

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

October, 2016 issue #98

## Modern Reflection on the Emigrant Crossing of Donner Summit.

I thought that a clever title would lend gravitas to the subject about to be undertaken here.

At the DSHS there is no risk or discomfort we won't endure in the pursuit of local history (See "Adventures in History Death Defying Re-enactment" in the July, '15 [Heirloom](#) for example) and so there we were in November, 2015 retrieving the 20 Mile Museum sign for Roller Pass. It had snowed a few days before and it had scarcely warmed up so most of the snow had not melted. What little had melted had refrozen into ice making footing treacherous but our readers are paramount and so we kept on. We collect, by the way, most of our 20 Mile Museum signs each fall for winter storage to keep them from the maws of the snow removal machines. Donner Ski Ranch provides most of the space and Sugar Bowl the rest. We're just not sure what would happen to the Roller Pass sign if a big snow encompassed it.\* Did you know that an average of 34 feet of snow falls each winter on Donner Summit? Did you know that snow avalanches trapped people in the old days, like three Chinese workers who were buried and who appeared with shovels still in hand, standing behind a rock, after snowmelt? Those are stories for a different [Heirloom](#). We do have an historical snowfall page on our website though.

It's two miles up the Pacific Crest Trail toward Mt. Lincoln and to Roller Pass (see the November, '11 [Heirloom](#)) where the sign sits in summer and fall. Getting up there leaves time for ruminating while ambulating. It was November 6 and the snow got deeper the higher we went. It was not easy going like a summer hike might be. Snow is hard to walk through. Each step sinks into the snow and each foot has to be pulled out for each next step. Each step forward is against the snow. It's hard and tiring and cold and wet.

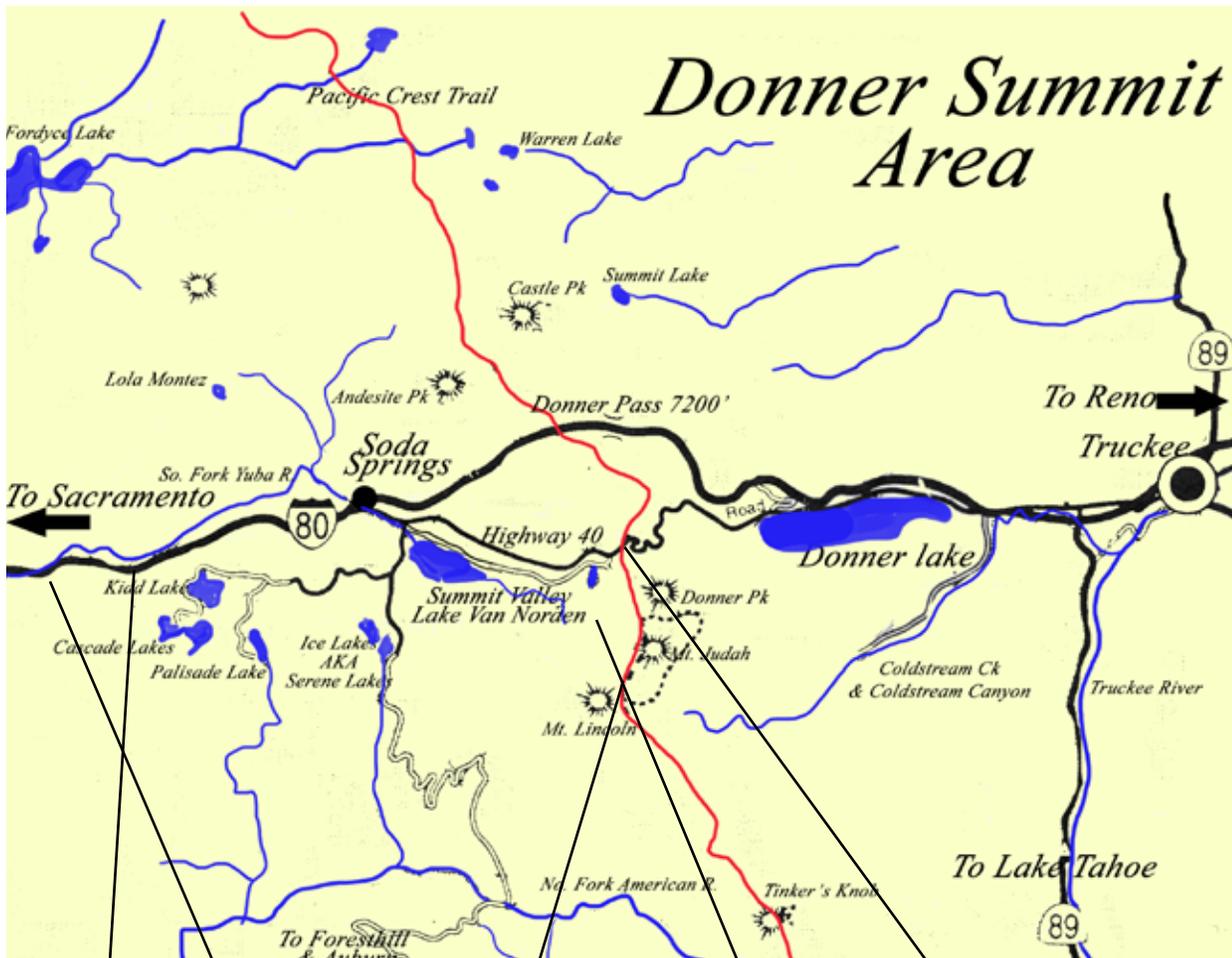
Late October/early November was the same time of year that emigrants crossed the Sierra and for many emigrants the conditions were the same as for us. There was snow and ice.\*\* The emigrants, of course, were encumbered by oxen, wagons, mules, horses, and all their worldly goods left after jettisoning many



From the top of Roller Pass looking down. Emigrants had to struggle up the steep incline, more likely through the snow, while also pushing oxen and wagons up. For more on Roller Pass see the [Heirloom](#) editions: 11/11, 4/12, 2/12, 5/13, 7/13

# Story Locations in this Issue

**In This Issue**



China Kitchen pg 4 Hampshire Rocks pg 15 Roller Pass pg 1 Mt. Judah sign rescue pg 8 railroad pictures pg 10/11

Find us on 

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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



Looking back towards Mt. Lincoln on the PCT.

There was some snow. There was ice. It was slippery and the snow made walking challenging. We were fresh though. We'd slept in soft beds. Breakfast was good, hot, and tasty. Hot showers were at our commands. Our clothes were clean, waterproof and warm. We'd be rewarded with civilization in just a couple of hours.

The emigrants were exhausted and desperate. Their clothes were worn, wet, and did not keep out much of the cold. They'd been sleeping on the ground for months and they'd walked across most of the continent. Their shoes were worn, had holes, and were disintegrating. They had to get over the mountains and to California before weather made it impossible. That could happen anytime. The Donner Party was a lesson in all their minds. Their food was almost gone. They had, maybe, a little flour and jerky. Maybe there were some dried peas. It was the same food meal after meal. We slipped on the ice as they must have done. We trudged through the snow as they must have done. They were desperate though; we just had to get a sign. They had to keep the oxen and wagons moving. We just had to go a couple of miles.

In the end we got the sign and headed back downhill, just like the emigrants, but without the encumbrances, except for the sign and a screwdriver. At home the sun was streaming through the sun room windows. A lunch was waiting as would, later, a warm shower, soft bed, a good dinner, and a glass of wine. The emigrants of 1850 or so were still walking. They'd go to bed that night, after the summit crossing, on the ground. Their blankets would be covered with ice in the morning. Their exhaustion might have inured them to the cold. They hadn't changed clothes in many weeks or longer. The food was the same as yesterday, but maybe there was just a bit less.

Then they discovered that even though they were heading downhill, the trip from the summit was far from easy. It was some of the hardest part of the journey (see "It Wasn't All Downhill..." in the December, '13 [Heirloom](#)).

They were heading for California though, the land of their dreams, the land of their hopes, the land of their futures. They'd sacrificed so much they couldn't stop. The effort had to be worth it.

things at the 40 Mile Desert in Nevada.

They'd experienced all kinds of hardships: accidents, the death of friends and family, the Nevada desert, cattle rustling by Indians, disease, and human nature. They were running short of food. Wagons had broken down. Many had been abandoned. Possessions had been left behind. Then, leaving the desert, finally finding water, they saw the Sierra for the first time. The sight struck terror in some (see emigrant quotes in October and November, '11 and June, '16 [Heirlooms](#)). The Sierra would prove to be the hardest part of the entire journey.

As they approached the mountains they were feeling desperate. Winter was coming and now there was this barricade in their way. Then, for many, it began to snow.

Hiking up to retrieve the sign, because, as said above, there was lots of ruminating time, we considered the emigrant experience. The temperature was the same – in the low 30's.



On the PCT looking towards Castle Pk.



Just off the PCT. This is the top of Jerome Hill lift at Sugar Bowl. Summit Valley is in the distance. Emigrants would have had this view just after crossing Roller Pass - without the lift tower however.

This fall we go before snowfall.

\*This article was written in fall, 2015. By the time room in the [Heirloom](#) was possible it was August, 2016 and we knew that snow and ice had dismembered the sign stand for the Roller Pass sign. Presumably the sign would have been destroyed had we left it in place.

\*\*For some emigrants, who traveled quickly and arrived early, there was no snow. For others, there was little. For the Donner Party, which tried for the Summit on October 31, there was a couple of feet. For the Stephens Party of 1844, the first wagon train to California to arrive with wagons, they arrived at Truckee Lake (this was before the Donners arrived in 1846) and there was a foot of snow at the lake and more up top.

## China Kitchen

The Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT)  
Searches for Chinese RR Workers' Camps.

For the last few months the [Heirloom](#) has been running a series of articles about the Chinese railroad workers on Donner Summit during the construction of the transcontinental railroad. We've focused on the job, living conditions, danger, the building, Summit Camp, and prejudice. (This comes after a series on Tunnel 6 in our 2012 [Heirlooms](#).)

Having covered the history there was just one more topic to cover: actual camp sites if we could find them. We'd covered Summit Camp, the longest lasting of the Chinese RR worker camps in the August [Heirloom](#) but there were lots of camps and maybe we could find one or more.

This issue was supposed to cover that but as you can see from the rest of the pages there was a lot more Donner Summit history competing for space and the editor wanted to have a more eclectic collection of articles than focus on one topic. Parenthetically there were quite a few other articles that were bumped entirely (here's a little foreshadowing to keep you coming back): Sierra Crest signs above Lake Mary to follow on this month's article, Piracy on Donner Summit, the survey of the original buildings at Soda Springs Station, arrows from the transcontinental air route, Sleuthing in Hi Res, Norm's matchbooks, etc. So you can see why you should keep up your subscription.

All those things aside there were three articles about Chinese railroad worker camps in the October folder as well: China Kitchen, Camp 5 and Big Bend. Having gotten the series about Chinese workers "to bed" (an old newspaper term) the Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) went out looking for camps. We had some general information and maps from archeologists to work from and we'd had contact with Sue Ellen Benson of Big Bend. You'll have to wait for most of that because this month

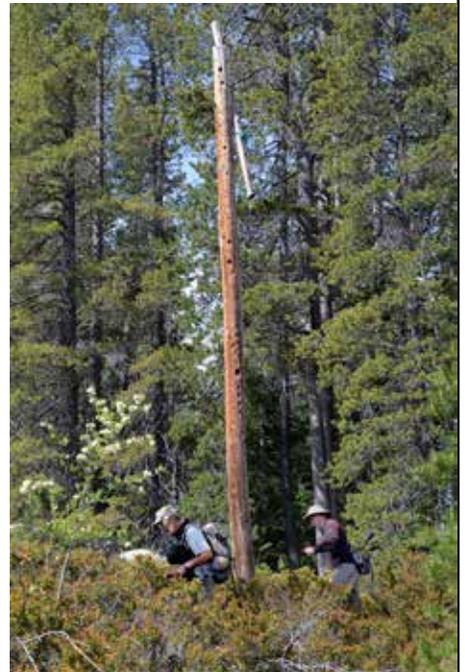


The railroad is just at the west end of the "China Kitchen" site. This is a panorama; the railroad does not bend here. Bill Oudegeest is at left and Art Clark at right

there is only room for one more article, China Kitchen.

Working off of archeologists' maps discovered after much historical sleuthing, we'd identified two likely spots. There were Chinese railroad worker camps every mile or so along the railroad route but there was not much to them and they were temporary. It would be hard to find evidence we thought, so focusing on a couple of sites that might have had more "action" seemed a better strategy.

China Kitchen seemed the most likely since it's marked on USGS topo maps and should lie just off the railroad bed just west of the Cascade Bridge (take a look at the map on the next page). We were in for a disappointment, but read on.



You access the site from Troy Rd., off of Old Highway 40, just west of the school at Kingvale. We drove up the road, parked and started walking. Across the railroad tracks we found a likely spot. It

was close to the map location, it had water, it was generally flat, and it was near the railroad. Being flat and within a few hundred yards of the railroad were conditions archeologists had described.



We started searching. There was a lot of forest detritus (See above) which made a nice cover over anything important like Chinese artifacts. There was also a lot of other more modern detritus, some of which was no doubt defenestrated from train car windows (we were just looking for a spot to write that).

You can see here from the pictures what we found. The photographs are by George Lamson.

It was disappointing but just wait until next month when we get to Camp 5 and then later Big Bend. You will not be disappointed.

Above: Art Clark shows the difficulty of the search given the heavy ground cover. Above right: Art Clark and Bill Oudegeest at one of the old telegraph poles in heavy brush above the site. Right: modern junk at the site: part of boots, cans, etc.





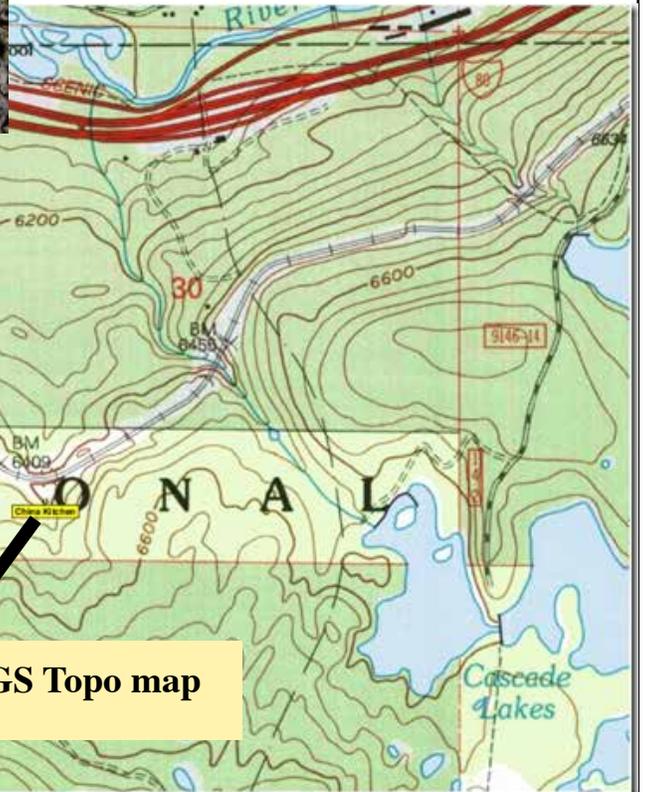
Granite rock with wedge holes. Workers drilled a line of small holes in the granite and then inserted wedges. The wedges were hit in succession until the rock split. You can see many of these rock splitting artifacts in China Wall stones.



Square nails (left on site) and an old drill hole in granite.



A trove of Prince Albert tobacco cans - left on site.



**China Kitchen on the USGS Topo map**



Clearly a man-made mound from long ago. What was the purpose?



Another drill hole.



Modern junk



Pottery shard of indeterminate age.

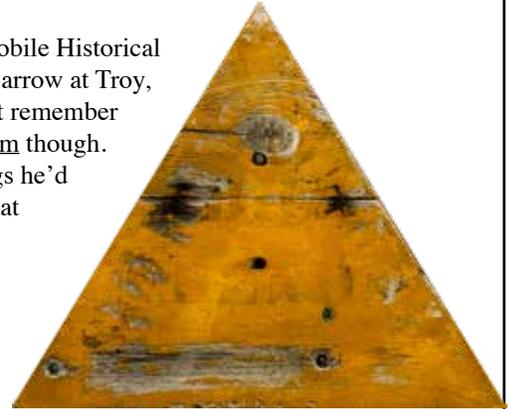


The train coming.

# A Tale of Two Signs

The Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) Rescues Historic Signs

You won't remember in last month's [Heirloom](#) an exciting episode of the MHRT (Mobile Historical Research Team) in which Art Clark, upon approaching the transcontinental air route arrow at Troy, suddenly remembered a lost railroad tunnel that sits underneath the arrow. You don't remember because the story was "pulled" for lack of space. It will be in a forthcoming [Heirloom](#) though. That makes a good intro to this article though. Art did not remember any other things he'd forgotten to mention, but earlier he had remembered that there was a downed sign that needed rescuing - the Sierra Crest sign to the right.



Loyal readers will remember that in the December, '10 [Heirloom](#) we had an article entitled, "Search for Sierra Ski Ways." Art Clark had been combing the area for the old signs that marked government ski trails in the 30's and 40's. He'd found quite a few which you can see on our website.\* He's also rescued quite a few that have fallen down and taken them to the DSHS where they are being preserved.

In the case of this sign, he remembered it was on Mt. Judah on a downed tree. If it was not rescued it would disintegrate. So an expedition was born. As long as we were in the neighborhood we thought we'd check out the two Weddell signs\*\* also on the flank of Mt. Judah. One was on a dead tree when discovered some years ago, so we'd see if the tree was still standing.

Up the PCT with an exploration first of the source of the Yuba (see a picture in our "Most Scenic Byway" brochure on our website - on the inside) and then for the Ski Way or Sierra Crest sign. After some searching of every downed tree in the neighborhood the sign finally turned up. Above, it's in its original form. On the next page you can see small versions after it had been through the MX-1000 Historical Rejuvenator a couple of times to expose different iterations - like old Italian masters.

Then we went up the hill to where Peter Weddell thought the emigrant wagons had gone as they came down from Coldstream Pass. Regular readers will know that Donner Pass was used only in 1844 by the Stephens Party, in 1845, and then just a little in 1846. The rescued Donner Party members came up Donner Pass but most of the '46 trains went up Roller Pass. That same year Coldstream was discovered between what is now Donner Pk. and Mt. Judah. Since it was easier it became the preferred route and the one Peter Weddell marked with signs and a cairn that still stands just below Donner Pk. You'll have to consult our [Heirloom](#) indices to see where you can read about all of the above. There are just too many references.



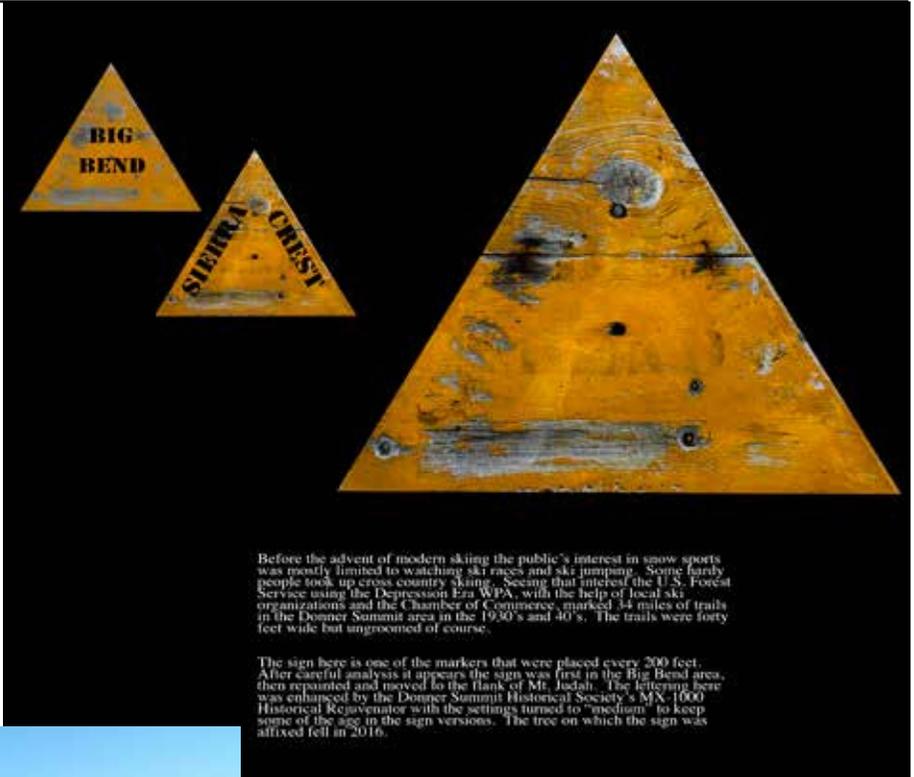
There were two Weddell signs just yards apart in an area that does not look auspicious for top heavy emigrant wagons to have gone. We climbed over a lip and there was our tree. It had fallen. Trees are generally roundish. There are 360 degrees around trees. The fallen tree had fallen right on the side where the sign had been. What were the odds? Imagine our disappointment. It was irretrievable because it was a big tree. Nevertheless we hunted. Then Sharp Eyes, Art Clark, noted that at the break of the tree there was a piece of wood that was not from this tree. There, in the crack, was the Weddell sign from the 1920's (next page, top). It's now saved for posterity in its own exhibit.

\*you'll find links at <http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/projects.html>

\*\* see the April, '14 [Heirloom](#) for Peter Weddell, signs, and his map of the emigrant routes. See also his cairn in the September, '15 [Heirloom](#) and more in the January, '12 [Heirloom](#).

Right, the partner of the Sierra Crest sign from the other side of the fallen tree as found in worse shape than the rescued sign. Photo right, by Art Clark. Photos above are the actual rescued signs as found.





Above and below left, digital versions of the actual exhibits. The exhibits explain the signs and show the signs almost in their original forms (or two forms in the case of the Sierra Crest sign) thanks to the DSHS MX-1000 Historical Rejuvenator). Go to our Exhibits page to see larger versions: <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/exhibits.html>

Upper left: the Weddell sign as found at the break in the tree. Left: another Weddell sign nearby still on its tree on the flank of Mt. Judah above the road that goes to the lift. Both photos by Art Clark.



In the 1920 Peter Weddell read *The Expedition of the Donner Party and its Tragic Fate* and was hooked. Then he read the McGlashan classic, *The History of the Donner Party*. Weddell spent the following summers in the 1920's marking and mapping the Emigrant Trail. It was a difficult job due to the time passage, the extensive logging, and grazing of thousands of sheep, but eventually he marked the trail from Verdi, Nevada to near Lake Mary on Donner Summit, just below this sign's original location. At intervals along the emigrant route he placed wooden marker signs like the one here.

This sign sat on a tree between the road to the top of the lower Mt. Judah lift and the Judah Loop trail. In 2016 the tree fell on the sign side. Fortunately the tree broke almost right at the sign and the sign fell into the crack between the stump and the fallen tree. The sign was retrieved by the Donner Summit Historical Society's Mobile Historical Research Team. Left is a version with its aging reversed.

# What's in Your Closet?

This is at least the 12th “What’s in Your Closet” feature in the Heirloom. It must be a pretty good feature. Each of the previous “Closets” were about things donated to the DSHS, mostly picture albums.

Mike Pechner is an eminent meteorologist in the Bay Area who is also an aficionado of trains. Like any other kid, he grew up with them. His love of trains grew when his father took him on a trip along Highway 40 to Donner Summit in 1958. He was “really hooked then.” He even remembers the numbers of the locomotives that stirred his heart, numbers 6378 and 6380. Mike grew to know the operators, he rode with the crews, and he admired the trains.

That admiration has continued over the decades and Mike has built a portfolio of train and locomotive pictures numbering in the hundreds. He brought an album, which contains the best of his pictures, in to show Norm. Put into a book Mike’s pictures would stir a young boy’s heart (or an older fellow with a young boy’s heart). All of the pictures date from the 1960's.

Then our scanning team went into action preserving Mike’s efforts, some of which you can see here.

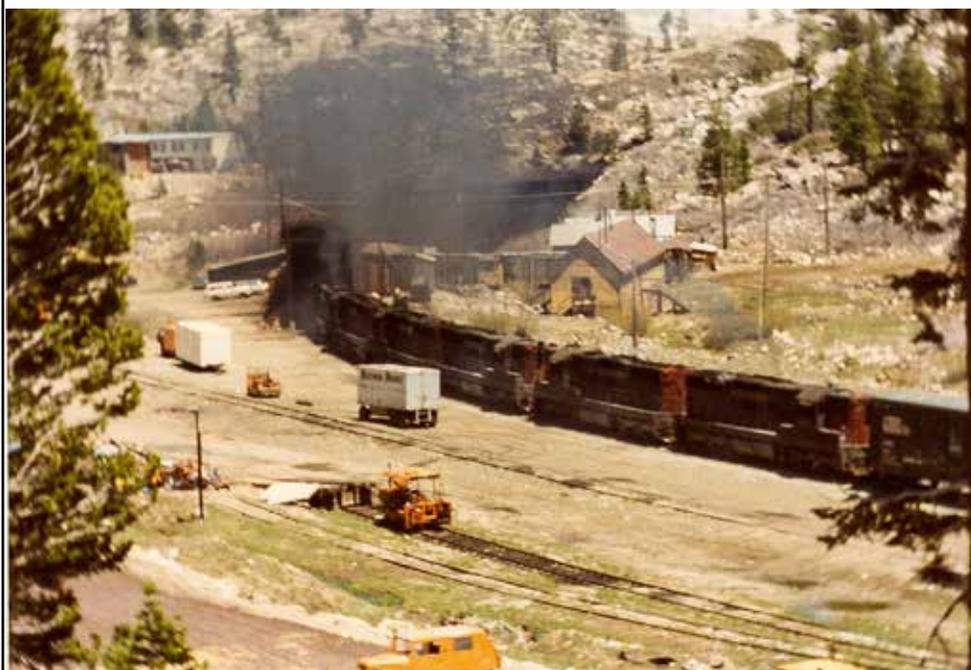
Maybe you’ve got an historic item, old pictures, or something else related to Donner Summit. We’d love to see what you’ve got, hear the stories and duplicate if possible.

Let us know. Meanwhile, thanks Mike.



Above: snowshed interiors.

Left, Donner Summit. The train is entering Tunnel 6.



Right, Donner Lake is the background. A Southern Pacific train is emerging from Tunnel 8 over China Wall.



Left, Locomotive emerging from Tunnel 8. It's about to cross China Wall.



Winter is coming.

Here are rotary snowblowers from the Mike Pechner collection. Summit Valley is in the background of the upper left photograph.

# Book Review

## Finding the Hidden Voices of the Chinese Railroad Workers An Archeological and historical Journey

In association with the Chinese Railroad Workers Project at Stanford University and the Chinese Historical Society of America.

Mary Maniery, Rebecca Allen, Sarah Christine Heffner  
2016 107 pages

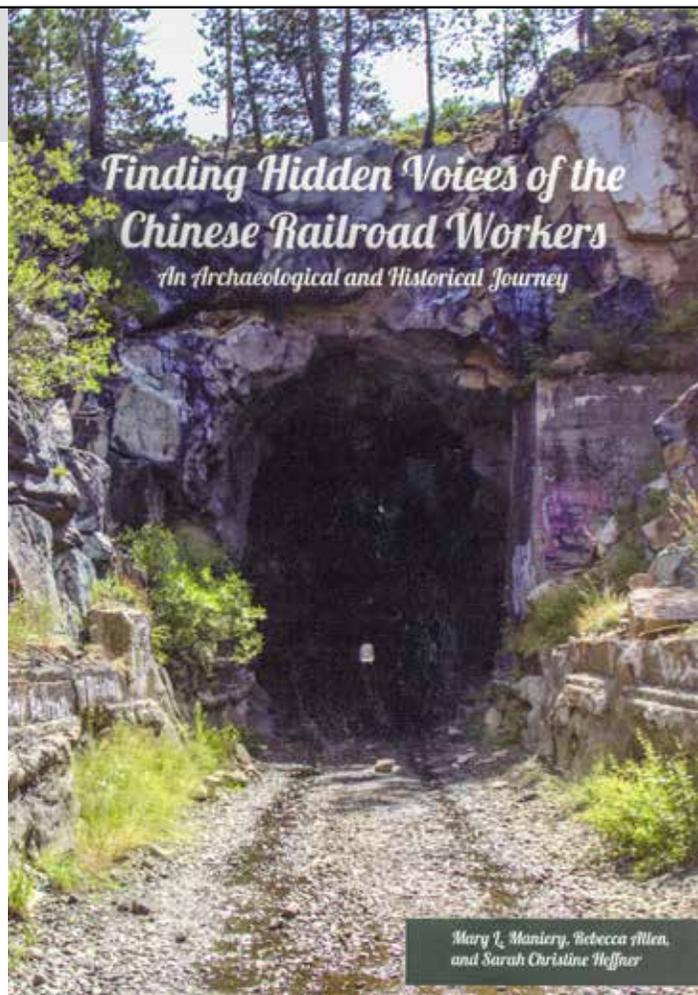
The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in the mid-19th Century was the greatest industrial project of the age. Nothing like it had ever been done in the world. Without the Chinese railroad workers it could not have been done. Finding the Hidden Voices... is a wonderful overview of the Chinese contribution to that effort. The book is aimed at the widest audience, rather than an academic one, and to accomplish that it is done in a popular and attractive magazine-type layout style with, as the introduction says, a “vibrantly illustrated format” for the “diverse audience” it is aimed at. Prose is in short snippets.

Every aspect of the Chinese working on the railroad is reported: the project in general, the crews, dress, food, the work, work camps, health and medicine, recreation, legacy, etc. There is also some of the archeological work that developed a lot of the information and some of the archeology methods.

The Chinese workers were not just the footnote that many histories of the Transcontinental Railroad relegate them to. Nothing like the railroad had ever been done in the world. Without the Chinese railroad workers it could not have been done. Finding Hidden Voices.... is a wonderful overview of the Chinese contribution to the effort that changed California and the country.

To help tell the story the book is illustrated with quotes, maps, pictures of artifacts, historical and modern pictures, illustrations, and ads. The historic pictures are a particular strength of the book as are the contemporaneous quotes such as, “We passed hosts of Chinamen... They are all young, and their faces look singularly quick and intelligent. A few wear basket hats; but all have substituted boots for their wooden shoes, and adopted pantaloons and blouses.” (Albert Richardson, New York Tribune, 1869 pg 27). There is even a little

caption of a catfish picture saying that fish, planted by the



Chinese, have survived and propagated for more than 140 years despite Sierra snows and ice. That of course is Catfish Pond on Donner Summit. At the end there is a good list for “further reading.”

The Chinese workers were not just the footnote that many histories of the Transcontinental Railroad relegate them to. They were integral and this book puts them at the center of the endeavor. The Chinese left no records themselves of their lives and work and so we have to rely on newspaper articles, reports by the railroad and visitors to work sites, and the archeological work to tell the stories. The many pictures of artifacts uncovered during archeological work illustrate the Chinese experience and the archeological component. For example in maps of Chinese work camp sites, done by archeologists, the reader can see how archeologists work. The artifacts illustrate what the text says about Chinese. They used porcelain from China rather than, or in addition to, America-made goods. They used coins for gaming and in folk medicine. Opium was used on the line. Some porcelain-ware was personalized with names. There is even a short discussion of the origins of different porcelain designs.

It's important that Finding the Hidden Voices.... puts the Chinese contribution into perspective. In doing that it puts some of our past into perspective. There is a reproduction of an article titled, "Honors to John Chinaman." The article says that upon completion of the railroad the CPRR's chief engineer, James Strobridge, invited representatives of the Chinese workers to his railcar for a celebratory dinner. To the wider public the Chinese still remained anonymous and were referred to as "John Chinaman." History, the authors say, remembered the "Triumph of the line" and not the Chinese who "helped to link the East to the West."

"Archeological studies of Chinese skeletal remains give clues to their experience in the American west. Robust skeletons and degenerative joint changes attest to the strenuous labor these men performed."

Sue Fawn Chung,  
historian, and John  
Joseph Crandall,  
bioarcheologist, 2014  
(pg 47)

With no note of irony, because it was expected at the time, the article continued, "So, too, will that day's work of 'John Chinamen' be recalled as the most stirring event in the building of the railroad." Chinese workers weren't worthy of having their names remembered and indeed were not even considered as individuals by the railroad. More likely they were hired in groups with their names lost to history.

One would think that as modern times arrived the story would have changed. But on the 100th anniversary of the completion of the railroad in 1969, a celebration was held.

In 1928, things had not changed. The Southern Pacific (the Central Pacific had been absorbed) Bulletin (Vol. 16, no. 5, pg 3) said "Fifty-nine years ago a squad of eight Irishmen and a small army of Chinese coolies made a record in track laying that has never been equaled..." "Fired with enthusiasm" the team laid ten miles fifty-six feet of track in one day.

"The names of the Irish rail handlers have been passed down through the years. Their super human achievement will be remembered as long as there is railroad history."

The Chinese Historical Society of America moved to ensure recognition of the Chinese contribution. They had two commemorative plaques made to install during the Golden Spike Ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah. The plaque dedication was not included in the official program although the Historical Society received a telegram saying that a spokesman for the "Chinee [sic] Community would be on the platform. During the ceremony, when no Chinese were allowed to speak, the Secretary of Labor, John Volpe, said, "Who else but Americans could drill ten tunnels in mountains thirty feet deep in snow? Who else but Americans could chisel through miles of solid granite..." Who else indeed, except the Chinese who did do the tunneling of fifteen tunnels and did chisel through solid granite.

Hidden Voices... can be obtained at Lulu.com

For more information the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/>

"Systematic workers these Chinese – competent and wonderfully effective because tireless and unremitting in their industry. Their workday is from sunrise to sunset, six days in the week. They spend Sundays washing and mending, gambling and smoking."

Daily Alta California,  
November, 9, 1868 (pg 60)

"Did they not build the Chinese Wall, the biggest piece of masonry in the world?"

Charles Crocker CPRR construction chief, 1865 (pg 6)  
answering objections to hiring Chinese workers

## Note:

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

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

You might even want to do a review for us.

# Then & Now with Art Clark

## Alfred A Hart 105 - New Hampshire Rocks

The name of this spot is somewhat of a mystery. When Hart photographed it in the 1860's he used that name. Was it already known by that, or did it remind him of New Hampshire? Either way, the name stuck. But the "New" part of it seems to have wandered off, and again, who shortened it? Along the highway, it's just "Hampshire Rocks."

Regardless of what it's called, it's been a popular spot for photographers. Hart produced two versions looking upstream, and two downstream. Sometime after that, the buggy view man was made by someone else, but oddly cropped the river out of the scene. If it wasn't for the trapezoid-shaped rock on the left, the location might not have been found.

The view with the bus was part of a series of photos produced to promote the Lincoln Highway in the 1920's and they were nice enough to include the same rock. Luckily, they included a wide view of the river, and on the far right of their image is another distinctive triangle-shaped formation in the granite. This triangle is visible today, and caught my eye while driving by looking for the photo spot.

The trapezoid rock is still there too, but now hides in the bushes, though it is closer to the road due to widening done when this became Highway 40.

Photo location 39° 18.646'N 120° 30.364'W or "The spot is about 250 yards up the road from Rainbow Lodge on the south side of Old 40."



Original Hart #105



# Then & Now with Art Clark



The same spot today.



## Behind the Scenes @ the DSHS



### Ed's new sign caps It Takes a Community

In the last [Heirloom](#) you read about the disappointment the 20 Mile Museum staff had upon finding that snow removal machines had destroyed some of the 20 Mile Museum receptacles. You saw pictures of what had to be replaced.

It takes a community sometimes. Ed Bubnis of Serene Lakes volunteered to make new caps for the sign receptacles to be used when the signs are taken out for winter. The new caps are beautiful and will be used to replace mangled ones and for new signs. You can see them, left, in their delivery box, or you can wait until winter and see the caps in use.

Volunteers are great.

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

Membership

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

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

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http://donnerpartyhike.com



## SPEAKER SERIES

### An Evening with Greg Palmer

*The Lost Party—Stephens Townsend Murphy*

October 8, 2016 | 5:30 p.m.  
Donner Memorial Visitor Center  
12593 Donner Pass Rd., Truckee

5:00 P.M. DOORS OPEN  
5:30 P.M. PRESENTATION STARTS  
*Cheese and crackers served and beverages are available for sale.*

### THE FIRST WAGONS OVER THE SIERRA NEVADA

Greg Palmer will talk about the saga of the Stephens Townsend Murphy Party of 1844.

Greg Palmer has years of experience guiding youngsters and history buffs alike in area history. He currently is a docent at Thunderbird Lodge and Donner Memorial State Park. He will delight our audience with his gift of story telling. The lost party is a story of the first wagons that came over the Sierra Nevada. The participants became the core of California development. This small wagon party made up of men, women and children became the first pioneers to successfully take their wagons over the first practical wagon route to California.

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OCTOBER 3 & 4, 2015



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