

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

March, 2019 issue #127



The Sesquicentennial Is Coming

2019 is the Sesquicentennial of the first Transcontinental Railroad. The railroad is just one of the many firsts for Donner Summit* but it was important for the country as well. The DSHS along with the Truckee Donner Historical Society and the Truckee Donner Railroad Society are planning a series of events mostly starting on the 150th anniversary of the driving of the Golden Spike which was May 10 (1869) to Labor Day 2019. We'll get to all that later. To start with here is the first of a three part article about the importance of the railroad. The first part is below. The second part comes next month in April and will place the railroad in context in the 19th Century, and the third part, in May, will talk about what 19th Century people thought about it. After reading those three articles your newly acquired sesquicentennial and railroad perspective will make you so erudite you will be able to enter conversation on the matter with confidence. So stay tuned and don't let your subscriptions lapse. We'll also be printing, and putting on our website and FaceBook pages, the list of events: art contest, talks, newspaper articles, music on China Wall, walks and hikes, historical exhibits and the Passport, Then/Now's, and the Golden Spike drink. People, organizations and businesses in Truckee and on Donner Summit will be participating.

The Meaning of the Transcontinental RR

We take the transcontinental railroad for granted; it doesn't overtly affect our daily lives. The transcontinental railroad, though, is responsible for the North Tahoe-Truckee-Donner Summit area today. Without the transcontinental railroad this area would be very different. One past president of the Truckee Donner Historical Society says, "it all started because of the railroad."

The railroad brought travelers and emigrants and made crossing the Sierra relatively painless. It enabled the local lumber and ice industries. Because of the railroad, Truckee (previously named Coburn's Station) was born. It brought artists and writers to capture the beauties of the area. It brought tourists. It made early winter sports successful and spawned the ski and snowboard industries in the area. The first transcontinental highway followed the railroad's general route as did the first transcontinental telephone line, the first transcontinental air route, and the Interstate. The sesquicentennial of the transcontinental railroad marks the amazing feat of spanning the continent with rails and setting in motion what became The Truckee-Donner Summit-North Tahoe area. The transcontinental railroad was a revolution for the area and a revolution for the country, given the change it enabled and engendered.

Today California is one of the largest, richest, and most advanced economies in the world. The State provides leadership in many fields. If California was a separate country it would be number 5 in annual GDP. Three 19th Century events set

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*Firsts for Donner Summit: transcontinental railroad, transcontinental highway, transcontinental air route, transcontinental telephone line, first motorized transcontinental crossing, first motorcycle transcontinental crossing, first transcontinental crossing by bicycle, first Sierra crossing by an automobile, first transcontinental bike race.

Meaning of the Railroad Cont'd

California on that path: the Gold Rush, statehood, and the building of the transcontinental railroad.

We take a lot of what is around us for granted. It's easy to pick up an electronic device and use it as a window on the world, communicating with friends and relatives, seeing pictures from the far side of the globe, getting immediate gratification by shopping digitally, and having instant access to the newest. If we take a step back we realize how remarkable all of that and more is, and things just keep getting better and faster. Really, we live in an age of wonder. Who would have thought just a few years ago that the answers to every question would be at our fingertips for immediate retrieval and gratification? Smart phones and tablets are amazing. Self-driving cars are on the horizon and in a generation individual auto ownership may be passé. We are in the midst of a technological and transportational (here we use a useful tool called historian's literary license to develop vocabulary) revolution. The transcontinental railroad was at least as revolutionary for those of the 19th Century. Just wait 'til next month.

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

Proofread by Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, Donner Summit

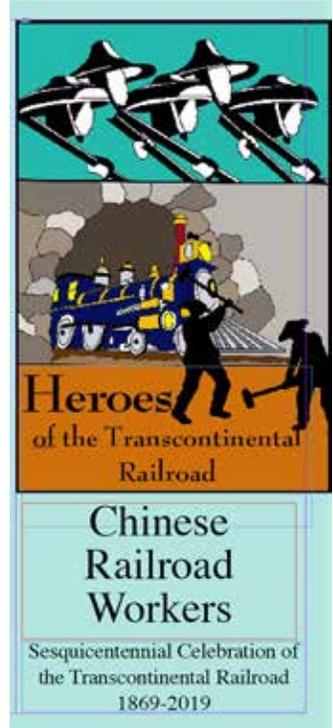
Find us on 

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

Exploring the Path of Chinese Railroad Workers



A Self-Guided Heritage Tour of Chinese Railroad Worker Sites from Auburn to Donner Pass. Source: ExploreAPAHeritage.com



Before we leave the idea of the transcontinental railroad for this month here is something you might like to check out.

The Chinese were the heroes of the transcontinental railroad. The Central Pacific, coming from the west, could not get enough workers locally and so decided to try the Chinese. They were superb for many reasons and so importation of workers from China increased. Eventually as many as 10,000 Chinese worked on the Pacific railroad (Central Pacific going from Sacramento to Utah). If you are interested, take a look at the website above, take a look at our Chinese railroad workers exhibits (on our exhibits page on our website - reduced size to the right), take a look at the Heirloom articles about Chinese workers on our website (June- September, '16), and look at our new brochure when it's released (reduced size above right). We're waiting for the winners of our Sesquicentennial art contest to provide us with a logo. (Second parenthesis: the brochure is on the "Brochures" page of our website in case you can't wait.)

https://1882foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Railroad-Tour-Brochure_Digital-Publishing_Single-Page.pdf

Exploring the Path of Chinese Railroad Workers: A Self-Guided Heritage Tour of Chinese Railroad Worker Sites from Auburn to Donner Pass. Source: ExploreAPAHeritage.com

TUNNEL 6 - THE CHINESE

"The Chinese were steady, hardworking set of men as could be found."

Without the Chinese, it would have been impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national highway.

They Built the Railroad

The Chinese built Tunnel 6 through the Sierra crossing and without them there would have been no transcontinental railroad.

Once construction started on the Transcontinental Railroad there was not enough labor. Whites wanted to work for themselves or for higher pay in the mines. A call for 5,000 laborers only produced a few hundred. Charles Crocker, one of the Big 4, suggested Chinese laborers. James Smithridge, construction superintendent was against the idea. Crocker countered saying, "Did they not build the Chinese wall, the biggest piece of masonry in the world?"

"As a class they are quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious and economical. Ready and apt to learn all the different kinds of work required in railroad building, they soon became as efficient as white laborers. More gradual and economical, they are contented with less wages. We find them organized into societies for mutual aid and assistance."

Edward Stanford in a letter to President Andrew Johnson, October 10, 1865

Eventually the Chinese made up 80% of the CPRR workforce.

Grueling Work & Danger

The work was long and hard, done all by hand and black powder explosives. Rocks were moved using baskets and small carts. The work went on 10-12 hours a day all week long.

On Donner Summit the Chinese endured frostbite, avalanche, accident, pneumonia, explosion, rock slide, disease, and cold, continual cold. During winter the workers continued work without seeing the sun as they toiled through their camp in the work through snow tunnels.

In the tunnels they worked by candle and lantern light. The air was filled with rock dust and black powder residue.

For the work, the danger and the discomfort, they earned \$28, then \$30, and finally \$55 a month, less than whites who also had their board covered by the railroad.

TUNNEL 6 - THE CHINESE PT II

I wish to call your minds that the early completion of this railroad we have built has been in large measure due to that poor despised class of laborers called the Chinese - to the fidelity and industry they have shown.

The Work

The Chinese were steady, hardworking set of men as could be found. Without the Chinese, it would have been impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national highway.

Danger

The Chinese built Tunnel 6 through the Sierra crossing and without them there would have been no transcontinental railroad.

Living Conditions

The Chinese lived in small, crowded quarters in the mountains. They had no running water, no electricity, and no modern conveniences. They had to make their own food and clothing.

Roadway Under Snowshed in Tahoe Regions Open for Autos

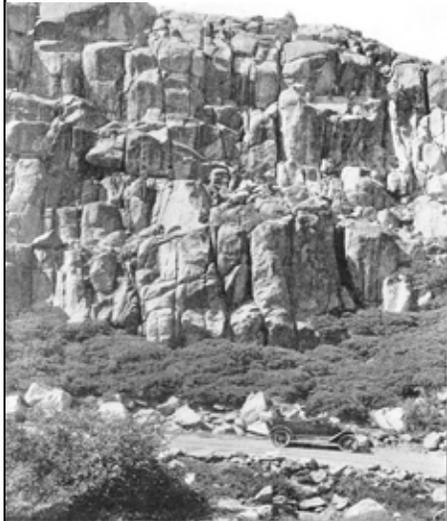
Oakland Tribune Headline
August 24, 1914

This article has been waiting quite a while to get into the Heirloom. It keeps getting moved from future issue to future issue, but now it's going to finally hit daylight. It's not the only article that's been waiting. One about a guy tunneling UNDER Donner Summit has been waiting since 2009 for Heirloom exposure but has not won the historical literary lottery so to speak. Be patient and don't let your subscription lapse.

You can imagine our delight when we opened the July, 2014 (which we indeed opened in July, 2014) issue of the Traveler, the magazine of the California Chapter of the Lincoln Highway Association, and found on pages 21 and 22 an article about the underpass on Donner Summit. Gary Kinst, the editor in 2014, gave us permission to reprint what they had,

to which we've added from the DSHS archives. Mr. Kinst was particularly gracious in giving permission in 2014, "I'm glad you enjoyed the article. I would be honored to have the article reproduced in your newsletter."

Mr. Kinst had reprinted an article from Motor Magazine's August, 1914 issue. The California Chapter of the Lincoln Highway Association is clearly better at planning since they ran their article on the 100th anniversary of the underpass' completion. We've been storing our article and material so we're four years late.



Mountain Tunnel Subway

Danger at Snowshed Number 6 is a thing of the Past

Motor Magazine and Motor Life August 1914

"The opening of the new subway at the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains on Emigrant Gap State road is finished. The opening of this new piece of road is one of the most important improvements that has been made on the Auburn Emigrant route to Lake Tahoe in years.

"The Subway takes the new road under the Southern Pacific tracks and eliminates the crossing at what is known as Tunnel Six. This crossing was very dangerous, as the grade was so steep on the north side for about two hundred feet that it was necessary for most automobiles to take it at their highest possible speed to avoid stalling the engine, and as the grade ended right at the railroad tracks, there was no chance to stop and listen for the approaching trains.

"The new road eliminates this steep grade, and owing to its location will be free from snow much earlier in the season than the old road.

"State Engineer Baxter is doing a great deal of permanent work on the Emigrant Gap Road this season. The old water breaks are being replaced by iron culverts, and in the low swampy ground the road is being built of crushed rock, which is manufactured on the ground by a portable rock crusher.

"The improvements as outlined by Baxter will make the Auburn Emigrant route the most popular as well as the safest and easiest route to Lake Tahoe and the East. "



from The Traveler, the newsletter of the Lincoln Highway Association, California Chapter, Gary Kinst editor July, 2014 issue. The pictures on the previous page were part of the article.

Now our article

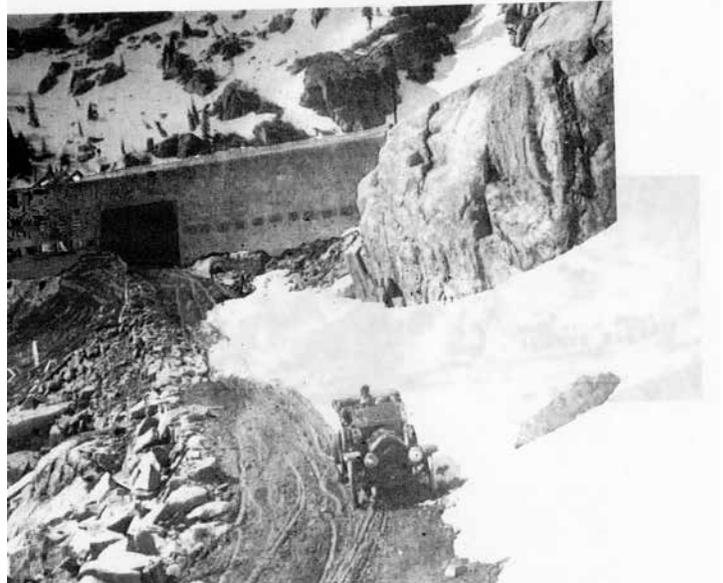
If you've looked closely just to the right of China Wall you have seen the underpass in the space between snowsheds as you travel Old 40 over the Summit and down to Truckee. It is an historic structure, being possibly the first underpass for automobiles dug under an operating railroad. It was completed in 1914 and can be considered a "gateway to California." How many emigrants from the east traveled through it looking for the opportunities that California offered?

The subway's completion was a big deal because it ended the inconvenience and danger of going through the snowsheds in order to cross Donner Summit.

In order to appreciate the subway, or underpass, you have to know what crossing was like before construction which shows that in the old days things weren't always better despite what we think we can remember. The photograph to the right shows the snowsheds. Tunnel 6 is to the right and Tunnel 7 to the left. Donner Pk. is up behind.

Imagine you are the "autoist" attempting to cross the summit early in the season on the Dutch Flat Rd. early in the 20th Century. (The Lincoln Highway will come along shortly).

If you're on the south side (on the other side of the snowsheds in the picture to the right) you can just work your way over the rocks to the snowshed. It was really rough going. If you're on the north side (the side where the auto in the picture is) you have to get up some speed to get up the incline to the snowshed. Early day automobiles were not all that powerful and some had to go in reverse to go uphill.



Stop.

Turn off your motor so you can hear.

Open the sliding barn door on the side of the snowshed.

Listen for any approaching trains.

Keep in mind that east bound trains make little noise as they gain speed going downhill.

If none are coming, walk about fifty yards inside the shed, cross the tracks, and open the sliding barn door on the other side.

If there is no train coming, retrace your steps.

Crank the motor on your car to get it started.

Run around to the driver's seat and hop in.

Drive into the snowshed, go about fifty yards to the exit.

Hope no trains are coming.

There were accidents at the crossing as you can see below.

AUTO STRUCK BY TRAIN IN 3 MILE SNOWSHED

B.J. Maupin and R.L. Douglas of Fallon, Nev, took a chance in short cutting with their machine through a three mile snowshed on the Southern Pacific at the summit of the Sierras [sic] last night and as a result were struck by a freight train. Maupin was probably fatally injured but Douglas escaped with a few minor bruises.

November 18, 1913
San Francisco Call

The subway was widened the next year because in its original form some people had to remove their running boards to get through.

The instructions above are for travelers who crossed after snow melt. Crossing before snowmelt was even more difficult although there were not trains to contend with.

Here is a report of the crossing before snow melt by the winner of the annual Tahoe Tavern silver cup for the first auto to cross the summit in 1914. The contestants drove up to the summit and across the snow until they reached the snowshed where the barn doors were.

"The crossing through the snow sheds at the summit was blocked with 20 feet of snow, and in order to get onto the road on the north side of the sheds it was necessary to cross directly over the top of them. This crossing was made at a point, known to railroad men as the eastern end of tunnel 7. At this place the snowsheds join a round granite knob. By driving the car up a steep, narrow ledge it is possible to get within 12 feet of the top of the wooden shed, but this last 12 feet is the hard part. The roof of the shed is built on a one-to-two pitch, and the chains on the rear tires almost wore in two the heavy planks which form the roof." Be patient. One day we'll run an article about early season crossings by auto.

The article continued, "A consultation was held and Schmidt decided that he could drive down the face of the drift. This he did without accident, but it is safe to say that an automobile was never intentionally driven down a steeper place."



This is just an example of someone crossing over the snowsheds because the barn doors below were blocked. This picture is not part of the story here.



The photo above is also not part of the article. It's a picture from the Searles Library in Nevada City showing Alfred Foote doing what the article says the driver did in 1914. Foote did the same thing and won the silver cup in 1911. One day we'll do his story in the [Heirloom](#) too.

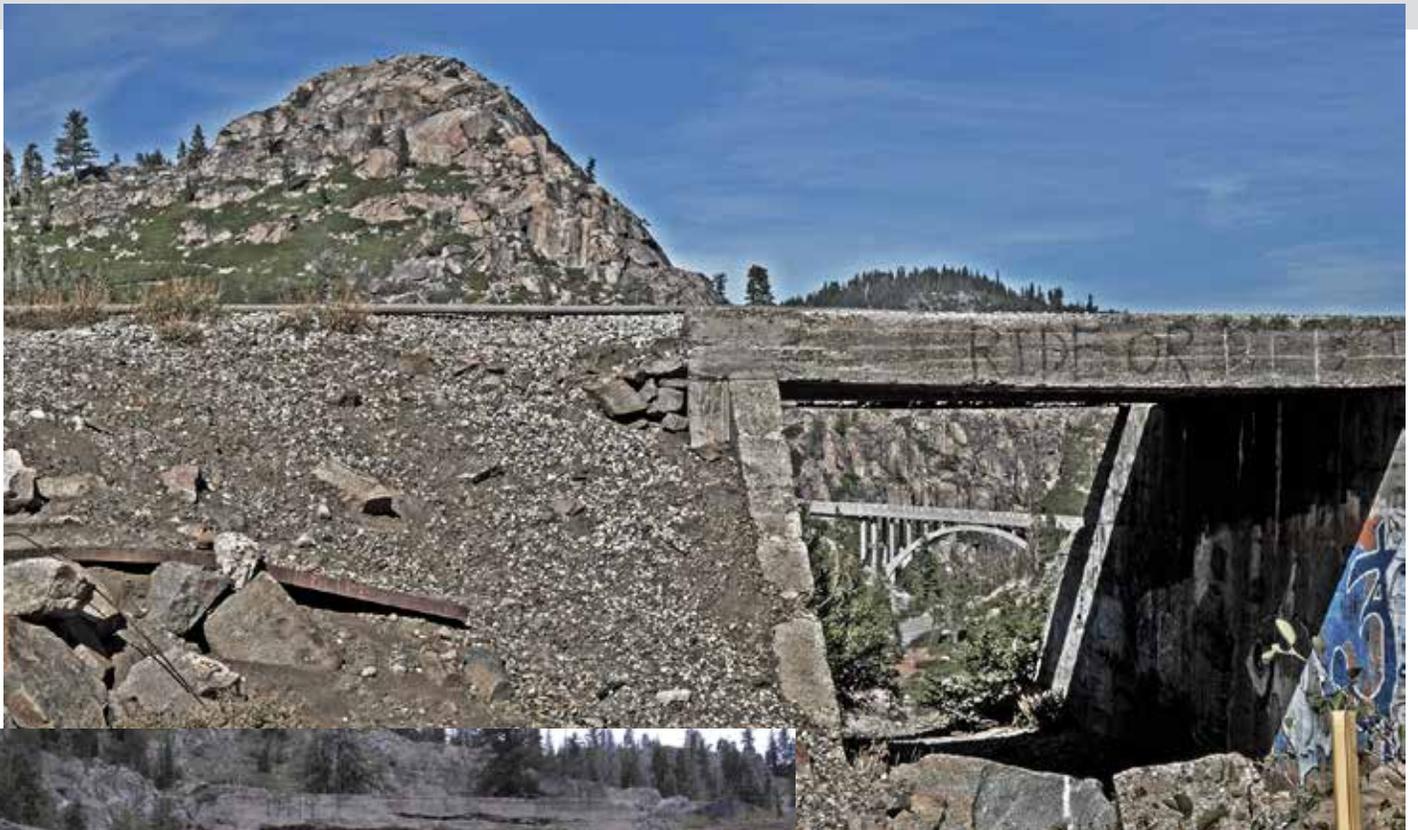
"It will never again be necessary to cross the top of the sheds, as the Southern Pacific Company and the State Engineer are now building a crossing under the railroad tracks.

"This crossing is located in such a proposition [sic] that it will be free from snow long before the summit is open." Indeed, the original crossing sat in the shadow and has snow much longer than where the underpass is.

Now that you've read about the underpass you'll want to go look at it and here we show our good planning. Snow will be melting soon and the underpass will be accessible. When the snow does melt go take a look but make the trip even more worthwhile by taking our "Summit Canyon" brochure along (see top page 9 and available on line on our brochure page, at the DSHS, at the visitors' center in Truckee, or at the State Park.) It will start you at the top, at the PCT trailhead and then lead you down to the Truckee Donner Land Trust trailhead. You'll pass ads painted on the rocks more than a hundred years ago, see petroglyphs incised into the granite up to 4,000 years ago, and walk along the Lincoln Highway with some great views. Leave one car at the TDLT trailhead so you don't have to walk uphill to get back. That means you'll have to go with friends.

You can contact the Lincoln Highway Association, California Chapter at <http://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/ca> or P.O. Box 2554 Fair Oaks, CA 95626

Summit Underpass Today



Above is the view from the south with Mt. Stevens and the Donner Summit Bridge in the background.

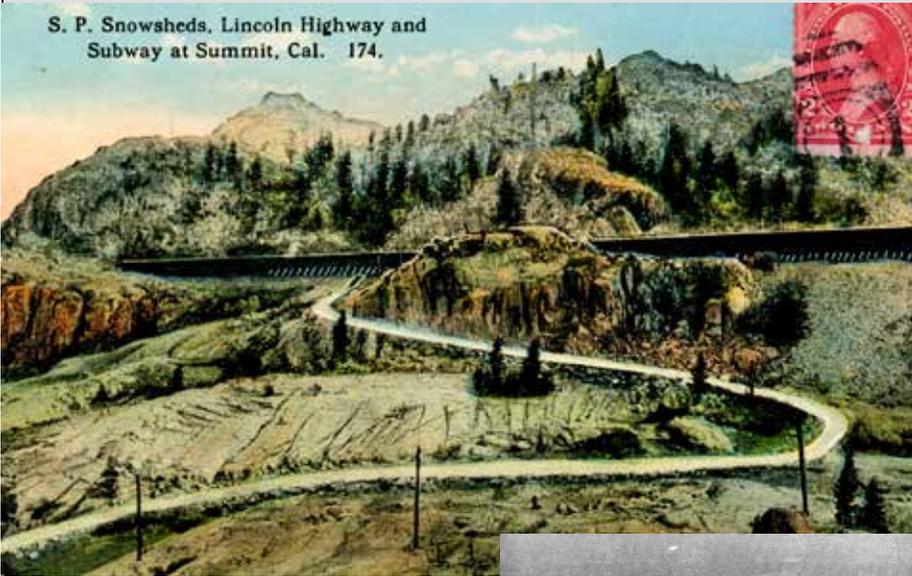
Left is the view from the north before graffiti.

Below left is what it looks like when we take a group for a hike and there's a lot of graffiti. This was the Margie Powell hike in 2014.

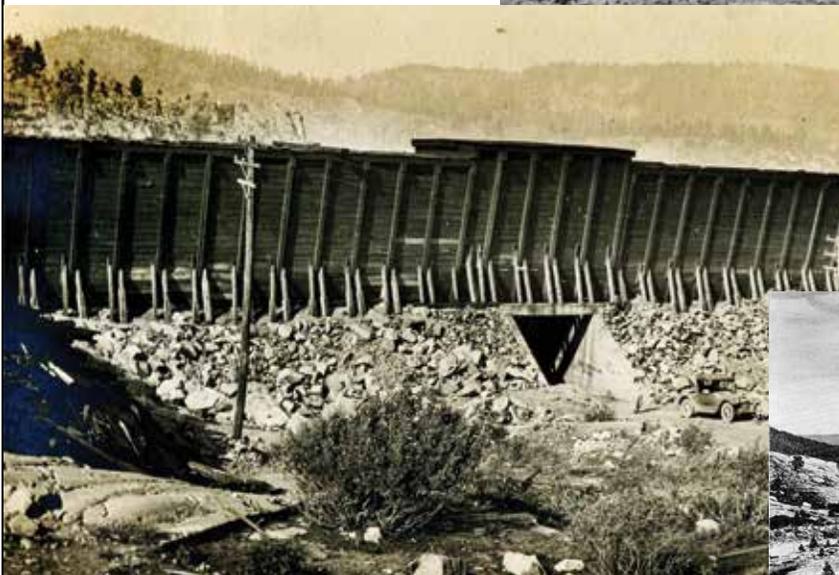


Summit Underpass in the Old Days

S. P. Snowsheds, Lincoln Highway and
Subway at Summit, Cal. 174.



Pictures from Norm Sayler's collection at the DSHS. Left, the Lincoln Highway coming out of the underpass. Below an auto in the underpass. Below left, another view with the snowsheds on top and the underpass underneath. Bottom is a view toward Donner Lake. The underpass is around the corner to the right.



CHAPTER 619.

An act to make an appropriation for changing the state road known as Emigrant Gap so as to eliminate the grade crossing over the railroad track near Summit station.

[Approved June 16, 1913. In effect August 10, 1913.]

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

Appropriation: elimination of grade crossing, Emigrant Gap road.

SECTION 1. There is hereby appropriated out of any moneys in the state treasury not otherwise appropriated the sum of four thousand dollars for making a change in the location of the Emigrant Gap state road so as to eliminate the grade crossing of said road over the railroad track near Summit station; *provided*, that the Southern Pacific company shall contribute not less than three thousand five hundred dollars for the same purpose.

SEC. 2. The state controller is hereby directed to draw his warrants in such sums, and at such times as claims therefor, approved by the board of control, may be presented by the department of engineering, and the state treasurer is hereby directed to pay the same.



Pick up our "Summit Canyon" or "Summit Canyon Lincoln Highway" brochures on our website's brochure page or at the DSHS and walk down Summit Canyon through the underpass, past petroglyphs, hundred year old ads painted on the rocks, etc.

1913 appropriation from the State of California for the underpass construction on Donner Summit. The State would contribute \$4000 if the Southern Pacific would contribute "not less than three thousand five hundred dollars for the same purpose."



Here is a good picture from 1923-24 showing the road cut of Highway 40 on the right.

Center is the east end of Tunnel 6. You can see where the road used to go before the underpass was put in place if you look closely.

In front of that Tunnel 7 still has its top (today it's concrete).

Center bottom shows the Lincoln Highway crossing under the railroad tracks.

Note the lack of trees and brush.

WE ARE IN THE SIERRA NEVADA!

19th Century writers had such a way with words. This excerpt comes from Between the Gates by Benjamin Taylor in 1878. Between the Gates was a guide book sold by the railroad to passengers.

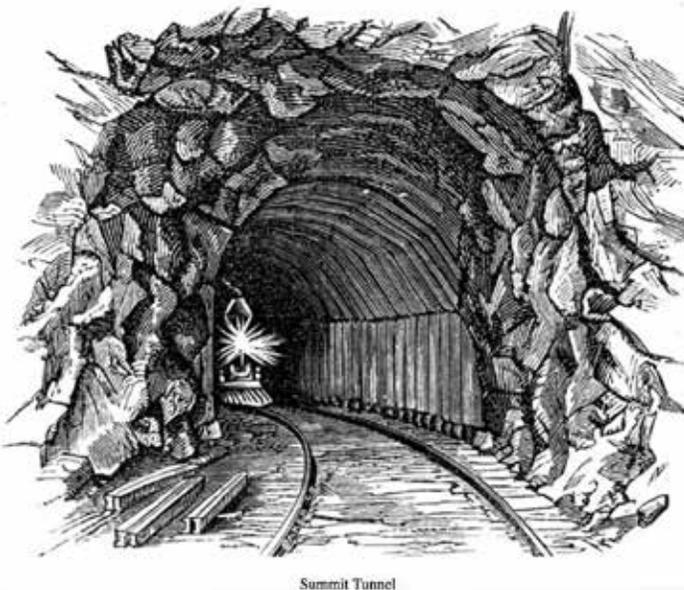
Tally Twelve! Twelfth empire from the Atlantic. Less than three hundred miles from the Pacific. We are in California—the old Spanish land of the fiery furnace. The turbaned mountains rise to the right, and the dark cedars and pines in long lines single file, like Knight Templars in circular cloaks, seem marching up the heights.

You feel, somehow, that though not a pine-needle vibrates, the wind must be "blowing great guns," so to ruffle up and chafe the solid world. Across ravines that sink away to China like a man falling in a nightmare, and then the swooning chasms suddenly swell to cliffs and heights gloomy with evergreens and bright with Decembers that never come to Christmas, the train pursues its assured way like a comet. It circles and swoops and soars and vibrates like a sea-eagle when the storm is abroad. Mingled feelings of awe, admiration and sublimity possess you. Sensations of flying, falling, climbing, dying, master you. The sun is just rising over your left shoulder. It touches up the peaks and towers of ten thousand feet, till they seem altars glowing to the glory of the great God. You hold your breath as you dart out over the gulfs, with their dizzy sapphire heights and depths. You exult as you ride over a swell. Going up, you expand. Coming down, you shrink like the kernel of a last year's filbert. We are in the Sierras [sic] Nevada! The teeth of the glittering saws with their silver steel of everlasting frost cut their way up through the blue air—up to the snow-line—up to the angel-line between two worlds.

The train has burrowed in a tunnel to escape the speechless magnificence.

It was day an instant ago, and now it is dark night. The train has burrowed in a tunnel to escape the speechless magnificence. It is roaring through the snow-sheds. It is rumbling over the bridges: Who shall say to these breakers of sod and billows of rock, "Peace, be still!" and the tempest shall be stayed and the globe shall be at rest?

And all at once a snow-storm drives over your head. The air is gray with the slanting lines of the crazy, sleety drift. Some mountain gale that never touches the lower world, but, like a stormy petrel, is forever on the wing and never making land, has caught off the white caps and turbans from some ambitious peaks, and whipped them whirling through the air. You clap your hands like a boy, whose sled has been hanging by the ears in the woodshed all summer, at his sight of the first snow. But the howling, drifting storm goes by, and out flares the sun, and the cliffs are crimson and silver.



Summit Tunnel

You think you have climbed to the crown of the world, but lo, there, as if broke loose from the chains of gravitation, "Alps on Alps arise." Look away on and on, at the white undulations to the uttermost verge of vision, as if a flock of white-plumed mountains had taken wing and flown away.

We are in the Sierras Nevada! [sic] The teeth of the glittering saws with their silver steel of everlasting frost cut their way up through the blue air—up to the snow-line—up to the angel-line between two worlds.

A chaos of summers and winters and days and nights and calms and storms is tumbled into these gulches and gorges and rugged seams of scars. Rocks are poised midway gulfward that awaken a pair of perpetual wonders: how they ever came to stop, and how they ever got under way. With such momentum they never should have halted: with such inertia

they never should have started. Great trees lie head-downward in the gulfs. Shouting torrents leap up at rocky walls as if they meant to climb them. See these herds of broad-backed recumbent hills around us, lying down like elephants to be laden. See the bales of rocks and the howdahs of crags heaped upon them. They are John Milton's own beasts of burden, when he said, "elephants endorsed with towers," and such an endorsement should make anybody's note good for a million..

From the DSHS Archives



Left, front of 1938 postcard.
Text on the reverse:

"Pick a hump in the snow, dig into it, nick the paint off a car and hope its [sic] yours. That's [sic] the price paid for parking along this Donner Summit Highway this week.. Forty eight hours of snow did the camouflaging job."

Snow—Scenes March 27, 1938



The horse-pulled sleigh that brought people into Sugar Bowl from the railroad in 1939. Not long after the horses started to be used the driver went into the Sugar Bowl Lodge for a drink. The horses escaped and got onto the railroad tracks where the walking was easier. This is a family publication so we'll go no further.

Right, the warming hut at Johnny Ellis' rope tow at Lake Mary about 1938.



From the DSHS Archives

Above is a picture from the Truckee Donner Historical Society which we wish we'd had in January, '18 when we did the article on the first locomotive over Donner Summit. It's just as fanciful as the pictures we used from "The Iron Horse" to illustrate the story.



The picture on the left goes with the Johnny Ellis warming hut on the previous page. This is the lower end of the Lake Mary rope tow. Both pictures come from the Dartmouth Outing Club.

March Storm

Los Angeles Daily Herald March 10, 1874

The most violent storm has been raging. The drifts are "enormous" and the wind is "blowing a tempest. "The snow-plows were sent out, with the force of a dozen engines behind them to drive them through the immense drifts; but the snow was so hard and banks so thick that the plows were hopelessly wedged in and had to be extricated with shovels and picks...."

A "huge snowplow, with eleven immense engines, started out to clear the way... The drifts were enormous in height [sic], exceeding the height of the engines' smokestacks and top of the plow itself. Notwithstanding the fact that the eleven engines furnished a power almost incalculable, it was with the greatest difficulty that the plow was driven through the snow. " Indeed it was impossible until much of the drifts had been "shoveled away by the large force of laborers accompanying the snow-train."

"All this time the storm was raging, the wind whistling through the pines and the weather the coldest that has ever been known for many years."

"The train which got through on Tuesday by the tremendous exertions... arrived here... [twenty four hours late] The passengers report that it was with the utmost difficulty that they got through.... The wind was blowing the cuts were filling up again as fast as the great plows could force through them..."

That same train took ten hours to go forty-one miles from Truckee to Blue Cañon even though it was preceded by the huge plow "propelled by eleven large freight engines."

The storm was the worst in four years exhausting the work crews that got through drifts of snow only to see the cuts filled with snow almost immediately.

Newly in the Archives What's in Your Closet?



The images here come from a 1952 film that was sitting in someone's closet until he brought it in to Norm Saylor (president of the DSHS) to see if he wanted it.

It is about Soda Springs so of course Norm wanted it.

Then what do you do with it? Get out an old projector and show it. Then how do you share it? Someone has to scan some of the frames for use in the [Heirloom](#). That was not easy given the low quality of the home movie. Nevertheless the DSHS Technical Photographic Improvement Squad (TPIS) went to work and dealt with resolution, enlargement, "pixel aspect ratio correction," etc. and the results of the most usable frames are here.



This is 1952 in Soda Springs during a heavy winter. January of 1952 was when the City of San Francisco Streamliner train was caught for days in the snow near Emigrant Gap. See the November, '08 [Heirloom](#) for pictures and an article, Snowfall --- "66 Feet! The Winter of 1951-52"

Above there is Old Highway 40, today's Donner Pass Rd. in "downtown" Soda Springs. Right, above is the Zorich Ski Shop which is now the DSHS. Center, right is Rowton's Service Station which is today a rental shop. Right are people trying to get to the slopes.





Here are more pictures from the 1952 home movie. The left series is, according to the narrator, Hanness Schroll, who founded Sugar Bowl, showing that even the experts have troubles some times.

Below is another view of Rowton's and two more people walking along the road.



So What's in your Closet?

Maybe you've got something that's great or not so great but which is worthy of preservation and sharing. We don't have to keep your original. We can take photographs or scan so that the history is preserved.

"SNOW ON THE SUMMIT"

"Six Feet of the beautiful Deposited on the Mountains"

"SACRAMENTO, Feb. 18. – A large force of men was to-day sent to the Summit, where the railroad men have been having serious trouble with snow. All trains from the East were late to-day, but the road is now open. Yesterday's storm was very severe about the Summit, and six feet or more of snow was deposited on the mountains. To-night rain began falling here again, and at midnight it is still coming down."

San Francisco Call February 19, 1894

Book Review

30 Years Over Donner

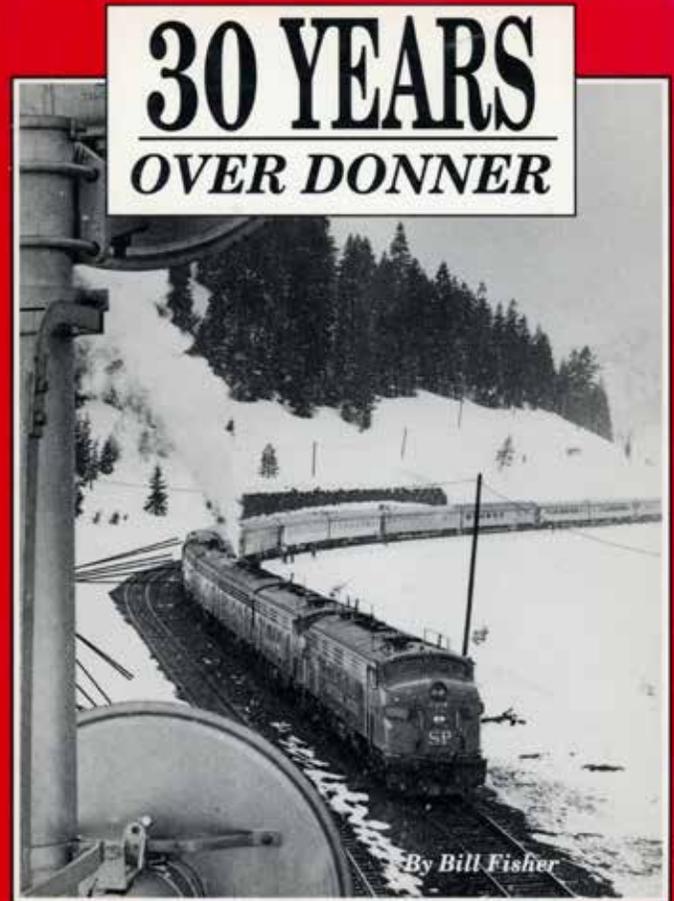
Bill Fisher 1990 198 pages

Bill Fisher, the author, is the husband of Kay Fisher who wrote *A Baggage Car with Lace Curtains*, the book review in the December, '18 Heirloom. Kay's book is about her life as the wife of a train man but without much about railroads and with a lot about her experiences. *30 Years....* is a collection of very short stories about the railroad, the Fishers' life, and some miscellanies, but not much about Donner or Donner Summit. Bill was mostly at Emigrant Gap and points west during his 30 years. "Donner" helps sell the book though.

The stories are all very short (half a page to a page and a half) and relate experiences mostly about fixing signals and wiring connections. Those who take their rail buff(ing) seriously, those who like trainspotting and those who like to catalog locomotives, may like this book. There is a paragraph about the weight of rails, for example, and how different sizes were designated. That kind of thing should make a real rail buff very happy I'd imagine. There's detail about track cars, batteries, signal light glass covers, and the duties of "maintainers" which was what Bill was for a lot of his career. There is a lot of detail about how some things that break get put back together. There is little explanation of what those pieces of equipment do, however, and that is one point of weakness for non-rail buffs. Just how does signaling work? The book is also heavy with names of railroad personnel and what people did so the author's goal in the introduction, to put together the book about the people and their personal experiences working on the railroad is met - partly. In *30 Years...* we find out what Bill did while his wife was busy with the baggage car. Actually, the baggage car experiences were in the early part of Bill's career and *30 Years...* carries into the modern day and up until Bill's retirement.

There are lots of pictures in the book. That is a strength.

"February. Another typical day – rain clothes and overshoes, snow falling steadily, gusty winds at times driving it through the top vents in the snowshed, about two feet on the ground, and temperature about 22 degrees. Franco Chavez' men were out at all switches in the Gap yard, shoveling snow and trying to keep the kerosene heaters going under switch points.



Railroading "family-style" over Southern Pacific's Donner Pass, through the eyes of a company signal maintainer

The stories of problems on the line are interesting to begin with but the litany gets tiresome since they follow the same format: Bill is home in the evening or on the weekend and something breaks so he has to go out and fix it. That repetitive format does not provide much incentive to keep turning the pages.

There are all kinds of emergencies: derailments, broken rails, washouts, rear enders, avalanches, rocks, downed trees, inexperienced crew, accidents, broken tracks, broken wires, all ending with "trouble cleared" reports and rest after exhausting days.

There are interesting parts not about fixing things though. World War II was a challenge for the railroad. Traffic increased with as many as fifty trains in a twenty-four hour period and there were not enough workers. There were also military guards along the railroad. Madame Chiang Kai Shek went by one day. There are Bill's descriptions of his feelings on the end of WWII which is an interesting perspective for those born later. There is some humor too such as a runaway car full of wine that derailed and leaked,

“I’d worked in the sheds mostly, chipping ice around the switch controller levers and electric lock rods, adding rock salt. Traffic was busy in both directions, several eastbound mixed freights, a couple west. After a westbound train or flanger went by, I’d tramp up to the NO. 1L power derail and help the section fellow clean out the snow. Make sure he had the heaters going okay, sweep out between ties where the lock rods moved and around the M-3 machine. It and the switches in the shed were essential to turning snow equipment. Then back down to check the yard switches between the telegraph office and upper cook shack...”

allowing the track repair crew to become inebriated.

Some stories just fill space. “Never a Dull Moment” is about a dull moment – mushrooms emerging from the dirt. “Kay Tells This One” is about a drunken neighbor falling in the creek with no memory the next day. There are also telescope stories because Bill got interested in those and repairing a model engine. Some stories are about the Fisher family’s life: delivering Christmas trees, Kay’s business activities, the school at Emigrant Gap, family vacation and visiting relatives, buying a wire recorder, buying a new television, buying houses, fishing, and buying a second car.

The book could be greatly improved by cutting down on the number of stories (there are 71) and giving the stories some kind of plot lines rather than simple renditions of fixing things. For example, one longer emergency which did not get much attention in the book was the stranding of the Streamliner, the City of San Francisco, in 1952 near Emigrant Gap. That’s treated as a simple repair but there was drama there in real life. There could have been descriptions of life on the line during World War II. Vivid descriptions to draw the reader in rather than simple recitations of fixing things would also improve the book.

One particularly good story is the description of the railroad town of Emigrant Gap. In just a page and a half we learn about how the locals used the railroad, how a fellow tried to rob the hotel but was treated to a meal and then given a job, how gambling continued despite sheriff’s visits, and what Nyack Lodge was like before the freeway arrived. That kind of thing is compelling and all of the other stories could have benefited from that kind of personal experience.

Despite the title, there is almost nothing about Donner or Donner Summit but there is one piece of a story that mentioned Donner Summit and the Norden Store. A work crew, headed by Bill, came to stay at the Norden Store owned by Herb and Lena Fredricks. The Norden Store had dorm space for twenty and Herb and Lena were “charming people and glad to have us. I knew we’d get good eats here!” That was the end of that. What did Herb and Lena do that made them “charming?” Were there really “good eats” there? What was life like at the summit, Norden and Soda Springs compared to Emigrant Gap?

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, SUNDAY, JUNE 27, 1942

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This was originally in the December, '18 [Heirloom](#) but we forgot to note the center of the picture behind the guy who is bent over. Who is the bear and who is the owner? Why is the bear there and where did he/she come from? Given that the picture is from 1923 or so, perhaps the bear, two years later, starred in Charlie Chaplin's Gold Rush, filmed on Donner Summit. See the August '11 [Heirloom](#) for that story. Above is a picture from the movie of the bear. You decide if they're the same.



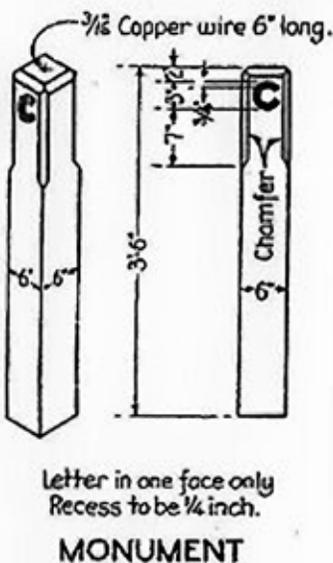
Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

It's a trial sometimes editing (writing) the Heirloom. In our editorial offices we take our responsibility very seriously as we work to bring the best of Donner Summit history to our 800+ subscribed readers. We are lucky that Donner Summit is so rich in history that we've never had to make anything up (that we know of). Everything is true – except for some mistakes.

In our January, '19 issue of the Heirloom the featured “Odds & Ends” item was about the “C” markers that are found along roads in the area (see right). Our usually reliable source for things that are old on Donner Summit said they were Lincoln Highway markers and so that's what the Heirloom wrote. It's not true and you can imagine the chagrin the editorial staff felt when Joel Windmiller, president of the Lincoln Highway Association California Chapter and a Highway Historian for California Highways wrote to say,



"Bill: Excellent edition of the January 19 Heirloom on page 18 odds and ends your discovery of highway markers unfortunately are not connected with the Lincoln Highway but with California Division of Highways you found a few surviving right of way markers. I have included an article about the markers for your next issues. Joel"



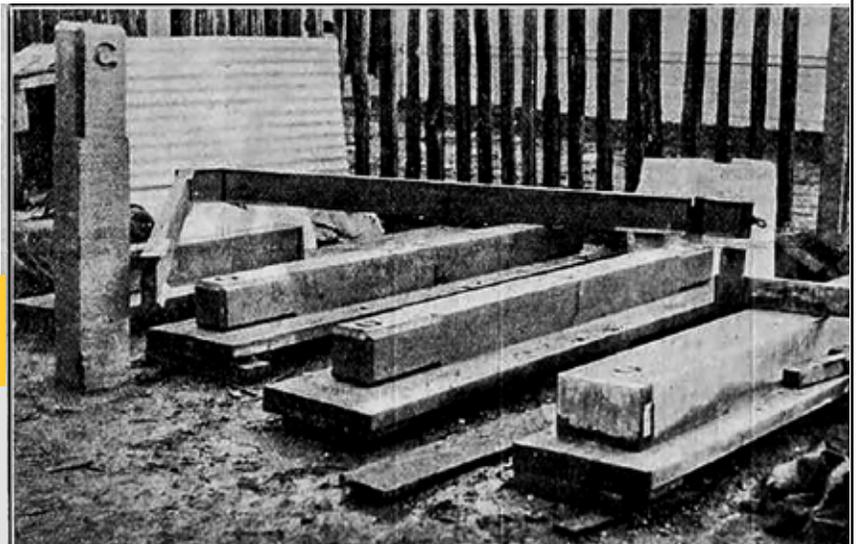
Joel thoughtfully included a graphic of a marker, left, and an article about the markers below with a picture. Look at how things have changed.

The article says “Much difficulty is frequently experienced in determining [sic] the location of the side lines of roads. These roads have been laid out in the past when the land was of little value and the surveys were carelessly made or the descriptions carelessly recorded...” After time there have been changes. Trees grew, fences were planted, buildings arrived and “traveled ways have shifted from place to place as the action of the elements or the whims of the travelers have directed.” To prevent that from happening to State highways the California Highway Commission “not only makes very careful surveys and plans and files said plans in several localities, but it also places monuments on the side lines of the roads at each and every angle or curve point, and at intervals on long straight lines.”

“The monuments project six inches above the surface of the ground. They are made of concrete six inches square and three and one half feet long.” The edges of the upper portion are beveled to present a neat appearance, and on one face

there is indented a letter “C.”

Article source: July 1, 1914
California Highway Bulletin
California Division of Highways



California Chapter of the Lincoln Highway Assoc.: <https://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/ca/>

also could you include a link to their official map of the route across the US at the following link <https://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/>

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

We chose an easy "Odd & End" for this month's column. Wander around Donner Summit and you'll find all kinds of things and then if you focus in you'll find even more.

This is definitely an old bridge abutment and it's definitely down at Big Bend a hundred yards down the river from the bridge nearest the road that comes down from the freeway. As the article on the previous page said, routes changed over time. Presumably this bridge abutment, which has no markings on it, is of Lincoln Highway vintage. It looks older than the bridge up from the fire station that is dated, "1928." Shortly, next month, we're going to have an article about a Model T on the Lincoln Highway just about right there, so stay tuned.



This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, "Odds & Ends" of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we've been collecting them. Now they're making appearances in the [Heirloom](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass the on to the editor - see page 2

*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.



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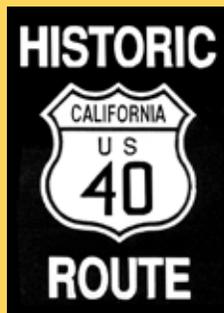
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