

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

September, 2021 issue #157

## The Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road Pt II

“It must have been a work of desperation before the [Dutch Flat] road was cut through” so hard was crossing the Sierra.

Old Block (Alonzo Delano)

(See the July and September, '20 Heirlooms)

Sacramento Union November 1, 1873

9 years after the road's completion and 4 years after the transcontinental RR

Last month the Heirloom's main article was about the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. giving you all the information you might ever want to satisfy your curiosity or stand you in good stead in case you are ever on a quiz show about Donner Summit history. There was a lot more than we printed in particular in photographs we've been collecting of the road. We didn't want the Heirloom to get too long so we thought a good alternative would be to make this issue's main article a scrapbook of the collected pictures.

First though, as review and caution,

Samuel S. Montague, acting chief engineer of the Central Pacific Railroad said the road was started in 1863 and completed in 1864. It was good practice for the railroad which came along a bit later, completing the summit crossing in 1868 and the whole thing the next year. More importantly the road was built to facilitate the building of the railroad. A little less importantly it served also as a toll road helping the railroad's Big Four with their sometimes shaky finances. Montague also said, while touting the many benefits of the road that it had “comparative immunity from heavy snows.” Beware of salesmen. Donner Summit gets an average of 34 feet of snow each winter. Norden, on Donner Summit, has the highest snowfall of any residential area in the Continental United States. Theodore Judah, who laid out the route of the transcontinental railroad, opined that snow was not a

cont'd to page 3

## Advice Solicited

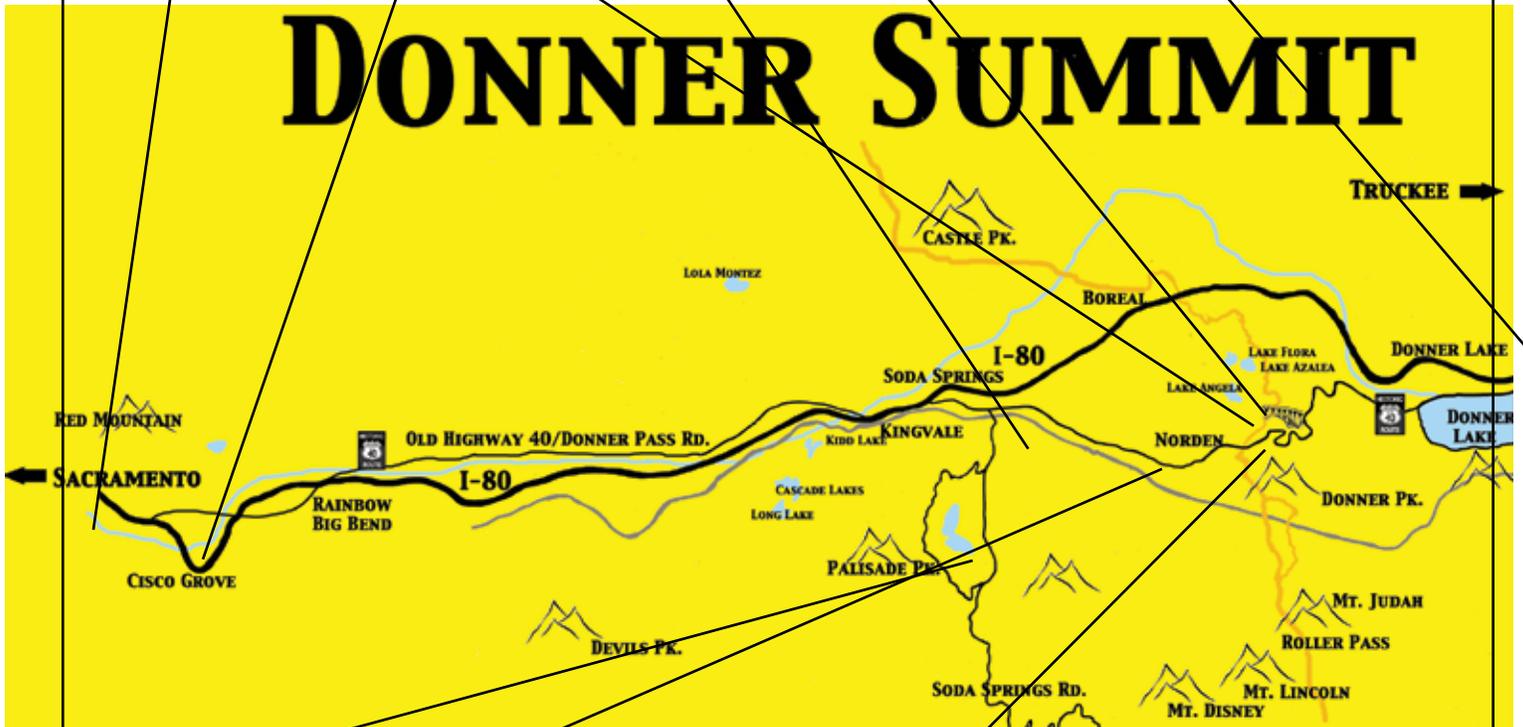
The first issue of the Heirloom “hit the stands” with the September, 2008 issue. Our initial Heirlooms were 10-15 pages long and over the now 157 issues, have grown to twenty pages or so. Each has been full of Donner Summit history and we've covered about every possible story. There are a few left.

Margie Powell was the spark behind the DSHS. She got it started telling Norm Saylor, our president, it would be the perfect repository for his incomparable collection of historic photographs and historical ephemera. She did the required State and Federal paperwork, got things organized, and was the energy behind the DSHS until she passed a couple of years later. As things were getting started and the first Heirlooms rolled off the presses, she cautioned against the Heirlooms being too long, more than ten pages. She was afraid we'd run out of history. Of course, she was right in the abstract. As historically significant as Donner Summit is, the history is not unlimited. The problem with her advice was that there is so much

cont'd to page 3

# Story Locations in this Issue

Crystal Lake pg 5 Cisco pictures picture pg 9 pictures pg 10 pictures top/middle pg 12 Polley's Station pg 14



fossils pg. 21

picture pg 18

Lake Mary pg 15

## Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We've now passed 150 issues of the Heirloom: thousands of pages, thousands of pictures, and hundreds of subjects. You've probably begun to realize that you cannot keep all the history in your head. Even if you remember it all, retrieval is difficult.

Fortunately John Albert Index invented the index\* and one of the choices we made back at the birth of the DSHS was to index all our Heirloom articles and pictures. 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.

One of the strengths of the DSHS is the incomparable historical photograph collection of Norm Sayler, our president. The collection is thousands of pictures and again the sheer number makes finding anything in particular, difficult. Avoid the long URL by going to our website and clicking 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 of Donner Summit. Have fun.

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\*historical society humor

Find us on 

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

## Reader Advice from page 1

history and to tell the stories properly, space in the form of more pages was needed. We also wanted to have a mix in each issue so that there would be something for everyone.

Now here we are in 2021, 157 issues and a couple of thousand pages later. Margie's caution is coming true.

What do we do when there are no more big stories like this month's Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. Pt II?

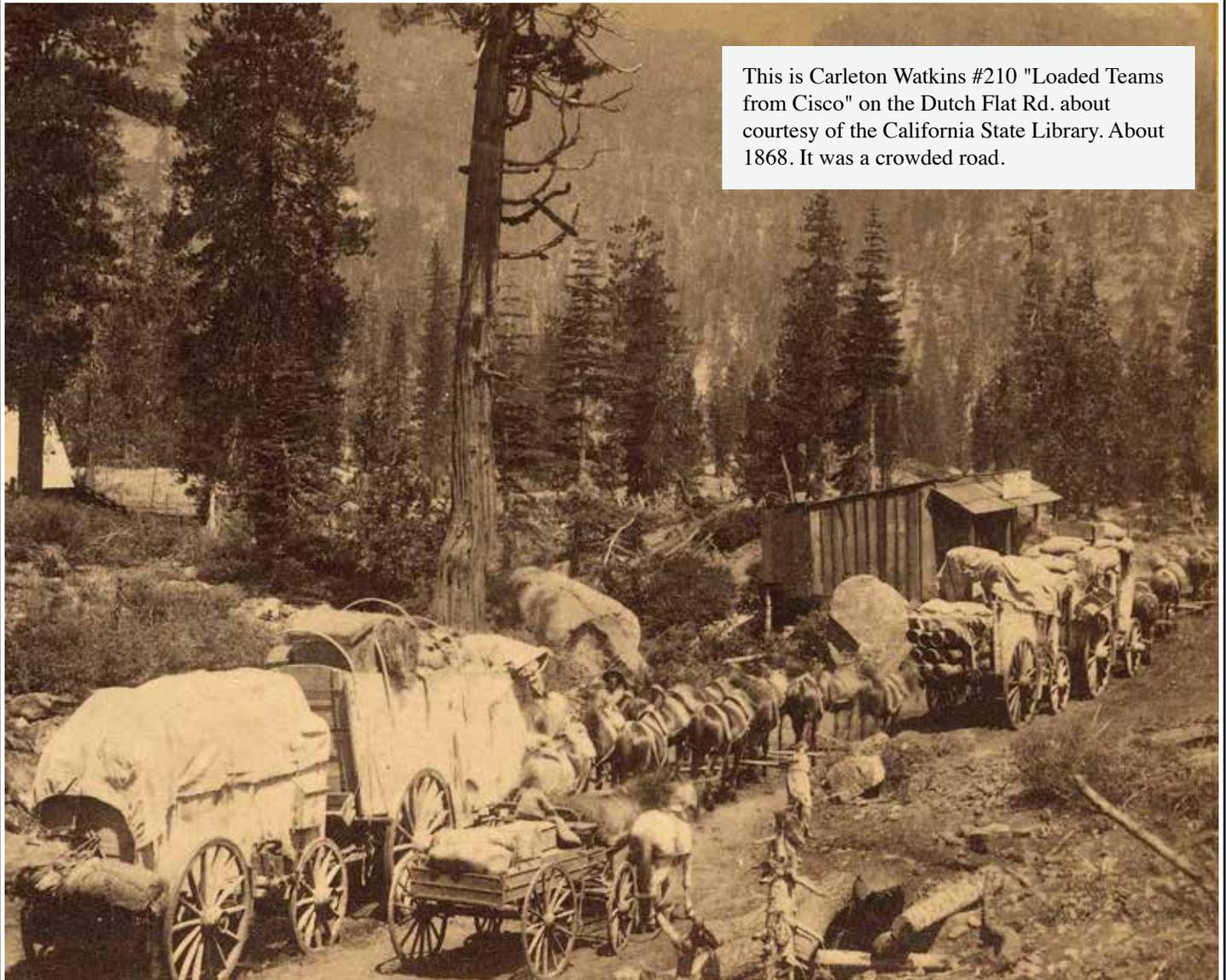
In newspaper circles the most important column goes on the right side of the front page. That's where this request is situated on page 1. We hope to get some good suggestions from our almost 1000 subscribers and others who get the Heirloom from the Face-Book link or the website but don't subscribe: [info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

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## Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. Pt. II, cont'd from page 1

problem on Donner Summit after his thorough analysis.

Snow is a problem and the railroad had started building snowsheds to protect the track before they'd even finished the railroad.



This is Carleton Watkins #210 "Loaded Teams from Cisco" on the Dutch Flat Rd. about courtesy of the California State Library. About 1868. It was a crowded road.



Central Pacific Railroad at Cisco

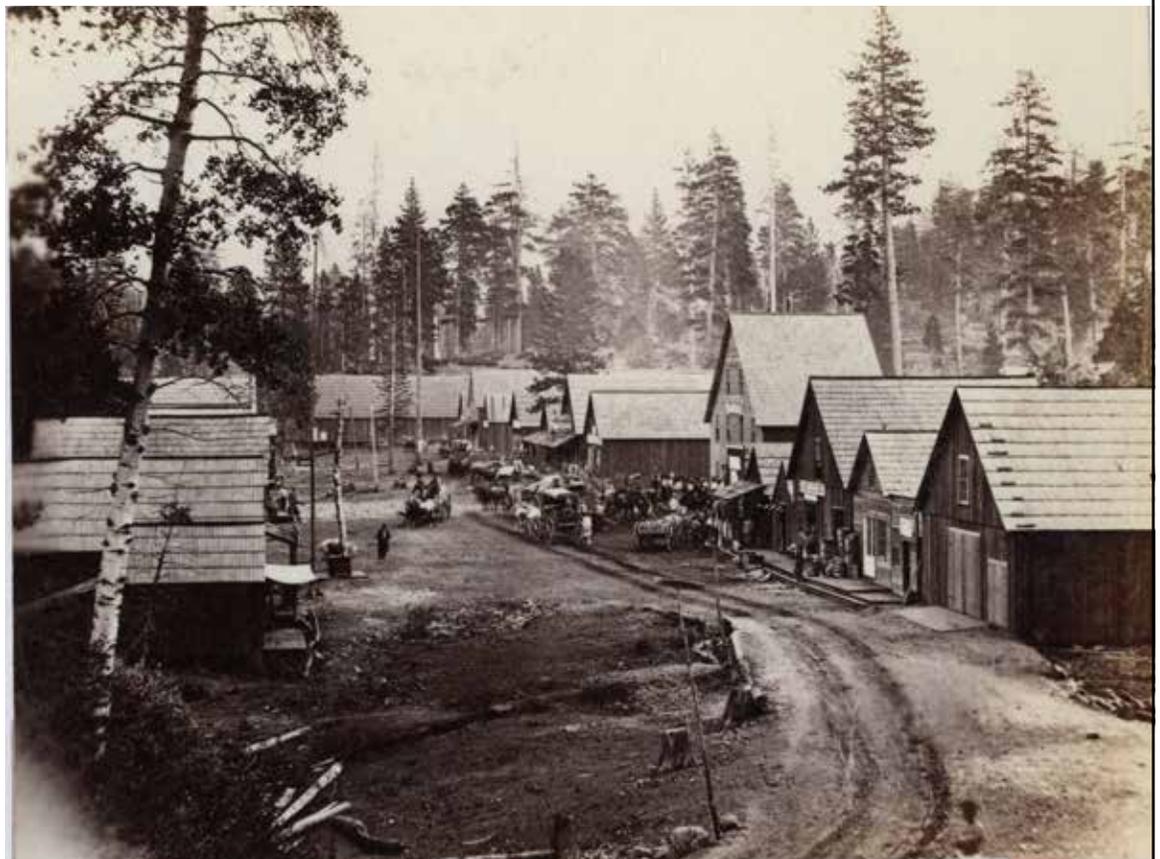


Above: Upper Cisco, Placer County, Central Pacific Railroad teams. Lawrence and Houseworth albums, Society of California Pioneers.

left: Main Street at Cisco. *ibid.*



Left: View on Crystal Lake, Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road. Lawrence and Houseworth albums. Society of California Pioneers.



Alfred A. Hart #99  
Cisco, Placer County

## NEW ARRANGEMENT



### PACIFIC, STAGE AND EXPRESS

COMPANY. - On and after June 1st this Company will run a Daily Line of Six-Horse Concord Coaches, connecting with the central Pacific Railroad at Newcastle, for Grass Valley, Nevada, North San Juan, Forest City, Downieville, Virginia City, and all part of Nevada Territory, carrying the United States Mail and Pacific Express. N.B - Passengers by this line will arrive at Nevada and Virginia City before anything that leaves Sacramento at the same time, except the Pony Express. Person having business, and in a hurry, will find it to their advantage to travel on this line, which, for safety and comfort, can't be beat.

J.S. Cue, Superintendent  
S.W. Boring, Agent

Sacramento Daily Union June 30, 1864  
(art work and formatting as originally done)

## NEW ROAD TO WASHOE

**THE NEW ROAD, VIA DONNER** lake, will probably be open for travel by JUNE 15, 1864, and will be the shortest and best route from Sacramento over the mountains to Nevada Territory Two lines of stages, if not more, connecting with the Central Pacific Railroad at Newcastle, will run over the same as soon as opened.

CHAS. CROCKER Pres't of Company

Sacramento Daily Union June 25, 1864  
(formatting as in the original)

## NEW ROAD TO WASHOE

**THE DUTCH FLAT ROAD IS NOW** open for travel, and Teamsters can save **THREE DAYS** in the round trip to Virginia City, and carry fully one-quarter more freight, on account of the light grades. Plenty of freight can always be procured at Newcastle, the terminus of the Central Pacific Railroad. Until further notice, all teams, going west without load can pass **FREE** of toll. All those taking loads at Newcastle can pass free up to July 1, 1864

Teamsters, try it and see for yourselves

CHAS. CROCKER  
President D. F. and D. L. Road

Sacramento Daily Union June 14, 1864  
(formatting as in the original)

### FOR THE ALTA. - The Dutch Flat *Inquirer* says:

The Dutch Flat and Donner Lake road is in excellent order, and the amount of travel on it is immense. The stages per this route are making good time, arriving regularly in advance of time, and usually jammed with passengers.

The *Inquirer* also says that rapid progress is being made on the Pacific Railroad, and that the cars will soon reach the famous locality of Dutch Flat.

Sacramento Daily Union November 13, 1865  
(formatting as in the original)

## FAST FREIGHT

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN  
THAT THE  
UNION FAST FREIGHT COMPANY,  
CAPITAL STOCK, \$30,000**

Is now being incorporated. The design of this Company is to transport Freight from San Francisco, via Sacramento, to Newcastle. From Newcastle Freight will be conveyed by Six-Horse Teams, via Dutch Flat, over the Donner Lake road to Virginia City

**TIME-THROUGH IN THREE DAYS!**

It is the design of this Company to have all their arrangements completed by July 1, 1864

**UNION FAST FREIGHT COMPANY**

Sacramento Daily Union June, 1864  
(formatting as in the original)

**INCREASING.** – The Dutch Flat *Enquirer* of September 30th says:

The travel to the State of Nevada over the Dutch Flat route is rapidly increasing, the road presenting an almost continuous line of teams from Colfax to the Summit. The stages are frequently delayed an hour behind time on account of the crowded condition of the road.,

Sacramento Daily Union October 2, 1865

From the Sacramento Daily Union September 1, 1865

### **Highway Robbery – The Virginia Enterprise**

August 30th says : Day before yesterday, morning Josh Romelli, the man who a short time since stabbed and killed in cold blood a Swiss named William Lombard in this city stopped a German teamster on the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake road, about a half mile this side of Ingraham’s Station, and robbed him of sixty-three dollars in coin. Romelli had a handkerchief over his face as a mask yet was recognized by the teamster at whose head he presented a pistol. The German being unarmed was forced to “shell out.”

After getting what he wanted Romelli told him he was at liberty to travel. The German gave the alarm as soon as he reached the station, and a number of persons started in pursuit to the robber, but failed to find him. It is reported that Romelli is harboring with the Indians in the vicinity of Summit Valley [Donner Summit]. A reward of \$500 is offered in this city by the friends of Lombard for the arrest of Romelli and we hope to hear of his being caught..

Then because readers are naturally in suspense, this from the Daily Alta on September 6, 1865

On August 28th, says the Territorial Enterprise, Josh Romelli, the man who a short time since stabbed and killed in cold blood a Swiss named William Lombard, in this city, stopped a German teamster on the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake road, about a half mile this side of Ingraham’s Station and robbed him of \$63 in coin. Romelli had a handkerchief over his face as a mask, yet was recognized by the teamster, at whose head he presented a pistol. The German being unarmed was forced to “shell out.” After getting what he wanted, Romelli told him he was at liberty to travel. The German gave the alarm as soon as he reached the station, and a number of persons started in pursuit of the robber, but failed to find him. It is reported that Romelli is harboring with the Indians in the neighborhood of Summit Valley. A reward of \$500 is offered in this city by the friends of Lombard for the arrest of Romelli, and we hope to hear of his being caught. His is desperate villain, and we are sorry to know that he is still at large.

## News Snippet

John Bezan was a butcher in Colfax. He froze to death on the Dutch Flat Rd. according to the Sacramento Daily Union, January 1, 1868. There were no more details.



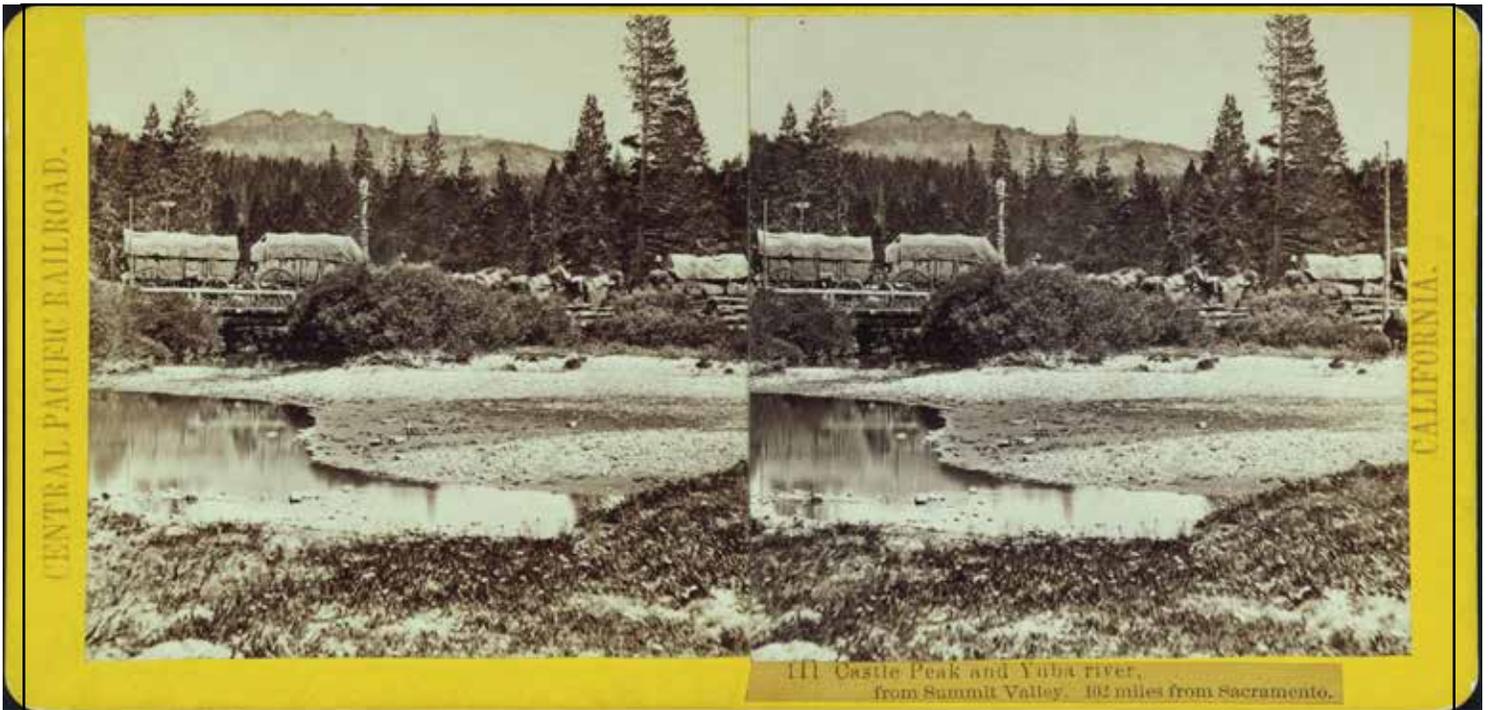
Lawrence and Houseworth. You can see how crowded the Dutch Flat Rd. could be before the railroad was completed.



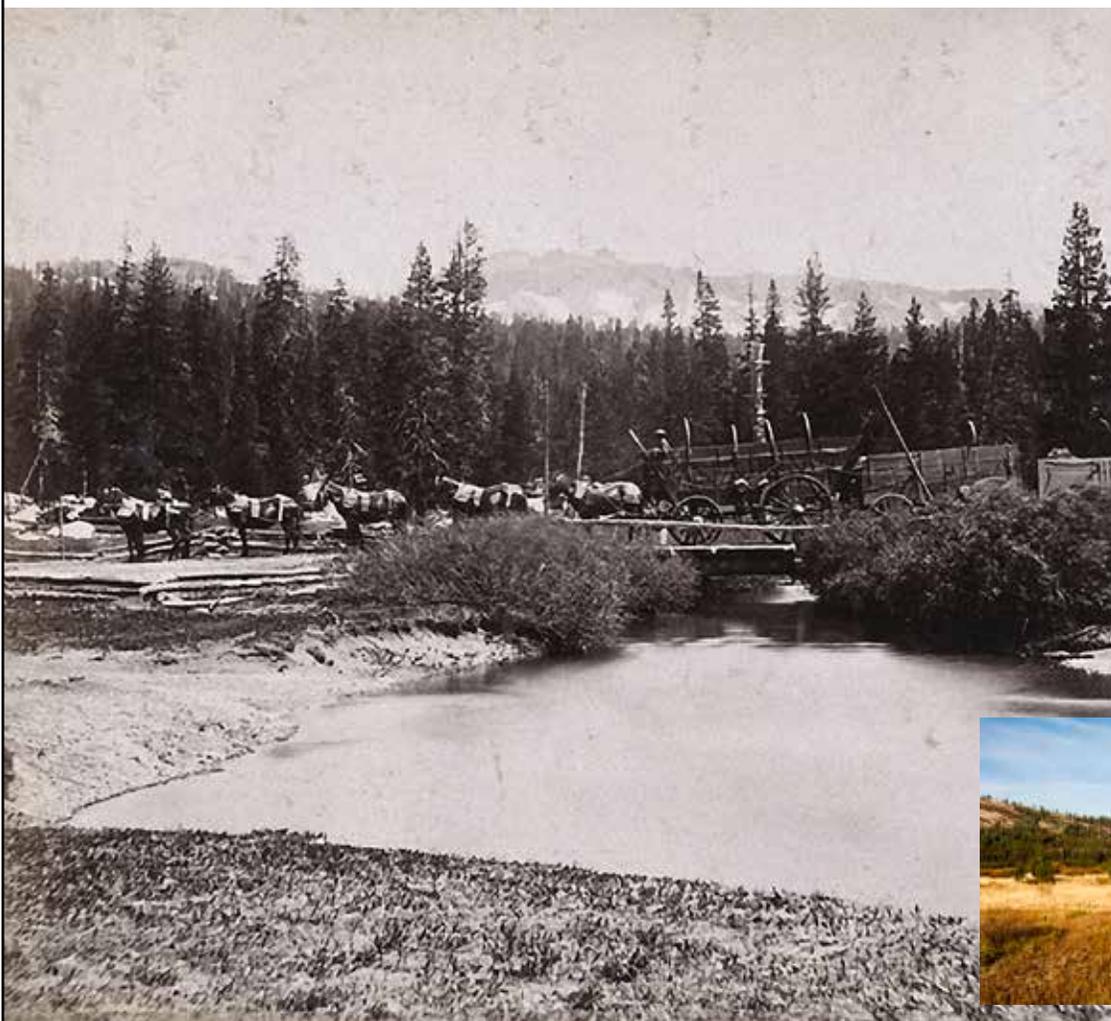
O'Sullivan Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road looking down from Donner Summit. Today's Mt. Stewart and Mt. Stephens are on the left.



Alfred A. Hart #116 Camp Near Summit Tunnel Mount King (today's Donner Ski Ranch) in the background. The buildings are Summit Camp, the largest and longest lasting of the railroad workers camps. Tunnel 6 goes approximately under the buildings. Today, the Dutch Flat Rd., in the foreground, is a trail that starts at the Pacific Crest trailhead, and heads down to Donner Lake. On the way you can walk on the Lincoln Highway, see ads painted on the rocks more than a hundred years ago, see petroglyphs thousands of years old, and more. Pick up the DSHS's newest brochure, "Donner Summit Historic Donner Pass Trail," or download it from our website. It has a map and QR codes you can access the stories with your cell phone on the way.



Alfred A. Hart #111 Castle Peak and Yuba river from Summit Valley. That's Castle Pk. in the background. The water is Castle Creek which drains the area below Castle Pk. and Boreal. Below is the same view, Lawrence and Houseworth 1269

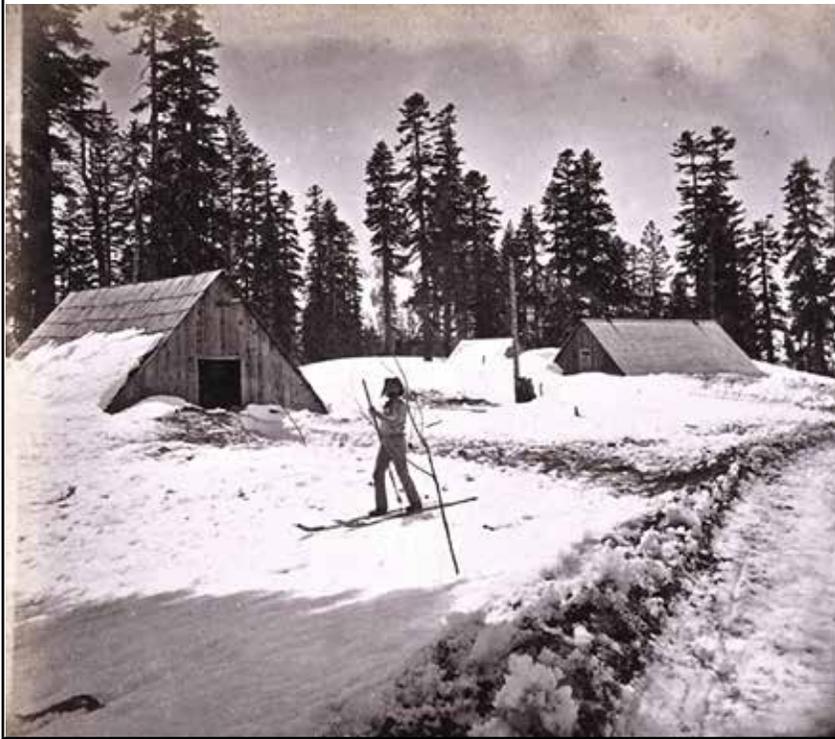


Take a copy of this scene and walk out into Summit Valley. You can match the photographer's location exactly and see the remains of the Dutch Flat Rd. Note as you gaze along the old road (below from last month's [Heirloom](#)) no trees grow on the route because the earth is still so compacted from the huge and heavy traffic.





Alfred A. Hart #117 Bluffs in Donner Pass, Western Summit. This location is just east of the Pacific Crest Trailhead on Donner Summit. The buildings in the photograph on page 9 are to the right of this location.



Houseworth #837 Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road - The Summit House.



Alfred A. Hart #120 Road and Rocks near Summit Tunnel - Donner Peak in dist.



Carleton Watkins 124



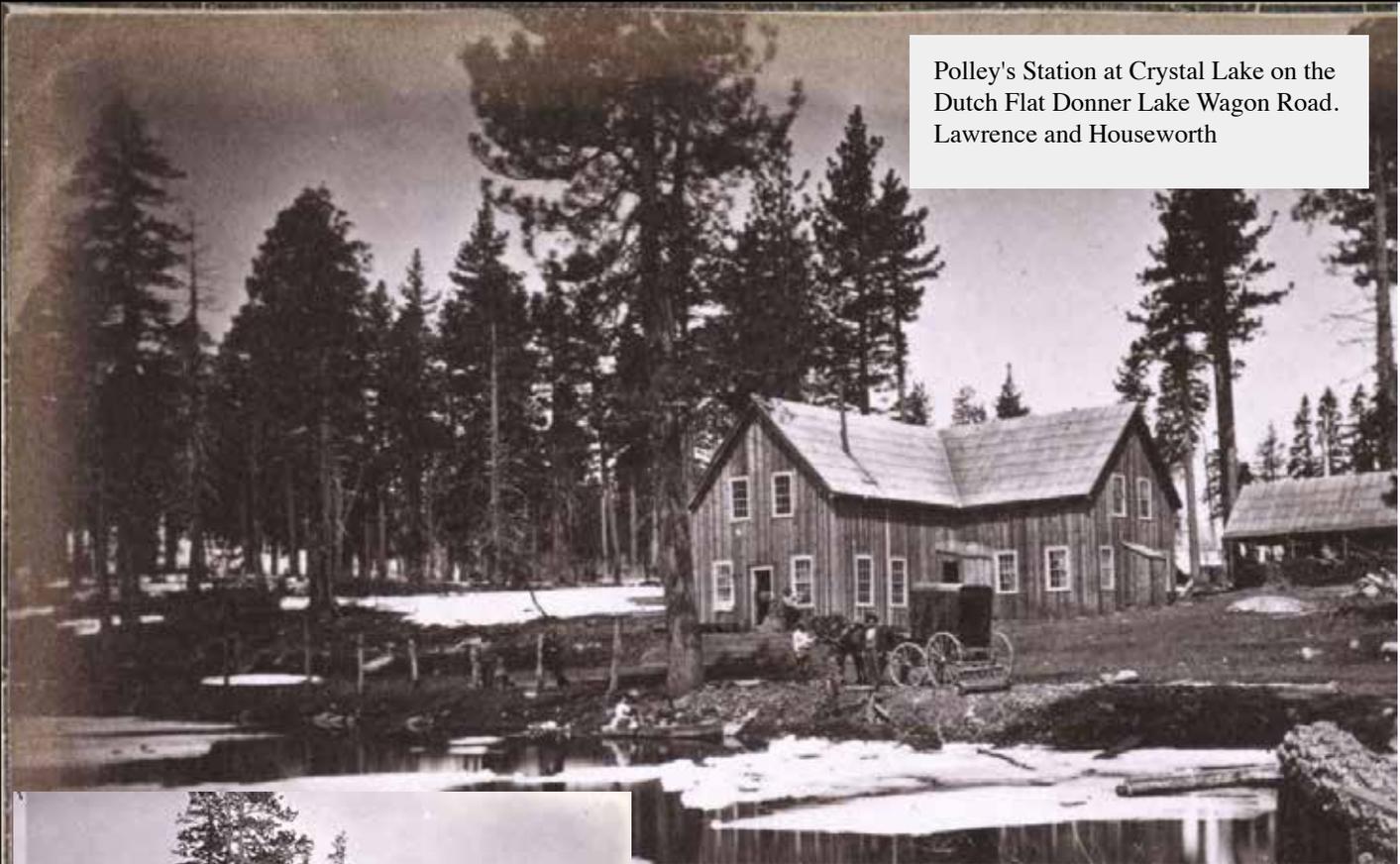
Library of Congress view from Pollard's Station



Houseworth Zurr's Station and Water Tank, Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road.

Pollard's Station on the Dutch Flat Rd. at the east end of Donner Lake. Library of Congress





Polley's Station at Crystal Lake on the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road. Lawrence and Houseworth



The Summit House Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road.

Here's a great website full of very short California history videos some of which include Donner Summit:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/TreyPit-senberger/videos>

**R. LIDDLE & CO.,**  
**SPORTSMAN'S DEPOT,**  
 No. 418 Washington street,  
 SAN FRANCISCO.



**Guns, Rifles, Pistols, Fishing Tackle and Sporting Implements of every kind.**  
**Powder and Dram Flasks, etc., etc.**  
**Rods, Reels, Lines, Salmon and Trout Flies, etc., etc., Wholesale and Retail.**  
**Guns and Rifles made to order, and Repairing of every description neatly executed and guaranteed to give satisfaction.** s19-1m4p

**NOTICE TO CONTRACTORS.**

**THE DUTCH FLAT AND DONNER LAKE WAGON ROAD COMPANY** will receive Sealed Proposals at the store of Huntington & Hopkins, Sacramento, until 12 m. on the 14th inst., for the construction of two sections of said road—one to commence at the Upper Crossing of Yuba river and extending down said river so far as to include what are known as the New Hampshire Rocks; the other section to commence one half mile west of the summit of the Sierra Nevada and extending east three miles. The work on the two sections is nearly all rock, and must be completed by the 1st of July, 1868. The work is on the line surveyed by S. S. Montague. Some member of the Company will be at Dutch Flat on the morning of the 16th inst., to accompany contractors to the ground.  
 C. CROCKER,  
 of President D. F. and D. L. W. R. Company.

**CALIFORNIA COLLEGIATE**

**INSTITUTE FOR YOUNG LADIES.**  
 Nos. 62, 64, 66, 68 and 70 SILVER STREET, SAN FRANCISCO. -Mrs. M. B. SWEDENSTIERNA, Principal.  
 The Ninth Session of this Institution will commence on the **FIRST MONDAY OF OCTOBER NEXT**, when the classes will be reorganized and the regular course of study resumed. Applicants for admission to the Collegiate Department, whether as boarders or day pupils, will present themselves at the Seminary, at 9 1/2 A. M. of that day, for examination. Pupils admitted to the Primary and Preparatory Departments, without previous examination.  
 Catalogues and Circulars can be obtained on application to the Principal, either personally or by mail.  
 s20-1m3p

**ALPHONSE DENNERY &**

Lawrence and Houseworth 779  
 "Turret Mountain (now Mt. Lincoln and Sugar Bowl) from lake near the Summit, Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road." The Lake is Lake Mary.

Left, center: Bids being solicited for the summit work  
 Sacramento Daily Union 10/11/62

**DUTCH FLAT AND DONNER LAKE WAGON ROAD.**

Commencing at Dutch Flat, in Placer county, sixty miles from the city of Sacramento, the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road follows the general course of the Pacific Railroad line along the "divide" or watershed between the Yuba and American rivers in nearly a direct line, without descending grade, to the summit of the Sierra Nevada mountain at the Donner Lake Pass, and, by a descending grade, to the Truckee river, a distance of forty and a half miles—thence across the Truckee river and over an undulating plain, a distance of fifteen miles, to Ingham's Station, on the Henness Pass Wagon Road, and distant from Virginia City twenty-nine miles—making a total distance by this route of 144 1/2 miles from Sacramento to Virginia City.

The road bed in rock cuts and mountain-side excavations is in no place less than sixteen feet in width, and is nearly all twenty feet wide, affording ample room for two loaded teams to pass each other. The ascending grade over the mountain in no place exceeds ten inches to the rod.

The road has been constructed during the past year, giving employ to from 300 to 500 men for more than six months, under the direction of Henry Pally, General Superintendent, at an aggregate cost of about \$200,000, and by competent judges who have passed over the road it is said to be superior to any mountain road of equal length in the State.

The California Stage Company will early in the Spring put on a daily line of stages to run over this route from Auburn to Virginia City, in connection with the Pacific Railroad from Sacramento.

Above: Sacramento Daily Union January, 1, 1864



State of the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. in 1872,  
(three years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad)

**-Editors Union :** If there is a wilder drive than that from Tahoe to Donner, or a rougher one than that on the old Dutch Flat and Donner road through Bear Valley to this place, we have not been made acquainted with the fact up to this writing.

Coming down the gorge of the Truckee in the early morning, robins flew and chirped, and quail danced along in the road ahead of the team, the waters in the river rolled and gurgled, and fresh winds played among the trees as we rounded the curves of the stream and dashed on. Another lake comes in sight. We pass by the spot where the ill-fated Donner party spent a horrible Winter, dash along the shore of a sheet of water three miles in length and look up at the continuous snowsheds of the Pacific Railroad, a thousand feet above, on the mountain opposite.

At the head of Donner comes a terrible passage of the mountains. Money has here been lavished upon a road winding and twisting in every direction to find the easiest ascent, bad enough at last. But what must have been the trail when the early immigrants scaled these granite walls? We are on the old immigrant Truckee route, and traces of the trail may be seen on which the toil-worn stock of the early comers to California and panted, surmounted almost inaccessible cliffs or sunk to die.

Looking up from Donner at the rocky heights to be scaled it seems scarcely credible that a carriage, or even a man, could make the ascent, and obstacles ahead are always present as the winding road is traveled. But somehow a way is opened as you proceed, rocks part to give you entrance, streams are crossed and re-crossed, clumps of timber are penetrated, and at last, passing over banks of snow, at the top of the mountain is gained, and I looking back blue Donner lies calm and peaceful in the valley from which we have ascended.

All along the Donner Lake and Dutch Flat road, built by the railroad company, are seen at intervals the remains of the old immigrant route, and we cannot but admire the stubborn courage of the pioneers of the State, when we see how many hardships they had to endure in crossing the Sierras.

At Bear Valley they had to let their wagons down by means of ropes passed around trees. The evidences of their exploits in this line are still visible. It is doubtful if a worse route could have been chosen across the mountains than the Truckee route.

The railroad company spent probably ten dollars to make a wagon road here antecedent to the construction of the Pacific Railroad to one dollar expended on the Henness Pass road, and yet the Henness Pass road to-day is in good order, and the bridges mostly impassable [sic], while this road is the roughest imaginable, though not as long deserted by teams as the Henness road. The bridges have tumbled in and the road is scarcely passable.

On both routes are mournful relics of decay and destruction. Large and fine buildings are often met crushed in by the heavy snows, or standing with the windows all in with not an occupant or a living soul within miles. Once in traveling over either of these mountain roads in the stage it was not uncommon to pass 150 heavy wagons in a day. Now not even a solitary horseman can be met. For miles not a track is seen in the road once so well worn. The railroad has superseded all. Herds and men sometimes make use of the old thoroughfare in driving their stock to fresh mountain pastures, and that is about all. The old time comfortable log fires blazing in expansive chimneys for stage passengers have gone out forever.

Sacramento Daily Union August 10. 1872

paragraphs added for readability

# BEAR VALLEY HOUSE,



Junction of the Nevada and Dutch Flat Roads,



## BEAR VALLEY,

Nevada County, California.

### ELIJAH O. TOMPKINS

Would inform the Traveling Public, and all who wish to spend a season at this beautiful part of Nevada County, that he has now opened his

### LARGE HOTEL AT BEAR VALLEY,

And is prepared to accommodate all, in as good style as any house in the State.

The House has just been built and handsomely Furnished throughout, having Rooms enough for forty persons.

The Table will be supplied with the best viands to be found; equal, if not superior to any other house in the County.

### HUNTING, HUNTING.

There is no place in this section equal to Bear Valley for hunting.

The DANCING HALL is the Largest and Best in the County.

SUPPERS AND MUSIC FURNISHED ON SHORT NOTICE.

Horses and Carriages to let, at reasonable rates.

Distances from the BEAR VALLEY HOUSE to the following places:

Bear Valley R. R. Station... 2 miles.	Meadow Lake.....15 miles!
Alta.....11 "	Omega ..... 5 "
Dutch Flat.....12 "	Nevada .....22 "
Colfax.....25 "	Bowman's.....15 "
Washington ..... 7 "	Fall Creek..... 7 "
Grass Valley.....25 "	Diamond Creek..... 4 "

From Bean's 1867 History of Nevada County - one of the many ads. Note where Bear Valley House is.

# From the DSHS Archives



Cisco Grove about 1940. The Cisco Grove gas station is to the left of the couple at the center of the picture (what are they puzzling over?). The store and office are in the building behind them. The buildings are gone now, having been torn down by the owner to save on property taxes. Once I-80 came into the picture it took traffic away from the little communities along Highway 40, which is the road in front of the cars.

1938	October	1938				
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1938	November	1938				
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1938	December	1938				
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31						

In case you need a 1938 calendar. This is Donner Summit in the ad. Mt. Judah is in the background left. Highway 40 was first built using concrete. Today it's been covered by asphalt but as they renovate the road in 2021 that cement will be exposed, ground up and used again. The railroad workers' homes at Norden are at the right side of the picture.

# Book Review

## **Days of Hope Miles of Misery Love and Loss on the Oregon Trail**

Fred Dickey 2020 420 pages

We don't usually review fiction books because there are almost none that have anything to do with Donner Summit. Days of Hope Miles of Misery Love and Loss on the Oregon Trails is fiction though, and despite the title, the story sends emigrants over Donner Summit. Better yet, the story opens with Hannah Blanc watching "the Sierra-show with awe, but her admiration was beclouded by her whisper to the sky – 'What a taunt, that Hell should be so beautiful.'" It's a good start.

The first chapter is just one-and-a-half pages long but it sets up the expectation for the story and how hard the journey was, ending with Hannah saying, "Dear God, how did I let this happen?" That's foreshadowing, for those of us in the literary trade (and indeed the Heirloom is high class literature). Days of Hope... is 1845, pre-Gold Rush and pre-Donner Party.

This story is about the most benighted group of emigrants ever to cross the Sierra, at least with the exception of the Donner Party. If you've read books about the emigrants or emigrant accounts you've come across most of the various episodes in this book. Dickey has done a lot of research about the emigrant experience and all the stories of hardship and human nature are in this book, applied to this group of emigrants. This is a catalog of everything that ever went wrong with all the wagon trains but given to just one group.

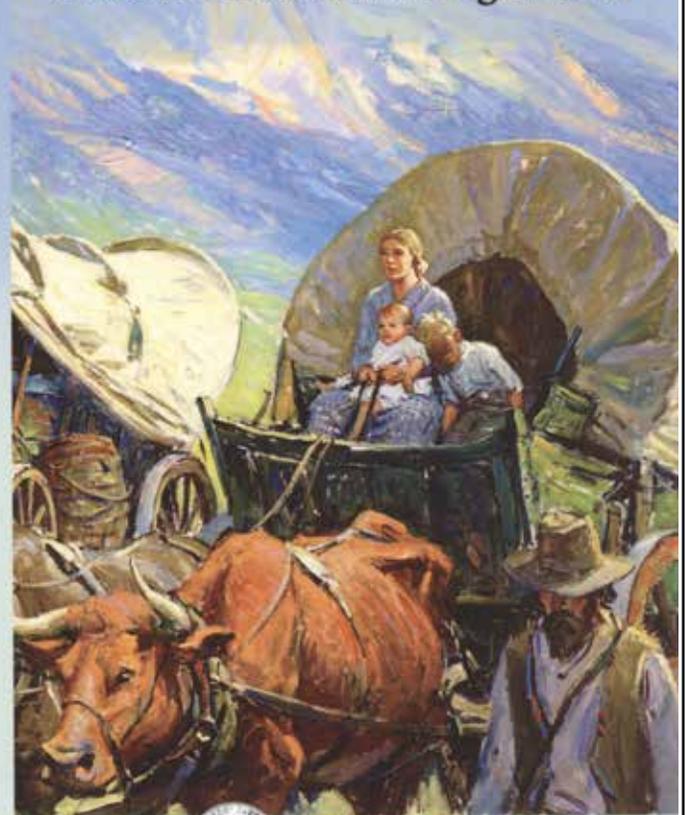
Another issue is that there is unending conflict. Every day someone is having a problem with someone else. That emigrants got to California is proof that groups overcame hardships, personality conflicts, and individual deficiencies. In Days of Hope it's amazing anyone got to California by crossing the continent due to infighting, but of course many tens of thousands did.

Days of Hope starts with seventy or eighty people and twenty-eight wagons. By the time they get to California there are no wagons left and only nine adults and five children. There have been suicides, murders, accident, people turning back for home, and a group that decided Oregon has better prospects because of the coming Mexican War. Although there was no cannibalism and the group did not have to over-winter in the Sierra, the story still exaggerates the typical continental crossing.

That said, if you've not read about the emigrant experience, Days of Hope will introduce you. Dickey's research is translated through dialogue and you learn about social mores and customs of the time, dress, trappers' rendezvous, oxen versus horses, food needed per person and lots of other details. There are good hints in case you want to make the trip: don't take dogs, take a milk cow, take extra oxen, take "dissicated vegetables," etc. There are some errors too. For example, Dickey confuses latitude and longitude (pg 99).

The beginning of the book introduces to two main characters, Nimrod Lee and Hannah Spencer. They have good back stories. Nimrod is going to be the guide but he has other things on his mind too like killing the guy who killed his Native American wife. When Nimrod accepts the guide job for a discount (because of the other things on his mind) the party asks him what to expect and he replies, "The worst." More foreshadowing. It's going to get bad.

## **DAYS OF HOPE, MILES OF MISERY** *Love and Loss on the Oregon Trail*



A Novel by  
**Fred Dickey**

There are good descriptions, for example, the whimpering of children “was sandpaper on her heart.” Describing dust, Dickey says there were only twenty-five hundred emigrants on the trail in 1845 but dust was still the issue.

“Dust could not be escaped. It flew on the wind and swirled like a snowstorm in the dry air and invaded everyone’s lungs. It was the leader of a conspiracy of the elements. It kicked up under wheels and into wagons, into water buckets, and into the soups bubbling in Dutch ovens.

“Day after day, the wind never wearied. It worked dirt and sand into every crevice of their bodies, into beards, and babies’ diapers. Eyes became red and irritated because no amount of blinking could shield the grit. Every bit of fried bacon included the sandy crunch of Platte River grime.”

Later the women stage a revolt to do laundry, “They made it clear they were tired of wearing clothes so dusty that when it rained they almost turned to mud.”

Then Dickey went on to describe the sun and its effects. That was only the prosaic discomfort. On top of that there’s a long list of episodes that whittle down the starting 28 wagons to zero: quicksand, Indians, cholera, frustration, prejudice, snapping turtle attack, Rake Face Marcel, accidental gun fire, child birth, dust storms, drownings, suicide, murders, child abuse, insanity, theft, people running off, the desert, snowstorm, starvation, animals dying, a child run over by a wagon, deaths, and more.

In describing things there are a lot of homespun similes that get a little tiring, “He’s as popular as a wet dog at a church social.” “You’re as cocky as a goat on a narrow ledge.” “Zack’d last with Nimrod ‘bout as long as sausage in a pig pen. He’d fold like an outhouse in a tornado.”

Dickey at times imagines what must be going through emigrants’ minds to give the reader a sense of the misery of the travel. The summer heat wave drained “energy from people and animals alike.” People were tormented by rashes. They took out frustrations on animals “as they never would have back in their own fields.” The continued upward slant of elevation caused “muscle to burn and breaths to heave... and it shortened people’s fuses in dealing with each other.” “Women got tired of sweat-sticky clothes and wor-

ried about body odor. Children grew bored and took dangerous chances. “Men found fault with each other over matters that back home would have been shrugged off. People were tempted to lash out in their misery.” “Their lives had changed psychologically in ways they could not have prepared for.”

“They were lonely in a crowd: Americans, by circumstance and by choice, were accustomed to lots of space and carefully selected associations. In the small group of pioneers, they had abruptly become hemmed-in by strangers whose habits and manners disgusted them. It was toxic claustrophobia.”

To work through all the travails Dickey’s assembled a varied cast: city people and farm people, educated and uneducated, gay people, a Jew, and an Hispanic. Many of the cast are clearly deficient, less than desirable people, and that leads to unending conflict. There’s a dope addict, a bully, a drunkard, the educated and the uneducated, a wagon full of prostitutes, and thieves. There are the upstanding people too: the heroes, Hannah and Nimrod, the group’s captain, and some who do nice things with their dying breaths.

There are some problems with the plot besides throwing in every experience emigrants ever experienced and the unending conflict. Hannah is made a leadership committee member. There is no motivation for that, no examples of her good judgement. There is child abuse and one wonders why that had to be brought into the mix of plot elements. Was that a common emigrant experience? For two different murders there are different reactions.

Zack is let off for killing a prostitute but then they later want to hang Edgar for killing Zack. What brings Hannah and Nimrod together except for the convenience of the plot? A former slave is unaccountably given away to the Indians as if that was the only workable solution to a plot problem.

Every little bit through the book someone turns back, runs off, dies, or is murdered. It’s a wonder that anyone was left when they got to Sutter’s Fort.

Hannah Blanc watching “the Sierra-show with awe, but her admiration was beclouded by her whisper to the sky – ‘What a taunt, that Hell should be so beautiful.’”

## Note:

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

Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Sayler 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



Donner Summit has world class recreation opportunities, rich biological diversity, and wonderful scenery. The history, of course, makes Donner Summit unique and the most historically significant square mile in California.

That's not all though. The geology of Donner Summit is quite interesting. The current Sierra, as opposed to the one that came before but which eroded away, rose about five million years ago. The great granite batholith that is the Sierra pushed up raising all that above it. Part of what was above it was part of the Merhtens formation which is made up of volcanic mud flows from what is now Nevada. The flows raced west obliterating all that was before them. A lot of what was on top of the granite has eroded away leaving exposed granite. In other areas there is still volcanic conglomerate from those mud flows lying atop the granite, like icing on a cake.

Today, if you find the right kinds of rocks in that icing you can break them open and find fossils of the vegetation that was obliterated by the volcanic mud flows 25-30 million years ago. The rock above was split open exposing the leaf. The rock was found among the loose rocks in the drainage in Serene Lakes right next to Soda Springs Rd. about where Dulzura Rd. intersects but on the opposite side of the street.

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 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.

**DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
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