

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

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

November 2025 issue #207



Edwin Prime's 1850 Travel to California Via Donner Summit

Will Bagley an historian of the American West says that about 28% of the emigrants traveling across the Sierra went by way of Donner Pass. That would seem to give us lots of material about Donner Summit in the mid-19th Century. Unfortunately for us most of those emigrants didn't leave us with anything useful. Most of those emigrants who did keep diaries kept what they wrote to the basics: distance traveled, the weather, availability of water and forage, etc. They were in a hurry to get to the promised land, California, and probably didn't make room for paper and writing utensils. So when we get to a diary with detail we take notice. We've not written about emigrants in quite a while and all the detail in Mr. Prime's diary make it eminently worth sharing with [Heirloom](#) readers.

Edwin M. Prime's 1850 journal covers his trip to California via Donner Pass. Until the group approaches Donner Pass we'll only highlight some of the experiences travel by wagon across the country provided. His diary is full of details of the crossing to California.

"This journal was not intended for the public gaze but was kept for the gratification of the party concerned."

E. M. Prime

Mr. prime was taken by gold fever. He "resolved to see the elephant" (the "elephant," in 19th Century vernacular, was something to see and experience but probably never to see or experience again) and so in March, 1850, accompanied by some friends he headed for the California "gold regions." The whole experience turned out to be a "wild goose chase," he said which was the case with most gold seekers.

Towards the end of May the wagon train came together consisting of 18 wagons, 50 men, and 140 head of cattle. The wagons were full of hard biscuits, flour, salt pork, sugar, rice, syrup, tea and "a great many small articles for our journey."

The diary gives us a good feeling for what it was like traveling in the old days They crossed the Missouri River on ferries at \$1 per wagon. They met Indians, bad weather, and "musquitos"; came across buffalo skulls with Californians' names penciled on them (presumably graffiti left by those who had already passed), saw graves and abandoned wagons of those who were headed to California, along with animal carcasses. They endured stampedes of their cattle (which included the oxen that were

August 29

"The night was very cold and as we had left camp without our coats we were nearly froze. We rolled about in the dust before the fire freezing on one side while we roasted the other until morning when we got up looking like a set of wandering arabs our hair and clothes completely filled with dust."

Story Locations in this Issue

Cisco pg 6/8 RR crossing pg 17 Sugar Bowl pg 5 weather station pg 10

DONNER SUMMIT



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 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. 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. Or you can use this shortened URL made by Heidi Sproat of the Truckee Donner Historical Society. <http://bit.ly/418lhxN>

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pulling the wagons) and had to watch for wolves. They saw buffalo herds, "sublimely beautiful!" scenery, and large yellow rattlesnakes. There was the constant search for water and forage. There were drownings and toads with horns and tails. Independence Rock was covered with the names of "Californians that have passed" (sic). Prime and friends left their signatures on the top.

There was more: buffalo chips for cooking, "musquitos" in many places, using muddy water for cooking, having to wait in a line of a hundred wagons waiting to cross a river on the ferry, writing a letter home (which would be taken east by those going in that direction), adjusting the wagon "reach" to put the wheels closer together, and taking time out for washing clothes. Ferry charges early in the trip were \$1 per wagon, then \$2 per wagon and by the time they were crossing the Platte River the charge was \$5 per wagon. Prime notes that that last ferry person could "clear from one thousand to fifteen hundred dollars per day." There was no need for them to go to California he said. Swimming their cattle across rivers was difficult. There were springs of poisonous water surrounded by "plenty of dead horses cattle and mules having died by drinking." They endured "mountain fever" (sic) and cold, "During the night it was so cold that we almost froze." Sometimes water was "as cold as ice" and they almost froze while doing a river crossing and then having to dry out their provisions and clothing.

Then there was the weather. The wind and dust could be terrible. One episode capsized a tent and "filled our eyes and hair with dust and sand" "Resembling the very picture of hard times."

Upon arrival in Salt Lake City they bought vegetables ("which was a treat to us having had nothing of the kind on our route.") While there some of the "boys" (men) hired out to the Mormons to help with the harvest. The pay was one bushel of wheat per day which worked out to \$5-\$6. While in Salt Lake the group went to a concert, re-provisioned, put on an exhibition, shod cattle, heard Mormon preaching, and ate in a boarding house (dinner was \$1.25). They discovered it was impossible to sink in the Salt Lake.

After hearing the Mormon preaching there was a brass band, singers and "dance tunes." Prime was particularly taken with "a bevy of young ladies who were seated in the same pew with us, to give the sermon a thought. They eyed us with rather a musical look (and well they might for we had not shaved in the last three months and our shirts had been worn for two weeks."

Further west there were sulfur springs, hot springs, alkali springs, springs full of ice, a hot tar spring, as well as beautifully pure springs.

They traveled at night through the desert and noted the thermometer said the day temperature "stood during the day at one hundred and forty degrees." "not a sprig or anything could be seen on the desert as far as the eye could reach."

At one point after crossing the desert "Some of the boys got rather impatient and started off for the mines with their packs on their backs" That was August 29. Two days later the main party came upon two of the men "Waiting for us they having had enough of packing."

As they got closer to California Indians stole livestock many times which occasioned reprisals by the white men

July 18

"In the afternoon saw a band of about forty Crow Indians on horse back who were out on a foray as we supposed. They were all fine looking fellows and well mounted They went by like the wind and were soon lost in the distance. Drove fifteen miles and camped on the Sweet Water. We kept a strong guard out all night but were not molested by the indians."

Sept 27

"This morning a train arrived who have lost the greatest portion of their teams on the desert. It was a sad sight to see the property of all kinds that lay strewn over the desert. Waggons enough to fence a farm and dead animals enough to stop the hog hole. The stench arising from dead carcasses was perpetual. To day I am teetotaly blind. My eyes are swelled entirely shut and are very painfull. Hitched up and crossed the Truckie Rivver. The current was very swift and from two to three feet in depth. Drove four miles to Waldo station. Here we received some flour and beef ... for past favours."

Sept 28

"Received into our company Dr- Truett, wife and daughter from St. Louis whom we found destitute of a team Haveing lost all their horses and mules by the indians and the hardships of the desert."

Looking back we can wonder about how emigrants found their way. Prime's group gives us one idea dated Sept. 4:

"Drove ten miles over a low range of hills which were covered with low cedars and small bushy pines and struck a small creek which we suppose to be a tributary of the St. Mary's Rivver. Haveing no guide for this part of our route we are entirely lost. There was considerable Gossing [guessing] as to our whereabouts but to no effect We had a number of Col. Fremonts maps in our train but could not find this route laid down Drove fifteen miles farther and had good feed and water."

How they got back on track is not revealed.

One day they met two men with mules coming back from California "They gave us encouraging news which we very much stood in need of having seen so much of sickness and death our spirits were at ebb tide."

Another day they ran into a band of Mormons heading for Salt Lake City. They had musicians in their group who "were none of the best it was a grand treat to us Poor Devils having heard nothing sweeter than the growling of wolves since leaving the States." There was celebration on the Fourth of July. Another celebration was described, "we made a merry night of it and rather think a more noisy set never camped on the banks of Green Rivver."

On Sept 12 they met a large group of Mormons heading for Salt Lake who said they were "still four hundred miles from the mines and would see the Eliphant before we got through in the shape of snow on the mountains. But that remains to be seen." Here we might hear ominous music if it was 1846, the year of the Donners.

Then as we get close to Donner Pass we have the actual diary entries with most spelling and grammar corrected. We'll leave out the quotation marks.

Oct. 3.

Good road, Drove thirteen miles through a forest of beautiful pine, spruce and cedar. Some of these trees were from five to eight feet in diameter and from two to three hundred feet in height. Camped on a small spring creek and had good feed for our teams.

Oct.4

Drove through a heavy forest for twelve miles when we arrived at the Cannibal Cabins. Here the unfortunate Donner party four years ago the twenty seventh day of September last were blocked in by the snow and were reduced to such an extremity that they were compelled to eat the dead bodies of their companions which gives the name of the cannibal

cabins here we camped for night. Around the cabins were stumps of trees which were from ten to sixteen feet in height having been cut by them [unclear] showing the depth of snow that must have fallen during their stay in the mountains. We are now six miles from the summit of the Sierra Nevada. Parenthetically the Donners had arrived at the same place on October 31.

Oct. 5

Drove five miles when we began to ascend the "back bone" of the Sierra- which was very steep and tedious We had to double teams to ascend. After some hard pulling and a great deal of noise we at last arrived to the summit. The altitude of which was 9,700 feet. Being two thousand feet higher than the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains. [This sounds like Coldstream Pass, two over from Donner Pass which is a bit less than 8,000 feet or so]. And still there was many peaks around us that rose for thousands of feet above where we stood. Bearing their snow capped heads in majestic grandeur to the very clouds. We now begin to descend the mountains which was steep and rocky. Drove five miles down the mountain side and came to a small valley where we camped for night [Summit Valley]. We now feel ourselves safe [?] for the mines as we have passed the summit.

Oct. 6

This morning a short distance from camp we found a man murdered and covered up with willow bushes The side of his head was considerably fractured. As there was signs of there having been a trading station here we came to the natural conclusion that he had been murdered by his partners for his money. We took our shovels and hurried him as decently as possible. Hitched up and drove twelve miles over a road that defies description. Being a combination of everything bad...

Oct. 7.

Our road to day was horrible in the extreme. Let our wagons down twenty feet over a ledge of rocks by means of ropes. Made eight miles by hard driving and camped for night by a beautiful stream of pure water with but little grass.

Oct. 8

Commenced storming in the morning and lasted most of the day which was very disagreeable. Drove five miles over rocks and mountains and camped by a number of springs of rather poor water Feed very scarce.

Oct. 9

To day we went but two miles and it was a hard days work descending the mountains. We had to unyoke our cattle and drive them down the mountain singly as it was impossible to get them down with the yokes on. We had to let our wagons down twice upwards of three hundred feet by means of a rope hitched to the hind axletree besides chaining all the wheels to keep them from turning Used the pine trees beside the road

for snubbing posts- Camped in Bear Valley and took our stock off in the mountains about three miles for feed as the emigrants have swept everything before them in the shape of grass along the road. While herding our cattle measured a tree that had been blown down and found it to be three hundred and thirty feet in length although no more than five feet in diameter.

Oct. 10

Drove four miles up a steep mountain over rocks and old logs a road that defies description. Drove fifteen miles and camped at the Mountain Cottage. Tied our cattle up to the wagons as there was no feed to be had for them.

Oct. 11

Left the Mountain Cottage and drove eleven miles to Rock Creek and within four miles of Nevada City. Camped on

Rock Creek and drove our stock off some two miles for grass. In the afternoon cleaned up and went to Nevada [City] to see the Elephant. Paid two dollars for our supper which we got in the city and returned to Rock Creek

Oct. 12.

Sold off our stock and was paid in Feather River gold dust. Sold our cattle for seventy five dollars a yoke [two oxen] and the cow for seventy five dollars. Sold our wagon for twelve dollars and got cheated awfully. Pitched our tent on Rock Creek and made preparations for mining.

If you are interested in old diaries you should join OCTA, the Oregon California Trails Association. They have lots of archived diaries which is where Mr. Prime's diary is stored: OCTA (Oregon California Trails Association Merrill J. Mattes Collection)

From the Archives of Sugar Bowl

Last month the [Heirloom](#) included three old photographs Elissa Hambrecht, Sugar Bowl resident, had found as part of her quest to gather all the Sugar Bowl history she can find. See the 2024 "Gondola Rescue" in the February, '25 [Heirloom](#) for an example and a good story.

The database she has crafted contains the information and location of each item along with a snapshot. Using the database we can then see where the original item is and then make a high quality copy. Stay tuned for stories that come from that archive.

This month's [Heirloom](#) adventure includes four more of the seven beautiful photographs she had borrowed from Sugar Bowl homeowner, Richard Walker. Mr. Walker's father had obtained the photographs from Southern Pacific (successor to the Central Pacific which was the transcontinental railroad). Most of the pictures stretch back to 1866 or 1867 and some seem to be variations of Central Pacific photographs by A.A. Hart (see various [Heirloom](#) articles and picture entries in our [Heirloom](#) article and picture indices on our website). So although we've sort of seen these pictures we really haven't because there are slight differences in perspective or cropping. The quality is mostly fantastic; the photos may have been made from the actual negatives and so one wonders if there are more gems in the Union Pacific (successor to the Southern Pacific) archives.

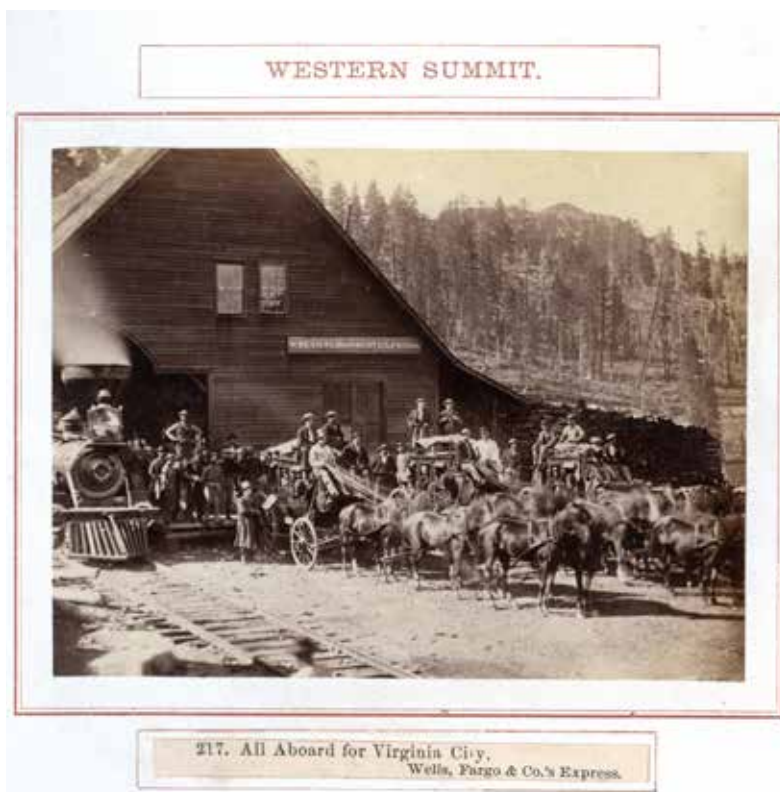
We thought readers would enjoy seeing these pictures and the variations from the well known photos. The captions are from the backs of the photographs. Next month four more photographs.



Here is a picture that was widely disseminated in the 19th Century showing end of track at Cisco. Trains stopped here and freight and passengers off loaded and disembarked to be loaded on to freight wagons and stagecoaches. Once the Donner Summit tunnels were completed Cisco was no longer the end of track and that activity went to the summit and then Truckee. The stagecoach business that apparently was pretty good at Cisco went elsewhere. Cisco had also been the jumping off spot for Meadow Lake and the gold mining there but that also disappeared. Check out the Meadow Lake stories in our [Heirloom](#) article index.

The photograph here is Cisco Stages "Stage coaches meeting Central Pacific train at Cisco 1867 Southern Pacific photo X31. This is a variation of Alfred A. Hart # 217 "All Aboard for Virginia City," right.

This is a mystery picture. The picture above was taken at a wider angle than the one right. It is clearly the same picture with the same people in the same poses. One can wonder why Mr. Hart chose to disseminate the one with the narrower focus rather than the one with locomotive and cars. His job was to memorialize the railroad, not stagecoaches. Still he saved the photo. Then there is the issue of the window in the building above the "Wells Fargo and Co. Express" sign. In some versions of the picture there are two window and in others just one. We can also wonder what happened on the day of the the picture regarding windows. We hasten to note that PhotoShop had not yet been invented.





Here is "The town of Cisco in the Sierra Nevadas, 1868 Southern Pacific photo X-3009." This was actually Lower Cisco as opposed to Upper Cisco which sat astride the tracks. When Cisco was end of track during the construction of the transcontinental railroad's summit tunnels, thousands of people lived in Cisco. This was "downtown" for Lower Cisco which sat about where the freeway goes past the service station at Cisco Grove. This is also Alfred A. Hart #99 "Cisco Placer County 99." The cropping is just a bit different.

WESTERN SUMMIT.



99. Cisco, Placer county.

93 miles from Sacramento.



C.F. McGlashan was the editor and owner of the Truckee Republican. He thought a first hand account of riding through a snowstorm on the front of the lead engine to battle the snow during an 1874 storm would be good press. His snowplow was backed by six locomotives. Charging along at 40 miles an hour, the procession blasted into the snow. Six times the snow stopped the train.

As they moved higher toward Donner Summit the snow got lighter, producing "one of the most beautiful scenes that can be imagined. The Snow was light and loose, and, when the plow struck it, rose like a spray in two perfect arcs of a circle to the height of twenty feet, and the sun shining upon it produced an effect at once grand, beautiful and indescribable."

Donner Summit Heirloom
January, 2015

This is a Bucker Plow, "Central Pacific snowplow near Cisco in the Sierra, winter of 1867 Southern Pacific photo X-399."

This is a variation of Alfred A. Hart #239, right. Note that both pictures have people posed in the same way in the same places but some are different people. The cropping is a bit different too.

Bucker plows started out at 12 tons of steel pushed by a number of locomotives that cleared the tracks of snow. As time when by it was clear that 12 tons were not enough and they increased to 19.5 tons. All of that weight was pushed by up to twelve locomotives that would hit packed snow at full speed. Snow would fly and the plows were brought to a halt. The train then backed up and charged forward again to ram into the snow. All of the momentum was sometimes enough to blast through piles of "Sierra Cement."



Read more about Bucker Plows by looking in our article index



"Boating Party on Donner Lake, 1866 Southern Pacific negative X6304" This is Alfred A. Hart #128 and is not Donner Summit. Nevertheless it was in the picture collection and readers may enjoy considering who were these people? What were they doing that particular day and what were their lives like in Truckee? Maybe they were tourists who took the train to end of track at Cisco and then hopped on the stagecoach to come down to Truckee to one of the resorts. What were their dreams? Were they fulfilled?

There are two pictures below because this is a stereoscope view, the entertainment system of the 19th Century. People were amazed at the three dimensional displays of far off lands and would pass the device, below left, from one person to another.



From the Archives

Weather station pictures found by Heidi Sproat of the Truckee Donner Historical Society

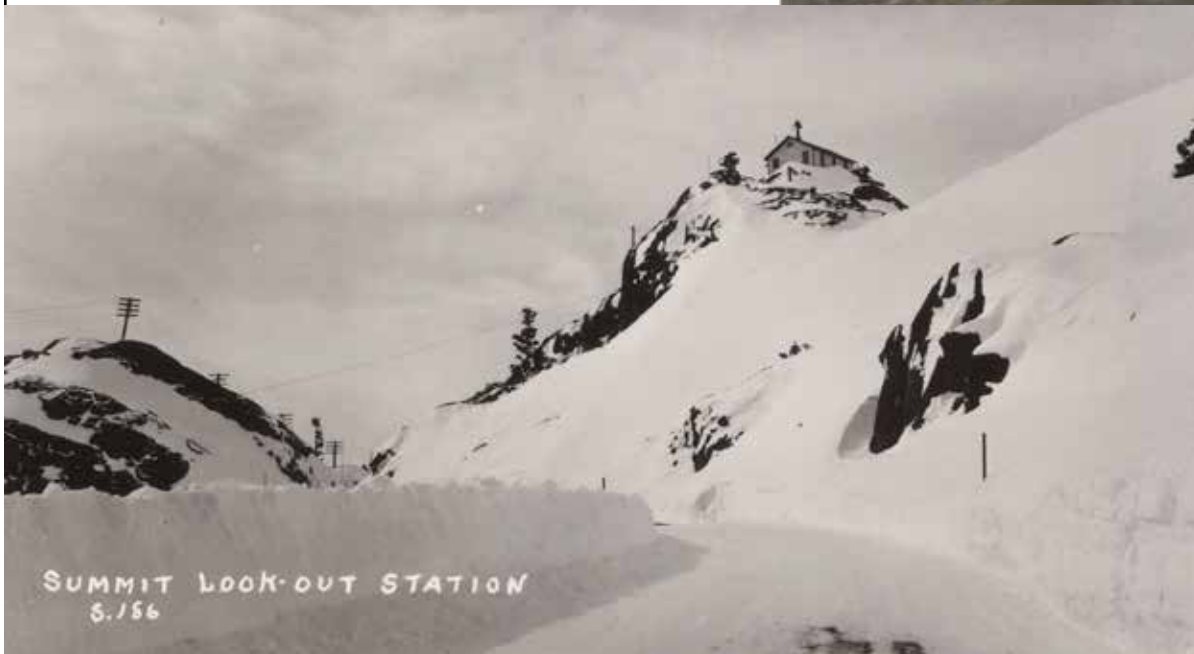
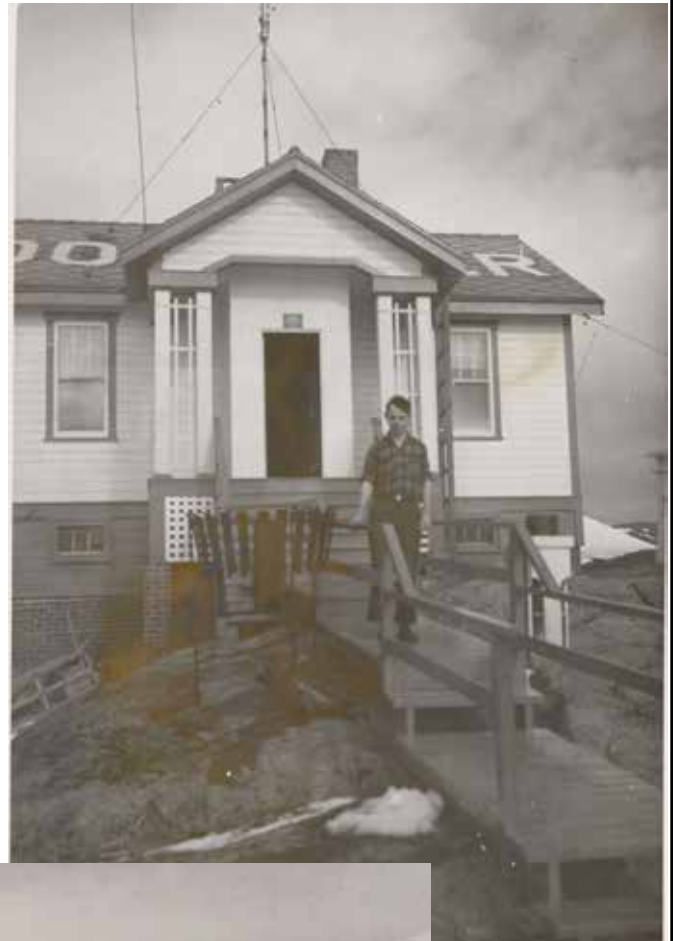
This collection contains the papers, notebooks, and photographs of James Edward Church, who was a professor of Classics at the University of Nevada, Reno, and the man known as the "father of snow science." Church developed the Mt. Rose snow sampler to accurately measure the water content of snow. In 1935, Congress created the Federal-States Co-Operative Snow Survey based on Church's method; it continues to be used today.

This is the weather station atop Donner Pass for the first transcontinental air route. Before instrumentation pilots flew by what they could see. To give them more to see the Federal Government laid out the transcontinental air route. Emergency landing strips were built along with weather stations. The roofs of the weather stations carried the name of the station and the station's number. In the Donner Pass case it was "Donner" and "15" along with "SF SL" for San Francisco, west, and Salt Lake, east. There were also large concrete arrows marking the route (check out our article index). The nearest arrow sits atop Signal Hill, Donner Ski Ranch where there is still a red beacon stemming from the first days of instrumentation.

There was also a dormitory building a few hundred yards away from the weather station. Imagine the commute. Of course the view from the weather station was spectacular (see our picture index).

A fun story says that when they built the station they affixed steel cables over the building and anchored them in the granite. That prevented high winds from taking away the weather station.

In the picture below Highway 40 is in the foreground and the pass sits between the two peaks.



There are many more pictures listed in our [picture index](#) and there's more written in articles in our [article index](#).

See any [Heirloom](#) page on our website.

What was it like to ride a stagecoach over Donner Summit just a year before the railroad?

We were looking for something in the newspaper about a train excursion over Donner Summit that was mentioned in [Picturesque California](#). Following up on footnotes or excerpts from old books can lead us to stories. This search was not successful for the train story but it did lead us to another.

Here we have Mr. Henry Boller who took a stage trip from Virginia City to Sacramento in February, 1866. We've taken out some little anecdotes, humorous asides, and general commentaries (where you see the ellipses, the three dots) to shorten things a bit. Mr. Boller starts off on the stage and then switches to a sleigh to go over Donner Summit. There he meets some horrible roads. In Dutch Flat he and his companions have to change to horses since the road is even worse. In Colfax they pick up the train at what was then end of track during the railroad's construction, and end in Sacramento. There are some interesting descriptions here.

Along with reading this you might want to look at our website's book review pages and see the review of [Cavalry Life in Tent & Field](#). Mrs. Orsemus Boyd came west to meet up with her husband and she also took a stage ride over Donner Summit in 1868. I'll just tantalize you with a quote from Mrs. Boyd in our July '14 [Heirloom](#), "A pen far more expert than mine would be required to do justice to the horrors of that night." There's no need for a more expert pen since she did a pretty good job with her pen. There are a couple of other mentions of stage rides over the summit in past [Heirlooms](#). Take a look at our article index, which can be found on each [Heirloom](#) page.

1868

Stage Ride Over Donner Summit

Part II

ACROSS THE SIERRA NEVADA.

By Henry A. Boller

From [Lippincott's Magazine](#) for June 1868

The first part was in the May '25's [Heirloom](#)

In last May's exciting episode Henry Boller started his stage trip from Virginia City to California. We read about the expertise of the "autocrats of the stagecoach" (the stage drivers), the "Golden State of California, teeming with wealth and enterprise," and the state of stage coach riding in 1868.

Here the journey continues after dinner at Donner Lake and goes over Donner Summit. Keep in mind this was February. We'll dispense with quotation marks.

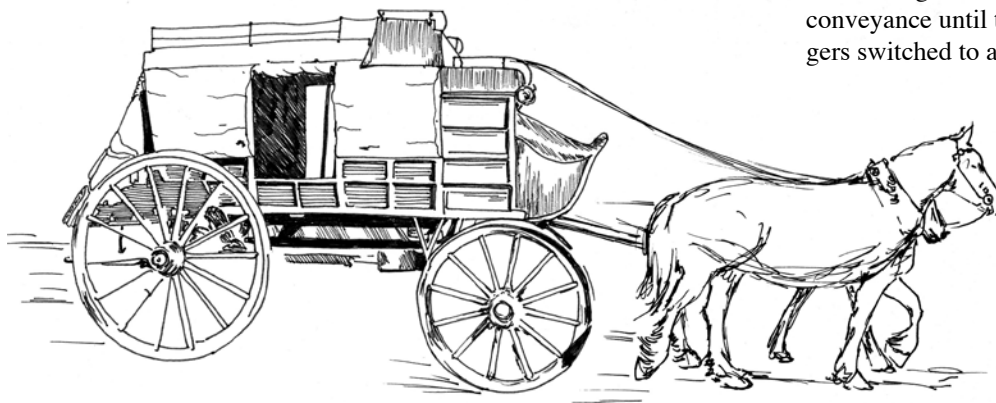
Now came the really dangerous part of the road: we here commenced in earnest the crossing of the Sierra Nevada. High above us towered the grand old mountains, guarding like grim sentinels the portals to the promised land of California. Huge masses of snow, seeming to need but a breath to topple them over, and gathering fresh strength from their impetus, roll

down into the valley a frightful avalanche ! Occasionally to our left we see stumps of trees cut off some fifteen or twenty feet from the roots, and also the ruins of several log cabins. The driver tells me that the cabins are the remains of those erected by the Donner party, and the stumps now rearing their ghastly heads high above the snow were nearly on a level with it that terrible winter. Horrible sufferings ! Frightful deaths ! If they had only known it, or had succeeded in the attempt, it was but a short distance from the fatal encampment to the mild and sunny climate of California.

In answer to my question the driver said that in a month hence, when the sun has greater power, the danger is very much increased and lives are not unfrequently lost.

We anxiously watch each impending cliff with its snowy crown, and feel relieved, on emerging from the gloomy defile, to find ourselves upon the comparatively level summit of the range. What a sight ! Snow, snow, snow ! And it is through this that the iron horse is soon to plow his resistless way, and, laugh to scorn those whose faith in a railroad to the Pacific wavered when the impassable barrier of the Sierra Nevada was mentioned. [The transcontinental railroad was completed in May of the next year after Mr. Boller's crossing.]

The " rack of torture,"



A mud wagon - Mr. Boller's conveyance until the passengers switched to a sleigh.

How lonely the station looks we are coming to almost buried in the snow, and yet everything about it is exceedingly comfortable. Huge fires roar in the chimneys, immense ricks of hay overshadow the spacious stables; each and all, with silent eloquence, cordially inviting the storm-belated traveler to rest. On this summit the snow is constantly filling up the road, and snowplows are regularly run over it to keep the track in a passable condition. Our new driver is as fast as the old one, his horses are every bit as good, and we recline in our comfortable seats and think how splendid it would be if we could only transport some of the spirit of that ride to the far distant East — the vast masses of snow, the magnificent mountains, the towering pines, the dashing driver and his Mazeppa [a Ukrainian military leader tied naked to horses to carry Ivan Mazeppa back to Ukraine and away from the woman with whom he was having an affair] team, so different from the sober, staid, discreet style in vogue in the land of steady habits.

The shades of night are now falling fast, and the dark forest through which our road leads looks more somber than ever. The snow is not near as deep as it was, and in many places the ground is almost bare; the air, too, is milder. We are fast descending the western slope of the mountains, and begin to get a soft breath from the tropics. Before going much further we find it necessary to change back to the mud wagon again, and for nine miles crawl at a snail's pace over a corduroy road of the roughest possible construction — nine miles of mortal agony, of cruel bumps and dislocating jerks. Right glad are we to see, from the heights behind it, the twinkling lights in the pretty town of Dutch Flat, in California.

The remainder of the road, until we strike the cars of the Central Pacific Railroad at Colfax, eleven miles further, we are told, is utterly impassable for wagons, and has to be traveled

on horseback; so I was not sorry at the prospect of resting my sore and wearied limbs. The "rack of torture," as one of the party feelingly called the last nine miles of corduroy, had most effectually taken away all the romance of our splendid sleigh ride across the Sierras.

At early daylight the stage agent went around, gave each passenger a tender punch in the ribs, thrusting his lantern right into his face to see if he was awake and comprehended the call, "Boots and saddles." With many a groan did the unfortunate wights follow him to the stables, where our would be chargers were in readiness.

As stage horses they were richly entitled to their full meed of praise; but as saddle animals ah! they are horses of other colors.

By the time the company is mustered and mounted it numbers fourteen, including the conductor and several local passengers two, by the way, being ladies, and one a genuine John Chinaman in the full glory of his Celestial splendor.

"How far to the cars?" inquired an individual bestriding a very rough trotter.

"Eleven miles."

"Pshaw!" said another, thinking, doubtless, of the fleet-footed steeds and the flying sleigh of the day before, "a mere bagatelle of a distance, we'll do it in no time." The spirits of the whole party were on the rise; the new-comers feel particularly exuberant and addressed sundry jocose observations to the unfortunate possessor of a pigtail, upon whose unappreciative ears the sharp arrows of wit fell harmless.

"Bless my stars! here's a big mud bole!" shouted out a

California — "the vast masses of snow, the magnificent mountains, the towering pines, the dashing driver and his Mazeppa team, so different from the sober, staid, discreet style in vogue in the land of steady habits."

luckless equestrian, as his horse plunged in up to his belly.

"Follow after me carefully, gentlemen," said the conductor, coming to his assistance, and we were soon fain to believe that the road was not only impassable for wagons, but well-nigh for horses also. Our swelling plumes were gently smoothed down, and we followed the conductor at a slow walk in Indian file, moreover picking our way most carefully. It was broad daylight, and we were in full view of some placer mines now being worked by extensive hydraulics. The road ran almost parallel with the line of the railroad, upon which thousands of Chinese laborers were swarming like bees, cutting through hills, leveling mountains, building embankments and grading. No one in our party experienced the slightest difficulty with his charger but the unfortunate China man, whose girth was always getting loose, or something else out of order. Once, while ascending a steep hill, his saddle slipped back and turned; the horse started and plunged, and a mingled mass of pigtail, nankeen and chopsticks flew into the air and struck the ground, whence arose a badly frightened, mud bespattered, but uninjured Celestial.

To catch the horse, adjust the saddle, and assist Mr. Chinaman to remount, delayed us some little, and between the laughter of the spectators (who would have thought it exceedingly funny if the brains and pig-tail had been generally scattered), the anathemas of the conductor and the jabbering explanations of the equestrian Celestial, the scene was highly sensational.

"How far to the depot?"

"Seven miles."

"Goodness have we only come four miles?" growled one; to which another added, "Four of the longest miles I have ever ridden !" So on we jogged.

Yesterday we had nothing but snow, snow, snow. To-day it is mud, mud, mud !

"Look, boys, flowers and as I live, there are strawberries !"

"Hurrah for old Californy !" shouted an enthusiastic admirer. The air was warm and balmy: how oppressive our Winter clothing began to feel ! Coats were unbuttoned, gloves and

tippets removed. So genial was the weather that it spread its influence to me, under which I presented to the conductor (thereby firmly ingratiating myself in his favor) my fur gloves and muffler. All things must have an end, and so we at last arrived at Colfax.

A train of cars, the first I had seen for several years, with, a large, handsome engine, resplendent with polished brass, fumed and fretted in its impatience to be off. Seated in the elegant cars, the whistle sounded, and over the rails the train speeded toward Sacramento.

Actually on a smooth, well-equipped road in that wonderland of California, I could hardly realize the fact. Swiftly as had our wild horses drawn us across the mountains and over the snow, it was nothing to the speed of that iron horse as he roared and rattled over, the plain.

Farms and improvements begin to crowd each other in the rapidly changing landscape. The American and Feather rivers appear in sight: the speed is slackened as the train rolls by the populous Chinese quarter. The river is crowded with odd looking boats, teeming with their still odder inmates. Round a curve, and the engine whistles "down brakes" on the broad levee of Sacramento. It is Sunday, and very quiet the city is more quiet and orderly than one would expect to find in a country so new and impulsive as this. Stately steamers are moored at the land-

ings: omnibuses are in waiting to carry us to the hotels. We are driven to the Golden Eagle, on K street, and gladly seek rest from the fatigues of the past few days like a dream to look back upon, so swiftly had they passed.

The great, clanging quartz mills of Virginia City, the wild drive over the Sierra Nevada, the ludicrous ride to the depot, the cars, the calm Sabbath in the city. Everything so new, so strange, and yet so natural withal !

Here shall I rest a while, and bask in the rays of this sunny clime before commencing my proposed tour on horseback through the southern part of the State and among the vaqueros of California.

From June 18, 1868 Sacramento Daily Union

a corduroy road of the roughest possible construction — nine miles of mortal agony, of cruel bumps and dislocating jerks. Right glad are we to see, from the heights behind it, the twinkling lights in the pretty town of Dutch Flat, in California.

Book Review

Gabriel Conroy

497 pages (large print) 1875 1882

Bret Harte

Searching around for this and that (which is the technical term for the DSHS research department's primary function) for the Heirloom, our DSHS resident historians came across the subject "Donner Party fiction." That was something they'd never considered since there are so many Donner Party books, many of which have been reviewed in the Heirloom and occupy space on the DSHS website's book review page, to keep a curious reader busy.

Hunting around in Donner Party fiction we found the only novel Bret Harte ever wrote, Gabriel Conroy. Harte uses the basic idea, and Sierra winter setting, to craft a story that spans some years during the California Gold Rush. The DSHS department thought some Heirloom readers might be interested. Interestingly, Gabriel Conroy was mentioned in last month's October, '25 Heirloom in America's Wonderlands when that book's author was talking about Donner Lake, a "ghastly tale of cannibalism is told of the survivors, and the whole tragedy is embalmed in Bret Harte's novel of Gabriel Conroy."

Bret Harte (1836-1902) was a famous writer of Gold Rush era short stories. He'd come to California with his mother and tried teaching and prospecting but those didn't work out. Writing Gold Rush stories did work out. Harte became internationally famous and one of the highest paid American writers. His most famous stories are "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." His writing helped develop the classic Western stories and characters. His character descriptions were based on real people and his description of Gold Rush life were realistic.

Gabriel Conroy uses the Donner Party as the foundation of the story of Gabriel coming to California. On the very first page there is the foreshadowing of disaster.

"Snow. Everywhere. As far as the eye could reach—fifty miles, looking southward from the highest white peak,—filling ravines and gulches, and dropping from the walls of cañons in white shroud-like drifts, fashioning the dividing ridge into the likeness of a monstrous grave, hiding the bases of giant pines, and completely covering young trees and larches... Snow lying everywhere over the California Sierras on the 15th day of March 1848, and still falling.

"It had been snowing for ten days: snowing in finely granulated powder, in damp, spongy flakes, in thin, feathery plumes, snowing from a leaden sky steadily, snowing fiercely, shaken out of purple-black clouds in white flocculent masses, or dropping in long level lines, like white lances from the tumbled and broken heavens. But always silently! The woods were so choked with it—the branches were so laden with it—it had so permeated, filled and possessed earth and sky; it had so cushioned and muffled the ringing rocks and echoing hills, that all sound was deadened. The strongest gust, the fiercest blast, awoke no sigh or complaint from the snow-packed, rigid files of forest."

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GABRIEL CONROY

BY
BRET HARTE



BOSTON
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK: 11 EAST SEVENTEENTH STREET
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1882

No 1.

That's pretty realistic and it goes on for two more pages.

Then there is notice on a tree:

"Captain Conroy's party of emigrants are lost in the snow, and camped up in this cañon. Out of provisions and starving!

Left St. Jo, October 8th, 1847.

Left Salt Lake, January 1st, 1848.

Arrived here, March 1st, 1848.

Lost half our stock on the Platte.

Abandoned our waggons, [sic] February 20th."

In the opening scene a man, "haggard," "ragged," has gone scouting and returned.

"Here he stopped, or rather lay down, before an opening or cavern in the snow, and uttered a feeble shout. It was responded to still more feebly. Presently a face appeared above the opening, and a ragged figure like his own, then another, and then another, until eight human creatures, men and women, surrounded him in the snow, squatting like animals, and like animals lost to all sense of decency and shame.

"They were so haggard, so faded, so forlorn, so wan — so piteous in their human aspect, or rather all that was left of a human aspect,— that they might have been wept over as they sat there; they were so brutal, so imbecile, unreasoning and grotesque in these newer animal attributes, that they might have provoked a smile."

Harte is telling the story of a party of emigrants trapped in the snow in a canyon. They've left a notice in a tree some distance away but any rescue will be up to them huddled in shelters under the snow. Harte imagined what it would have been like and translated that imagining into evocative descriptions, "they were men and women without the dignity or simplicity of man and womanhood. All that had raised them above the level of the brute was lost in the snow." To add realism Harte writes conversations in the vernacular.

Reading books about the Donner Party one comes away

with what happened in recitations of dates and short diary entries or reminiscences cleaned up years after the fact. Since almost all are non-fiction there is no description of what people thought, personal interactions, or what the atmosphere was like. Harte solves that by imagining the conversations, interactions and descriptions there must have been. In the descriptions of the trapped people he says they fought, quarreled, swore, wept, sighed, and fainted all in one sentence. We can imagine the Donner Party did too.

In this opening scene the man who went out scouting has come back to report and then left for another mound in the snow. Those to whom he's reported then talked about having

no food and that the scout must have a secret source of food, maybe they should kill him. Another topic was that someone they picked up on the trail must be the source of bad luck. Then they eagerly listen to a party member describe a dinner he once had. It all seems so real — people desperate, trapped and how at least some must have acted in their desperation. We're also primed to see the worst of humanity: accusations, thievery, and even murder.

The man who was the scout, Phillip, talks to his apparent girl-friend, Grace, saying they must leave and leave behind those too weak. They can send help back, but they must go to survive. That sets up the rest of the story which takes

place in Gold Rush camps. Phillip and Grace escape leaving behind everyone else including Gabriel Conroy and Olly who are Grace's brother and sister.

Phillip leaves Grace at a miner's cabin and heads back to the trapped party as part of a rescue expedition. Apparently at least some people survive although there are allusions to cannibalism. A doctor in the group died but not before giving Grace a mining claim he had. Some of his property is buried to keep it safe. It will be rifled.

From there the story is a story of California, Spanish land grants, vigilantes, forgery, accusation of murder, aliases, coincidences, providential earthquakes, and trying to keep track of who is who among a long cast of characters.

Now things get confusing. Grace disappears but will reappear some hundreds of pages later with a different name. Phillip

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“There were the old rafters painted in barbaric splendour of red and brown stripes; there were the hideous, waxen, glass-eyed saints, leaning forward helplessly and rigidly from their niches; there was the Virgin Mary in a white dress and satin slippers, carrying the infant Saviour in the opulence of lace long-clothes; there was the Magdalen in the fashionable costume of a Spanish lady of the last century.”

turns out to have a different name too and was a member of the army. Gabriel survives entrapment in snow along with his sister, Olly, and since Grace is nowhere to be found Gabriel takes over the mining claim. The claim sits on a Spanish land grant with the mining interest taking precedence over the grant. The owner of the grant will turn out years later to be Grace. Throughout the book, before that person is identified finally, the story about her is that she is a “half breed” who had been brought up by a Californio (Spaniard) after her mother died. She only looks like a “half breed” because of what she’s been putting on her skin.

Coincidence plays a big part in the story to help move the plot along as is the case in many 19th Century novels. For example, when Gabriel rescues a woman on a stage that is almost washed away by a dam break, it will turn out that the woman was the wife of the doctor who died on Gabriel’s wagon train and gave the property to Grace. Gabriel and the woman will get married. Phillip will turn out to be a lawyer and have even a third name.

Knowing that many 19th Century novels were full of coincidences that lay out convenient solutions to plot points, we keep reading in order to find who is really who, what the various relationships are, who is what to whom, who will suddenly pop up after a few hundred pages, and how it all strings together. Harte does bring it all together.

There is some illogic from time to time. For example how did Phillip run into a rescue party and how did the rescue party know it was needed? How was he intending to rescue people on his own? How did the rescue party know where to go? Here there is a footnote by Harte solving all that. He says the Donner Party rescue parties were guided by clairvoyance. There is the notice in the tree which is also illogical. Who would put up the notice expecting someone to come by and read it?

Bret Harte’s observations of life in the gold diggings provide the reader with a view into 19th Century California life. Lots

of people changed their names to start over in California. Land grants were important and there were fights over them. Harte’s observations bring out interesting details. The rooming house has cloth and paper room partitions and ceiling. When a visitor knocks on one door heads pop out of all the other doors in the hallway. You can just imagine the detail.

In another description, “It was the first sound that for an hour had interrupted the monotonous jingle of his spurs or the hollow beat of his horse’s hoofs. And then, after the fashion of the country, he rose slightly in his stirrups, dashed his spurs into the sides of his mustang, swung the long, horsehair, braided thong of his bridle-rein, and charged at headlong speed upon the dozen lounging, apparently listless vaqueros, who, for the past hour, had nevertheless been watching and waiting for him at the courtyard gate.” It’s easy to “see” what Harte describes.

There are also the less savory details of 19th Century California in the prejudices of the time: “half breed,” women as the “deceitful sex,” “Niggerhead Tobacco,” “They might forgive you for killing Mexican of no great market value, but they ain’t goin’ to extend the right hand of fellowship to me after running off with their ringleader’s mustang,” “savage customs of her race,” “Greasers,” and “You gentlemen are so critical about complexion [sic] and colour...”

Then there is 19th Century writing which uses a richer vocabulary than we use today, “Gabriel had nursed many sick men, and here was one who clearly ought to be under the doctor’s hands, economising his vitality as a sedentary invalid, who had shown himself to him hitherto only as a man of superabundant activity and animal spirits. Whence came the power that had animated this fragile shell? Gabriel was perplexed; he looked down upon his own huge frame with a new and sudden sense of apology and depreciation, as if it were an offence to this spare and bloodless Adonis.”

Finally, just for fun, there is an allusion to “a truly magnifi-

“The interior courtyard no longer existed. The sombreness of the heavy Mexican architecture was relieved by bright French chintzes, delicate lace curtains, and fresh-coloured hangings. The broad verandah was filled with the latest novelties of Chinese bamboo chairs and settees, and a striped Venetian awning shaded the glare of the seaward front. Nevertheless, Donna Maria, out of respect to the local opinion, which regarded these changes as ominous of, if not a symbolical putting off the weeds of widowhood, still clung to a few of the local traditions. It is true that a piano occupied one side of her drawing-room, but a harp stood in the corner. If a freshly-cut novel lay open on the piano, a breviary was conspicuous on the marble centre-table. If, on the mantel, an elaborate French clock with bronze shepherdesses trifled with Time, on the wall above it an iron crucifix spoke of Eternity.”

cent plan to bring the water of Lake Tahoe to San Francisco by ditches..." Long time Heirloom readers will remember Alexi Von Schmidt and his plan to do exactly that. See the February, '21 [Heirloom](#).

[Gabriel Conroy](#) is available on the internet for free.

Making History Colorful



Errol Flynn at Sugar Bowl. Sugar Bowl was a favorite winter destination for many people in Hollywood.



Train crossing Soda Springs Rd. in Soda Springs in 1937

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

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