

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

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

November, 2022 issue #171



## Before Hetch Hetchy

Before we get to the "before Hetch Hetchy" part we have to have a little background.

Serene Lakes, formerly Ice Lakes sit on Donner Summit (see the maps that follow). Today the lakes are an idyllic little community nestled in a glacier carved depression. The community is set around two little lakes, which are Sierra jewels.

The community has a fascinating history and has dodged major change over and over. Today there are more houses but it is still a quiet little friendly community hidden away behind the hills. If you don't mind a little snow (35 to 40 feet of snowfall in average) it's a great place.

After crossing Donner Pass and Summit Valley wagon trains headed right through Serene or Ice Lakes. Those were the first modern visitors but Native Americans occupied the place in summers. It was with the coming of the transcontinental railroad that history began at Sereno Lakes, as the early maps called the area.

The railroad received every other section of land along the transcontinental route and land agents must have explored their acquisitions. B.B. Redding was a land agent and friend of Mark Hopkins. He would go on to be an assemblyman, mayor of Sacramento, California Secretary of State, and fisheries commissioner among other things.

Mark Hopkins bought land a few miles south of Sereno Lakes for an estate to which he later added a hotel so his socialite wife could invite friends. That story is coming in a future Heirloom. B.B. Redding

was an avid fisherman who once claimed to have pulled 200 fish in one day out of the American River near Mark Hopkins' estate.

On his way fishing or exploring for the Central Pacific B.B. passed Sereno Lakes. He must have told his 20 year old brother, Fitz William Redding Jr., because he bought 160 acres of what is Serene Lakes from the to government. He paid, or would have paid, \$2.50 an acre.

Imagine the dreams he had. He was young and adventurous and he was living in an age of wonder.

The transcontinental railroad was being built just over the hill from his front door. It would average 20 miles an hour or so, hour after hour. What incredible speed.

Steamboats plied rivers and lakes. Clipper ships made incredibly fast transatlantic runs. Factories were being built. Wilderness was being conquered. Cities were springing up. A letter could go from St. Jo to Sacramento in 12 days via Pony Express. The soon to be completed

transcontinental telegraph line would provide instant communication. The U.S. seemed unstoppable. It had doubled in size and then doubled again. There was opportunity for all. What an exciting time!

"About a mile and a half from Summit Valley there are two beautiful little lakes, with some ice houses broken down by last year's snow, and abandoned by the company who have moved to Prosser Creek ..."

Truckee Republican August 26, 1872

"The drive to these [soda] springs is one of the most picturesque and enjoyable in the Sierra. Passing by fine dark cliffs ... the road leads to Anderson Valley [Serene Lakes] – a green meadow embosoming three little lakes, which are perfectly idyllic in their quiet beauty... "

Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine  
February, 1874

# Story Locations in this Issue

Serene or Ice Lakes

## 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 Saylert. 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 

Fitz William Jr. built a small twelve by twelve cabin and cleared a little land that first Fall of 1866. He even stocked the lakes with the first fish. He must have been amazed by the snowfall and sometime in the winter he headed for Sacramento where his parents lived.

He returned to Serene Lakes in the spring. Could he find his cabin? He got sick, returned to Sacramento and died. His father completed the land purchase from the Federal Government.

#### Ice lakes

In the old days it was hard to keep your drinks cold in California unless you paid high prices for Alaskan ice. With the coming of the railroad Sierra ice could be used and the Alaskan ice monopoly broken. Right at the top of the Sierra where common sense would say it would be a great place to harvest ice, sat the three little Sereno lakes: Serena, Dulzura, and Sybil. The Summit Ice Co. was formed in 1868 under B.B. Redding and partners on Fitz William Jr.'s land. Ice houses were built and ice harvesting begun. This was just as trains were reaching the Summit.

Unfortunately it's not only cold at the Summit but it snows – a lot – sometimes as much as 60 or 70 feet in a season. Snowfall is bad for ice harvesting. The ice company moved to Prosser where it's colder and less snowy after only two years. To ready more about the history of Ice Lakes see the March and April, '21 [Heirlooms](#).

Decades went by and almost the only activity in Serene Lakes was the stage taking travelers from Soda Springs Station to the Soda Springs where the Mark Hopkins estate and his hotel were. The hotel burned and there was not much traffic after that.

#### Development Ideas

Some dreams come to fruition and some don't. Serene Lakes has dodged the bullet many times over the decades. Fitz William's dreams didn't work and neither did the ice company's.

Before there was Hetch Hetchy the City of San Francisco knew it needed a predictable and adequate water source. In 1901 the Giant Gap Water Co. proposed to transport American River water to San Francisco. One of their reservoirs was to be Serene Lakes. There they planned on a one hundred foot granite block dam. Lucky for Serene Lakes Hetch Hetchy was seen as a better bet much to John Muir's displeasure.

A lodge and cabins were built in the 1940's. A dam dammed the creek and three lakes became two.

The Sierra Lakes Club arrived in the 1958 with big plans for a family style camping experience. The club advertised access



GIANT'S GAP, AMERICAN RIVER CANON.

BY THOMAS MORAN.

Giant Gap by Thomas Moran in [The Pacific Tourist](#)

to the "vanishing wilderness" and "wholesome family activity...at a nominal cost... A nice average family should be able to enjoy the magic splendor of our Sierras [sic] without the tinsel ... now so prevalent." The club planned on rope tows, stores, gas station, stables, club house, golf course, store, ice rink, pool, small rentable chalets, and camping areas for tent cabins and trailers.

Lack of membership sealed the club's fate and Serene Lakes was subdivided under a succession of developers so that today there are eight different subdivisions with over 800 cabins.

There were other ideas too: a small airport, an Army Navy club, a golf course, something called "Olympic Village", and a really large development, but none of that is the story for today. That's on the next page.

# San Francisco Needed Water

When the growing San Francisco finally realized that it needed a predictable and adequate supply of water it began casting about for sources. Hetch Hetchy of course became the source for irrigation, power, and the city's water supply. There were other ideas to solve San Francisco's need for water though too. One was Von Schmidt's idea to take Lake Tahoe water through a tunnel to the North Fork American River drainage and thence to San Francisco via canals and tunnels (see the February, '21 [Heirloom](#)). The Feather River was considered as was the Yuba.

In 1901 a small water company on the North Fork of the American River, The Giant Gap Water Company, proposed the Giant Gap Project. It was intended to take North Fork American River drainage water, store it in reservoirs and transport it to San Francisco for domestic and irrigation uses. The North Fork of the American River is what drains the south side of the Donner Summit area, behind Sugar Bowl and the drainages of Serene Lakes and Palisades lakes for example. On the map on the next page that would be on the right hand side of the map between the Serene or Ice Lakes circle and the Soda Springs Valley circle.

The project called for Ice Lakes, Palisade Lake, Lake Valley, 6 Mile Valley, and 2 Mile Valley to serve as reservoir sites (see the map on the next page). It was predicted the flow would be 835 cu ft/second or 540 million gallons a day with about half going to domestic water supply and half to irrigation. The collection area would be 212 square miles. An expanded proposal enlarged the project to include Yuba River and Bowman Lake water (north of I-80), and would have put 25-30,000 million gallons in storage and covered 800 square miles of drainage collection. The project would have taken water through 174 miles of flume, tunnels, and pipelines which is close to what the present Hetch Hetchy system does.

The proponents were focused on the Northern Sierra rivers because their runoff was greater than further south. Unfortunately for the proponents there were various problems among which was that the American River's water rights were (and still are) over-subscribed especially in dry years. There was no way the plan authors could obtain enough water rights for their project. That was the case with other Northern Sierra schemes.

At Serene Lakes the plan called for a one-hundred-foot high granite block dam on Serena Creek. You can see from the chart on the next page, that they expected to capture a lot of water in the Ice Lakes basin alone.

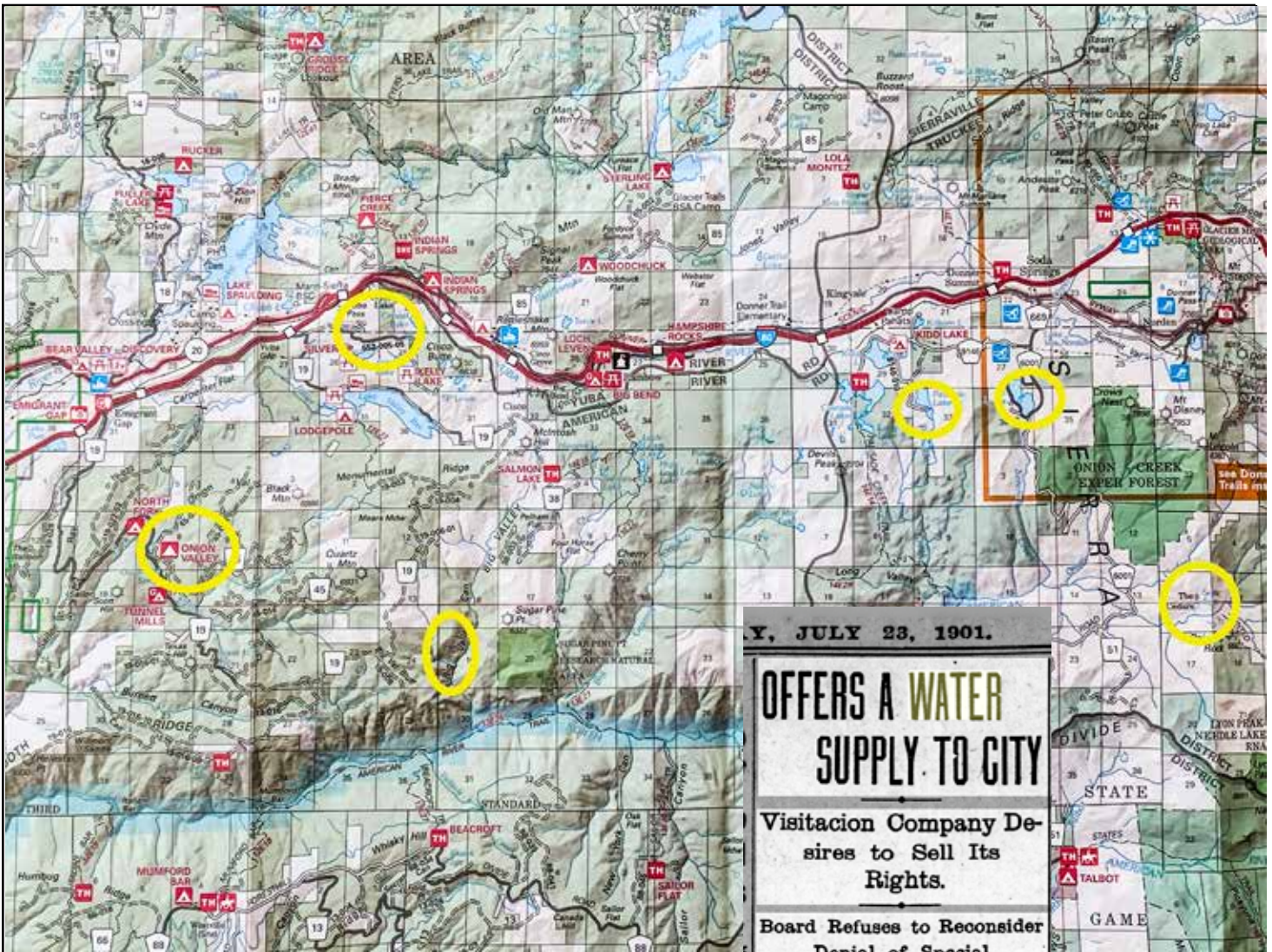
San Francisco's quest went south and Hetch Hetchy was approved flooding a valley much like the Yosemite Valley. One can only imagine that John Muir would have been pleased to see the project be north of Yosemite. About Hetch Hetchy he warned,

“As in Yosemite, the sublime rocks of its walls seem to glow with life, whether leaning back in repose or standing erect in thoughtful attitudes, giving welcome to storms and calms alike, their brows in the sky, their feet set in the groves and gay flowery meadows, while birds, bees, and butterflies help the river and waterfalls to stir all the air into music—things frail and fleeting and types of permanence meeting here and blending, just as they do in Yosemite, to draw her lovers into close and confiding communion with her.

Sad to say, this most precious and sublime feature of the Yosemite National Park, one of the greatest of all our natural resources for the uplifting joy and peace and health of the people, is in danger of being dammed and made into a reservoir to help supply San Francisco with water and light, thus flooding it from wall to wall and burying its gardens and groves one or two hundred feet deep.”

Giant Gap, which gave its name to the water company and to the project, is a magnificent area memorialized in paintings and photography and now a popular white water rafting destination not far from Serene Lakes. You can see on page 3 a print made from a painting by Thomas Moran, famous American painter, and a photograph by Alfred Hart, famous American landscape photographer.

There are directions to a beautiful view spot looking out on Giant Gap on page 6



Y, JULY 23, 1901.

**OFFERS A WATER SUPPLY TO CITY**

Visitation Company Desires to Sell Its Rights.

Board Refuses to Reconsider Denial of Special Privilege.

The Board of Supervisors received a communication yesterday from the Visitation Water Company submitting an offer to sell to the city its Bay View property and the water rights of the Giant Gap Supply Company for the sum of \$2,600,000. The inventory of the properties owned by the company accompanies the communication and includes the following: +

Pumping works building and wells at the corner of Twenty-fourth avenue and K street; the water rights of the Giant Gap Water Company to the water of the north fork of the American River at Euchre Bar, in Placer County; the right of way of a canal line from Euchre Bar to a point above Auburn; 25,000 acres of watershed lands, including the site of the Lake Valley or Towle reservoir, near Emigrant Gap, having a storage capacity of 2,000,000,000 gallons; the ditch and canal line known as the Cedar Creek or Towle Ditch, about sixteen miles in length, besides other property specifically enumerated.

The offer was referred to the Public Utilities Committee.

Braunhart introduced a resolution requesting the City Attorney to inform the board as to its powers in the event of a resolution recites that the provision of the charter that eight hours shall be the maximum hours of labor on any calendar day and the minimum wages of laborers employed shall be \$2 per day for any contract with the city is being violated by Gray Bros., who have obtained the municipal contract for street sweeping. The resolution was referred to the Judiciary Committee.

The resolution directing the Board of Works to cause immediately the removal of the railroad tracks from Tehama street, between Third and Fourth, was referred to the Judiciary Committee. The resolution recites that the Omnibus Railroad Company was granted a franchise for fifty years and the Market-street Railway Company, the successors in interest, has abandoned the tracks, which are a source of annoyance to pedestrians.

Wilson objected to postponing action on reconsideration of an ordinance granting Maria Sjobom a special permit to add a superstructure on her building at Powell and Sutter streets, and the motion to reconsider the bill was lost. A. E. McCreery filed a protest against its passage. He

Proposed reservoir sites for the City of San Francisco from left to right: Onion Valley, Six Mile Valley, Big Valley, Palisade Lake, Ice Lakes, Soda Springs Valley

**RESERVOIR SITES—GIANT GAP.**

Name.	Height of Dam, Feet.	Material of Dam.	Storage Capacity, Gallons.
1 Palisade Lake.....	70	Granite masonry	3,400,000,000
2 Ice Lakes.....	100	Granite masonry	26,000,000,000
3 Lake Valley.....	75	Earth.....	3,800,000,000
4 Six Mile Valley.....	60	Earth.....	800,000,000
5 Two Mile Valley.....	65	Earth.....	2,000,000,000
6 *Onion Valley.....			Estimated over 500,000,000
7 *Soda Springs Valley.....			Estimated over 1,000,000,000
8 *Big Valley.....			Estimated over 1,000,000,000
9 *Small Lakes.....			Estimated over 500,000,000
Total.....			39,000,000,000

\*Not surveyed.

Reservoir capacities of the proposed Giant Gap system to supply water to the City of San Francisco from Reports on the Water Supply 1900-1908

Offer to sell properties and Giant Gap water rights to the City of San Francisco

San Francisco Call June 23, 1901



Stereo view by Carleton Watkins #77 Green Valley and Giant Gap

## Going to Giant Gap for a View

Exit I-80 at Alta. Turn right and make an immediate left onto Casa Loma Road that parallels the eastbound lanes of I-80

Turn right and continue down Casa Loma Road just before railroad overcrossing.

Cross railroad tracks, and proceed through beautiful forest of Ponderosa Pine, Incense Cedar, Douglas Fir, Black Oak, Big Leaf Maple and Dogwoods.

Take short walk across the railroad tracks.  
Downstream to the right (west) we can see Giant's Gap

Richard P. Hilton  
Dept. of Geosciences, Sierra College

The resolution requesting the Board of Works to report upon the availability of the north fork of the American River as a source of water supply, with special reference to Ice Lakes, Palisade Lake, Lake Valley, Six-mile Valley and Two Mile Valley, as storage reservoir sites, was referred to the Public Utilities Committee. The resolution was presented by the committee in lieu of another directing the Board of Works to prepare plans and estimates of original cost of the system, which is better known as the Giant Gap supply, and offered to the city by R. L. Dunn and W. Alherger.

Truckee Republican  
March 11, 1902

# REPORTS ON THE WATER SUPPLY OF SAN FRANCISCO CALIFORNIA

1900 TO 1908. INCLUSIVE

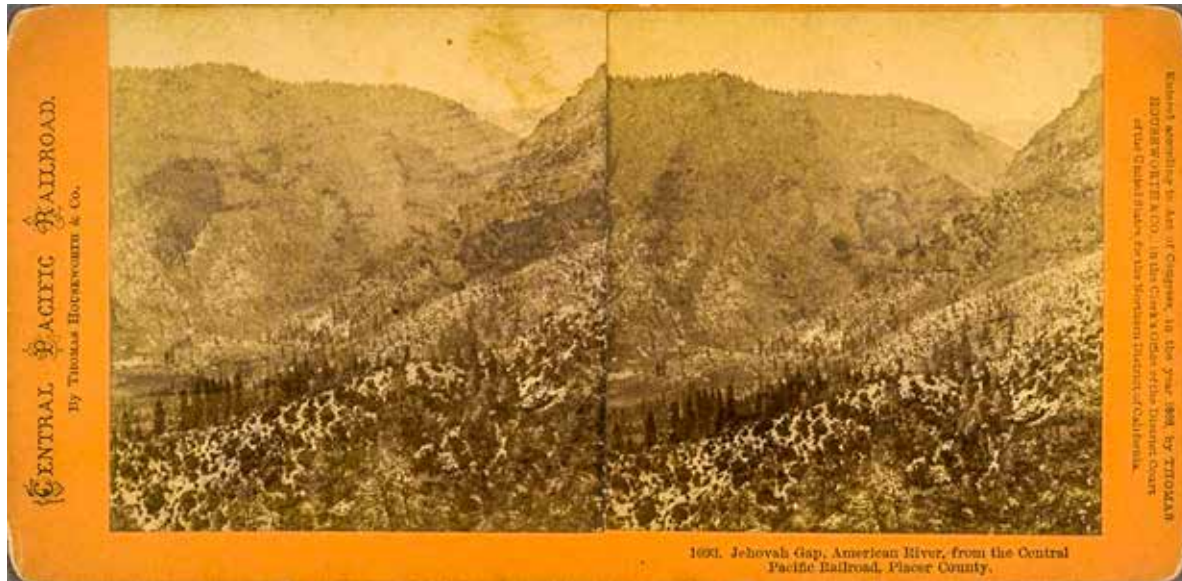
PUBLISHED BY

**Authority of the Board of Supervisors**

C. E. GRUNSKY, City Engineer, 1900-1903  
MARSDEN MANSON, C. E., City Engineer, 1908

1908





Houseworth Jehovah (Giant) Gap 1093 CPRR

## Why the Hetch Hetchy Was Chosen

The North Fork of the American has been proposed by the Giant Gap Water Company. The company found a storage reservoir at Ice Lakes with a capacity of twenty-six billion gallons, but Mr. Grunsky looked into the subject and found that the watershed above would give less than eight per cent of this amount of water to fill the reservoir. All three forks of the American are lacking in large storage sites which are absolutely necessary, as the summer flow is all taken up by power companies. It may be of interest to note that the ultimate combined capacity of Hetch Hetchy and Lake Eleanor is over one hundred billion gallons, ten times larger than any other reservoirs constructed or proposed on any stream in the Sierra except that at Donnel's Flat on the Stanislaus. The Tuolumne reservoirs are three times as large as that reservoir and approach in size the new Ashokan reservoir of the New York supply now building.

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At Hetch Hetchy there is no great power plant to be condemned and bought, as there is on every one of the other large rivers, with a consequent disturbance of other economic relations. There is now, and will be as long as the rains fall, far more water in the Tuolumne River than the city wants and the irrigation districts can use. Year after year the devastating floods ruin the lands of the San Joaquin Valley, and to these floods the Tuolumne adds its quota. We wish to store a small fraction of this water, about 12% in an average year, about 25% in the driest year, for the city's use when it shall have grown to a population of a million and a half. Hold-over storage would reduce the dry year demand to 15%. The so-called conflict with the irrigation districts has been adjusted and in reality never existed.

There was always far more water each year than needed, and it does not lie within the physical or financial power of men to store all the water of that river so can be made to show a uniform amount of 2350 second feet per day, which is the claim of the irrigation districts. All the storage sites possible on the entire watershed would not approach such a development, and no irrigated lands, were they ten times as valuable as those at Modesto, could stand the cost. Thus it is that nothing in the way of other interests conflicts with the city's use of Hetch Hetchy.

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printed in: Transactions of the Commonwealth Club of California Volume IV 1910

# Modern Skiing Comes to Donner Summit

As our research department comes across interesting materials they've started just placing them in future [Heirloom](#) folders. That provides the [Heirloom](#) editors with interesting surprises as they go to start putting together an [Heirloom](#) issue. Here is an example, or are examples. Below we have an article retrieved from the February 1931 [Sierra Club Bulletin](#). It's a first person account of the coming of modern skiing technique to Donner Summit. The pictures come from the archives of the DSHS and illustrate what the author is talking about; they were not part of the Sierra Club article.

Here we have an article from the [Sierra Club Bulletin](#)'s February, 1931 issue. The author describes skiing on the summit in the 1920's and the coming of modern skiing equipment. To read a bit more about the coming of modern skiing, see "State of Skiing, 1939" in the October, '09 [Heirloom](#). You might also want to look at "The Remarkable Dennis Jones" in the February, '09 [Heirloom](#) which also touches on the coming of modern skiing. Even with the new equipment skiing in the 1920's was clearly an adventurous activity requiring a bit more than just a desire for recreation. The author's last paragraph is prescient though. We add a few pictures to illustrate the difference between what the people on Donner Summit were using as skis and what Otto Barkan, the author of the article, brought.

## SKIING IN CALIFORNIA [Sierra Club Bulletin](#) February, 1931

By Otto Barkan

It was in the winter of 1919-20 that a small group of enthusiasts put about to find suitable skiing country in the Sierra Nevada of California. Up to that time skiing had been for the most part of the eight- or ten-foot pine wood variety, with primitive toe-straps — merely a means of locomotion for the lumbermen and railroaders of the Sierra. A few initiates may have penetrated the Tahoe region, a few boys may have performed some jumps at Truckee's snow carnival for the delectation of trainloads of metropolitan excursionists, or a very occasional knight-errant of the ski may have appeared for a snowy day; but skiing — the great and glorious sport of ski mountaineering — was practically non-existent in California.

So at least we were led to believe when two of us alighted in the snowsheds from the train at the old Summit Station one chilly morning at 5 o'clock with our Norwegian skis and sticks. A huge fellow occupied the little station-room, spat on the remaining bit of floor, and remarked, "Going to ski?" — "Yes." — "Them sticks ain't no good — you want a big pole"; for the Sierrans were wont to ski forth with a single pole, acting as brake, hobbyhorse, or balance, as the occasion demanded, much after the manner of the old Zdarsky one-stick method of the Austrians. Little did he guess that with these small skis and dainty bamboo canes it was possible to turn, swerve, or stop, at a speed of forty miles an hour and over, avoiding obstacles, shooting between and around trees, in a glorious flying descent of perfect control.

Out of deference to my companion, who was a novice, we spent the first two days in a secluded spot of the woods. On the third day, however, the writer, fresh from the Swiss Alps, climbed to the cliffs behind the railroader's settlement and "let her go," oblivious of

everything but the sinuous flight down to a whirling stop. He was greeted by loud hurrahs and shouts from the various houses and shacks half-buried in the snow; for it was Sunday and the railroaders were at home. As they afterward confessed, they had watched the "fool city guys" climbing to the cliff with some amusement, and had hoped they would break their necks. Sturdy skiers though they were over long distances and in any weather, they had never seen such turns or even imagined the possibility of their execution. That afternoon they shyly dropped in on our host, Bob Agnew, on various pretexts, incidentally casting a glance at our skis and bindings. Later we heard a sound as of hammering from the neighboring cabins and before long

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Single poles enabled stopping and turning.





saw them sally forth on quite modernized skis. Our Telemark and Christiania turns were imitated by our good mountain friends, some of whom in the course of the following years became expert skiers. With them we explored the surrounding country from Castle Peak to Mount Lincoln, and to our delight one day dropped into a skier's paradise, which we named the "Sugar Bowl" — the spot Charlie Chaplin at a later date chose for the first scene of his "Gold Rush." [See the August, '11 Heirloom]

In 1921 the writer's better-half, on her first arrival in California from Sweden, was greeted at Summit by fourteen feet of snow and a boxful of orange-blossoms. On that occasion, while skiing from Mount Lincoln to Mount Anderson and Tinker Knob, my wife and I saw in the light of the setting sun the opalescent glint of Lake Tahoe. To reach Tahoe across the mountains became our dream, the realization of which had to be postponed to a future occasion. That evening we had to ski against the swiftly approaching night. We enjoyed a glorious run for a mile or two down the top of a ridge, and managed to complete the last half-mile of the descent in darkness by following the sound of a stream far below. A kindly freight- train picked us up in the snowshed and returned us to Summit.

For three winters Dr. Duncan Morison, of Edinburgh and Switzerland, was our happy companion. In these days our group called itself the California Ski Club. In 1923 Dr. Hans Lauper, the well-known alpinist, joined us for a season. He and Dr. Eloesser, the novice of 1919, with some others, climbed Mount Shasta on ski; but because of the wind-blown nature of the snow there they were glad to return to Summit later in the winter. After trying various localities — Cisco, Truckee, Tahoe — we always returned to Summit because of its pleasing location at an altitude of seven thousand feet, and its better snow conditions.

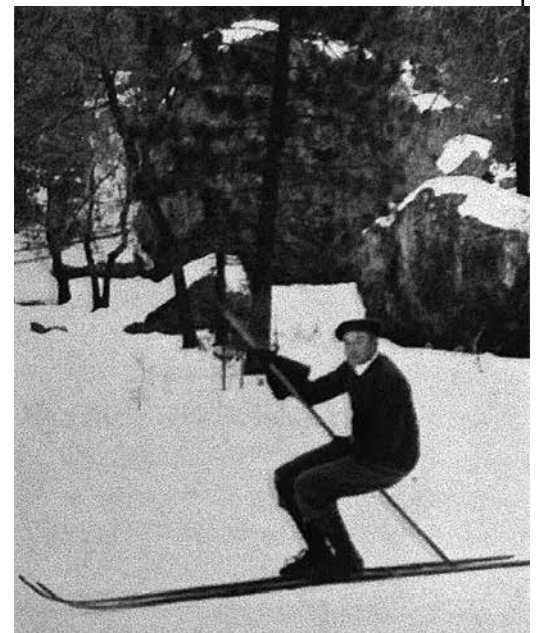
In 1923 the historic Summit Hotel burnt to the ground, and with it burnt a bit of old California. But its spirit of generous hospitality was continued by our good friends who put us up the following years. Now there is a good hotel at Soda Springs Station [Soda Springs Hotel - now condominiums], about a mile and a half west of Summit.

In 1926 the broad-gauge [railroad] made it possible for the first time to go directly to Tahoe. Yet we regretted the passing of that fine sleigh drive up the Truckee River which we had enjoyed before the advent of the winter-train service. On this occasion we had a rarely beautiful tour, skiing west from the Tavern up Ward Creek to Ward Peak, from the top of which we dropped down north to Bear Valley and so to the Truckee River. The cliffs were aflame in the setting sun as we shot down in the shadow of the peak into the blue depths beneath us. The snow on this cold northern slope was so dry and powdery, and, except for a slight hiss, our descent so noiseless, that we became aware of the swiftness of the descent only through seeing the blazing crags to our right rapidly rise and thrust upward into the sky. After what seemed an endless series of downward shoots, punctuated with sharp turns and stops, panting, we reached the shadowed floor of the valley and its gentler slopes. The flaming cliffs were now high above us. With wings on our feet we coasted in gentle curves between the trees and into the starlit night.

As this tributary of the Truckee offered such a fine descent, my



Skiers using the single pole method. Photo from Rainbow Tavern from 6/14 [Heirloom](#)



Above and Below: [Pacific Gas and Electric](#) magazine April, 1912





less sticky, and at 4 o'clock we finally looked around Tinker Knob at our next objective, the watershed between the North Fork of the American River and Squaw Creek. We traversed the south slope, where the granular spring snow permitted us to swing along at a good speed, while the Granite Chief range, radiant in the afternoon sun, kept pace to the right. Just to our left, and seemingly within our grasp, cadmium-colored cliffs pierced a deep-blue sky. We had hoped

wife and I decided to carry out our cherished dream of crossing the mountains from Summit to Tahoe at the next opportunity. In 1927, one morning before daybreak, "the little woman," as the line-men called her, Scott Smith, and the writer started from Summit for Lincoln Saddle, which we reached as the sun was rising. We had decided upon the route to be followed from previous tours in the Summit and Tahoe regions and from the Geological Survey maps of the intervening portion. Due to the small scale of the maps, we were left largely to our own resources to find the route which would entail the least loss of altitude and of time — for it was imperative to reach the floor of Squaw Valley before nightfall. The trip took fifteen hours, including one half-hour of reconnoitering and one half-hour's rest. The distance covered was between thirty and thirty-five miles.



that the descent from the watershed to Squaw Valley would prove to be a skier's reward for our previous labors. But, alas, after the first few excellent runs across wooded slopes we found the head of Squaw Valley to be broken up by a maze of boulders and cliffs. Time pressed; so good form was thrown to the winds. We slithered and skidded between the rocks any

The first two hours from Lincoln Saddle took us underneath and past the wind-swept cornices of Mount Lincoln and Mount Anderson. At this early hour of the morning there appeared to be no danger from slides. Toward noon we lost altitude by being forced to descend into a cirque on the north side of Anderson. This was bad enough in itself; but when it began to thaw we wondered whether we should ever reach our goal. Hopeless though it seemed, we began the very hot and tedious climb up to Tinker Knob through abominably sticky snow that stuck a foot deep to our ski. The advisability of giving up the trip before it got too late was discussed. However, as we gained altitude and the shadows grew longer, the snow became



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Top, skiers at the Summit. Top right: unidentified skiers. Lower right, Hannes Schroll founder of Sugar Bowl skiing on a mound of salt.

which way until our bones ached — albeit an interesting and fascinating descent — and reached the valley floor as night fell. Tired and hungry, we plowed our way for two hours along the Truckee River to Tahoe, where at last we thawed out our frozen clothes in the Pullman car...

Such experiences await the skier when sometime in the future the Sierra will be made more accessible for winter sports. In the last few years interest in winter sports in California has grown apace. Where a few individuals formerly carried on there are now hundreds.



right: more Hanness Schroll



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## SUMMIT HIGHWAY IS SHOWN TO BE PASSABLE

Editor of The Bee-Sir: Since writing my other letter, the Truckee people took it upon themselves to prove the Summit highway could be traveled over. At 5 P. M. to-day a party of them returned from Soda Springs. Three autos drove up and back with chains on and had no trouble to speak of, just to show how easy it would be done.

The old snow fighters can do the things when others think it impossible.

GEO. W. REA.

Truckee, Nov. 25. 1930.

Sacramento Bee November 27, 1930

Things we take for granted today occasioned more attention in the old days. Here for example is a little celebration before Highway 40 was plowed in winter. We can wonder if the Sacramento Bee letter resulted in anyone wanting to drive over the summit. That would have been good follow up reporting but the Bee has let us down.

# From the DSHS Archives

## Life was Tough in the Old Days

### **A NIGHT OF TERROR.**

#### **An Emigrant Train Caught by a Snow slide Near Emigrant Gap— Cold and Hungry, ihe Emigrants Pass the Night in . Icy Sheds – The Efforts to Relieve Them.**

Alta, April 10th Hourly the situation grows more desperate. Train No. 6, two miles east of Emigrant Gap, is the objective point of all the efforts and struggles made thus far. This train, halted by a snow-slilde,was subsequently caught in a second slide. Three freight cars were overthrown and badly crushed. At the rear of the train were emigrant coaches filled with men, women and children. The shock occasioned by the snow-slide as it crashed through the train, and the constant fear that other slides would follow and bury them In its depths, caused most agonizing terror to these poor emigrants. During all last night their terror was pitiable in the extreme. This morning their sufferings were augmented by the lack of food. The cries of the women and children were perfectly heartrending. In icy sheds, with part of their train crushed by the terrible slides, with avalanche momentarily expected from the overhanging mountain sides, with hunger and cold and the dreadful storm and their wintry surroundings, the situation of these people beggars description. At half past five last evening, Superintendent Pratt and Master Mechanic Cooley, with fifty men, took supper at Blue Cañon and started to relieve the imprisoned train wlth five engines It took them over sixteen hours to make Emigrant Gap, distant six miles. All night long, without a moment's rest, they

### **BATTLED WITH THE DEEP SNOW**

And deeper drifts. Arriving at the Gap at 11 o'clock

to-day, they ate a hurried dinner, and pressed forward toward crippled train. The snow-plow train which yesterday left Emigrant Gap to relieve train No. 6 was found hopelessly imprisoned by slides which, crossing the track in its rear, rendered a return to the Gap impossible. Releasing this train and liberating the engines and forward cars of train No. 6. the relief train backed to Emigrant Gap, reversed engines and plow and ran to this place for reinforcements. This train reached here at 7:30 this evening. Meantime, 50 workmen arrived here from Sacramento on a special train. Again reversing engines and plow, the snowplow train started for Emigrant Gap shortly after eight o'clock with three workmen. M. W. Cooley came down on the snow-plow and returned with it. From him I learn that Superintendent Pratt has issued orders to have an abundant supply of provisions sent to the blockaded emigrants. The battle is also being waged from the eastward.

The Truckee plow, with fifty or Seventy-five men, left Truckee this forenoon, with orders to run to the blockade. At Tamarack this plow encountered

### **A HUGE SLIDE,**

And no further tidings have been received concerning its progress. Should it clear this slide, it will probably press forward until the heavy breaks are reached at Butte Cañon bridge. Meantime, bowever, slides have occurred at Tunnel Mo. 13 and at Jones' Mill, east of Summit, so the Truckee plow cannot return . Between Cisco and Emigrant Gap several new slides have crossed the track. The storm continues with unabated fury. The East-bound overland train of to-day arrived here this evening, and was coupled to the two passenger trains already halted here. A dreadful night awaits the poor railroad men. The wind is cold and piercing, the darkness profound, and the tank both dangerous and herculean. Working like heroes all night and all day to-morrow, they will scarcely be able to clear away the slides which have already occurred.

Daily Alta California April 17, 1880

# From a friend of the DSHS



## Last Auto to Make Trip Over Summit

The last automobile to cross the Summit this season was the Pierce Detroit driven by N. Chatfield of Los Angeles, who went thru Truckee to Reno a few days ago. It was a three cylinder car and the only injury sustained was the tearing off of a tire. The car plowed thru two feet of SNOW between Soda Springs and Summit

Truckee Republican December 21, 1911

# Book Review

## Gold Rush Diary

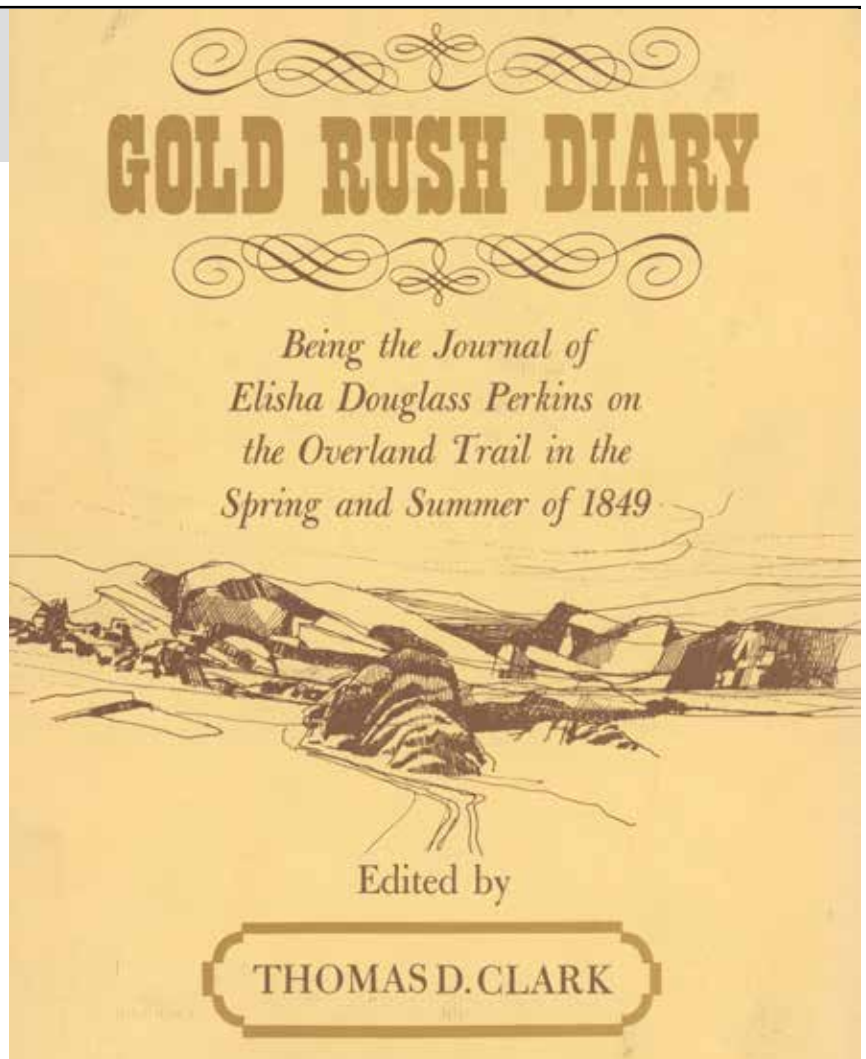
Being the Journal of Elisha Douglas Perkins on the Overland Trail in the Spring and Summit of 1849

Editor: Thomas D. Clark. 1967 207 pages large format

The subtitle is the description of this book as Mr. Perkins recorded his impressions of the cross country journey he took. There are a lot of emigrant diaries and the entries in most do not give much detail beyond weather, miles traveled, and maybe landmarks seen. The Gold Rush Diary is quite different. Mr. Perkins includes lots of details about the journey and then goes further by including a lot of his thoughts. In addition, the editor, Thomas Clark, provides extensive sidebar notes as a running commentary to Perkins' journal entries.

Perkins was part of a small group of gold seekers from Ohio who called themselves the Marietta Gold Hunters bound for California, leaving Ohio in May, 1849. They started with wagons but later dispensed with them in favor of just taking necessities on the backs of their mules. About the same time they broke up their group into pairs but apparently stayed generally together.

Perkins' diary entries are so full of details that they give the reader a realistic feeling for what it was like to cross the country during the Gold Rush. For example one entry talks about their preparations and discovering that they thought they had taken too much. So they were going to sell some of the excess and ship other things to California by boat "around the cape." Then Perkins said that most other travelers had the same problem and so threw away what they thought were excesses. Then wagons from town would follow "& come back loaded with Ham, flour, pilot bread, Beans, sheet iron stoves extra axletrees & wheels, medicines Tools of all kinds & personal clothing of all description." Presumably all those goods harvested from the emigrant trail found their ways onto store shelves again for the next set of emigrants. Perkins also reported that over the first thirty or forty miles there were also "40 or 50 wagons broken down & deserted... Some of them splendid & expensive ones but being entirely overloaded could not stand the terrible roads." That tells more of the story as does a quote that comes shortly after, "The guide books for Emigrants are all humbugs..."



Then Perkins reports on a story about a pet dog that was scared by the weather and so "found his way into our tent, & unknown to any one ensconced himself at C.'s head. During the storm same felt a stream running down his face & neck very unlike the rain... it being quite warm. This naturally excited his curiosity somewhat & and he was not long in tracing it to its source, between his rage, & our amusement! With dilated eyes muscles distended he braced himself for a terrible kick at the unfortunate offender." The story went on a bit and shows there were more dangers in crossing the country than we might imagine.

There's lots of detail in the diary entries: guide books, sickness on a ship, who was cooking and what, colds and headaches, leaky tent, weather, run away mule, cholera, shooting a mule as punishment to the mule (in the hind end), trouble with Indians, rattlesnakes, dead cattle, alkali, food, even squirrels and hoping to bathe one a week. No details were too small it seems. They took their crackers out of their barrels, for example, and put them in sacks to save weight but admitted "they will probably be ground to find powder before we have progressed far." Perkins even lists the con-

tents of 300 lbs. of supplies they were leaving behind, selling it all for \$5 to a ferry man, "We shall have to do without most of the little comforts & luxuries on which we had been depending..." Without the 300 lbs. they would be able to travel "More expeditiously" but "less comfortably."

Beyond the reporting of details and incidents of travel Perkins writes about his own thoughts, "I confess to a feeling of loneliness [sic] as I thought on the prospects before us, & all we were separating ourselves from behind.. Henceforth we shall have no society, no sympathy in our troubles, & none of the comforts to which we have been accustomed, but must work across these vast wild wastes along, & go in our own strength."

At another point Perkins says when they came to a fort and had let out their animals to graze "From the Fort came the sound of the merry drum & fife & the hum of many voices & I felt my spirits quite elated at the appearance of an inhabited & civilized community again. I'm tired already of this life of solitude & and long for new faces & new scenes."

There's even editorializing. On seeing a government wagon train carrying "Uncle Sams [sic] preparation for war... must cost him a great amount of treasure... how useless a waste of property all warlike preparations are. There was more money probably in this one expedition than are yearly spent on common schools!"

Besides Perkins' diary entries the editor writes a whole book in the sidebars on each page. In those he elaborates on Perkins observations, quotes from other emigrants who wrote about being in the same places, and provides information.

For example when Perkins group is about ready to embark Clark quotes from a local newspaper saying that there were "twenty wagon and blacksmith shops actively engaged in manufacturing wagons, besides large droves of mules, herds of cattle, and provisions – everything the traveler needed." There were 1600 inhabitants in Independence, thirty

"drygoods" stores, two large hotels, etc. Those kinds of elaborations give a richer flavor to the story of the overland journey.

#### **At the Sierra Divide on Donner Summit,**

"I witnessed a sunset whose grandeur was at most inspiring Before me were peaks of mountains each side of the Yuba becoming lower and lower as they receded to the west. They were in the Sacramento Valley! How many slow and tedious hours, and days, and months of toil had I undergone to enter it! Here it lay before me The parting rays of sunset gilded the craggy mountain peaks of this gold valley, imagination converting their fantastic crags into castles and turrets at pleasure... After feasting my eyes with this enchanting scene, I began to descend into the Yuba valley..."

Some of the sidebar entries give further flavor by quoting other diarists. One emigrant talked about the swearing, "I do not think there ever was as many men ever together or on any road so shockingly blasphemous as the emigrants on this route to California – they hardly use any expression to horse, mule or ox except 'G--d'm your soul' or 'heart to h'll,' or to 'damnation.' I think I hear it 50 times a day. Woe for California, if such is the character of the future population – this habit extends through all ages from the boy of 12 to the old men on the border of eternity."

Then we get to Donner Pass and Perkins, like all good emigrants, took that route. He and his friends crossed the Sierra at Donner Summit in the middle of September. He estimated it was 15 degrees and there was 2" of ice on the water. There was news from people they met that there was not as much gold in California as had been represented. Miners & emigrants, were disappointed and going home. Wolves were howling and they came to the huts of the Donner Party. "a most melancholy and gloomy spot." Perkins gathered some "relics and curiosities and left, thankful that late as my journey has been prolonged, I was till safe from any such catastrophe as befell those unfortunates."

"If the thousands who have gone should find themselves in the mountains without provender or caught in the snow storm what would become of them & us?... I may have seen the last of those dear ones at home... But I must away with such gloomy anticipations & trust to Providence..."

"The ascent to the pass from Donner cabins is about 5 miles over rocks & steep bluff & through majestic forests of fine cedar. Fir, arbor vitae &c, & a rich luxuriant undergrowth of laurel & various other evergreens. The journey is wild & magnificent beyond description. I was perfectly in raptures during the whole of the toilsome ascent... The trees exceeded anything I had ever seen & fully realized my expectations of a Cal. Forest. Hundreds of them were six feet in diameter & standing so densely together I could hard get myself & mule through them... Up, up, we toiled wondering every five minutes how 'the dickens' ox teams & wagons can get over here, & it is a wonder indeed, until at 3 P.M we arrived at the foot

#### **About mosquitoes**

"Never in my life did I have the misfortune to fall into the hands of such a pursuing merciless set & they came in such perfect clouds & and their sting was so sharp & 'itchie' that sleep was out of the question."

of the terrible "Passage on the backbone." "For half an hour before arriving we could hear the shouts of teamsters urging their cattle up the steep & when we were near enough to see through the forest we could look up nearly over our heads & see wagons & cattle looking like pigmies, & and as if almost suspended in the air. The 'Pass' is through a slight depression in the mountains being some 1500 or 2000 feet lower than the tops in its immediate vicinity. As we came up to it the appearance was exactly like marching up to some immense wall built directly across our path so perpendicular is this dividing ridge & the road going up to its very base...

"We began to scramble up sometimes upon 'all fours' like our animals & glad enough were we to stop 'to blow' several times before reaching the top.

"At last the summit was gained & we attempted 3 cheers for our success which unfortunately failed for want of breath, but sitting down for ½ hour we enjoyed the magnificent prospect on either side of us. Our route back could be traced for miles, & the mountains among which we had been winding our way. Far below us was snow in vast quantities which never melts & on either side were peaks some thousands of feet higher than our position. Before us we could see the mountains of Bear River & Yuba Valleys descending in size towards the coast, & the Yuba Valley some 5 or 6 miles distant with its green grass & camps, lay almost under us. I could have spent hours on this spot so many thousand feet higher than I ever was before or ever expect or be again, but the coldness of the air though it was Sept. & and a bright sun shining compelling us to 'button up' to the chin..." and they continued on.

Also illustrating the text, there are a lot of pen and ink drawings and the last part of the book consists of reprints of various emigrants letters which will give the reader an even better feel for what the emigration was like.

Perkins tried his hand at gold hunting but was not successful. He suffered from ill health, became a steamboat captain in California and died in 1852. His diary found its way back to his widow who transcribed it.

Perkins best described his disappointment after arriving in California in his September 26 diary entry, "Never was there such misrepresentation as about this country, both as to the futility, fertility or capability of cultivation, & richness of the mines, & all that a few men might make fortunes. Among the Emigrants you will hear Bryant, Fremont, Robinson & others whose published accounts were the chief inducement to many to leave their comfortable home, cussed up & down, & loaded with all kinds of opprobrious names. They have all massed fortunes of the Emigration they have induced."

### Sidebars

"There were twenty-five wagons with five or six yoke of cattle to each & as they stretched out across the Prairie for nearly a mile. They looked like some huge serpent, "dragging his slow length along."

"This morning antelope are running round us in all directions & such running! Without apparently any effort they glide over the Prairie at a bird's wing pace that scorns the effort of the fleetest horse..."

### About buffalo hump

"& then the luxury of eating it! Such delicious tender juicy meat I never before put under the operation of my masticating organs. All that has been written in the praise of 'Buffaloe hump' falls short of the reality."

"Never have I seen so much hospitality & good feeling anywhere exhibited as since I have been on this route. Let any stranger visit a camp no matter who or where, & the best of everything is brought out, he is fed, & caressed almost universally. If at meal time the best pieces are put on his plate & if the train has any luxuries they are placed before him. Nor have I seen any man in trouble, deserted, without all the assistance they could render."

### Finding water

"We descended into a valley & found a fine spring of pure cold water. What quantities of it we poured down our parched throats, & how deliciously it tasted!"

"Any man who gets his wagon safely over these roads to California deserves a good price for it to pay him for his trouble. How triumphant we pass all wagons & slide down the hills & over the rocks, leaving htm to make their 5 or 6 miles per diem."

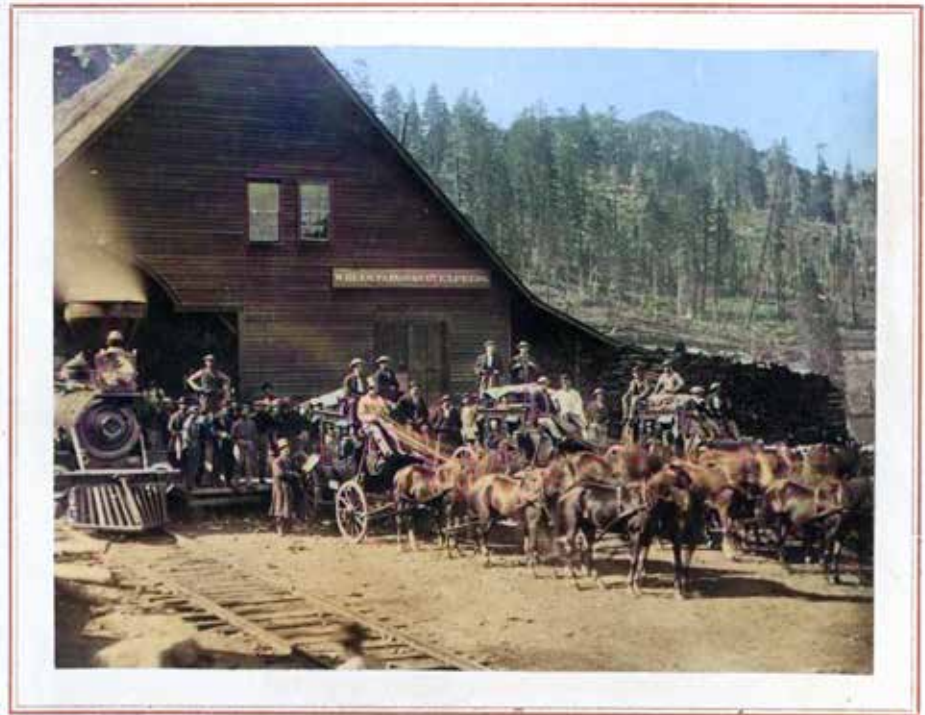


# Making History Colorful

WESTERN SUMMIT.

Alfred A. Hart #217 "All Aboard for Virginia City.

While the tunnels were being dug on the summit end of track was at Cisco. Stagecoaches took on the passengers headed east to Virginia City or north to Meadow Lake. At the time Cisco had a few thousand residents. Today nothing is left.



217. All Aboard for Virginia City,  
Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express.

WESTERN SUMMIT.



217. All Aboard for Virginia City,  
Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express.

Today, due to advances in computer graphics technology, there may be a solution to the color limitations of our historical black & white images. Computers are remarkably adept at manipulating photographic images. Algorithms developed for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning have been adapted to image technology to give almost magical results such as the colorization of black & white images. Algorithms are "trained" by looking at millions of color and black & white versions of photos to "learn" how to add back colors to a black & white image. The algorithms learn how to find a sky and make it blue, find a face and make it flesh colored, find a tree and make the leaves green. They develop highly sophisticated models that can do amazing transformations. Amazingly this technology is now available on desktop computers.

George Lamson

# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

We've been running "Odds & Ends" on Donner Summit for several years now going through items we've been collecting. This month we decided to start at the back of the alphabet. The first item from that direction was "Van Norden." Since the Forest Service and the So. Yuba River Citizens' League are engaged in a multi-year effort to restore the valley to its pre-civilization condition it seemed like a good subject for this Heirloom

In 2019 Heirloom reader Joe Royer was walking around the dewatered areas of former Lake Van Norden and "came across a wood structure in the lake bed that I never noticed before." It was poking just out of the mud and of course Joe wondered what it might be and "wondering if this might be the structure that shows in the Watkins Series photo that was taken from Soda Springs Hill."

Naturally we'd like to say that Joe's discovery is the original dam but that's going to have to await excavation by the Forest Service which owns the land now and is in the process of restoring the meadow to what it was prior to the arrival of civilization. You can read about the history of the dam in our May, '13, June, '13, April, '17, and May, '21 Heirlooms.

Joe also dug up the couple of pages of plans you see here on page 21.



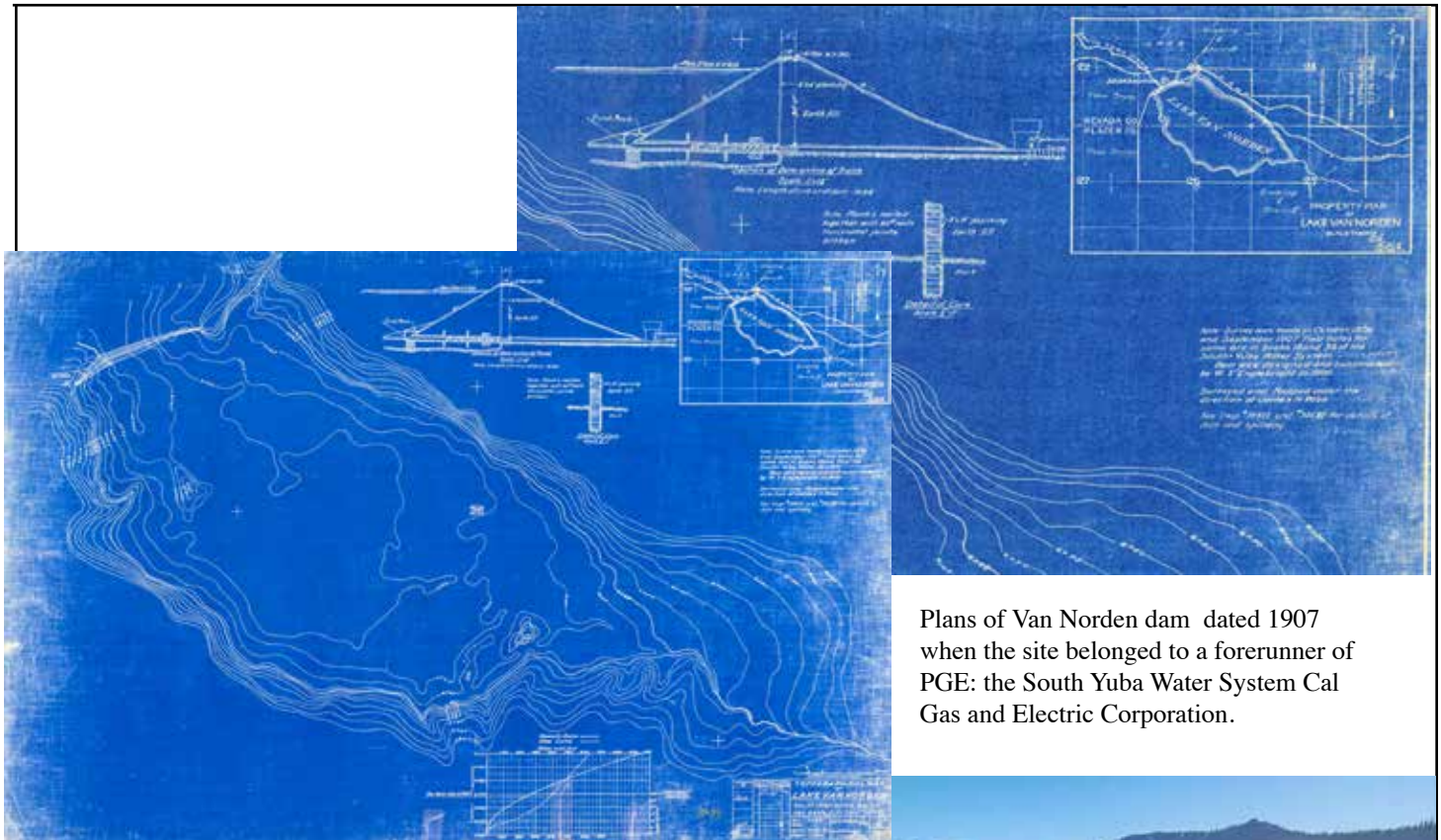


Carleton Watkins Summit Valley photograph showing the original dam in Summit Valley (at the tip of the arrow) and Tinnker's Station buildings to the left. This is a close up. The whole picture is to the left for context.



Above and below, more old dam remnants exposed after the second notching of the old dam to let out all remaining water. The old redwood showed no signs of rot.





Plans of Van Norden dam dated 1907 when the site belonged to a forerunner of PGE: the South Yuba Water System Cal Gas and Electric Corporation.



more views of what may be the old dam poking out of the mud after the second notching released remaining water from what had been Lake Van Norden.



### An 1874 description of Summit Valley and the original dam

"Arrived at the summit of the Sierra Nevada on the line of the railroad, there are many delightful pedestrian and horseback excursions to be made in various directions, and the finest points are fortunately the least hackneyed. At Summit Valley (which is associated with the relief of the tragically fated Donner emigrants, and is only three miles from Donner pass) there is an odious saw-mill, which has thinned out the forests; an ugly group of whitewashed houses; a ruined creek, whose water are like a tan-vat; a big sandy dam across the valley, reared in a vain attempt to make an ice-pond; a multitude of dead, blanched trees, a great, staring, repellent blank. And yet this valley is not unlovely. It's upper end, still a green meadow leads to the base of peaks 10,000 or 12,000 feet high, whose light-gray summits of granite, or volcanic breccia, weather into castellated forms, rise in sharp contrast to the green woods margining the level meadow. A little apart from the noisy station, the woods are beautiful, as we have described them, and the boulder-strewn [sic] earth reminds one of the pasture dotted with sheep."

"Summering in the Sierra" pg 175  
Benjamin Avery of Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine. February, 1874

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