

# The Donner Summit

# Heirloom

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

April 2025 issue #200



Collector's Edition

# The 200<sup>th</sup> Heirloom

This month the Heirloom reaches venerable status, having reached the two hundredth issue. You can imagine the celebration in the Heirloom offices when that issue was “put to bed” (to use a journalistic term we’ve not used before, but which reflects our status now as an eminent historical periodical.) Two hundred issues... if issues average twenty pages each that’s four thousand pages. That’s maybe a thousand different stories or items, all about Donner Summit history, over the last more than sixteen years. The indices for our stories and pictures are thirteen and eighteen pages long, respectively, all in small type. That’s many hundreds of entries. You, our reader (we have almost 1100 subscribers) can use our indices for your own searches of the stories of Donner Summit history.

We’ve covered every topic imaginable and then lots that were not imaginable like flying the Hump or the tunnel to take Lake Tahoe water to the Central Valley of California. We’ve covered the many firsts that were big stories and the many firsts that were small stories. In the first category there are the first wagon train to come to California with wagons, the first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, the first transcontinental air route, and the first transcontinental telephone line. In the second category there are the first bicycle over the Sierra, across the country and around the world; and then the first motorized crossing of the Sierra, and the first automobile crossing of the Sierra.

The people who crossed Donner Summit opened California to the world and the world to California. They made the California of today – the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world, depending on how the math works on any particular day. Many of those people came over Donner Summit first in wagons, then on the train, then on the highway, and finally in the air overhead.

There are important stories: the building of the transcontinental railroad; the arrival of modern winter sports; the first ski areas; the Chinese workers, heroes of the transcontinental railroad; the rise and fall of the economy on Donner Summit, and the opening of the highway in winter.

In all of those stories there are the stories of people, people just like us, and within those stories are smaller stories: stories of people looking for better lives; stories of heroism and sacrifice; stories of ordinary people called to do big things; stories of people with stories to tell through newspapers, artist canvases, diaries, interviews, and books. Then there are the bad stories like murder and robbery and stories of the unimaginable. Finally there are the stories of people today sharing historical ephemera

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## Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We've done hundreds of 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 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 web-site 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. 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.

Find us on the the DSHS YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJenAxPCb47Y14agmVGI-zA>

Find us on FaceBook where we place a new historical picture daily.

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(it's fun to use words like that) and their experiences. Their contributions humanize the wider history.

The [Heirloom](#) has covered it all and while there are still some things rattling around in the [Heirloom](#) files, waiting for exposure, it's getting harder. Rich as Donner Summit is, there is only so much history and so with this [Heirloom](#) front page the [Heirloom](#) announces some changes.

We've been reviewing books, primary as well as secondary sources, at least tangentially related to Donner Summit history since almost the beginning. We've been very strict about the books having to relate to Donner Summit so that the [Heirloom](#) (and our website) now host to just shy of one hundred fifty book reviews. There are only very few books which meet our content criteria that have not been reviewed and so that monthly feature is going to have to disappear.

Second there are not many stories left to tell. We'll continue to dredge the files but coming up with twenty pages of content monthly is hard. So we're going to move to a new phase: Favorites of Donner Summit history, reprises of good stories. Generally our readership doesn't go back into the archives to use our indices so there are a lot of stories of which they've not heard. We'll revisit and revise good stories. We can combine stories from different [Heirlooms](#) and add in new sub-stories or details that were not available at first writing.

The [Heirloom](#) lives on but that's not all there is to the Donner Summit Historical Society. See our web pages at [donner-summitsitoricalsociety.org](http://donner-summitsitoricalsociety.org) and our FaceBook pages. Sign up for our Donner Party Hike event each fall at [donnerpartyhike.com](http://donnerpartyhike.com). The seven hikes from which you can choose are illustrated, meaning the leaders share historical photographs and are full of stories as well as scenery. In the afternoon there's music and a historical presentation.

Thanks for subscribing.

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Our first story under "favorites" hasn't actually appeared in the [Heirloom](#). Rather it was a separate publication done to celebrate the [historyexpeditions.org](http://historyexpeditions.org) people who did a reprise of the Donner Party's Forlorn Hope (check out "History Expeditions" in our [Heirloom](#) article index on our website). We updated the publication after the History Expedition people did a reprise of the Donner Party rescue efforts. The story, "The Donner Party and Donner Summit Heroism, Pathos, and the Human Spirit" is a favorite because it explores the title rather than the sensational elements of the Donner Party story.

# Heroism on Donner Summit - Part I

We think of the "Donner" in Donner Summit and we think of the Donner Party: the wrong turn two times, bad luck, bad decisions made in ignorance, dietary issues, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror-filled, and unbelievable hardship. That's a lot but there's more. It's also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit. Whereas most of the first list didn't take place on Donner Summit, a lot of the second list did. Clearly, given that second list, Donner Summit is an elevated sort of place.

The Forlorn Hope set out on December 16, heading for California and help. They left what would be called Donner Lake taking a huge risk. To get to California they would have to slog through the snow on Donner Summit and risk new storms without shelter. They would have to go without food and bear hardships unimaginable to us sitting comfortably reading this. What is it like to sleep in the snow in soggy and sodden clothing fearing what might come overnight, fearing what the weather might bring? What is it like to hike through the snow,

sinking into it with each step, and to do it to exhaustion with no food or warmth at the end of the exertion? What is it like to starve slowly and be forced to eat leather shoelaces? What is it like to know you have to keep going, you have to survive, not just for yourself but for the children or family members you've left behind at the lake and who are counting on you? How can you possibly give up – as long as you live?

For the rescuees later on what is it like, after months, to be given a chance for life after having watched others die, but to have that chance depend on your starving, exhausted, freezing body? How do you keep going, slogging through the snow step-by-step mile after mile, wanting to just fall over and sleep? How do you keep going, starving, wet, freezing, and exhausted?

Then there are the rescuers, leaving behind the relative comfort of California to head over the Sierra, into

danger, in winter, at the mercy of the weather and their own stamina. They carried huge packs over the snow into which they must have been sinking with each foot, climbing thousands of feet, to rescue strangers. They saw the horrors of the starving people. They saw the dead and partially eaten bodies. They saw caches of food left for the return trip robbed by animals. They went hungry. They must have become exhausted, but those rescued, especially the children, were depending on them. How do you overcome physical weakness and exhaustion to save the people?

The story of the Donner Party is pathos. It is also amazing what people can overcome and what people can do for others. The stories of the Donner Party survivors and their rescuers are extraordinary.



#### Setting the Stage

In the history of the Donner Party (lower case “h” history since this is not referring to McGlashan’s book, *The History of the Donner Party*), December, 1846 was important. Most of the party had arrived at what would be called Donner Lake on October 31 (the rest of the party, including the Donners, was at Alder Creek, seven miles away). Some members of the party tried to get over the pass right away but failed. The snow was too much and people were dispirited and exhausted. On November 3, 13, and 22 there were more attempts to escape the coming winter as people tried to get over Donner Summit, but they all failed. They were tired and dispirited. It’s hard going uphill at altitude through the snow and everyone had to walk. The November 3rd attempt exemplifies the problems. Clearly there was an urgency to getting over the summit. Winter was coming. Some of the party were too panicked to even make the attempt to leave camp. Some tried to get over though, perhaps wishing they’d gone over a few days earlier when there was less snow. The animals were weak. There was three feet of snow on the ground. The animals could not pull the wagons so the oxen were packed with wagon contents. What could be left behind? There were arguments. The children had to be carried. They pushed through the snow but the snow is deep. Charles Stanton and one of John Sutter’s Indians went ahead and made it to the top. Breaking trail in deep snow is exhausting work. Doing it uphill, not knowing the route to take, is harder. The snow was chest deep at the summit but they’d made it. They returned to the rest of the party to galvanize them for the assault. Ev-

eryone was resting around a flaming dead tree. There was a measure of warmth. They would not go. Tomorrow would be soon enough. They were exhausted.

That night it snowed.

The Donner Party was trapped at the lake that would be named for them. The snow was just getting deeper and the food was running out. This was beyond what they had ever experienced, ever heard of, or even ever dreamed of.

What was going through the minds of the members of the people trapped at the lake? Were there recriminations? If only we’d gone faster. If only (name the person) had not been so slow. If only we had not taken the short cut. What’ll we do to Lansford Hastings when we get a hold of him. If only the snow would melt – we’d get over the Sierra quickly - we won’t dawdle, we promise. Will it ever stop snowing? Will there be enough food? Will we have to stay here all winter? Can we survive? Was there anger at the family that appropriated the little cabin Moses Schallenger and his friends had built two years before, leaving everyone else to scramble to build something for themselves? For the Reed Family, having lost their wagons, cattle, and father they must have wondered additionally, where was Papa? (James Reed had been banished from the party weeks earlier and had gone ahead to California). Could they survive on the kindness of others? For Charles Stanton and the two Native Americans Sutter had sent back with him to bring food and hope to the party, they must have thought, why’d we come? Maybe too, they thought, “These people are worthless.” We’ll never get out of here.

If you put your mind to it you can come up with any number of thoughts or conversations. They must have been depressed at their prospects. They must have been frightened. They must have been uncomfortable crammed together without privacy into shelters hurriedly thrown together. Those shelters must have offered little protection against the storms, the cold, and the accumulating snow. As the winds howled before the snow fell and almost buried the shelters, the shelter sides must have shaken and the wind must have pierced the sides. All the people inside could do was bury themselves in filthy wet blankets and pray. The actual Donners, at Alder Creek, were only in tents. There’d been no time to build anything less insubstantial. Little could any of them know that in a few weeks they’d be trying to eat the cowhides they’d thrown over their shelters.



### FORLORN HOPE

That sets the stage for the Forlorn Hope. On December 16, 1846, the Forlorn Hope left Donner Lake in another escape attempt. Seventeen members left the camp, fifteen wearing homemade snowshoes. They hoped their food would last six days and thought it might take ten days to get to California. They could survive a few days without food; that would be no problem. The youngest was 12 years old and the oldest 57 years old although most were in their teens and early twenties. The oldest woman was 23. Two people were a married couple. The oldest, Franklin Graves, took along two grown daughters and a son-in-law.

The snow was deep and even though the two without snowshoes stepped in the tracks of those in front, it was too much. They went back leaving fifteen to try to conquer the pass and get to California for help. What went through the minds of the two who turned back? They were tired, obviously, but now they had to retrace their steps through the snow, back to the unbearable conditions at Donner Lake.

What about the ones who continued on? What were they thinking? Four were fathers and three were mothers. They'd left their families behind. Franklin Graves had left behind his wife and seven other children. Which was a better choice? Fight snow and weather to head for California to get help and maybe never see your children again, or stay at Donner Lake to protect the children? Could the people to whom the children were entrusted be trusted?

How far was it to Sutter's Fort? They'd been living in the snow for one and a half months and had had little shelter and little protection. Now they'd be out in the open with only a few blankets. Walking the snow had been hard at the camp at Donner Lake. Now they would have to fight the snow for miles each day for days with little rest and little food. What about their families and friends left back at camp? Would they live? Would they be cared for? Could the Forlorn Hope bring back help in time?

### Charles Stanton

Then they wrapped their blankets about them and slept upon the snow till the morning light recalled them to their weary travel. On that morning of their fifth day out, poor Stanton sat late by the camp-fire. The party had set off, all but Miss G., and as she turned follow her father and sister, she asked him if he would soon come. He replied that he should, and she left him smoking. He never left the desolate fire-side. His remains were found there by the next party who passed."

Eliza Farnham,  
California Indoors and Out  
quoted in Donner Party Chronicles pg 235

And Mr. Stanton, who sacrificed his life to assist his companions – for he had no family or relations in the company – should be held in honored remembrance by everyone who can appreciate a noble act. [As we ascended the Sierra] the clouds on the mountains looked very threatening, but he naturally looked at the bright side of things, and assured us there was no danger, little thinking that the next summer's sun would bleach his unburied bones, not far from that spot.

John Breen  
quoted in Donner Party Chronicles pg. 235

"The noble Stanton was one of the party, and perished the sixth day out, thus sacrificing his life for strangers. I can find no words in which to express a fitting tribute to the memory of Stanton."

Virginia Reed Murphy, 1891  
Across the Plains in the Donner Party



How does a parent make that choice to leave their children behind? How can one bear to leave children to face starvation? How could one bear not to try to escape and get help in California? Was there a way to survive?

Climbing Donner Pass must have been excruciating. Walking in snow is hard. It's exhausting, step by step. Snowshoes make sinking less of a problem but those were amateur made snowshoes. They probably didn't fit well. As one walks in snowshoes the snowshoes pick up snow making them heavier as the wearer picks up snow with each step. In addition, particularly at the start, the Forlorn Hope was going uphill, sometimes very steeply. That kind of snowshoe walking is even harder. The Forlorn Hope had to climb 1,000 feet to the pass. They were cold and tired but tired doesn't describe things. Exhaustion is an easy term but does not describe things adequately. Each step must have been excruciating. They must have aimed each step to fit into the previous person's steps so they would not waste energy compacting the snow with each step. It's just a bit easier but everyone's stride is different and if you step in the previous person's footprint you compress the snow a bit more. Each step requires just a bit more lifting, a bit more energy.

The Forlorn Hope were full of hope though and it must have driven them. How far can it be to California? Mustn't it be downhill? They would save their families.

And they were worried.

Even considering all that, Mary Ann Graves remarked afterwards, remembering the climb up to Donner Pass 1000 feet above the lake as she stopped to look back, "The scenery was too grand for me to pass without notice." Donner Pass is grand. Tourists admire it daily but how extraordinary it must have been to remark on that and not her tired, cold, wet, and hungry person? Mary Ann also noted that someone else had said, "We were as near to heaven as we could get." That's touching but also full of dramatic irony because we know some of the horror to come. They couldn't even conceive of what was coming.

On the 17th the Forlorn Hope got to the top of Donner Pass and they camped just west building a log fire. The snow was twelve feet deep. Coffee and few strips of bacon were all they had after their exhausting day.

They went only six miles the next day after traveling all day. They had gotten through Summit Valley along "Juba creek" according to William Eddy's journal. That shows how hard travel in the snow can be. They were only able to go six miles despite their urgency. There were snow flurries and

high winds but at least it wasn't snowing – yet. Still, the travel must have been miserable, with no hope of respite at the end of the day.

About 11 on the night of the 19th it began snowing. The wind was blowing cold and furiously. Three days out from the lake the storm continued and "feet commenced freezing," said Wm. Eddy. It snowed all day. The Forlorn Hope was without shelter except for blankets. Blankets must have become soaked as did clothing. They made about five miles that day perhaps to about today's Kingvale.

On December 20 they were still in the vicinity. They struggled on through the snow. There was only one day of food rations left. Charles Stanton went snow blind. They could only go four miles. At this rate the original ten day estimate was hopelessly inadequate. Conditions were horrible but they didn't even have enough food to go back and then who would rescue the Donner Party?

Here a little digression is in order. Charles Stanton had no family in the Donner Party. When the party was low on food somewhere in today's Utah some weeks earlier, he'd volunteered to go ahead to Sutter's Fort for help with another member of the party who did have family. The other fellow fell sick and remained behind in California. Stanton, along with two Native Americans Sutter sent and some mules, returned to the Donner Party somewhere near today's Reno. His sense of responsibility must have been great as was his sense of decency and heroism. He'd given his word. He and the two Native Americans were part of the Forlorn Hope. They had just covered the route so that would make getting to California less difficult. The landmarks don't look the same in the opposite direction, especially after snowfall, though. A wrong turn got

them into a different river valley. Nothing looked familiar and all the party could do was head west. They had no maps to show a workable way.

"How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm !

John Sinclair  
Alcalde of Northern California  
who interviewed the Forlorn Hope survivors

On the fifth day out from Donner Lake the Forlorn Hope again awoke in the snow wrapped in blankets. What is that like to sleep in the

snow covered only by a blanket? Can you even sleep or does exhaustion inure you to the cold? As the group got ready to move on, Charles Stanton sat back against a tree and lit his pipe. It was December 21. He was so worn out. He said he'd be along shortly. He didn't want to hold them up. Charles Stanton died somewhere below Cascade Lakes on Donner Summit where there is a marker today. Wm. Eddy's journal said the food was gone.

On December 22 another storm hit the Forlorn Hope. It "snowd [sic] all last night Continued to Snow all day with

Some few intermissions..." Wm. Eddy. They stayed in camp all day. What do you do all day in camp with no food, huddled under a wet blanket?

On the 23rd they realized they'd made a wrong turn somewhere. The Indians were "bewildered."

If the journey of the Forlorn Hope does not sound miserable so far, on the 24th the "storm recommenced with greater fury; extinguished fires," said Wm. Eddy. The storm had increased so much they could not travel. As the storm raged around them as they sat in a circle covered by blankets. John Sinclair, Alcalde of No. California, who interviewed members of the Forlorn Hope (and whose report is included in Edwin Bryant's What I Saw in California) said Wm. Eddy suggested they all sit in a circle on a blanket. Their feet pointed in to the center of the circle and blankets were spread over their heads. Snow and wood held the blankets down on the outside of the circle. Snow fell and closed off openings. Body heat made the cold less unbearable. The group sat that way for 36 hours while the storm raged. Once the storm had abated one member of the party found some cotton stuffing in her cape that was still miraculously dry. It served as tinder to start a fire. How does one bear that kind of thing?

On Christmas Day only eleven of the 15 were still alive. Mary Ann Graves said, "Father died on Christmas night at 11 o'clock in the commencement of the snow storm."

December 26 Wm. Reed said, "Could not proceed; almost frozen; no fire." They'd been four days without food and only a little food before that.

December 27 The Forlorn Hope cut flesh from a dead companion's body, "roasted it by the fire and ate it, averting their faces from each other and weeping." (Donner Party Chronicles pg 238) The two Indians refused to eat. Lemuel Murphy, aged 12, died.

Alcalde Sinclair captured some of the pathos, "How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm ! Oh ! how they must have thought of those happy, happy homes which but a few short months before they had

left with buoyant hopes and fond anticipations ! Where, oh where were the green and lowery plains which they had heard of, dreamt, and anticipated beholding, in the month of January, in California ? Alas ! many of that little party were destined never to behold them. Already was death in the midst of them." [sic]

The Forlorn Hope] made snow-shoes, and fifteen started, ten men and five women, but only seven lived to reach California eight men perished. They were over a month on the way, and the horrors endured by that Forlorn Hope no pen can describe nor imagination conceive."

Virginia Reed Murphy  
Across the Plains with the Donner Party, 1891

January 1, 1847 The Forlorn Hope turned into the American River drainage away from a better route in the Yuba/Bear River drainage. There were only ten members. They carried dried human flesh. Their feet were bloody and frostbitten.

January 17 Wm. Eddy arrived at Bear Valley. The seven surviving members of the Forlorn Hope, five women and two men, had been rescued a few days earlier by Miwok Indians. Two Indian boys helped Eddy to the nearest settler's house where Harriet Ritchie broke into tears when she saw him. He was staggering and emaciated. Four people from Bear Valley retraced Eddy's bloody footprints to find the other six survivors lying in the mud. It took 33 days for the Forlorn Hope to travel from Donner Lake over Donner Summit and down to Bear Valley.

"... they resumed their journey, their feet being so swollen that they had burst open, and although they were wrapped in rags and pieces of blankets, yet it was with great pain and difficulty that they made progress... Every foot of that day's struggle was marked with the blood from their feet."

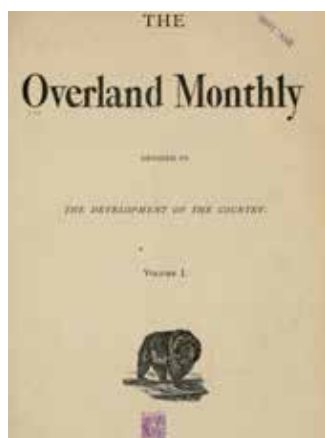
J. Quinn Thornton, 1849  
The Donner Party Mountain Camp 1846-47

News spread about the fate of the Donner Party trapped in the mountains. Rescue parties were formed. People who could have easily stayed comfortably in California, with plenty of food, would endure the hardship of carry-

ing heavy packs uphill through the snow. They would endure hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake.

# Donner Summit, 1867

[We included a much shorter excerpt from this essay, "The Pacific Railroad Unopen" by Robert L. Harris in our August, '17 Heirloom. It was first published in the Overland Monthly magazine in September, 1869. This is not the whole essay but this time includes more details of interest to readers of Donner Summit history and is illustrated with Alfred A. Hart photographs. Mr. Hart photographed the building of the Central Pacific Railroad.]



"The great crowd of pleasure seekers know nothing of the remarkable natural scenery by which they are surrounded when crossing the Sierra Nevada by the railroad, and can have no conception of the magnitude of the work over which they are flying at the rate of from twenty to forty miles an hour." Passengers today (1869) are mostly interested in meal times and are now bored. Had they been able to travel just five years ago, more slowly, and spent a summer doing it, they would have enjoyed things much more.

That said, Mr. Harris decided to share experiences he had had before the railroad was finished, when it was still "unopen," and try to break through the ennui (boredom) of current travelers who lounge on cushions in the palace cars and who cannot see out because of the timbers of the snowsheds. The sheds have shut out the snow but also "some of the picturesque" "Sierran solitudes."

In the Fall of 1867 Mr. Harris left the "plains of California" for Cisco, taking an 18 hour trip to the "terminus of the Pacific Railroad." From there he walked to the Summit. Like people today, who walk along the tracks, he rued the spacing of ties. They are not placed with human steps in mind. During

the twelve mile walk Harris hiked past "delving men; massive stone culverts, hanging on the steep slopes of granite mountains; a constant succession of blasts, with their grand reverberations; a granite roadway through tunnel and cut, and over fill; an immense serpent, whose convolutions rested on mountain spurs, and bridged deep ravines." The railroad would be finished in a year and a half and was, in 1867, engaged in placing track over the most difficult part of the route - Donner Summit.

He passed "thousands of hewn tamarack ties... Chinamen are as thick as bees, the various sets of 'strikers' keeping in unison with their hammers on the drills..." The masons were fortunate to have such an abundant "crop of stones" for building... "Here is a bank eighty to one hundred feet in height covering its culvert of two hundred and fifty feet in length; there a bridge, leaping a chasm of one hundred and fifty feet in depth. One thousand feet beneath me I see the "mountain schooners," (freight wagons - see below) each drawn by twelve mules. Their bells toll the knell, and their wheels



Alfred A. Hart #210 Loaded Teams (mountain schooners)

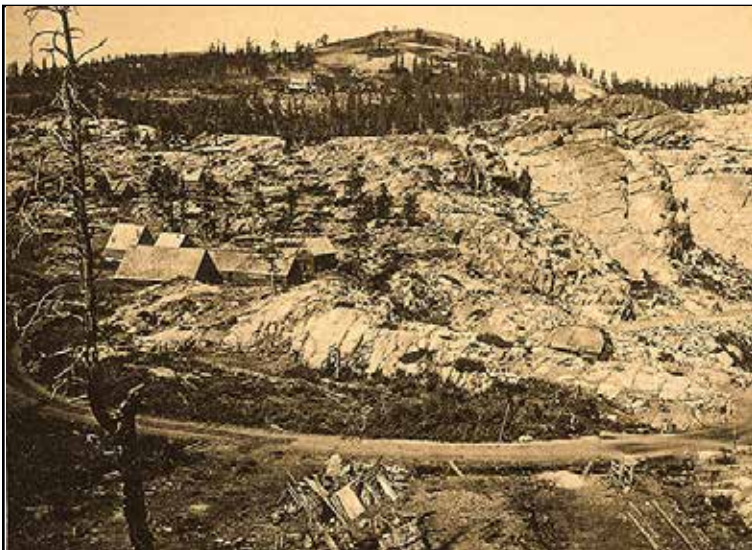
creak the dirge... Here is a "camp;" but, alas! none of the old style of snow-white canvas, with its memories of refreshing sleep upon fragrant pine boughs; no, it is a Chinese camp [next page], resembling a collection of dog-kennels, which, in fact, it is – each hut hastily made of "shakes," about four feet high by six feet broad, and eight feet long..." The next cut is the hardest granite "and a score and a half of carts and two hundred fifty men are working, crowded together in a space of two hundred and fifty feet."

"Ah! no one will be impressed by the sublimity of this



Alfred A. Hart #249 Lower Cascade Bridge





Alfred A. Hart #116 Summit Camp

scenery, when whirled through it at twenty miles per hour – a wall of rock on one side, and empty space on the other. What! We are nearing the summit, and there you shall see mountains of granite, sheer and clear, and shall ride along the verge of precipices, where a tossed stone will bound and bound again until it strikes one thousand feet beneath.... Look far beneath you at those puny pine-trees. They are six feet in diameter and one hundred and fifty feet high! Then, look up, far up, a thousand feet or more, at Lincoln Peak, whose granite breasts has faced storms which have crushed and rendered these forests. On this crest of Lincoln Peak, the chief Engineer of the road, Mr. S. S. Montague, as if prophetic, raised a white flag on the very day of Lee's surrender. Surely, this railroad will be a bond of peace and unity."

"The wagon-road below [the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road, later the Lincoln Highway] is lined with slowly moving teams, the drivers cracking their whips, and smacking their lips at the prospect of supper [see the previous page]. The loud, sharp reports of blasts as of large rifled guns seem to crack the very mountains. Thus observing, I push forward, when a warning note is heard, and a rush of three-score Asiatics for a culvert betokens danger. I am eight hundred feet from the blast. Smiling at the frightened haste of these stupid fellows, I watch the effect. Bang! bang! Bang! Grand is the sight. 'Hurry down to this culvert, sir, hurry!' cries a foreman. 'Why, there is no danger here.' 'Hurry here; the big blast is yet to go.' Down the bank and into the culvert I, too, tumbled; and the next instant, with a sound as of thunder, a young volcano showered its stones in the air, rending trees, tearing the ground, and falling all about and over our hiding-place." Harris says that at that moment he almost had the chance to make more money without exertion

than ever before – from his life insurance.

"As the sun approaches his setting, I arrive where the [rail] road is less advanced, where more divisions of the army of labor are concentrated; and, tumbling down the granite banks, climbing over the cuts, elbowing my way between crowded workmen, dodging my head from their striking hammers, and my feet from their picks, hurry on" and then he begins to travel the wagon road.

"At about an hour after dark the 'Summit Camp' [a railroad workers' camp which sat just a bit east of the current Pacific Crest Trailhead on Donner Summit - pictures left] was reached. This is in reality a small town of one and two story houses, built quite strongly, to resist the weight of winter snows..."

That night he slept under "as many bedclothes as the human frame could stand, awakened only in the night by the dull boom of blasts in the tunnel..." Tunnel work went on 24 hours a day in three shifts.

The next day "a day of astonishment, wonder, and great satisfaction was before me. Every moment was full of con-



Alfred A. Hart #107 Donner Lake from Crested Peak.

densed enjoyment. After feasting my eyes upon the beautiful picture framed in the east, with its foreground of Donner Lake, eleven hundred feet below... the day's visit was begun by a visit to the Summit tunnel of 1,659 feet... through solid granite..."

In fact, the whole valley is covered with drops from these granite showers [rocks blown up with black powder]

Ere the iron rails .... the whole regions will be denuded of timber. These monarchs of the forest will lie low...Those immense piles of wood --- where will they travel? What Indians and game will they frighten, as they feed the rushing, fiery demons?"

They had been blasting and working on the road over the summit for some time, "the battle between intelligent force and mountain cohesion!" He observed "one rock, measuring seventy tons, [that had been blasted] a third of a mile away from its accustomed place; while another, weighing 240 pounds was thrown over the hotel at Donner Lake -- a distance... of two-thirds of a mile. In fact, the whole valley is covered with drops from these granite showers."

The work went on night and day. Harris describes tunnels, a workman hanging by a chain over a cliff when his tender fell asleep from having stayed out at a dance too late, an axe man discovering a nest of yellow jackets with his axe swing, a practical joke of making bear prints on the ground, and then another when the practical joker got his due and the attention of a swarm of yellow jackets. Then he was off to Coldstream Canyon and then Coburn's [Truckee] on the Truckee River, "Here we found the iron track again. From Cisco to this place was a hiatus of twenty-seven miles. The iron for thirty or forty miles of railroad had been teamed over this intervening distance, as also the pioneer locomotive on the eastern slope, the 'San Mateo.'" Here he hopped on the continuation of the railroad, "two of the first thousand of the many million passengers who will ride over this road. Now the serpent of the other side of the mountains seemed to have changed his nature, appearing like a water-snake, for the track follows closely the winding of the river..." He went to end of track near the state line and then back to Coburn's at twenty-five miles an hour. He stayed at Pollard's Hotel at Donner Lake.

In 1869 Harris remembered his 1867 walk "as I wended my way down this mighty cleft path, with crags ranging 1,500 to 2,000 feet above me on either side, their crests and slopes covered with timber. ...this was the last of

the timber;" what would the future train traveler think "on this natural grandeur so beautifully fringed and trimmed with evergreen... No! Ere the iron rails connect with those pushing from the East, the whole region will be denuded of timber. These monarchs of the forest will lie low; and, buried in the desert sands, will give in their short decay more practical benefit than in their lengthy lives... Those immense piles of wood which the indefatigable choppers are piling up--- where will they travel? What Indians and game will they frighten, as they feed the rushing, fiery demons?"

When the last rails were laid in 1869, "Here, near the centre of the American Continent, were the united efforts of representatives of the continents of Europe, Asia, and America -- American directing and controlling."

And then a final thought during his 1869 trip, "I could not help wondering why the railroad officials do not take off or hinge a couple of boards along these interminable galleries [snowsheds on Donner Summit], and give the passengers a view of the finest scenery on the route."

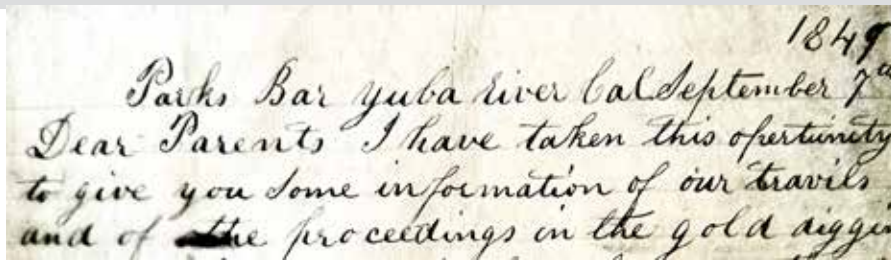


Alfred A. Hart #252 Snow Gallery, Crested Pk.

Ah! no one will be impressed by the sublimity of this scenery, when whirled through it at twenty miles per hour.



# What's in Your Closet?



## Your Affectionate Son

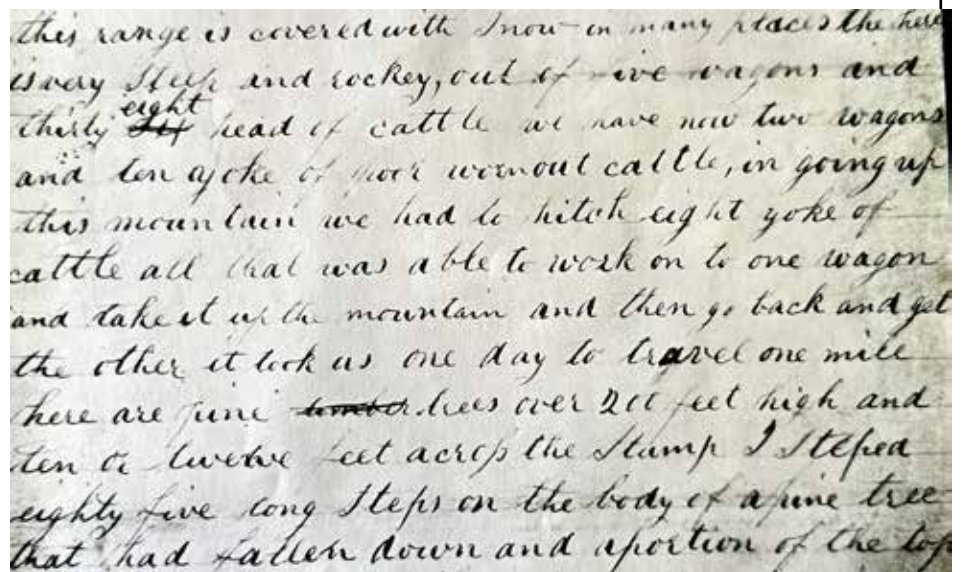
Some months ago Joshua Whitgob emailed the DSHS offices saying his grandmother had given him a letter written by his three times great grandfather about the great grandfather's arriving in California from St. Joseph Missouri. Since grandpa went over Donner Summit Joshua wanted to know if we were interested in reading the letter. Silly question.

The next day the seven page letter arrived attached to an email. It is interesting although there's not much about Donner Summit.

Joshua's three times great grandfather was Thomas Taylor. We don't know much about Mr. Taylor except that he was born in 1828 in Somersetshire, England. He died March 5, 1886 in Ohio.

Besides the few facts we can imagine he was adventurous and open to new ideas. He must have been a hearty fellow and full of energy. When he left St. Joseph for California he'd already left England and traveled to the United States. Imagine deciding to uproot your life and leave everything and everyone behind to head, first for America, and then the California Gold Rush in 1848 at only twenty years of age. The year before leaving for California Taylor fought in the Mexican-American War. We can wish Taylor was a diarist because a diary would have been very interesting to us today. Alas, there is only the seven page letter.

Going to California Thomas went with friends or acquaintances which would have made the journey less trying. He saw most of the United States and territories that most people had never seen but were wondering about.



Section of the letter describing the Sierra crossing at Roller Pass. This part of the letter is in bold on next page.

According to Joshua's grandmother, Thomas came back from the Gold Rush and settled in Ohio where he "built a nice big house." So we can imagine he found some gold.

Thomas wrote the letter to his parents in 1849 from Parks Bar Yuba River. He wanted to take the "opportunity to give you some information of our travils [sic] and of proceedings in the gold diggings [sic]." He and his company had left St. Joseph on May 1 and arrived at Johnson Ranch [just outside of Wheatland CA] on August 18. They had made really good time making the journey in only one hundred ten days. The journey and Sierra travel were apparently fairly uneventful or he didn't want to worry his parents. He talked about bad water, lack of firewood and burning buffalo chips, a terrible snow storm with winds so strong they threatened to blow the wagons away, lost and found cattle, losing one wagon and almost losing two men, a ferry boat made of

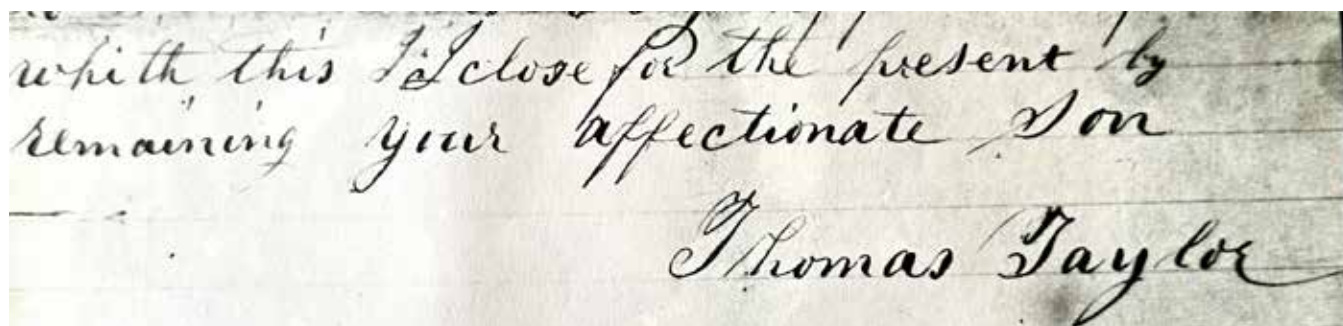
cottonwood tree trunks, a fellow carried downstream a mile before he could get out of the current, treeless plains, the Humboldt River disappearing into a sink, crossing the desert without grass or water, a sulphur water spring, a spring of salt water, and "here are hunderds [sic] of dead cattle and mules that has [sic] died of hunger and thirst." Taylor's group lost twelve of thirty-six cattle in the desert in one day which required the party to leave behind one wagon. They came to a spring of boiling water which also must have been disappointing. Then they hit the Truckee River (at today's Reno) and there was good grass and good water and wood. They crossed the river twenty-seven times on the way to Donner Lake.

At the head of the Truckee, where today the State park is located the party found "whare the emagrants perished in the snow a company of emigrants numbering about 90 was cauth here in a severe Snow Storm on the 12 day of October 1845 which lasted 3 days the Snow fell 8 feet deep So that they could not travel they built a house of logs which is yet Standing and after eating all of their provision forty five of them died of hunger and cold before relief reached them here are Stumps ten feet high ware they Stood on the Snow and cut the timber," sic

Then Taylor's group crossed the Sierra Nevada which "is very Steep and rocky." "Out of five wagons and thirty eight head of cattle we have now two wagons and ten yoke [two oxen make a yoke] poor worn out cattle, in going up this mountain we had to hitch eight yoke of cattle all that was able to work on to one wagon and take it up the mountain and then go back and get the other it took us one day to travel one mile. [Here we should interject that the party probably when over Coldstream Pass, which had been discovered in 1846, rather than Roller Pass but we don't know for sure.]" Taylor continued, " here are find trees over 200 feet high and ten or twelve feet across the Stump. I stepped eighty five long Steps on the body of a find tree that had fallen down and a portion of the top had burnt away that tree when standing was over three hundred feet high and from twelve to fifteen feet through at the Stump we was obliged to let the wagons down over the rocks with [unreadable] in five places on the 20 of June I was on Snow 20 feet deep and on the 10 of august I was on Snow eight feet deep and ice froze a inch thick in one night."

The party reached the gold diggings after traveling "about two thousand miles with ox teams." They were worn out by travel "and our teams wore out." The gold "diggings" were disappointing "The mines here is not so good as the accounts we heard at home." Wages were good though, at ten dollars a day in the mines with board and eight dollars a day in town. "Three or four men with a washing machine [Long Tom?] can average from one to two ounces of gold to each man per day" but "the diggings has failed this last year the best of places are worked out, we have worked four days and have got four hundred dollars worth of gold and I would not advice any person to come to this country but as I am here I may stay two or three years, traveling the mountains here is harder than carrying the musket in mexico."

"write as soon as you receive this and direct to Sacramento City... with this I close for the present by remaining your affectionate Son Thomas Taylor."



with this I close for the present by  
remaining your affectionate Son  
Thomas Taylor



In March '25 we included two diary excerpts of emigrants who went over Donner Pass in 1849.

Here is one more

## Bonine, Esq. – Journey to California, 1849

Wednesday Aug. 22nd We moved out early in the morning our rout was still up the River. Crossed several times during the day. Here I saw many of our native birds. The sapsuckers yellow hammer martin and bluebird. At night we arrived at a beautiful fine grove where we encamped, the evening was warm and pleasant. Here we left the stream.

Thursday Aug. 23rd This morning we started early passed over a high mountain which was covered with pine fir and cedar. It made me think of home to hear the birds singing in the tall pines. We made 16 mi. and encamped in a fine valley of grass, the night was very cold and frosty.

Friday Aug. 24th In the morning we started early went 12 mi. and encamped for noon, after eating our dinner we started on went 2 mi. and came to the houses of the doner party. Here we found ox bones and human bones all mixed together. The flesh had been eaten and the bones cast into the yard. The trees where they cut their wood were cut about 12 feet from the ground. There was a dense forest of hemlock around the huts. You could see many traces of distress. This was at the foot of the Syrenada [Sierra Nevada] Mts. Went 2 miles up and encamped on the side of the Mt. at a spring. The whole side of the mountain was dark with tall trees. Some of the pines were from 7 to 9 feet through [diameter]. This evening we passed Trucky Lake.

Saturday Aug. 25th We started early in the morning for the summit which took us until noon we had to put 10 [mules presumably] to each wagon. We passed above many heavy snow banks. This was a tall climb for a wagon. We then passed down into a valley [Summit Valley] and encamped. The descent was not so great as the other side. Here was a fine stream of water which we supposed to be a branch of feather River.

Sunday Aug. 26th We remained in camp all day to rest our mules for the mountains ahead. Dr. Prichet and I went about 3 mi. to a lake on the side of the mountain. Here we rolled large round stones down the mountain among the pines. They would knock the tops off when they would strike them. It was rare sport [perhaps Cascade or Long Lakes on the side of Devil's Pk.?.]

Monday Aug. 27th We left camp at 6. We traveled all day over a mountainous rocky country. Some places we had to rope down. [roping down was done at Big Bend as well as between Yuba Gap and Emigrant Gap. A rope was tied to a tree and a wagon. The rope around the tree acted as a brake so the wagon could be let down the slope slowly.]

Tuesday Aug. 28th This morning we left at 5 went up hill and down hill. We broke our wagon tongue and upset all in the fore noon but we gathered up and went on. This was one of the hardest days work that I ever done.

<https://www.octa-journals.org/category/merrill-mattes-collection/page/2>

# What's in Your Closet? The Flying 30



In our June, '25 Heirloom we included the picture at the bottom of the page along with the text that follows here.

Some time later Steve Westcott emailed with more about the Flying 30 and the picture to the left. The Heirloom is produced months ahead and then our editor misplaced Steve's picture. Hence the rest of the story is just now appearing in the Heirloom.

The text from June, '25: Jan Muff found the picture below at a garage sale and shared it on FaceBook.

To that post Donald Meyers said, "Soda Springs used to have a race called the Flying 30's. We'd hike up as far as possible on that run. A little above that was lift served. Shove off, point'm down and drop into a tuck. Rumor was if you clocked a run under 30 seconds, you would hit 60 mph. Lots of Fun!"

Then Steve's email said, "It used to be called the "Flying Forty" for many years, but everyone was beating 40 seconds, so it got changed to a 30 second threshold. You get under 30 seconds and you get a pin. This picture is of me crossing the finish line in 28.7 seconds. This was in March, 1973. It's approximately a half mile, so I averaged over 62 mph... on a pair of Dynastar S430 slalom skis, not downhill skis! It's not a group start so it's each person alone going against the clock." We can see the race line in Steve's picture, left. In a later email Steve said, " That's George Carmignani to the left of Steve, National Ski Patrol, from the Skoaler's lodge across the street from the old store."



# More from Steve About Life in the Old Days

About George first Steve said, "yes he's behind me on my right at the finish line. He was kind of in charge of safety and timing for the race. He and my dad, Don, were all on the National Ski Patrol as volunteers. There would be 6-8 patrollers on duty most days.

"By the way, notice no helmet? These days you can't go out to get the mail without Mommy or Daddy making you wear a helmet! Anyway, the Flying 30 was a couple times a year and was strictly for fun and bragging rights.

"I raced for the Soda Springs Spartans from '66-'72. We trained or raced every Saturday and Sunday from first snow through Easter, plus all holidays. We couldn't get enough! We'd leave Lafayette on Friday anywhere from noon to 3:00, and come home Sunday around 4:30... every week. That's why my parents built a cabin, so that we could all ski and have fun. We raced Slalom and Giant Slalom, with typically only one, maybe two downhill a year. I honestly don't think I free-skied five-ten full days until I went to college. But I wouldn't change a thing; those were the best years of my life. We were right across the street from Beacon Hill Lodge and Soda Springs Lodge was a two minute walk up the hill. Both were jam-packed with bus loads of kids from Sacramento and it was just one big party every weekend. Beacon Hill had a pizza parlor and a live band in the basement, and Soda had a pool table and pinball machines. We had two worlds; all our "flatland" friends and all our "Soda" friends. US 80 hadn't had an impact yet on Soda Springs. It just got us up there faster! But as Truckee and Squaw and Tahoe City and Northstar and Kings Beach grew, the Summit declined. And Beacon Hill burned down and the Soda Springs Hotel went condo and that killed things.

## Book Review

### The Ungodly

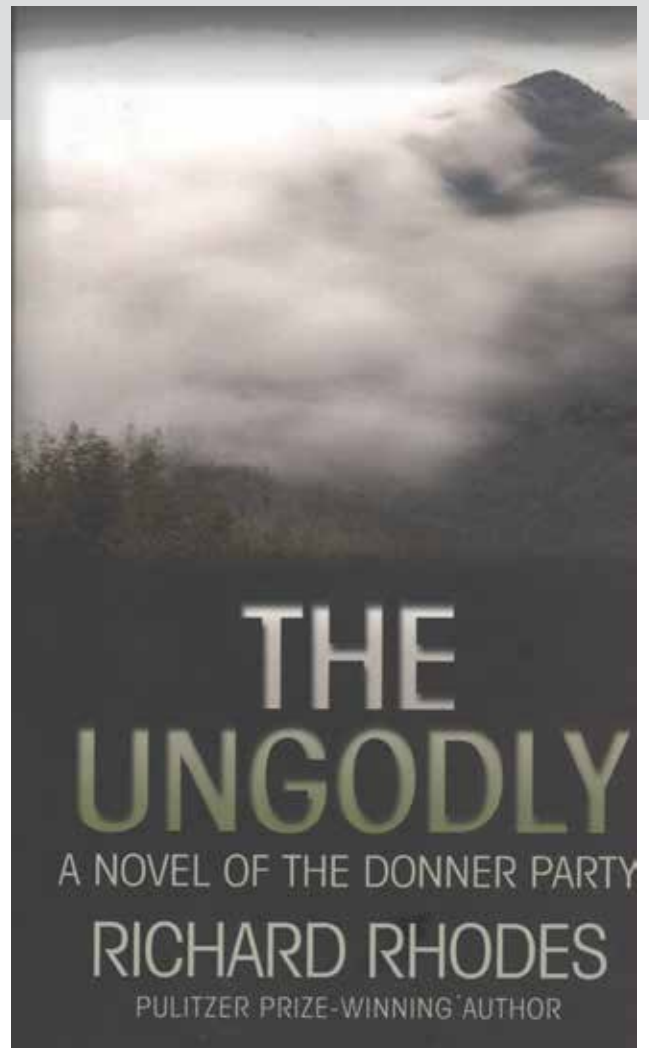
#### A Novel of the Donner Party

Richard Rhodes

382 pages 2007

Despite the word "novel" in the subtitle, this is not a traditional sort of novel where there is a story that has conflict that moves the plot along with characters with whom the reader can identify. This book has no real plot, no character exposition, and no specific setting. It is told in the form of a diary as the Donner Party moves across the continent and then settles in at Donner Lake. Added to that are diary entries from James Breen's diary with the narrator stepping in to tell what's happening around the people or elsewhere from the Breen diary. A couple of letters are also used. In this form the book covers all of the episodes in the Donner Party story just as non-fiction books on the subject do.

What makes this book the "novel" is that it answers the many questions a reader of Donner Party literature might have beyond the basic. How did the people actually interact? What were the details? What were the discussions among the party members when they were confronted with Hastings cutoff for example? How were women or their views treated? What was the party thinking as its members arrived at Donner Lake. What did they say to each other as they tried to get over the pass? How did they divide themselves up at the lake? Did the Reed family keep walking even after Stanton and Sutter's Indians arrived with relief supplies or did the arrival of mules give the Reeds relief? Common sense says no but there's no evidence of what actually happened. Those details flesh out the story beyond what the non-fiction Donner Party books do. Adding made up details, though, can change the story.





Of course all those details in the above paragraph are made up. For example, when there is discussion among people about going back for one of their group left behind in the desert Mr. Rhodes provides this vignette. "Then the 3 went to Uncle Bill Graves and he was the angriest of all. He said bluntly that he would not kill one of his horses to save the life of a worthless foreigner who probably never did anyone any good. Graves flailed his arms..." This may do the real Mr. Graves a great disservice.

On the other hand Graves may really have had prejudices typical of many at the time. Another example describes the people at they reached the Truckee River. "They had never seen anything so lush in all their lives...They ran as they reached the bottom of the hill. Ran through the grass. Ran past the trees. Ran to the cool sweet ribbon of water. Jumped in and splashed each other. Ducked under. Drank the water through their ears and their eyes and their mouths and their noses. Through their skin, Through the palms of their hands and tie elbows and their feet. Laughed and cried..." That's kind of poetic but there is no description like that in any Donner Party book. Emerging from the desert, they may have acted that way. Knowing this is a "novel" helps us accept that piece of the story.

Here is an example of characters' interaction in Mr. Rhodes' telling. We can imagine the Donner Party standing atop Donner Pass stuck in the snow having gotten Capt. Sutter's mules up there. The snow was too deep to go on with the mules. What was the discussion that ended with the party going back down to the lake with the mules instead of continuing on to California?

Stanton had refused to go on without the mules because he'd promised to bring them back. An argument erupts. (Mr. Rhodes does not believe in quotation marks.) But you're our guide said Eddy. You ought to be at the head of the line finding us the way. Not back wet nursing them mules.

Stanton's eyes darted from Eddy's glare.

You can argue all you like he said his voice squeaking but I have an obligation to return those mules.

Goddamn you Stanton you got an obligation to guide us over these goddamned mountains. Eddy jerked on Stanton's coat sleeve and the small man pulled his arm away.

Leave him alone said Graves. He stepped forward. He's right about them mules Eddy. If we leave them behind and they die up here we're goin to have to pay for them.

Eddy threw up his hands.

My Jesus Christ do you people believe what you're hearing. He waved his arms in the air. Have you got any idea of what trouble we're in? This old man here is worried about money and this church usher here is worried about his good name....

There must have been arguments but here and in other cases Stanton is made out to be the villain which belies the actual heroic parts of his story which were ignored in favor of the made up.

South of them a domed mountain towered up. There were 25 or 30 feet of snow in the bottoms. Eddy couldn't believe the snow. "There must be more snow in the California mountains than any place else in the world."

Adding these details that may or may not have been what really happened but seem to be common sense reactions to events, means that we are now privy to family arguments, unsavory personal characteristics, and just general details of people caught in the extremes.

One does wonder at times whether the author simply took what's in any number of Donner Party books and just added what sounded good without doing much research himself. For example, John Stark was one of the heroes of the rescue expeditions. Rhodes names him John Starks in a couple of places. Capt. Sutter becomes Colonel Sutter in Rhodes' telling. Then there is geography. Descriptions of Donner Summit are not true to the geography but if you've never been here on Donner Summit you wouldn't know (and you've missed something). For example the Forlorn Hope could see the cabins from Donner pass in Rhodes' telling. In the real area that's not possible.

It's a small thing but while the author was adding details to flesh out the story he left some telling things out. When the Forlorn Hope left the lake in mid-December, they had had little food and struggled through the snow for three miles. Then they climbed a thousand feet up to the pass covering another few miles. They must have been hungry and exhausted. They must have been wet from sweat inside and wet on the outside from melting snow. Uncomfortable and scared hardly describe their state. Nevertheless, Mary Ann Graves turned on reaching the pass, looked back down and remarked, "The scenery was too grand for me to pass without notice." She also noted that someone else had said, "We were as near to heaven as we could get." I can't believe that real epi-

"Strewn around the cabin s were dislocated and broken bones- skulls, (in some instances sawed asunder with care for the purpose of extracting the brain)- human skeletons, in short in every variety of mutilation. A more revolting and appalling spectacle I never witnessed..."

Edwin Bryant as part of the Army party sent under General Kearny to collect and inter the remains.



He made the lake camp by noon and descended into the Murphy cabin. The litter of bodies around the entrance told him most of what he wanted to know. Inside the filthy cabin he took in the bones and wads of hair that lay scattered on the floor. The girls were there looking like wild animals but worst of all he surprised Keseberg cutting up the body of a dead child.

sode, one of the few actual details we do know was left out. Rhodes didn't even have to make anything up. It tells a lot about the characters, the members of the Forlorn Hope as well as Donner Summit.

Instead Rhodes has Mary Ann Graves see mist in the distance and mistake it for smoke. She becomes hysterical, It's smoke Will! She yelled hysterically. It's smoke! They made it! They come to save us! She struggled to break free but he was too strong for her. Why are you holding me? she hissed. I want to get to camp. They got food for us. They got fire.

Might Mary Ann Graves who volunteered to leave the lake in quest to get to California to save her family, and who would have shown such tremendous strength surviving 31 days on the trek have really acted that way?

Rhodes notes that men didn't survive as well as the women. The Donner teamsters are pathetic. Maybe but there's no evidence in the actual literature.

The added details flesh out the story helping the reader visualize what life must have been like such as preparing ox hide for eating, moving a body or the stink in the cabins, or even the details of butchering a body. "Looking furtively around him he unbuttoned the shirt and raised his knife and plunged it into the belly. The liver was still half-frozen and he had to pry it from its place below the ribs. Then he cut it free. It was slippery and to hold it he cupped it in both hands. The craving made his head pound..." Even more gruesome was the pages at the end devoted to Keseburg all by himself waiting for the last relief party.

Sometimes the added details change the story we know from all the previous research. Charles Stanton is a hero. He left the party in the desert to head for California to get supplies from Sutter's Fort. He didn't have to go and he didn't have to return. After all, he had no family in the group. He did return though. He also volunteered to be part of the Forlorn Hope during which he died. Here is Rhodes view when Stanton began to have trouble keeping up:

Mary Graves pushed herself up and went to Stanton's side.

It's all right Mr. Stanton she said. You will make it.

No I won't said Stanton I'm going to die.

Bill Foster snorted.

Ah shit Stanton stop your snivleing.

There's women here Bill said Eddy. Watch your language.

I don't give a goddamn who's here said Foster make that sniveling son-of-a-bitch shut up.

Eddy turned to Stanton bawling won't do you no good Charlie he said. You got to just push on.

I'm going blind! screamed Stanton. I'm going blind!

Shut that up! yelled Foster.... And it goes on painting the hero as clearly defective and definitely differently from what the other Donner Party literature says.

The Donner Party may not have been a delightful group (but those details are beyond the scope of this review) but adding Rhodes' "details" does not do their memory any good.

We are all very well pleased with Callifornia particulary with the climate let it ever be so hot a day thare is allwais cold nights it is a beautiful Country it is mostly in vallie it aut to be beautiful Country to paus for our trubel getting ther

Virginia Reed

# Making History Colorful

WESTERN SUMMIT.



183. Main Street, Upper Cisco,  
5,911 feet elevation.

Above is downtown Cisco about 1867 when it was the end of track while the transcontinental railroad was being built over Donner Summit. The picture is by Alfred A. Hart, the railroad's photographer.

WESTERN SUMMIT.



183. Main Street, Upper Cisco,  
5,911 feet elevation.

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



Our February [Heirloom](#) had the story of the gondola rescue from behind Rainbow Lodge. The pictures above and below are good reminders of the event. The Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) of the DSHS had been up there some years before which is how the gondola car was discovered enabling Sugar Bowl to ask Christopher Peatross, owner of Rainbow Lodge, for the gondola car so they could restore and display it.

During that first foray to the top of the Rainbow Lodge (or Tavern) the MHRT came across some other odds and ends that were once part of the ski lift(s) that were behind Rainbow. Those are the pictures on the next two pages. To that collection we include some old pictures of Rainbow's ski area.

All along Old Highway 40 there used to be small mom and pop ski areas as well as the Auburn Ski Club's sites. All the sites had ski lifts of one sort or another such as rope tows, J-Bars, Poma lifts. They were superseded by large ski areas over time in the Tahoe area and on Donner Summit. The interstate highway enabled people to go further faster and so they could reach the Tahoe area. The move to those larger ski areas was also facilitated by the change in snowfall. Winters do not generally provide enough snow at the the sites of those old ski areas. The rain/snow line has moved up the hill a thousand feet or so. Today there are only remnants such as on the next page.



In case you want to go skiing at Rainbow.



RAINBOW POMA LIFT  
1963



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



"SAL HILL"  
RAINBOW TAVERN CAL.



Top left: looking up the Rainbow Lodge ski hill.  
Middle left: looking down the ski run. Bottom left:  
the bottom of J-bar next to the lodge. Above: two  
fellows with the J-bar. Bottom: two fellows outside  
the Rainbow Lodge.





# Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



On this page some of the remnants of the ski lift(s) above Rainbow Lodge. Left is Art Clark. Top picture shows Sue Ellen Benson, of the Rainbow subdivision and Bill Oudegeest, a member of the MHRT (see the start of this story).



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.

## Membership

I/we would like to join the Donner Summit Historical Society and share in the Summit's rich history

- ☐ new membership
- ☐ Renewing membership
- ☐ Individual Membership \$40
- ☐ Family Membership \$60
- ☐ Friend \$100
- ☐ Sponsor \$250
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- ☐ Patron \$500
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## Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



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## DOWNTOWN TRUCKEE HISTORY MUSEUMS



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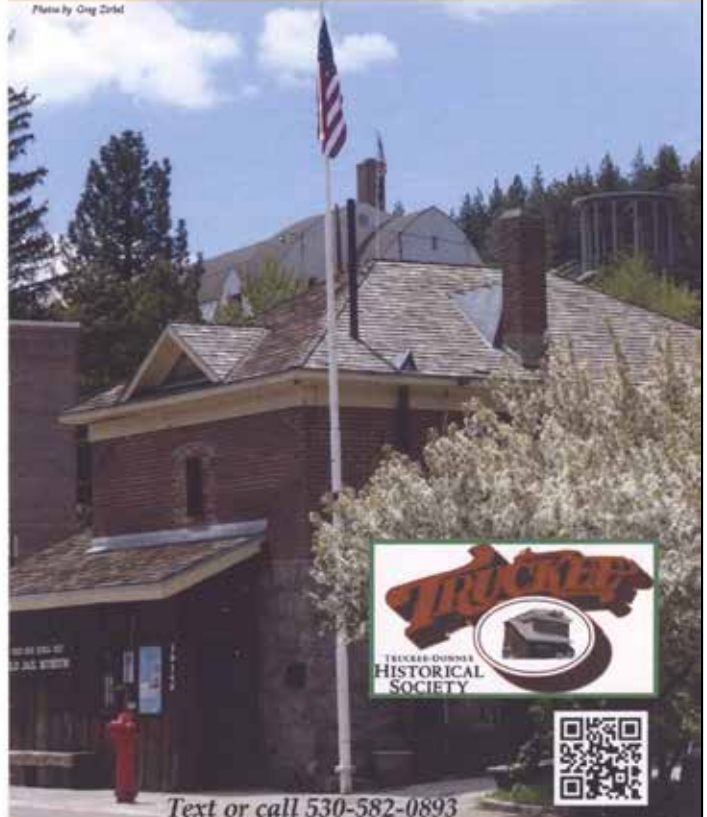
Visit the Truckee Railroad Museum

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## DOWNTOWN TRUCKEE HISTORY MUSEUMS

Photo by Greg Zorlat



Text or call 530-582-0893

### Old Truckee Jail Museum

[OldJailMuseum@TruckeeHistory.org](mailto:OldJailMuseum@TruckeeHistory.org)



Want more history, visit our nearby friends at the  
Donner Memorial State Park &  
Donner Summit Historical Society at Soda Springs



Museums are 100% volunteer 501(c)(3)s





# DONNER PARTY HIKE

October 4 & 5, 2025



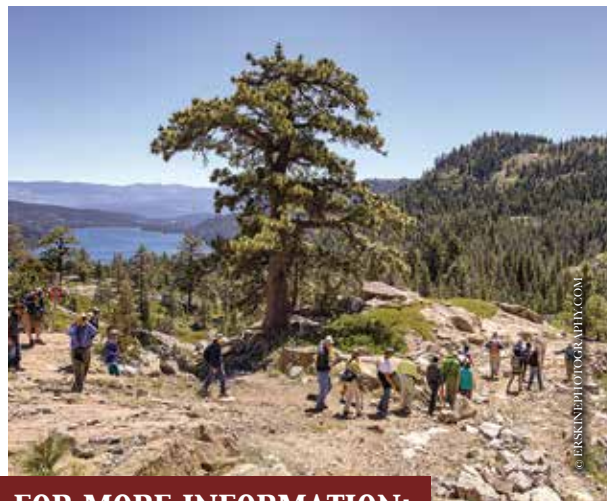
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*Learn secrets  
of the Sierra  
as you hike with  
local historians.*

**Saturday:**  
Scenery  
Illustrated history hikes  
Lunch at Sugar Bowl  
Donner Party chautauqua  
Reprise of Stephens Party  
**Sunday** (optional extension)  
The Donner party

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[info@donnerpartyhike.com](mailto:info@donnerpartyhike.com)  
[donnerpartyhike.com](http://donnerpartyhike.com)



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**Register  
early to save**

**E**xplore Donner Summit with local historians on illustrated\* interpretive walks and hikes. You'll discover why Donner Summit is the most historically significant square mile in California.

**SATURDAY HIKES**- Choose from one of eight hikes ranging from 3.5 to 6 miles with varying degrees of difficulty. Explore the trails, see petroglyphs and the China Wall. Stroll through meadows or discover hidden Sierra lakes. Price includes guided hike, hamburger lunch, afternoon chautauqua about the Donner Party, and presentation of 1844 Stephens Party's 2025 reprise.

Saturday Hike: \$65 per hiker (\$75 after September 19)

**SUNDAY WALKING TOUR**—Learn about the grueling mishaps of the Donner Party and the archaeological finds that remain. Then, it's on to Donner Memorial State Park to view the Murphy Cabin Site and Pioneer Monument. Price: \$20 additional (\$85 total - \$105 after September 19).

**REGISTER TO SECURE YOUR SPOT IN TIME** - Tour size is limited.  
[donnerpartyhike.com](http://donnerpartyhike.com)

\*We bring along lots of old photographs



PRODUCED BY DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY a 501c3  
[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

# Museum of Truckee History



## 2025 History Talks

Free to attend, donations appreciated

### Truckee's Logging Railroads and Lumber Towns

April 8th at 6 p.m.

By Dan Cobb & Judy DePuy

### Truckee's Chinese Railroad Story

May 13th at 6 p.m.

By Jerry Blackwill

### Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party

June 10th at 6 p.m.

By Ron Grove

### National Recognition Comes to Donner Summit

July 8th 6 p.m.

By Dave DePuy

### Every Picture Tells a Story ~ TDHS Image Collection

August 19th at 6 p.m.

By Heidi Sproat

Talks held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of each month at the  
Truckee Tahoe Airport, 10356 Truckee Airport Road

[Info@MuseumOfTruckeeHistory.org](mailto:Info@MuseumOfTruckeeHistory.org)

GPZ 2025-03-24