

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society and the most historically significant square mile in California.

July, 2022 issue #167

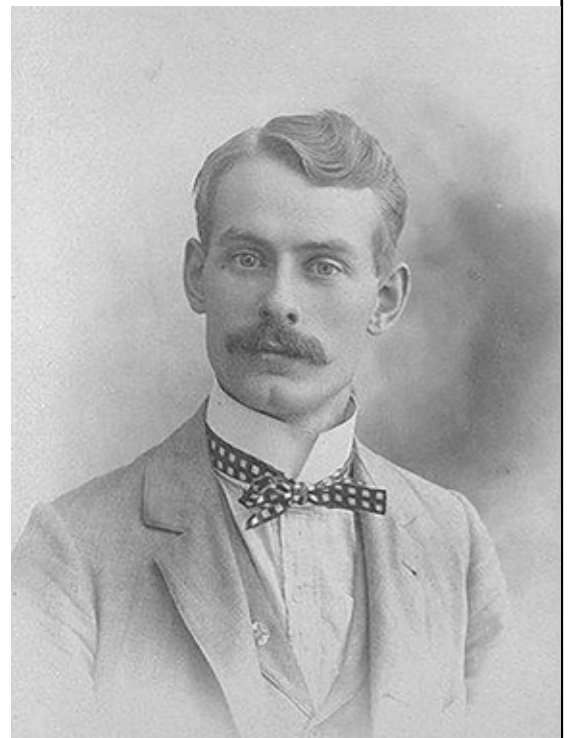


Harry C. Peterson and Red Mountain

Historical research is not “cut and dried.” There are a lot of vagaries and uncertainties. There are also a lot of false leads. For example, we at the DSHS had heard of a Charles E. Davis collection of photographs that Mr. Davis had made as he researched the Emigrant Trail in the 1920’s. Art Clark, long time member of the DSHS MHRT (Mobile Historical Research Team), found some old copies of the Overland Journal in a thrift store. One had a picture by Charles E. Davis on the cover and then several more pictures inside from his collection. The pictures were of Donner Summit, the credits said Sutter’s Fort, and the collection’s description, see the sidebar on page three, sounded really promising. That set off a treasure hunt. If there were some historic Donner Summit pictures at Sutter’s Fort then there might be more. There might be a gold mine. Indeed there was a gold mine but it was not one we expected. That’s a bit of foreshadowing just to set the tone for your further reading.

Sutter’s Fort collections are part of the State Archives now and we headed to the State Archives repository, just outside Sacramento at the old McClellan Air Force Base. We initially wrote about our visit there in the September, ‘16 Heirloom. It’s an amazing facility which you’ll appreciate if you delve into our website’s archives and retrieve that Heirloom. Part of the facility archives photographic resources include Mr. Davis’ collection. We sat down and began to avidly search through the catalog.

There was nothing. Mr. Davis* was an amateur and made assumptions a careful historian wouldn’t make, took irrelevant or unidentifiable pictures (e.g. one item is a picture of a tree - where was it? What was its signifi-



Harry C. Peterson
Palo Alto Historical Society

*C. E. Davis led an interesting life. He was born into a wealthy family. He started as a seaman in the Atlantic fishing fleet and worked his way up to captain. He went to Alaska to look for gold during the Klondike stampede. He then became a naturalist and explorer. He traveled to Alaska, the Caribbean, Siberia, the Amazon, and the American Southwest. At some point Davis became interested in the Donner Party and their trail west. The pioneers, he said, represented the indomitable spirit. The result of his explorations is the Charles E. Davis Overland Trail Project, a collection of more than a thousand pictures of the emigrant trail, taken in the 1920’s, from Independence Mo. to Sacramento, Ca.

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DONNER SUMMIT



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.

*historical society humor

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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 Sayler collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society



Example of a photograph from the C.E. Davis Collection. This is #198 labeled, "West side of Donner Lake. May 1927"

The picture is a bit west of Donner Lake but it's also a half mile or so south and it's clearly the bottom of Roller Pass looking up.

Attractive summary description of the C.E. Davis Collection at the State Archives.

"The Charles E. Davis Overland Trail Project Collection documents the efforts in 1927 to re-trace the Donner route from Independence, Missouri to Sacramento, California by Charles Davis, an amateur historian and explorer. He recorded his expedition in a journal and through regular correspondence with Harry C. Peterson [see below], the curator at the Fort. This collection's photographs, which number more than a thousand, may be of particular interest to researchers interested in the Interstate Highway system and the development of modern roadways in the western states. Davis' photos show much of the western trails as they appeared before the highways and the resulting communities covered them over."

from "Researcher's Guide to Sutter's Fort's Collection of Donner Party Materials"

cance?) and so our foray into the State's photographic archives of the Davis collection was a bust.

It looked like we'd wasted our time until a nice archives lady, after giving us a tour of the amazing facility, realized we were harmless. She mentioned that they had a collection of photographs done by Harry C. Peterson. She was cataloging them at the time and she said some were from the Donner Summit neighborhood.

There followed emails back and forth about the pictures and eventually a CD of some of Mr. Peterson's photographs, the ones of Red Mountain, from a summer he spent manning the Southern Pacific Railroad's lookout there. (See our July, '10, August, '10, and March, '17 [Heirlooms](#) to read about the lookout and Red Mountain). Prior to obtaining those pictures we'd only had a few of Red Mountain and those didn't really tell the story. So our misguided search for C.E. Davis' collection turned up Harry C. Peterson who not only had made a collection of Red Mountain photographs, but who turned out to be an interesting guy.

Those pictures we chose from the Archives collection have been sitting in the DSHS computers for seven years, just

waiting to be shared. In this [Heirloom](#) they meet public gaze for the first time.

Harry C. Peterson was an interesting guy. The "Guide to the Harry C. Peterson Papers" (they are at Stanford University) at the Online Archive of California, has a short biography which begins, "Harry Claude Peterson never met a historical fact or artifact that he didn't like." That's a guy we could like. You can see his professional and extra-curricular biographies on page 9.

We've looked for more personal information about Mr. Peterson, especially for any diary he might have had from his stint at Red Mountain. Stanford University, the repository of his papers, responded to a query answering, "Unfortunately we do not have a diary of any kind in either of the Peterson papers collections." They did wish us the "Best of luck in your search." A diary or some personal letters might have explained Peterson's transition from the U.S. Army to Southern Pacific fire lookout on Red Mountain right after World War I. Did he just need some time before deciding on the next stage of his life? Was he traumatized by the war and needed some seclusion? We should note that there are a lot of people in the pictures he took and two people

manned the lookout so seclusion not part of the work. What about his wife and son, by then aged 13, or is his son in some of the pictures? Was it a family affair on Red Mountain? What were his thoughts on Red Mountain as he contemplated things (see page 5)? What was life like up there? Maybe we'll never know or maybe a reader has a friend who had a relative who knew Mr. Peterson and to whom Peterson bequeathed a set of leather-bound diaries.

Here we present photographs of Red Mountain, taken in 1919 by Harry Peterson, selected from a larger collection of 106 pictures at the State Archives. We are only allowed to use these once and maintain them otherwise for research: "All Material reproduced in a publication, film, media presentation, exhibit or otherwise must be credited as '© 2015, California State Parks.'" There were also serious forms to fill out to bring you these pictures. Apparently Harry didn't label his pictures and the best the research person at the State Archives could do was label them generically: "man", "woman", "group," etc. There are a couple labeled "Harry C. Peterson" so we can see how he enjoyed Red Mountain.



© 2015, California State Parks

The railroad lookout on Red Mountain. Only the left, concrete building remains. The other, wood structure, was the living quarters.

Right, we can suppose building materials are being brought up.

The east side trail up is very steep possibly because it was built before switchbacks.





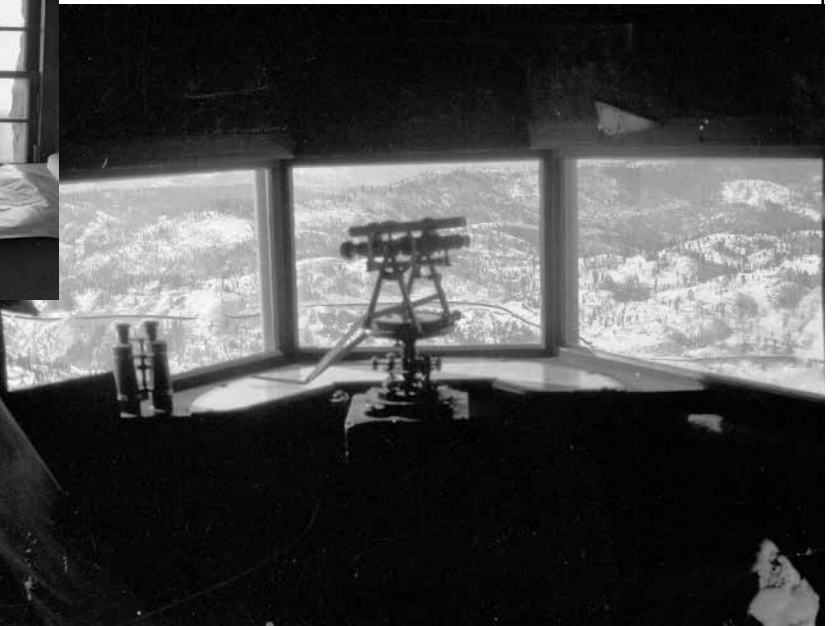
Kitchen area.

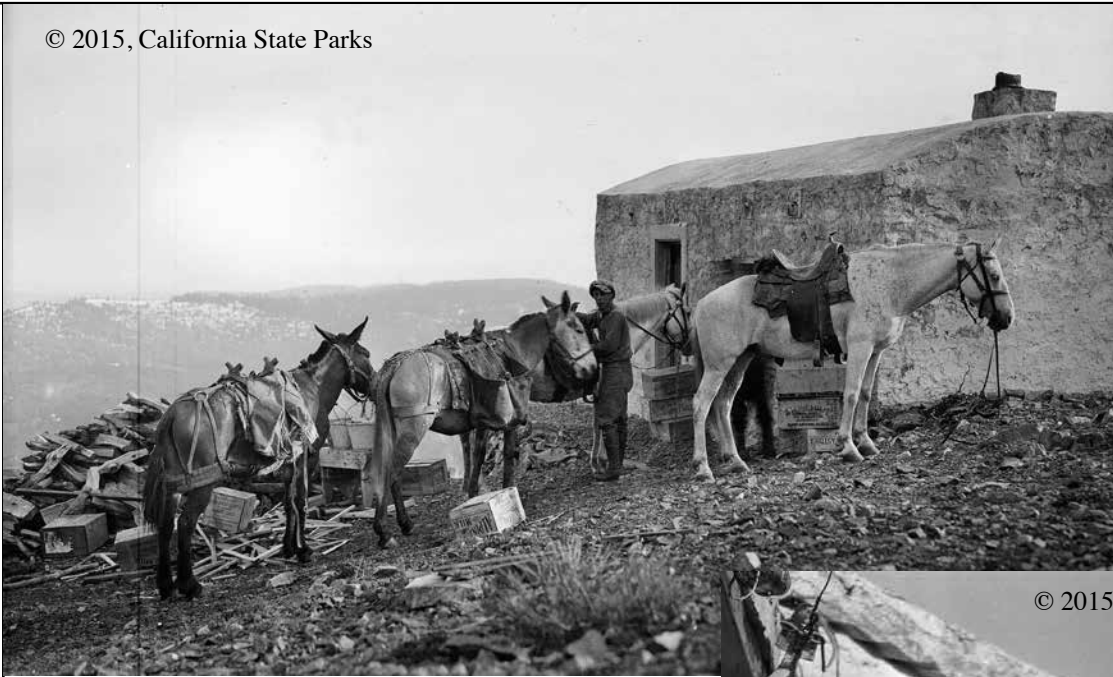
© 2015, California State Parks

Maybe no better place for contemplation.



The observation windows with tools for plotting direction to smoke. In the right hand picture you can look out the window and see the snaking black line. That is the railroad line.





Above: supplies being delivered.

Right: boy has a cage with chipmunks inside. Through the magic of technology there's an enlarged version below. Note the binoculars in the window behind the boy. Then look for binoculars in the following photographs. The boy's belt buckle says, "Stanford."





Above: visitors.

Right: Woman with butterfly net and jar. Is it full of butterflies?



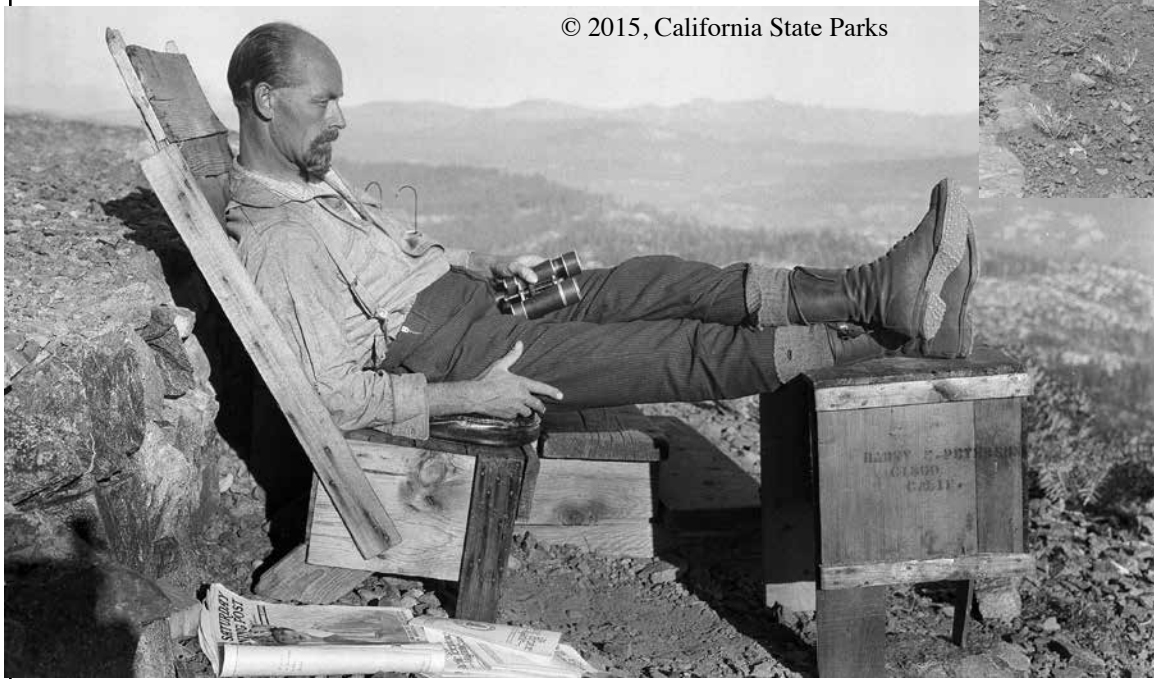
Left: reading materials
Saturday Evening Post
"The Battle Creek Sanitarium and Hospital Training School for Nurses"
and the Pacific Telephone Magazine



Above: visitors

Below: relaxing, perhaps from bringing up water, right. There are no water supplies on Red Mountain. Apparently at least some of it arrived in the form of snow.

The box under Harry's feet is labeled, "Harry C. Peterson Cisco Calif." It probably arrived by train at Cisco and then via donkey at Red Mountain. There's no bill of lading evident so we'll just have to guess about the contents.



Central Pacific Snow-Sheds

On the topmost height of Red mountain a light prominence, that looks no larger than a bushel basket, can be seen, which is a telephone station established by the Central Pacific Railroad company. This is a house occupied by two watchmen, who are on the lookout for fires in the snowsheds. They can take in the whole line of snowsheds with their natural sight and by the aid of glasses. If they observe a fire in or near the sheds on any part of the line, they immediately notify the station at Cisco by their telephone line, and forthwith the information is sent by telegraph to the station at Sacramento, and in a minute or two the order is sent up the line to Blue Canyon and the Summit, where the fire trains are constantly on duty, to precede to the point where the fire is prevailing. The fire train consists of a locomotive, with two tank cars filled with water, which is thrown with hose by a steam force pump. When the fire trains are sent out they have the road, all other trains near the point of danger being stopped. The services of these fire trains are frequently called upon, but they are so prompt in action that they generally subdue the fires before much damage is done. The system is as near perfection as it can well be made, so that any great destruction of the sheds is now nearly impossible.

actual graphic; all errors are the Reno Gazette's

(Reno (Nev.) Gazette March, 1888)

To read a lot more about Red Mountain, including how to hike to it, see our July, '10, August, '10, and March, '17 [Heirlooms](#)
The article above comes directly from the newspaper as a picture rather than text. So the erratum is theirs.

Basic Harry C. Peterson biography

Born, 1876
 Schooling in Palo Alto, CA
 Married 1902,
 Son born in 1906 (who lived to be 108 years old)
 1899-1917 Director/Curator Stanford University
 Museum of Fine Arts

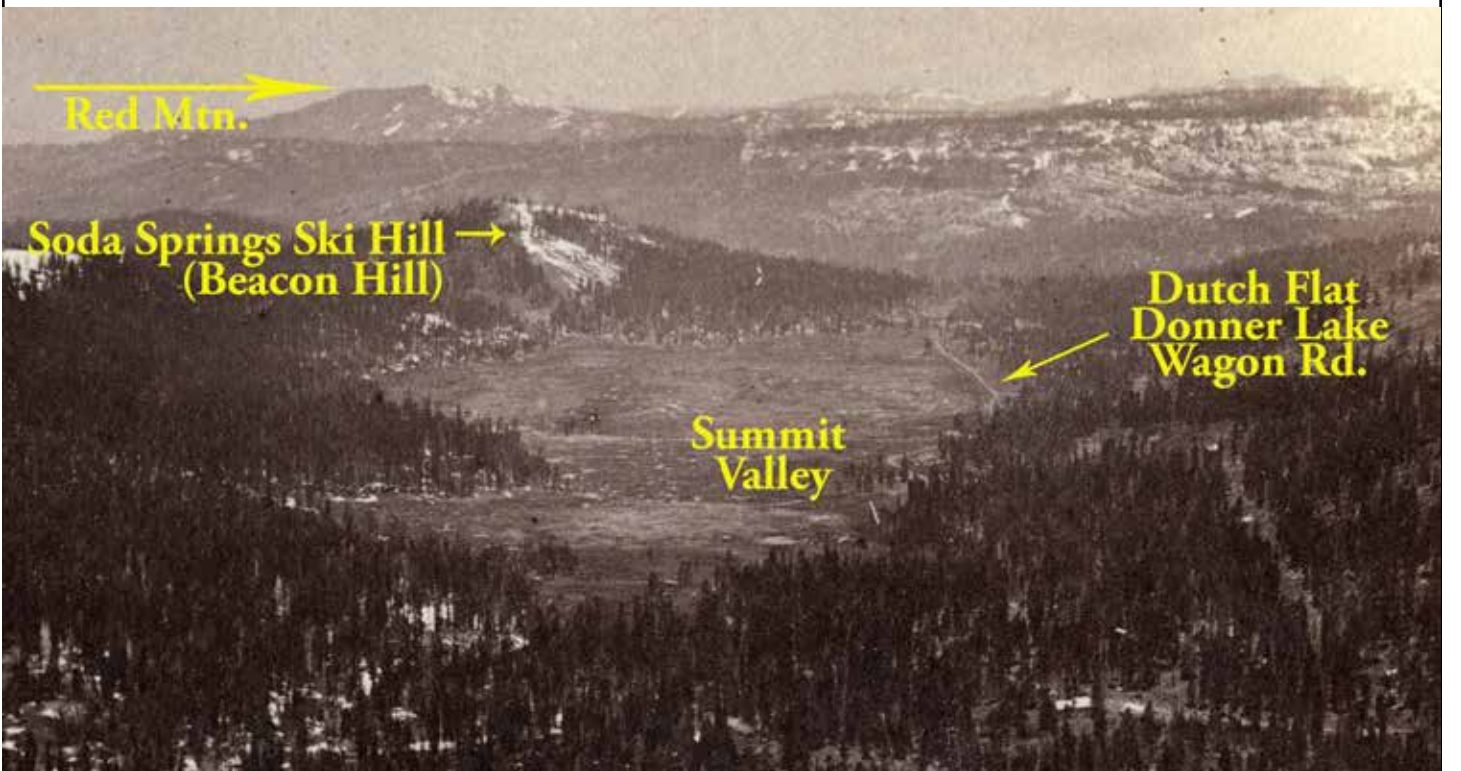
After the earthquake of 1906 his focus became
 preservation of California history
 1918 U.S. Army Wireless Service
 1919 Fire lookout on Red Mountain
 1920-1925 Head of field research for the California
 History Dept. of the California State Library
 Traveled the Mother Lode photographing old
 mining towns
 Did copy work to preserve images and historical
 materials
 1926-1941 first Curator of Sutter's Fort which was the
 beginnings of the State Park system.
 Died in his office, 1941

In Harry's Free Time:

First president of the Palo Alto Historical Association
 Extra in the movie "The Pony Express" (1925)
 Palo Alto city council for eight years (1913-1921)
Oakland Tribune feature writer of history for three years
 Wrote hundreds of stories about California history, gave
 speeches, took historic photographs
 Historical consultant for Hollywood films
 such as "The Pony Express," "The Big Trail,"
 "the Fighting Caravan," and "Sutter's Gold."
 Southern Pacific committee to identify historical sites
 along the railroad's route.
 Board of Directors of Sacramento Golden Empire
 Centennial (1939) during which he compiled a
 large collection of photographs
 Left a legacy of 7,000 negatives of historic California
 Wrote "The Romance of California" and The 49'ers, reviewed in
 this [Heirloom](#) (see page 14)



Above, the view today from the summit of Red Mountain looking at the remains of the railroad's snowshed fire lookout. The picture below is a panorama from the 19th Century showing Harry C. Peterson's view from the lookout. Bottom is Alfred A. Hart's #191 taken from the flank of Mt. Judah looking west at Red Mountain in the distance.



We don't know what happened here. Was there a freak snow-storm or was this the state of things after the winter's absence of people manning the lookout?



Biography

Harry Claude Peterson never met a historical fact or artifact that he didn't like. The inveterate historian spent his entire adult life in one position after another related to history, particularly California Gold Rush Days.

Harry was born in Algona, Iowa, in 1876, son of Julius E. Peterson, a Norwegian mechanic. Leland Stanford had learned of the elder Peterson in Europe and brought him to Stanford University to teach Machine Shop Practices. Young Harry was educated in public schools in Algona and Palo Alto, California. He was in the photographic business in Palo Alto for a time. He was married in 1902 and had one son, Austin Peterson.

Harry was named Director and Curator of the Stanford University Museum of Fine Arts (now the Cantor Center) in 1899, where he remained until 1918, adding collections to the Museum and writing historical papers. He also acquired his own collection of historical books and documents while serving as Curator. During his residence in Palo Alto, he served on the city council for eight years.

Harry's next endeavor was as head of Field Research for the California History Department of the California State Library. He remained in that position for three years, and then joined the Oakland Tribune as feature writer of California history for the paper, for another three years. In 1925, he was named Curator of Sutter's Fort Museum in Sacramento, California, and became a charter member of the American Association of Museums.

Harry Peterson's credits are many, from over three hundred published stories and speeches and countless photographs concerning California History, many for professional and trade publications and meetings. He was responsible for energizing the public to the historical value of Sutter's Fort. He served on the Southern Pacific Railroad Company's selection committee to identify historical sites along its lines. He also acted as historical consultant on several Hollywood films of the Gold Rush days, such as *The Pony Express*, *The Big Trail*, *the Fighting Caravan*, and *Sutter's Gold*. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the Sacramento Golden Empire Centennial in 1939.

His energy, exemplified by his many activities, appeared to be unstoppable, but Harry Peterson died suddenly of a heart attack, in his office at Sutter's Fort, in 1941. His series of articles on the Gold Rush for the Oakland Tribune were collected in book form, *The 49er*, published posthumously by the Doubleday Company in 1949.

Above from his papers catalog at Stanford: http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/ft7h4nb213/entire_text/



From the DSHS Archives

First Telephone in California

From "Railroading in California in the Seventies"

Clarence M. Wooster

California Historical Society Quarterly vol 18 no 4 Dec 1939

Up high on Red Mountain was an "observatory" where two men lived and watched the miles of snowsheds laid out below them. From that point they could see almost all of the snowsheds that covered the track for miles on either side of Donner Summit.

The need was acute since the original sheds were built of wood and stood baking in the sun all summer long. The locomotives did not just emit smoke and steam. Sparks were also a byproduct of train travel and sparks landing on the tinder dry wood would quickly start conflagrations. In addition, the snowsheds acted like chimneys when fires did get started.

If smoke was detected the observers on Red Mountain would telegraph to Cisco and then Cisco would dispatch the fire trains. The locomotives on those trains were always kept ready with full heads of steam so they could speed to the fires. Snowsheds were also built so they could telescope.. One part of the shed could slide over another creating openings to block the chimney effect in Summer.

Even so, fires were a constant threat and miles of sheds could be lost at one time. The fires could be so intense that "Under fire, the rails would twist and curl, resembling snakes."

Now to the real story. J.M. Graham, superintendent of track, "brought to Cisco an instrument which he called a telephone." It replaced the telegraph from Red Mountain. The new gadget was installed at Campbell's Store and residents of Cisco "were thrilled by hearing each other's voices over a telephone, and ran to and from the store in great excitement. That seems to have been the first telephone put into commercial service in the State of California."

*the fire trains were built with low centers of gravity so they could speed around the curves of Summit tracks. They could "make fifty-seven miles an hour in the snowsheds where the track was graded for a speed of about eighteen miles an hour."

The article from which the above was written is in JSTOR, an online database of scholarly articles.

JACOB HOEHN,

Dealer in

ICE, COAL AND MINERAL WATER,

OFFICE, 149 I STREET,

Between Fifth and Sixth streets, Sacramento

—•••••
AGENT FOR

SUMMIT ICE COMPANY,

Summit Mineral Water, and

ROCKY MOUNTAIN COAL COMPANY.

The Summit Ice Co. harvested ice from Ice Lakes (today Serene Lakes) for a couple of years before fighting the annual snowfall sent them down to Truckee where it was colder and there was less snow.

See the March, '21 [Heirloom](#)

From the DSHS Archives



Here is a gorgeous photograph of a steam locomotive in the Norden roundhouse. The roundhouse (the building in the picture below with the cupola) stored helper locomotives that were attached to the trains to help them over the summit from both the California and Nevada sides.

To orient you in the picture to the right, the snowshed in the center of the picture, coming to the viewer, connects to the entrance of Tunnel 6. Highway 40 will eventually be built on the hillside above the roundhouse. The white building is the first Summit Hotel. That site is the large parking area with cement block buildings opposite Donner Ski Ranch today.



Book Review

The 49'ers

Evelyn Wells and Harry C. Peterson

1949 273 pages

One of Harry Peterson's short part-time careers was as a columnist for the Oakland Tribune. For a few years he filled the columns with the stories he heard traveling the Mother Lode towns of California.

The 49'ers is a collection of sixteen stories that was extracted from the Oakland Tribune archives and reshaped into a narrative of the Gold Rush in California by Evelyn Wells, a few years after Harry Peterson had died. It includes a myriad of anecdotes.

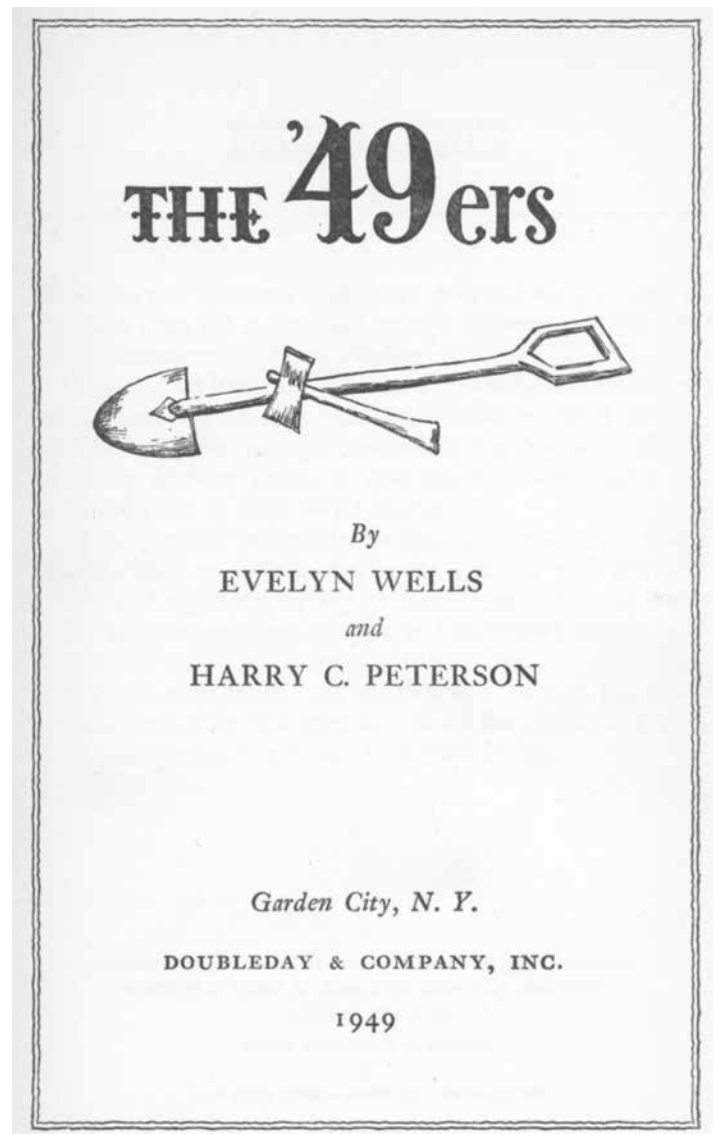
The men who came west and the year 1849 is the first story and puts the Gold Rush, for individuals, in perspective. The 1840's had been a lackluster decade. Americans were adventurous but by the 1840's there was no outlet for that spirit – until the Gold Rush. That changed everything, "And every lad among them with the price of a ticket and the courage to face the unknown could sit in on this millionaire's game."

This is a fun book, full of stories of the Gold Rush and the people prospecting and serving the prospectors. Each chapter starts with parts of contemporary songs (for example on the next page) and there are interesting facts. In 1841, years before the population boom in California, there were 150 "foreigners." 100 were Americans. Imagine. In 1844 Mexico knew there was gold in California, but apparently the world was not ready and no one did anything with the knowledge. Cleaning house for miners meant moving the tent to get a clean floor.

Stories cover how people got to California and what they needed to take. The bellows was the simplest of all gold hunting devices that were needed. "Just point it at the ground and blow – all the dirt blows away and leaves acres of clean gold." No wonder everyone was aiming for California and we can note here that people in the past were just like us. Confidence men were trying to take advantage through scams and were successful because of regular folks' gullibility. As a result, "Forty Niners remembered with bitterness the cruel disappointments and treacheries of the opening months of the great gold stampede."

All the stories contain a myriad of details and evocative descriptions. At the Isthmus of Panama crowds waited for ships for the final leg to California. "Every ship going south brought word of continued big strikes in California. The first northering ships found them [gold seekers] aboard, as feverishly anxious as they had been to leave the East."

"Through sickness, boredom, and storm the young men clung to their dreams. Those who took the long way, around Cape Horn, found the ship a savage enemy, determined to spew them into Antarctic water where it ran with bare sails and wheels lashed at the mercy of the sea. And yet, in calmer



Gold Rush Hotels

"There are not real hotels yet, just boarding houses, attached to each other. There is a large apartment littered over with flea-filled hay. For one dollar you could spread your blankets in the straw and enjoy a night's sleep, if you do not mind countless insects, dozens of drunken, snoring men around you, not to mention those who fell over you."

"Sometimes they merely planted their heavy boot in the pit of your stomach, or hit their toe against your nose, nor was it at all unusual to wake up in the morning to find your blankets profusely decorated with a choice assortment of designs from various tobacco chewers."

seas, how slow the ship – and how wild the plunging pistons hum in young veins.

"Oh, hurry, hurry, before all the gold was gone!"

Since we are Donner Summit we should focus on the wagon trains. By May of '49 "twenty thousand men, many with families, were encamped along the Missouri River with ox teams, horses, pack mules and wagons, and food and supplies to last a year. Tents mushroomed the land, fields and woods were vast encampments, whole canvas towns sprang up along this 'far Western' frontier, and the road westward as far as the eye could see, were ribboned darkly with wagon trains and men..."

"There was bustle and hammering and the shrilling voices. There was a fevered fitting of goods into wagons, breaking in of teams, burnishing of firearms, whetting of knives, grating of axes on grindstones turned by hand. A vast baking of bread, and the smell of broiling meats, to be eaten cold on the trail, and hung over the fresh Missouri land." Imagine what that must have been like.

The book is a compilation of stories put into a logical narrative. There are stories of hardship, success, failure, pathos, joy, accident, and Indians. There is the man and wife caught by early snow. He put her on a horse and set out in the storm for town. The horse fell. The man carried the wife until he could go no more. "A rescue party found the two lying in each other's arms waiting death in the snow." They survived. Other anecdotes tell about the founding of Auburn and other towns, Joaquin Murietta, hangings, salting claims with gold,

drunken activity, gambling, having to move cemeteries, the lucky and the luckless, large nugget finds, gamblers, and naïve greenhorns and how they got separated from their money.

One jokester salted his pan with a nugget as he showed others how to pan. The spectators saw the nugget and stampeded off to file claims. The jokester began to empty the pan and saw gold, a lot of gold

at the bottom. It was indeed a rich spot "but there was not an inch of land left" to claim by the time he got to town.

I'll be in San Francisco soon
And then I'll look around,
And when I see the gold lumps there
I'll pick them off the ground,
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys,
I'll drain the river dry,
A pocket full of rocks bring home,
So Brother, don't you cry.

"Many a Forty Niner said the hardships of crossing by plain or sea were as nothing to those endured after reaching the promised land."

"Men died in lonely ways and places, in gulches and ravines and forest, crying out names that went unheard."

"They died of exposure, fever, drowning, cave-ins, drunken brawls, hot lead, and hempen rope."

From the DSHS Archives

RAINBOW Looking Down Hill
HAD A POMA LIFT AT THIS TIME
1963 ?

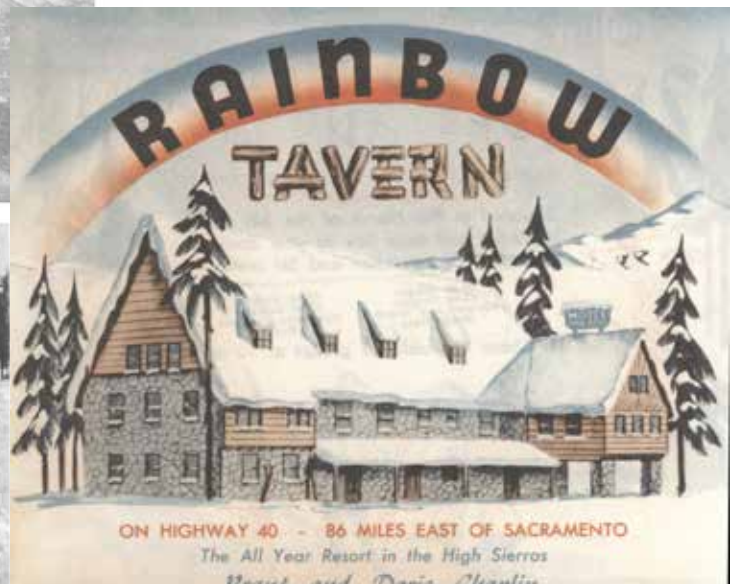


Once upon a time, long ago, before the I-80 freeway, there were small ski areas all along Highway 40 (Donner Pass Rd. today). They consisted of a rope tow or two, a "J" bar or a poma lift, and a lodge.

Eventually large ski areas became the attraction at higher elevations and I-80 sped travelers to them. The small communities along Highway 40 mostly disappeared.

There was another change, though. The rain/snow line has risen since those days leaving those lower areas with more rain and less, or no, snow.

Rainbow Tavern (Today it's Rainbow Lodge) was one of those ski areas. Look closely on the right side of the bottom picture and you can see the poma lift towing some skiers. Not only did one have to hold tight all that way up hill but one had to navigate unroomed slopes back down.



Top: Looking down on the back of Rainbow Lodge and Highway 40. View is from the top of the poma lift that was behind the lodge about 1963. There is no evidence of I-80 in the background yet.

Center: Rainbow Tavern ad about 1960

Bottom: Looking up from the bottom of the poma lift at Rainbow Tavern. ca. 1963

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



The above is a photograph of Native American petroglyphs by Art Clark, a member of the DSHS Mobile Historical Research Team. He took the picture at the Eagle Lakes exit from I-80.

The petroglyphs were incised by members of Martis Culture between 2,000 B.C.E. and 500 A.D. when the Martis disappeared from Donner Summit. Martis petroglyphs are all abstract with no representations of humans or animals, with the exception of their ubiquitous bear paws. Despite their ubiquity there are none above.

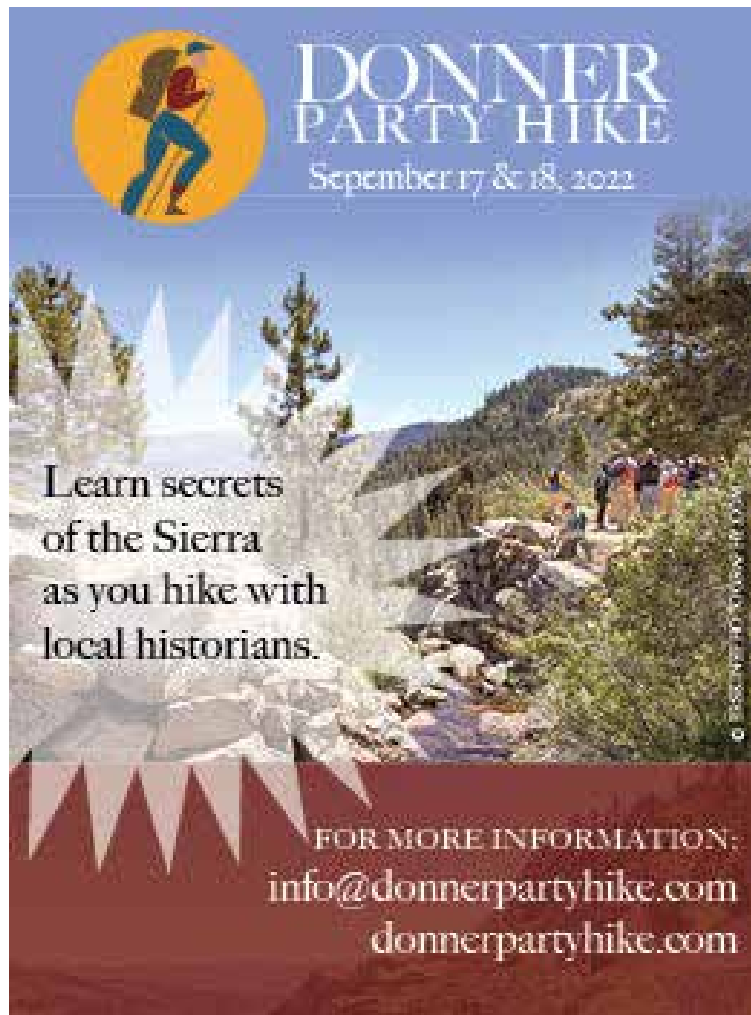
No one knows the meaning of Martis petroglyphs. They could be shamanistic (magical/religious), totemic (family or clan related), prayers for the future, stories of the past, or even maps. Whatever their meaning, they must have been important because they only appear on horizontal granite surfaces within views of mountain peaks. Granite is one of the hardest rocks on the planet, making the petroglyphs difficult to make.

There are dozens of petroglyph sites on Donner Summit.

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.



The Donner Party Hike event is back on in 2022 following last year's forest closures and the previous year's COVID. Choose from a number of historically themed hikes, then had back for music, a history talk and lunch.