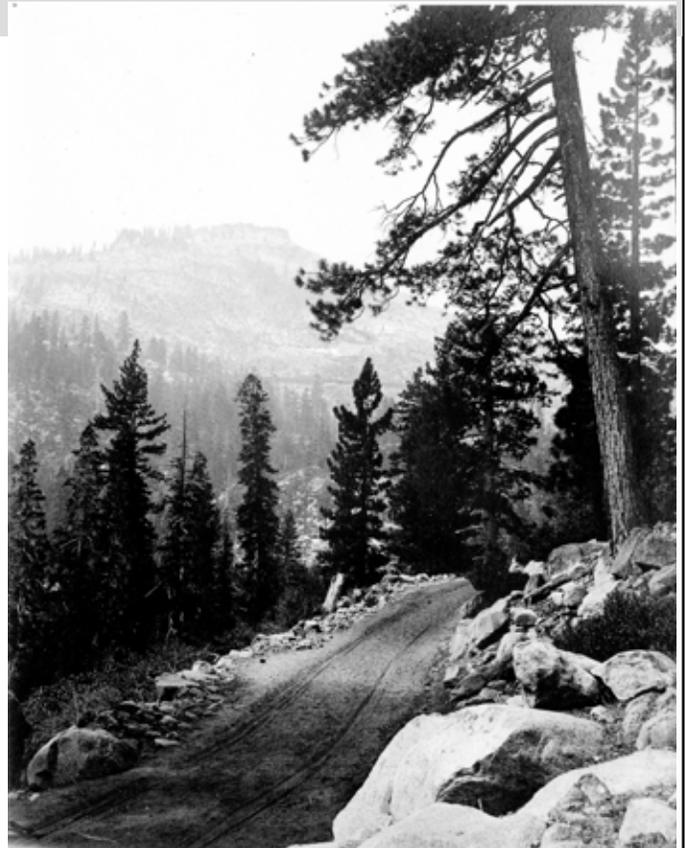
## Lincoln Highway Below Donner Pk.



Lincoln Highway Below Donner Pk. The photo location is about a half mile from West End beach at Donner Lake. The old road below it is now residential streets, and the original path is lost. Above, is a close up of auto tracks in the original.

Photo Location: N39° 19.308' W120° 17.880''

The original "Then" came from the Archives of the Soda Springs General Store - see page 7 for others in the collection.



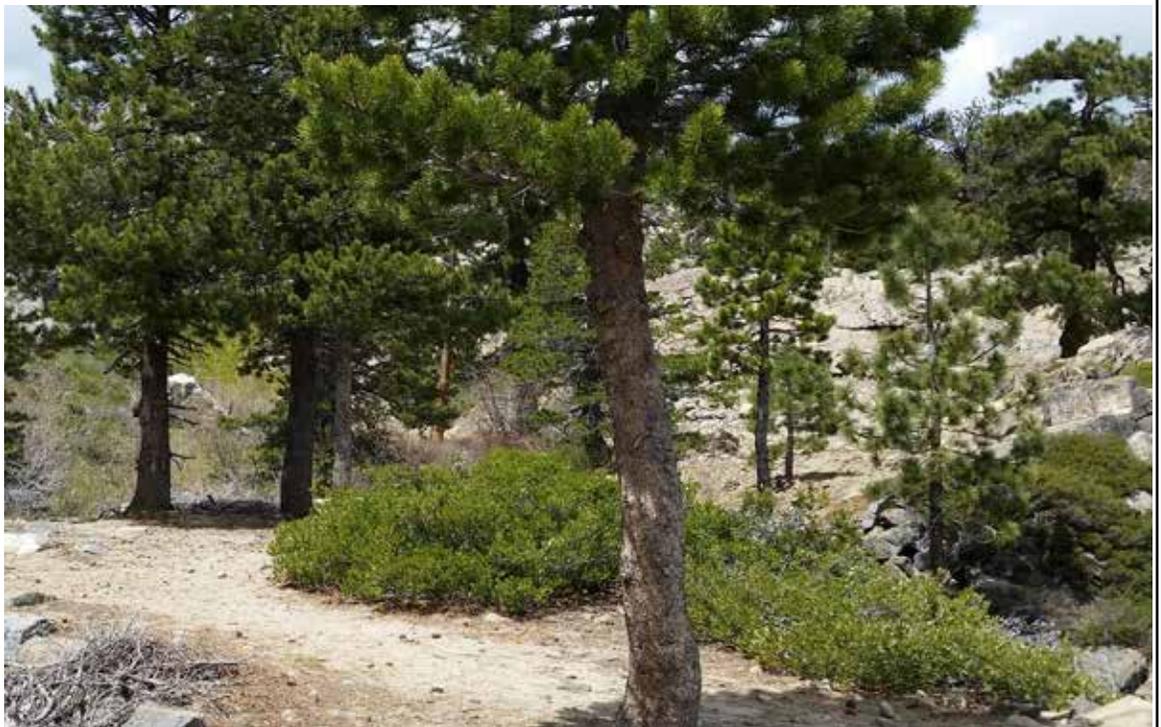
# Then & Now with Art Clark



## Pausing on east side of Donner Summit before attempting ascent.

This is in Summit Canyon on the Lincoln Highway route. If you pull off the road at our 20 Mile Museum sign for the snowsheds and walk downhill a few hundred yards on the old highway route (which is below the current road) you come to the old location of the bridge. The rock abutments make the spot very obvious. Trees seem to have a way of getting into a scene in places we wish they weren't. Luckily, the old tree on the right is still in good shape, and has grown some in the 80 or 90 years since this was taken. The old bridge hasn't fared as well, and has been gone for quite a while.

Photo location: N39° 19.014' W120° 18.883'



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.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 \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Walking Through Donner Summit History

Dozens of stories of Donner Summit history, dozens of historical quotes, hundreds of photographs and drawings, and lots of maps.

218 pages ©2015

### Purchase a Copy:

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

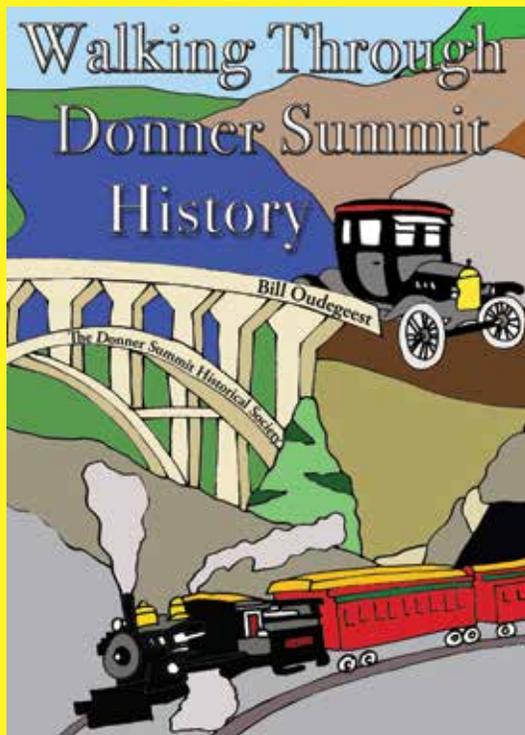
### Regular Mail:

DSHS P.O. 1 Norden Ca  
95724

### In person:

- Soda Springs Gen. Store
- Donner Summit Historical Society
- Donner Memorial State Park Visitors' Center
- The Bookshelf in Truckee

**\$25** includes S/H and sales tax.



## From the Back Cover

Donner Summit is the most important historical square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States. Native Americans crossed for thousands of years. The first emigrants to arrive in California with wagons came over Donner Summit. The first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, the first transcontinental air route, and the first transcontinental telephone line all crossed Donner Summit. The first person to bicycle around the world went over Donner Summit, as did the first person to make a motorized crossing of the U.S. and the first people to attempt to cross the country in an automobile. That's just a bit of the richness that is Donner Summit history.

Then there are the fun small stories: frozen turkeys roosting in the trees, the two-story out house at the Summit Hotel, blindfolded mules, and the Spider Dance.

You can walk through Donner Summit history, where it all took place. In the walks described here you will read the stories, "hear" history through people's words, and see the historical photographs that bring the history to life.