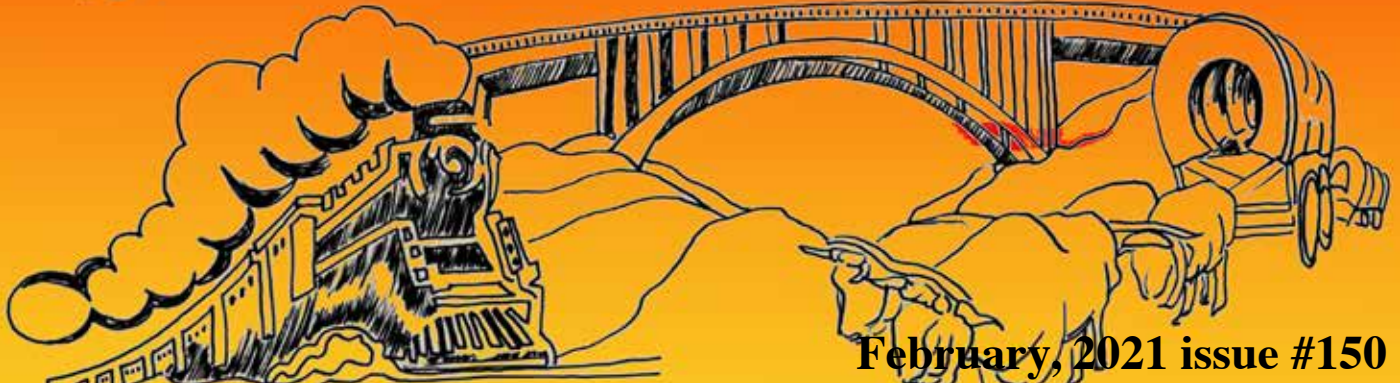


150th Heirloom Edition



February, 2021 issue #150

Ruminations on 150 Issues of the Heirloom

That's a lot of history

Twelve and a half years ago when we founded the Donner Summit Historical Society and I got the Heirloom job, I was counseled by one of the other founders, Margie Powell, don't make the newsletters longer than ten pages. You'll run out of history.

Here we are, years later, at issue 150 and the Heirloom is still full of history. The sidebar to the right here will help you find your way through the back issues of the Heirloom so you can enjoy the rich history of Donner Summit, the most historically significant square mile or so in California and maybe the entire Western United States. Native Americans crossed for thousands of years leaving behind petroglyphs, grinding rocks, metates, cupules, and basalt flakes from knapping projectile points. The people who made California came over Donner Summit in the wagons trains, on the first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, and the first transcontinental air route. Those who couldn't come maybe used the first transcontinental telephone line which also went over Donner Summit. We've covered aspects of all that in our 150 Heirloom issues.

Then there are the myriad of other stories: the first person to cross the Sierra by bicycle (and then across the country and around the world), the first motorized crossing of the Sierra and the continent, the first automobile crossing of the Sierra, the first chair lift in California and local ski history, various Donner Summit industries, the Summit Hotel and other hostelryes, locally famous people and their contributions, ski clubs, snow removal, escaped circus animals, ice harvesting, a sword in a stone, the origins of names, shoes made of licorice, life in the old days, "The Art of Skiing" starring Goofy, events, etc. There are lots of books at least tangentially related to Donner Summit and we've reviewed more than a hundred of those.

There are still stories and variations of stories to tell. The list is kept under lock and key to keep it safe from our competition (that's historical society humor). What happens though, when we begin to run out of never reported stories? What will our readers want?

Finding Your Way in all the History

150 issues of the Heirloom is a lot of history. It's a couple of thousand pages, a couple of thousand pictures, and a few hundred different subjects. The history is all just as old as it ever was, give or take a few years and so, still relevant to those who want to discover Donner Summit history. It's all easily accessible despite the daunting numbers.

Fortunately, one of the choices we made back at the birth of the DSHS was to index all our Heirloom articles and pictures. Over the last 150 issues we've diligently kept up the indices so that they are many pages long, full of alphabetized titles and subjects. Go to our website and to any of the Heirloom pages (one for each year) and you'll find links to the Heirloom indices. The links are also on the main Heirloom page.

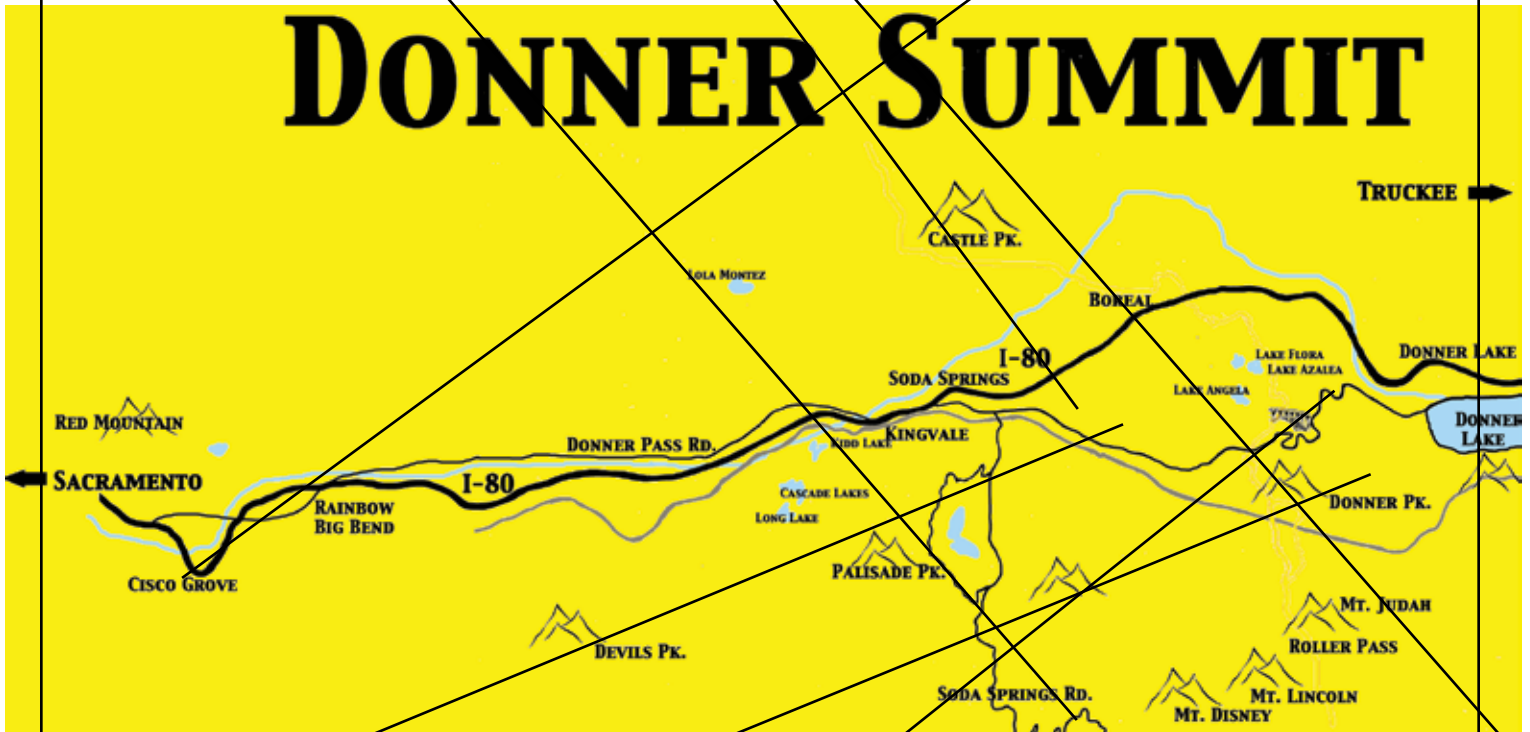
One of the strengths of the DSHS is the incomparable historical photograph collection of Norm Saylor, our president. The collection is thousands of pictures and again the sheer numbers make finding anything in particular difficult. To access avoid the long URL by going to our website and click on the "photographs" link and then to the "historic photo collection link." A third link, to the Flickr URL will take you to those thousands of searchable historical photographs. Have fun.

Story Locations in this Issue

Summit Soda Springs, one end of the tunnel pg 3 Near Squaw Valley the other end of the tunnel pg 3

Van Norden pg 12 Cisco Grove pg 12

DONNER SUMMIT



The chain embedded in the tree pg 15 Pollard's Pk. pg 9 Horse Drops Dead pg 11

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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

“The Grandest Aqueduct in the World”

Daily Alta California October 17, 1866

Alexis Von Schmidt

“The Would-be Water Stealer of the Century”

San Francisco Call April 27, 1900

Reno Gazette April 25, 1900

Under Donner Summit

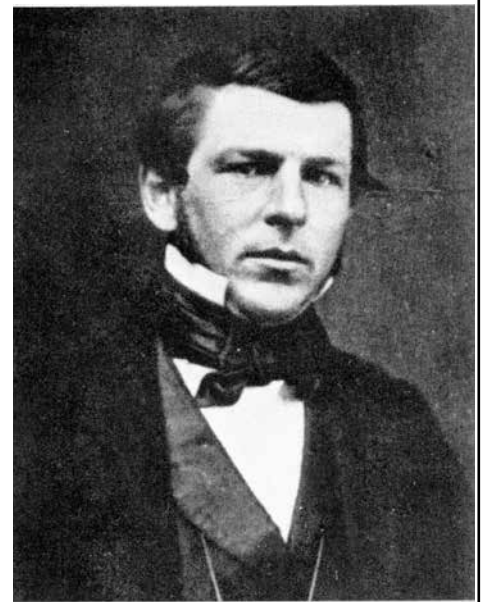
“It is at this point [Summit Soda Springs – the original Soda Springs] that the great tunnel of 7 miles in length, proposed by Colonel Von Schmidt to divert the water of Lake Tahoe to the north fork, has its exit to the California side of the Sierra.”

History of Placer and Nevada Counties by Lardner, 1882

Over the last 149 issues of the Heirloom we’ve covered all kinds of things: interesting people, the Summit and the wider world, early communities, Summit plane crashes, what could have been, etc. We’ve covered on Donner Summit, across Donner Summit and we’ve covered over Donner Summit. This story is about under Donner Summit.

Some decades ago I was reading a guidebook to Placer County written in the late 19th century and came across a snippet of information in relation to the original Soda Springs, Summit Soda Springs (the south side of Mt. Lincoln and Anderson Pk., below Tinker Knob and in the North Fork American River drainage, eight miles by road from modern Soda Springs, Soda Springs Station). The book mentioned that was where Mr. Von Schmidt had begun excavation to bring water from Lake Tahoe to San Francisco. That sounded like an amazing story, but there was nothing more.

In the 1960’s watching Star Trek I was enamored by the idea of just asking a computer for information. In the decades since I read about Mr. Von Schmidt’s project the internet has made Star Trek possible and now there is so much on the internet for inquisitive minds. While doing this story, for example, researching on the computer, I came across the digital version of Lake of the Sky (reviewed in the may, '15 Heirloom), a 1915 book about Lake Tahoe: tourism, geology, history, etc. Among other things, here was a guy driving to Donner Summit over Coldstream Pass (between Donner Pk. and Mt. Judah). He saw the high stumps cut by rescuers of the Donner Party. Diversions like that make the research go slowly but add to the fun. You may remember too, an early Heirloom when we reported the Oregon California Trails Association’s Dave Hollecker saying that tracing the Emigrant Trail is so much easier and accurate because researchers have access to so many diaries and other materials in so many libraries via the internet. That’s a bit of digression but it lets you into the inner workings and minds of the Heirloom. In this case the internet turned up many sources in newspaper articles, government documents, and books. It also brought us into personal contact with Donald J. Pisani, a professor of history at the University of Oklahoma who first wrote about the water scheme fifty years ago. He made suggestions and wished us good luck.



Alexey Von Schmidt (spellings vary)

This story is a compilation of many primary and secondary sources harvested from the internet.

First we should cover a little background about Mr. Von Schmidt who was an interesting character: inventive, entrepreneurial, a risk taker, a grandstander, and maybe a bit devious.

In 1849 Alexey Von Schmidt traveled via ship to Panama and then to California to make his fortune. On the way he was ship wrecked but that's another story. He started by mining but quickly turned to surveying and mapping. As he traveled the state mapping and doing surveying work he saw opportunities in solving problems as “civilization” reached California. Just a couple of his projects can give us an idea of his character.

Blossom Rock 1869 and Other Ideas

Von Schmidt won a contract to remove Blossom Rock, a shoal between Alcatraz and Yerba Buena Islands, which had been a shipping obstacle in San Francisco Bay. It was named Blossom Rock because the schooner Blossom went aground on it in 1826. Von Schmidt decided to apply for the contract to remove the rock. He got the job but payment was contingent upon the rock's removal. Not only did Allexeu decide to take the chance, but he talked the government into increasing the pay by 50%.

His inventive mind devised a solution to the difficult job. He floated a wooden structure over the rock in which was a metal coffer dam, a "boiler-iron cylinder nine feet in diameter and thirteen feet tall". It was sealed to the rock and the water was pumped out. 15 men lived on the rock tunneling down and then laterally mining tunnels and eventually excavating a large cavern (140 X 60 ft. with a roof twelve feet high) which was filled with explosives. Von Schmidt advertised that there would be a huge shock wave so on April 23, 1870, large crowds gathered on the wharves and hills of San Francisco to see the anticipated sight.

"One turn of the battery crank and the explosion instantly follows. A column of water, variously estimated at from 200 to 300 feet high, rose majestically in the air. The diameter of the body of water thus thrown up was probably 200 feet. Around the base of this column was another simultaneous outburst of water, probably 70 feet high, whose flood seemed to role outward. High above the mass of water could be seen rocks and pieces of timber. The highest jet of water was that which came through the shaft, and appeared as black as ink." (*Scientific American* June 10, 1876 and "Allexeu Waldemar Von Schmidt and the Von Schmidt Line," by Colonel R. S. Williamson of the Corps of Engineers.

Allexeu had already practiced his Blossom Rock technique earlier by building the first drydock in Hunter's Point in San Francisco. He tunneled under the proposed dock, filled the excavation with explosives, and blew off the top.

Von Schmidt designed and patented a dredging machine that was used in San Francisco Bay and as far away as Australia. It could deal with both clay and loose materials at the same time.

He developed the first water system for Hamilton, Nevada. He also surveyed the Mt. Diablo Base Line the reference line for all California topographic maps (check out the legend on your topographic maps).

Von Schmidt's line

In the old days the border between California and Nevada was not so exact. There was conflict between the states and people about where the actual border was. Some border surveys varied by as much as three miles given the inexact way that various people tried to set the border or perhaps based

on their desires for where the border should be. This created jurisdiction problems as well as a gunfight in 1863. In Aurora, Nevada they had a unique solution. It served as county seats for both Esmerelda county in Nevada and Mono County in California and elected officials for both California and Nevada state governments. In 1872 it was decided to mark the border finally and Allexeu Von Schmidt was named to the task. Von Schmidt began the survey and progressed south. By the time he got to Arizona it was apparent the line was off. Von Schmidt retraced his steps and petitioned the government for more money for the resurvey. When he found out he was not going to get the money, he quit leaving what was supposed to be a straight border, a little crooked.

It is understandable that there would be errors given the lack of GPS and that the state line goes through Lake Tahoe and makes the bend part way through. It was also difficult to get an accurate reading at the end since the end was supposed to be in the Colorado River which had changed its route by ten miles since the previous survey.

The disputed border was finally settled in a 1980 Supreme Court decision (California v. Nevada) leaving the border where it actually is rather than where the statutes say it should be. The line does not exactly match the 120th Meridian which it is supposed to do. Below are pictures of the Von Schmidt Line marker outside Verdi, NV. It was pretty decrepit ten years ago or so when these pictures were taken. Here's an opportu-



Marker for the Von Schmidt Line, his surveyed border between California and Nevada outside of Verdi, Nevada. Top left says, "120° west of Greenwich."

nity for some volunteer clean up/restoration labor.

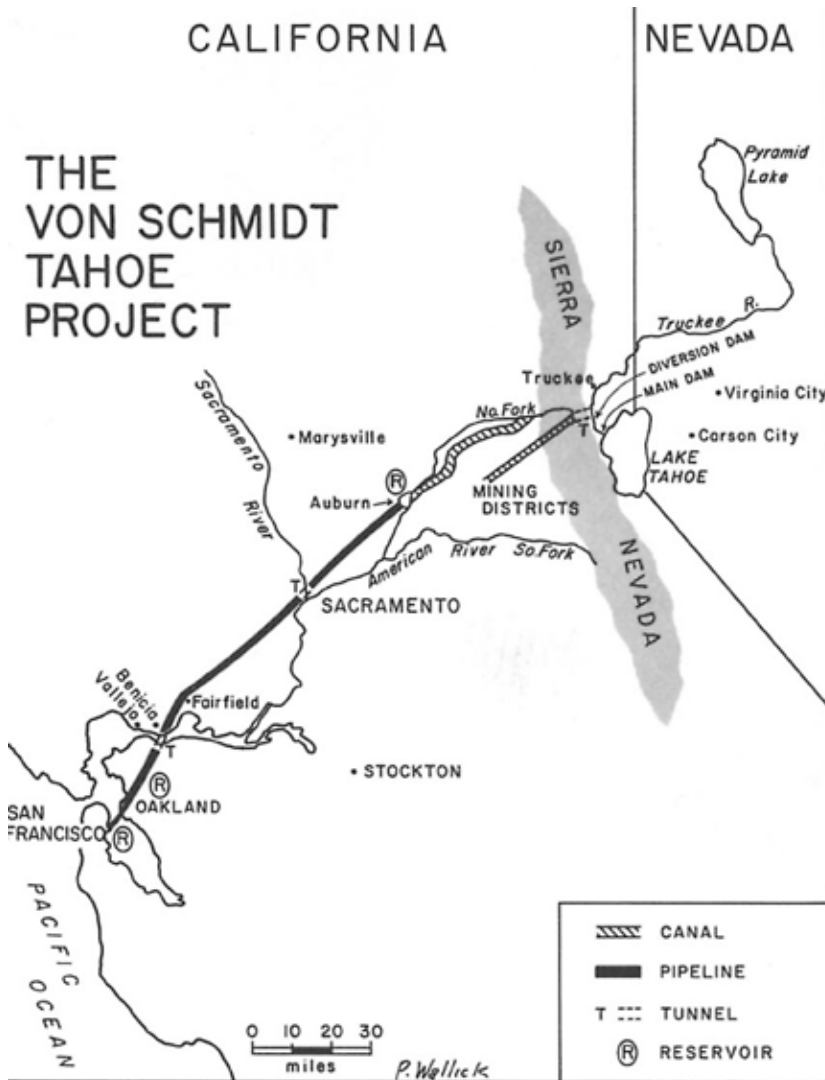
Alexey also had an idea to deliver water from Lake Tahoe to Virginia City. There were already flumes part way so it was a logical extension of the idea (have you ridden the Flume Trail at Marlette Lake on Spooner Summit?) but this did not pan out because of the cost. That was not the end of the idea of moving water however.

The water scheme

In 1855 Von Schmidt had helped start the Bensley Water Co. or San Francisco Water Works in San Francisco. As part of that he engineered the first water system using Lobos Creek.

Before that San Francisco water had been brought in on carts making it very expensive. He later, in a dispute over a water meter he'd invented, quit and joined the rival Spring Valley Water Co. which became a monopoly in San Francisco in 1865.

Everyone could see that San Francisco needed a stable water supply because wells would not continue to be the sole supply for a growing city. Water would need to be imported. There were various ideas and eventually of course the City would acquire land north of Yosemite for its Hetch Hetchy reservoir and water system. Before Hetch Hetchy though, Von Schmidt had another idea: bring water from Lake Tahoe.



It may not have been completely his idea. In 1865 Frederick Law Olmsted noted that San Francisco had no water supply and "...an aqueduct [from the Sierra] which would need to be at least two hundred miles in length. It has not as yet been suggested, and is not likely to be projected in our time."

Also in 1865, Von Schmidt and friends had established the Lake Tahoe San Francisco Water Works Co. to move water from Lake Tahoe to San Francisco. "To take the waters of Lake Tahoe at or near its outlet, known as the Truckee River, and conducting the same through suitable canals, tunnels, flumes and pipes, to the City of San Francisco." (See the map to the left.)

Editorials in San Francisco were euphoric since the current Spring Valley water monopoly was unpopular. The new system would "throw into shade all similar works of either ancient or modern times, in the old or new world."

Von Schmidt had bought land at the outlet of Lake Tahoe where there was a small dam which he planned to enlarge. He was working to obtain rights to the additional six feet of water storage his dam would provide. He intended another dam a three and three quarters miles down the Truckee River where water would be diverted to a canal which would take the water to the end of Squaw Valley. There a tunnel (to be bored with a compressed air boring machine Von Schmidt invented), five miles in length, would carry the water to an outlet at the Summit Soda Springs, below Mt. Disney and Mt. Lincoln at the original Soda Springs.

Then the water would make its way to San Francisco via canals, tunnels (under the Carquinez Strait), reservoir, and pipes (on the floor of the Bay).

Since San Francisco needed water and Lake Tahoe was a bowl full of pure mountain water, the idea looked like a good one to the City. The people of Nevada had a different opinion

Canal to Squaw Valley from Truckee River: 5 miles
Tunnel length under Donner Summit to the Summit Soda Springs: 5 miles
Total miles Lake Tahoe to San Francisco: 208 mi
Tunnel size: 8 feet in diameter costing \$50/ft
Total cost: \$15 million
Rivets cost \$5/1000

since they were the recipients of the Truckee River's waters. Nevada claimed the rights to Lake Tahoe water. Von Schmidt responded that the six feet he was going to store in Lake Tahoe with his improved dam would not affect Nevada's rights at all. Besides a lot of Lake Tahoe was in California (and still is). Because the water conflict was escalating Von Schmidt had to post guards at his dam to prevent "hot-headed residents" from taking "action."

Von Schmidt had analyzed that the Lake Tahoe water scheme, with a 500 square mile watershed, would produce 800 million gallons of water per day. The six foot dam would be one foot above low water mark and that one foot would, over a year, yield 137 million gallons. The six feet would yield over 800 million gallons, far more than was needed by San Francisco.

Interestingly the CPRR thought it was such a good idea that it maneuvered itself into participation. The tunnel then would not carry just water but also be a railroad route. This new route would have a reduced the total grade of the transcontinental railroad and reduce operating costs. If the tracks could bypass Donner Summit by going through a tunnel at Summit Soda Springs and end up just south of Truckee, there would be no snow sheds to maintain, little snow to remove, and the route would be seven miles shorter. (See "The Sierra Bump" in our September '09 [Heirloom](#)-page 9).

By 1870 the U.S. Congress was considering granting Von Schmidt's company a right of way for construction and alternating sections of land, twenty miles on both sides of the route, much like what was done for the transcontinental railroad a few years earlier.

April 26, 1875 to the Honorable the Mayor and Board of Supervisors of the City and County of San Francisco:

"...The said Lake Tahoe and San Francisco Water Works propose to enter into a contract with your Honorable Body to supply to the City and Count of San Francisco, from lake Tahoe, via Auburn, Sacramento, Straits of Carquinez and Oakland, sixty million...gallons of pure fresh water per day, of twenty-four hours... for the sum of thirteen million, three hundred and seventy thousand nine hundred and thirty dollars...in gold bonds of said city and county." The contract would be for 40 years at 6%

San Francisco Municipal Reports for the year 1875

Opposition built in Nevada though, with the [Virginia City Territorial Enterprise](#) saying that the militia would be needed to carry out the water scheme, "for we will not submit to the proposed robbery." Later the same paper said, "... the pure water comes to us from Lake Tahoe, that drives our mill... is God's exhaustless gift, and the hand of man cannot deprive us of it." Nevada saw no "surplus" water for San Francisco to use. The Truckee River was already in full use by farmers, flour mills, smelting and reduction works, the Reno water works, an electrical generating station, sawmills, businesses, the railroad, a paper mill, and of course all of the ice ponds around Truckee.

Congress never passed the law. Opposition rose in San Francisco as well, since the proposal created a monopoly taking over the monopoly already in operation. The 10 million dollar cost of the scheme seemed high too. Mayor Selby of San Francisco finally vetoed the idea in 1871.

Von Schmidt did not stop work. He continued trying to solicit

The quality of the water is, beyond doubt, the purest in the world, being produced by melting snows and mountain streams....."

Report on the Various Projects for the Water Supply of San Francisco Cal. ... 1877

LAKE TAHOE WATER WORKS.

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE "LAKE TAHOE AND SAN FRANCISCO WATER WORKS" having obtained the right of way from the Central Pacific Railroad Company, and also having obtained the right to lay pipes in San Francisco, have determined to offer for sale Two Thousand Shares of its capital stock (of \$1,000 each) at \$200 per share, payable as hereinafter mentioned, and for that purpose will open books of subscription at the office of the Company, Pioneer Hall, No. 508 Montgomery street, on and

After Wednesday, March 15, 1871.

The terms of payment will be as follows: Ten dollars per share, payable on subscribing, and deferred payments distributed over a period of nineteen months from the 1st of May next. Shares to be issued as FULL PAID STOCK. The public are assured that the Company is organized in good faith and will commence operations immediately, not only to supply all the available mining districts with water, at cheap rates, but in due time will extend its works to this city.

A. W. **VON SCHMIDT** President.
San Francisco, February 23, 1871. fe24-3w3p

1871 ad in the Sacramento Daily Union (2/25/71 and other dates) to sell stock in Von Schmidt's venture. A month later, the Sacramento Daily Union said the stock was "being liberally subscribed" (3/8/71)

support and did surveying work until 1900 when he finally gave it up. Even though the scheme seemed dead a Nevada senator tried to kill it with finality by having Lake Tahoe declared a national park. That bill never passed. Eventually Hetch Hetchy became the water source in 1934 validating Von Schmidt with a canal, pipes, reservoirs and a twenty-five mile tunnel.

What Was He Like?

It's interesting to poke into personalities through their activities. In this case Von Schmidt was clearly inventive and innovative, a risk taker, did not give up, liked grandstanding, and was full of energy. There were some other aspects of him as well.

"Splendid fishing is reported at Von Schmidt's dam about three miles this side of Tahoe City. Harry Silvey caught seventeen large fine trout there the first of the week. A gentleman who came down from the Tahoe Hot Springs yesterday afternoon says that the fishing at that point is better now than it has been at any time this season. Large catches are being made there daily."

July 7, 1883 –
Truckee Republican

He had to deal with disappointment having three children die in childbirth, one son commit suicide, and having a third son die at sea.

When he was surveying land around Death Valley, the contract stipulated payment only for surveying arable land. He "found" thousands of acres of arable (not arid) land no one previously knew about just by saying so in his reports. In surveying his "Von Schmidt line" between California and Nevada he was paid for new monuments to mark the line but simply reused and re-chisled many existing monuments. His survey of John C. Fremont's land grant from Mexico in Mariposa may also have found "extra" land.

On the other hand, Von Schmidt was once a hero. A robber stopped a stage in which he was riding. Alexey stepped out on the opposite side from the robber and pointed a gun at him. The surprised robber fell off his horse and down an embankment and the stage took off. Alexey caught up later. Wells Fargo rewarded him with a gold watch engraved, "...gallantry in successfully resting, at the peril of his life..."

Alexey in Context

Modern Californians would be appalled at anyone with a plan to build a dam on Lake Tahoe and shuttle the water all the way across the state to sate the thirst of San Francisco. In the 19th century though, Americans were still focused on conquering the wilderness and clearing it of the original inhabitants, both human and animal. The wilderness and the many resources were something to use and be tamed, not something to be saved or managed. John Muir hadn't really gotten his start yet when Alexey was working on his schemes. The Sierra Club came along in 1892. The California wilderness was so large it was unlimited, like the ocean or the atmosphere. The opposition to the Lake Tahoe water removal scheme was not due to ecology or "Keeping Tahoe Blue;" it was due to fear of monopoly, high costs, and because the water was already in use by industry along the Truckee River. Put in context, Von Schmidt was part of the "modern" thinking of the 19th century: conquer the wilderness for the use of man. Today the wilderness has been conquered and we are safe from its many dangers. Sitting comfortably in homes which in many cases are urban, we

How do you get big pipelines across the Bay?

Von Schmidt planned to assemble pipe on the Oakland shore, keep it full of compressed air to keep it afloat pushing the pipe across the bay. Once the bay was spanned with pipe he would let the air escape and the pipe would sink. This had been done elsewhere including across the Bay further south.

have a completely different view on the use of the wilderness. In our comfort, free from danger, it's easy to talk about saving what's left.

Imagine however, what would have happened had Von Schmidt been successful impounding 800 million gallons of Lake Tahoe water. What might that precedent have encouraged? What would Lake Tahoe be like today? What would the original and remote Summit Soda Springs with its dirt road and few summer-only residents and massive cedar trees be like today? What would the surrounding area be like? What would the American River route of the Lake Tahoe water on its way to San Francisco look like? What would Donner Summit be like had the railroad bypassed it?

Alexey died in May of 1906, his death perhaps hastened by the earthquake's destruction of his city.

Actual Construction

Alexey's idea had some traction but not enough to get it off the ground despite what appears to be evidence of construction starts in various newspapers. The Daily Alta California reported (2/26/71) that California and Nevada were "contending for Tahoe." The rights of way had been obtained and work would begin on the tunnel without delay. An Auburn paper, it said, had reported that workmen, tools, and wagons had already gone to the lake. Von Schmidt had built a couple of cabins at Summit Soda Springs (California Spirit of the Times and Underwriters Journal, June, 1885). The Sacramento Daily Union (8/26/72) said that behind the hotel at Summit Soda Springs a spike had been driven into a tree. "This will be the high [sic] of the floor of the tunnel and will be the highest point of the road... Von Schmidt has built a fine house for the Superintendent and a large one for the workmen, in the valley, and has a lot of ties cut and piled in front of where the tunnel is to commence..." Stock was also being sold at a good clip (See the previous page).

According to Nick Chickering, whose family owns what was the Hopkins Estate and Summit Soda Springs, there is no evidence in the (Summit) Soda Springs Valley that any construction ever started or any ties ever delivered. We can wonder about the spike in the tree.

A second dam outside Squaw Valley had been constructed by 1890 to divert water from the Truckee River, which drains Lake Tahoe, and into a future canal and tunnel. It eventually disappears from the history books along with Alexey's dream.

Von Schmidt's Idea in Front of Congress' Pacific Railway Commission, 1887

You will have noted that one of the iterations of Col. Von Schmidt's tunnel idea was to have the tunnel transport not just water but also be the route of the transcontinental railroad. Instead of following the original route along the ridges to Donner Summit and then down a thousand feet to Truckee, Von Schmidt's idea was for the railroad to bore into the mountains in a long tunnel and come out on what is today Highway 89 about where Squaw Valley is. That would shorten the mileage, obviate the need for snowsheds, and allow for greater speed.

There were other schemes like that but the expense was a problem. Electric locomotives were also needed in the long tunnels rather than the smoke billowing wood or coal-fueled locomotives or even later diesel ones.

Von Schmidt's idea was presented by Lewis M. Clement of the CPRR in front of the U.S. Congress' Pacific Railway Commission in 1887.

The title of the section's testimony is "proposed tunnel through the Sierra Nevadas."

The questioner asks Mr. Clement about the idea. Clement responded that it "would be the proper thing to do. It would certainly be a great advantage to the State of California. They could have the tunnel made large enough for a railway and for hydraulic purposes, so as to bring water enough to supply the whole State with water..."

Clement went on to say the tunnel should only have a single track and the water would travel below the track. It would be 32' high and 16' wide. The tunnel would be about five miles long. Clement's route would have the tunnel go from Coldstream Canyon, directly under Donner Summit, to "one of the branches of the American River." The proposal would take the railroad "out of the snow, and would bring it down low enough so that there would not be any more snow than what a snowplow could handle." This was a little different from the route Van Schmidt had and was advocating.

The Lost Observatory of Donner Summit

You can imagine our joy when Chaun Owens Mortier, of the Truckee Donner Historical Society, sent us an email with a newspaper article attached. The cropped article is to the right, below. It talks about a Professor Davidson having decided that "Pollard's Peak Summit Station" would be the "proper place for the national observatory." The article goes on to highlight the advantages of Pollard's Pk. It's close to the railroad. The atmosphere is less hazy than Castle Pk. and Castle Pk. is too inaccessible. Congress was going to appropriate \$50,000 for the observatory. The telescope was to be the second largest in the U.S.

Wow. What a great lead. Now, where is the observatory? Those things are usually too large to remain hidden for long. In our search the first question was where is Pollard's Pk. or is it one of the many peaks in the area that have had name changes? Second, Professor Davidson shows good character in highlighting Donner Summit. He must be interesting. Our crack DSHS research team jumped into action.

Art Clark, a member of the MHRT* sometimes doubles as a member of the DSGHRT** and he quickly not only found Pollard's Pk, see the map below, but got Google Earth to find it, next page. Then to crown his success, he found Alfred A. Hart's #205 stereograph titled "Donner Lake and Crested Peak – Railroad Grade on Pollard's Hill." Crested Pk. was the name of Donner Pk. in the old days. That picture is on the next page. Pollard's, one would guess, is named after Mr. Pollard who had a hotel on Donner Lake, but that's into the purview of the Truckee Donner Historical Society so we'll leave Mr. Pollard to them.

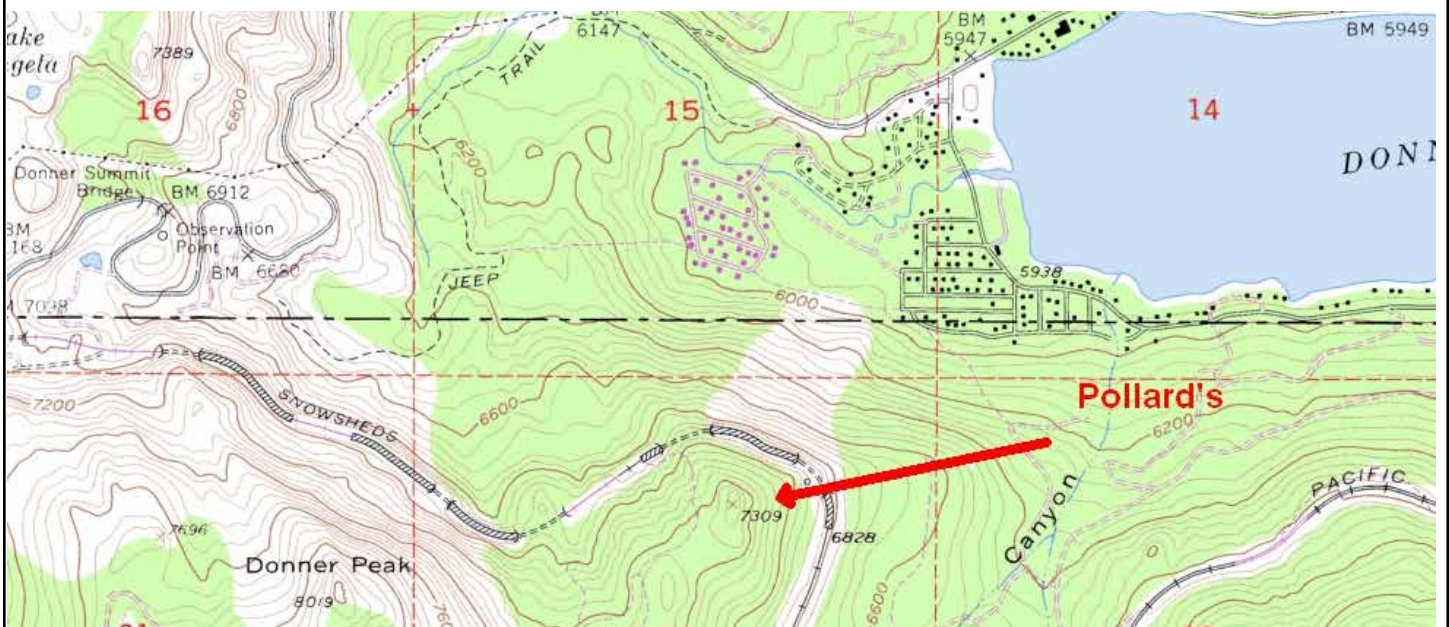
Next, who was Professor Davidson? He was a fascinating guy and famous in his time. He was a president of the California Academy of Sciences, a regent of the University of California, and first geography professor at U.C. Berkeley. He founded Davidson Observatory in San Francisco, was part of the Pacific Coast Survey, and was a professor of Geodesy and Astronomy.

ASTRONOMICAL OBSERVATORY.—
The Truckee Republican of Tuesday,
says: We understand that Professor
Davidson has determined upon Pol-
lard's Peak' Summit Station, as the
proper place for the National Obser-
vatory. This peak is located less
than a mile from Summit Station,

Pacific Rural Press, September 7, 1872

*Mobile Historical Research Team

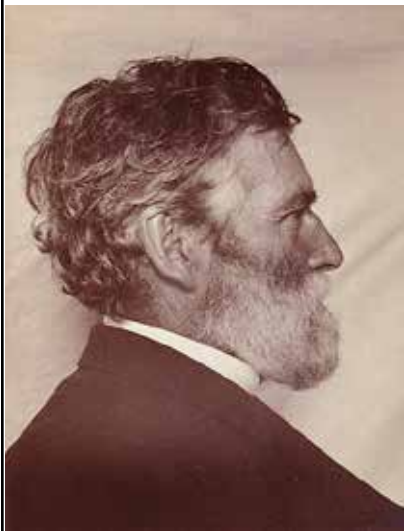
**Donner Summit General Historical Research Team





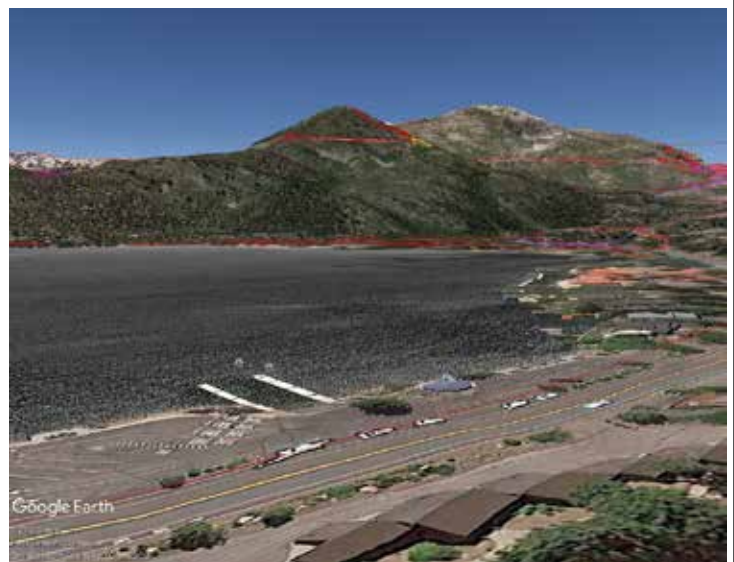
Mt. Davidson (with Sutro Tower on it) in San Francisco was named for him, and he was a charter member of the Sierra Club (1892). Carleton Watkins, famous 19th Century photographer, did a portrait of him (below left). That's an impressive if incomplete resumé. It's nice that someone that famous wanted to put a national observatory on Donner Summit too.

In 1872 the 27 inch refracting telescope was being manufactured for the U.S. Government and Davidson was looking for a suitable site. He looked at Mt. St. Helena, Mt. Shasta, and various peaks around Tahoe. From all those peaks he chose Pollard's Pk. on Donner Summit. In addition to the advantages of Pollard's Pk. noted above, the Pacific Rural Press (8/24/72) said that Pollard's was ideal because whereas the Atlantic Coast had too many bad nights and days, "on the Sierra, with our freedom from clouds, many more favorable opportunities must exist for such an important use of the extensive power of the instrument in making observations." So even the weather is good on Donner Summit (at least in those days). The astronomical view from Pollard's was so good that Davidson could even see the separate rings of Saturn. The Rural Press also hoped that "local jealousy would not interfere" "to prevent the early anticipated consummation of such a work." I should hope not.



So, where exactly on Pollard's Pk. is the national observatory? It's not a large peak and there must be a road up. There's nothing on Pollard's Pk. and there never was. Further delving into the newspaper archives our research team worked its way forward to 1873. The major donor of the new observatory was

James Lick, a very wealthy Californian. Here we have the beginnings of a sad story showing that historical research does not always deliver what you hope. Other peaks were being looked at. Col. Von Schmidt (see page 3), for ex-



Above: Professor Davidson by Carleton Watkins.
Right: The far peak is Donner Pk. The nearer is Pollard's and in the foreground, Donner Lake.

ample, wanted a site overlooking Lake Tahoe at Dollar Point. Various newspapers found fault with that.

The Sacramento Daily Union (8/17/75) weighed in to the discussion. They thought an observatory in the Sierra would be wonderful, "but [we've] always thought that the place heretofore determined upon was not the best that could be found. For one-third of the year it is practically unapproachable, because of the depth of snow." Our readers will remember without our having to repeat it here, that Donner Summit gets an average of 34 feet of snow each winter and did in those days too.

The Lick Observatory, of course, ended up on Mt. Hamilton, overlooking the Bay Area in 1888. Here our disappointed research team left the subject to others in favor of the many more stories of Donner Summit history that have yet to make their ways into the Heirloom.

From the DSHS Archives

Life was different in the old days and they had a way with words.

Here is just one of those things that makes historical research fun. We don't remember how one of our researchers came across this but the August 7, 1907 Truckee Republican's headline was too good to not go into, even if the event was near Donner Lake and not actually on Donner Summit, where horses are not so delicate.

Horse Drops Dead at Sight of Auto

Frightened to death by the sight of an approaching auto, George Keenan's horse laid down in the road near Donner Lake Sunday evening and yielded up the ghost. The auto was driven by Jack Winters and his friends say that it was the sight of the express agent, and not the auto, that scared the horse to death.

Keenan, with his lady friend, Miss Cooke, were out driving. The horse seemed to be in the "best of spirits" when the auto appeared in sight. Keenan realizing that the steed would scare at the auto, rapped the lines around his hands, pulled the whip from the socket, and in a poetical way said "whoa! Tommy, whoa!" Tommy never moved. The kind words of the driver and the coming of the auto paralyzed the left side of the faithful old horse. The animal snorted, and in an effort to stand on its hind feet, fell to the ground, and with one pitiful repentful look at Keenan, closed its eyes never to wake again. The horse was dead.

With a dead horse, harness, buggy, and his sweetheart, all in his care seven miles away from[sic], caused tears to drop from the brave man's cheeks. Winters seeing his friend was burdened with trouble suggested that he leave the dead horse and buggy and accept his invitation to ride with him to Truckee. After pulling the horse and buggy to the side of the road, the unfortunate couple were brought to town by Winters in the machine.

The horse and buggy were owned by Laity and Son. Keenan reported the loss to the proprietors of the rig. After relating how it all happened, the owner of the horse said: "Alright, Mr. Keenan, pay me \$75 and we'll call it square."

Keenan has been dreaming ever since.

Horse Dropped Dead at the Sight of an Automobile

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From the DSHS Archives



When Van Norden was a lake, prior to 1976, it was popular for water skiers, campers, boaters, and apparently, fisher-people.

Right: about 1940 at Cisco Grove. It was a small community on Highway 40 with residents, a gas station, general store, cabins to rent, a lodge and the Auburn Ski Club. The coming of the freeway and more efficient automobiles in the 1960's spelled the death knell for Cisco and other small communities. Many of the buildings were razed by the owner to reduce taxes. Today there are just a few vacation homes. It's hard to see how popular it was.



Clearing Highway 40 in 1927.

Book Review

Tom Burns

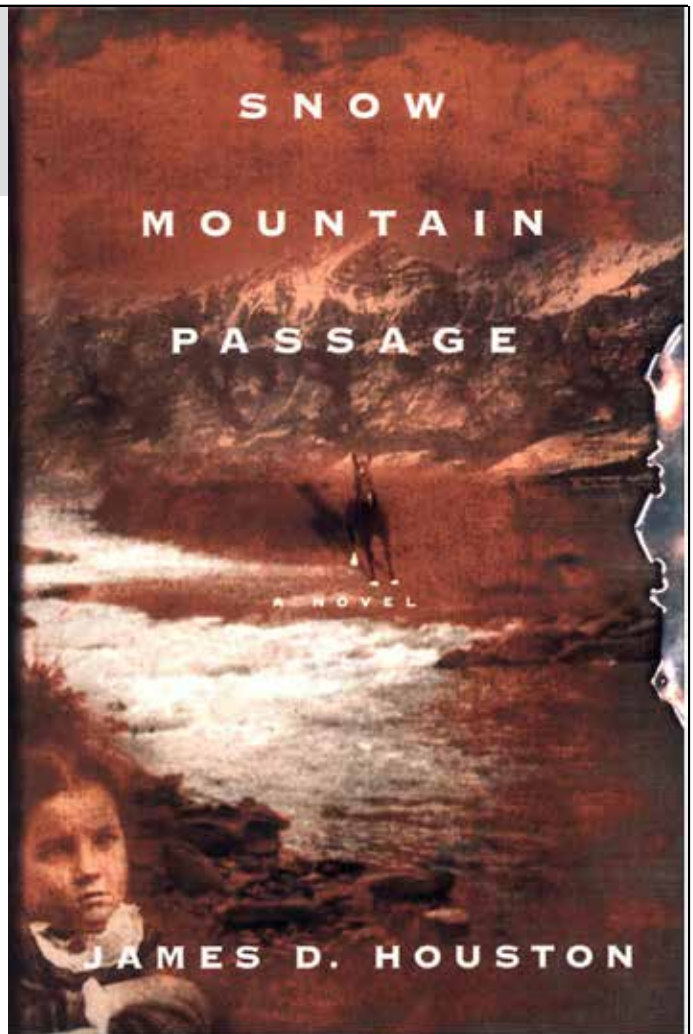
What I Saw in California, Edwin Bryant, (originally published in 1848)

Snow Mountain Passage: A Novel, James D. Houston, 2001

These two books provide an interesting perspective on the often-reported story of the Donner Party, the source of many familiar place names in our area. One, written at the time of the Donner Party tragedy by someone who made part of the crossing with the Party, but was successful, and a modern novelization of the tragic story written 150 years later.

Both books provide insights into the route across the country and the fateful decisions made by the Donner Party leading to the disastrous ending. Bryant's book describes the early part of the trip, but with ominous foreshadowing of the problems to come. Dissension among the leaders, conflicts between people who should have been allies, and misinformation about the route led to poor decisions and, ultimately, disaster. Bryant makes clear that the group was strongly advised to stick to the conventional route north of The Great Salt Lake and to avoid the Hastings Cutoff.

At Fort Bridger, Bryant and a small party abandoned their wagons, purchased horses and mules and took the Cutoff. Bryant left the Party at this point because he was concerned about their slow rate of progress. It was clear in his telling that the route he took would be virtually impassable for ox-drawn wagons. In some respects, it was a miracle that the Donner Party was able to pioneer this route for wagons, but the difficulties they encountered, including loss of wagons and animals, made their late arrival at the foot of the Sierra inevitable.



What I Saw in California

By Edwin Bryant

Introduction by Thomas D. Clark



As Bryant said, "The rear party, known as Mssrs. Reed and Donner's company, did not follow the trail of those who had preceded them, but explored for a portion of the distance, another route, and opened up a new road through the Desert Basin." (p. 250)

Interestingly, Bryant gives an alternative source for the name "Truckee." In 1844, two years before the Donner Party's trip, another late-arriving emigrant party met an Indian whose "appearance and eccentricities of manner resembled so much those of a man by the name of Truckee, who happened to be an acquaintance of one of the party that they gave the Indian the name of TRUCKEE; and called the river and lake, along which he conducted them, after this name." (p. 228)

Bryant devotes a chapter to the tragedy of the Donner Party, relying on contemporary published letters and articles, since he was involved in military activities to the south during the winter of 1846-7 that the Party spent in the mountains.

Bryant first met James Reed, who had been exiled from the Donner Party, at Sutter's Fort, where they started to recruit volunteers to fight the Mexican government. Reed's first goal was to return to the mountains to rescue the families stranded there.

When the weather forced his return, he rejoined the volunteers.

Bryant went on to Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) and served with Colonel Fremont in the war against the Mexican government that was then in control of Alta California. After successful conclusion of the war, Bryant served briefly as the first Alcalde (mayor) of the renamed city. If you have ever wondered about the origin of many of the names of streets in San Francisco and of cities of California, Bryant's book lists the key figures in the establishment of the city and state: Fremont, Sloat, Montgomery, Kearny, Sutter, Folsom, Larkin, Stockton, Livermore, and, of course, Bryant.

After completing his military service and term as Alcalde, Bryant returned to the East to retrieve his family before coming back to California. On his return to the East, he finished the book which was published before the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in early 1848 was widely known. This is one of the few contemporaneous tellings of the early days of cross-country travel and the founding of the American state of California.

Houston's novel, Snow Mountain Passage, follows the Donner Party from the vantage point of the family of James Frazier Reed, one of the main leaders of the party. The book begins with the preparations in the Rock River Valley in Illinois for the arduous journey. The story highlights many of the same problems noted by Bryant that, each in a small way, contributed to the final tragedy. Most of these will be well known to readers of other Donner Party books, but he does it in an engaging way. In the novel, Houston is able to add insights and emotions into these historical events. There are conflicts between hard-headed individualists, Germans and Irish, Protestants and Catholics, the settlers and the local Indians, and between the values of family and community.

The book changes direction when Reed is exiled from the Party in the desert after the killing of John Snyder. The story then follows Reed as he makes his way into California. After a failed attempt to rescue his family, he returns to Sutter's Fort and then to Yerba Buena, just in time to join a group of Volunteers gathering to fight against the Mexican forces still in the area.

Houston makes clear that there were four factions in this war: the Mexicans (representing the government), the Californians (representing the Spanish and Mexican settlers), the Native Americans (switching sides as necessary), and the newly arrived Americans. Most of the actual fighting between Fremont's American forces and the Mexicans occurs in southern California. The Volunteers expect to find Mexican forces in the north, but never do. They eventually come to terms with the Californians, who mainly want to protect their rancheros and families.

Houston's novel employs excerpts from Patty Reed's diaries (she was 8 years old during the crossing) to describe the horrors the remnants of the Party endured in the long winter at Truckee Lake (now Donner Lake). Some of these are contemporaneous and some are written from the perspective of Patty as an older woman in her home in Santa Cruz in 1921. This device uses the voice of an innocent participant to describe the tragic events.

An amulet Patty was given by Salvador, one of the Indians guiding the Party across the desert, ties the story of the Donner Party to the story of James Reed. After the family is reunited in San Jose, it turns out that the Indian, Salvador, who was murdered for food in the mountains, has a brother, Carlos, who was riding with Reed during the war with Mexico. (Incidentally, an Indian named Carlos was also mentioned by Bryant as aiding the Volunteers.)

from the Trail Notes of Patty Reed, March 1921

"I don't remember reaching the top, though we did, sometime after noon. I wished I'd looked back. I'd spent so much time watching that pass from down below. I deserved a moment to turn and see where we'd been for all those weeks. At the time, I couldn't see anything but the next step and the next step and the next....In my mind now, I can pause and look out from that high promontory that had stopped us in November and nearly stopped us that day in early March. I gaze down from the Summit at the icy ring of Truckee Lake, the one they now call Donner, and it's odd to think that neither George nor Jacob ever got anywhere near the lake that is named for them. For that matter, they never got within a day's ride of the famous pass that made their name a household word—neither George nor Jacob nor Jacob's wife, Elizabeth, nor Tamsen, who nursed her husband to the end. It tells you something about the way things get remembered. Hundreds of others climbed out that year and got through the mountains in pretty good time. But the party that they have named it for is the one that almost didn't get out at all. If they asked me, I would have named the pass for someone else. Maybe I would call it Charlie Stanton Pass. He and Mac were the first ones from our party to cross. Charlie crossed again to bring us those mule loads of provisions that got us out of the desert. He crossed it a third time before he lost his life trying to lead the Snowshoe Party to the other side. Isn't that the kind of grit you name some place in the mountains for? And by saying that, I don't mean to take anything away from Uncle George, since he was a capable leader until his wagon broke down and he tore his hand open building a new axle. But it does make you stop and wonder about how things get named."

Snow Mountain Passage: A Novel, p. 287

In his re-telling of the story of the Donner Party, Houston has ample opportunity to highlight the many conflicts that influence our lives: personality, religion, nationality, and ethnicity.

Tom Burns
August 2020

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.

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



This is a little hard to see because there is little contrast between the Lodgepole Pine and the chain embedded in it.

It's one of those artifacts that are all over Donner Summit. You can start your own collection if you walk the forests looking closely. There are old signs; electrical wiring; spikes embedded in trees; nails; insulators; road remnants; trail blazes; Native American grinding rocks, cupules, metates, and basalt flakes from projectile knapping (that's Native American activity); Emigrant Trail remnants; and more.

This is on the south side of Van Norden in the forest toward the eastern end. If we give you better clues the joy of the "chase" will be lost. Who knows who put the chain there when the tree was young or what its purpose was. Today it just evokes the curiosity of attentive passersby.

The picture on the previous page 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 them 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.

Old Time Sunday Drive

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Fascinating History
Picnic Spots
A Slower Pace



Take a look at our guide to Old Highway 40: turn by turn instructions from Rocklin to Truckee, broken into four legs and including pictures and history. Available on line on the brochure page of donnersummithistoricalsociety.org, at the DSHS (at the blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs, or the visitors' centers in Truckee and Auburn.



And while you are at it, check out the 20 Mile Museum - interpretive signs from Nyack to below Donner Summit on Old 40. Information at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

One More Thing

We'd gotten the whole Von Schmidt story done and laid out. The [Heirloom](#) was finished. Then, as we were throwing away notes on paper we saw in the old list of things to do and include, the word, "signature." Here is Alexey Von Schmidt's signature on the hotel register at Summit Soda Springs in 1889. He was still trying to get his project off the ground then and maybe he stopped by to look at the western end of his tunnel. Von Schmidt had also built two cabins in the area at least by 1872. Nick Chickering, whose family owns what was the Hopkins Estate and Summit Soda Springs, came by one day with the old hotel register, saved somehow from the fire that destroyed the buildings. One day Summit Soda Springs will be on the Heirloom agenda and there will be more signatures of famous people. Keep up your subscription.



okay, now one last thing:

@ the Museum



Special bonus page

Here we see some clever little gizmos carried by many skiers in the old days. We once featured two of the gizmos donated by Charlie White (Donner Lake). Those two items are the lower center gizmos, one with the cord on it and the smallest gizmo next to it. Norm Sayler, president of the DSHS, can't help himself sometimes though and when the other gizmos appeared on E Bay he picked them up. We could just describe their use again but this time why not let you ponder a bit. That's called reader engagement maybe.

Note that each gizmo opens like a garlic press or nut cracker. They are not for the kitchen however. The smallest gizmo is for the same purpose but does not change shape at all. One gizmo is attached to a belt and has a little holster which must have been convenient for carrying while skiing. One just has a cord which I suppose could be tied to a belt or something one would have while skiing. The others maybe had fasteners at one time.

So, what's your guess? Keep up your subscription.

Then & Now's Get Updated

One of our major DSHS projects over the years has been the work of Art Clark* as he developed his collection of Then & Now's of Donner Summit. Over the years he's done more than one hundred of the picture sets juxtaposing historical pictures next to what the scenes look like now. On the next page is an example which comes from our October, '14 [Heirloom](#) (page 10) of "Old Man Mountain." This Then & Now follows an earlier article in that [Heirloom](#) about our visit to Phoenix Lake which is not far from Meadow Lake and its townsite (check out our [Heirloom](#) indices for the history of this now gone mining town.)

Art is a perfectionist and it shows in his work. The "Now's" are perfect duplicates of the "Then's." That takes a lot of work as he moves, sometimes just a bit to get the same perspective in the Now that is the Then. You can read about how it's done in our September, '13 and May, '15 [Heirlooms](#) (pages 12 and 15 respectively). You can see the lengths he goes to on the next page. At the top is an Alfred A. Hart picture, #179 of the Phoenix Lake side of Old Man Mtn. The scenes match and where Alfred A. Hart includes three people, Art Clark has also included three Art Clarks.

For reference, the picture at the bottom of this page is the view of Old Man Mountain you are familiar with as you travel east on I-80 just past Yuba Gap.

Phoenix Lake was a mining area a few miles from the roaring town of Meadow Lake north of Fordyce Reservoir and Red Mountain.

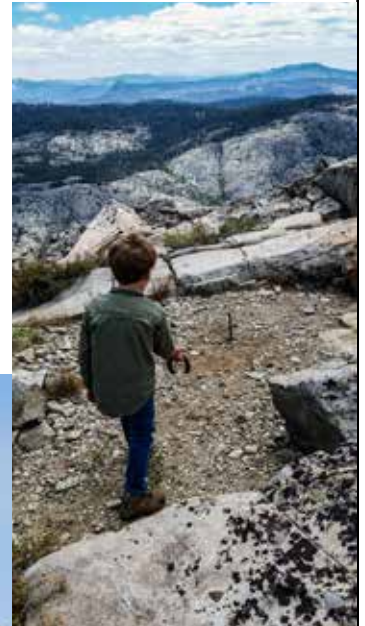
Cont'd on the next page



Above: Clay Gallagher, Art's grandson, proofing the Then & GIF of Old Man Mountain on a cell phone.



Left: Art Clark turning Flash files into GIF files.



Clay playing horseshoe on Old Man Mountain.



Left: Old Man Mountain (right) as seen from the Highway 20 entrance to I-80 looking east.

The collection of FLASH (Adobe) images that morph from old to new and back has been residing on our website for some years. Unfortunately technology has a way of catching up and recently Adobe announced it would no longer support FLASH. Apple had already left it behind which makes the collection more and more useless.

Art Clark stepped in again and made optimized GIF's that also morph from then to now and back. It was a huge amount of work to change all one hundred plus images but he did it over a few weeks in January. We got them uploaded and now you can enjoy the collection and hopefully GIF's will not disappear soon. The link to the new GIF empowered Then & Now's is: <http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/ThenandNow.html> You can also get to by clicking on "Photographs", then "Galleries" and then Art Clark's Then and Now's.

To help Art out, his grandson Clay Gallagher, acted to proof the images being sure that titles and text matches the new images and that the GIF's were doubles of the Flashes. Clay is at the top of the previous page with the Old Man Mountain Then & Now on the cell phone. Just for fun, just below is also Clay on Old Man Mountain playing horseshoe with a horseshoe he found. What a site for a horseshoe game. Is Donner Summit not remarkable?

*member of the DSHS MHRT**

**Mobile Historical Research Team



Right: Alfred A. Hart #179. Phoenix Lake is in front of Old Man Mtn. looking southwest



For each Then/Now Art also makes cards to duplicate how Alfred A. Hart displayed his images. To see larger images go to our October, '14 [Heirloom](#).

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Donner Summit Historical Society.org

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



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Pick up the brochure at the DSHS
or download it at:
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>

50 interpretive signs along Old 40
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>