

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

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

October 2025 issue #206



Heirloom Historian Has a Little Fun The Department of New Technology Tries AI

Last month we included a short biography of Elisha Stephens mostly from a book, Captain Elisha Stephens 1804-1887 A True California Pioneer, which our research department found at the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley. Readers will remember that Mr. Stephens led the first wagon train to arrive in California with wagons. Captain Elisha Stephens... included a couple of sources in the bibliography, including a book titled Adventure Valley which had a very short chapter about Mr. Stephens. From those and other sources we picked up some interesting details which spoke to Mr. Stephens' character beyond the general facts of his life and his being adventurous and a leader. Those details also encouraged our Department of New Technology to see how much AI (artificial intelligence) has progressed enough to enhance this story in the Heirloom. We were disappointed in our last attempt to use AI.

Adventure Valley has a three page chapter about Elisha Stephens with an interesting set of details:

"Legend maintains that Stephens was always surrounded with odd people. A half-witted man tended the blackberries and worked in the fruit orchard. The Overton brothers, who it is said, once lived with him, claimed to be inventors, and the yard was cluttered with perpetual motion apparatus, washing machines and steam plows. Once a week, demonstrations were given for the neighbors. One such exhibition was given of a steam wagon, which, as Mr. W. T. McClellan described it, was 'a small, four wheel vehicle having underneath, several iron feet shaped like horses 'hoofs.' One time a spiritualist medium joined the Captain's strange group and prophesied riches for all, especially the inventors. This so excited the halfwit that he went insane and declared that he could see gold two hundred feet under the earth. He wound up in an asylum."

Apparently Elisha enjoyed his friends. He kept the medium around for a long time and gave her daughter a \$400 piano.

Naturally our curiosity was peaked. Who were the Overton Brothers and what was the steam wagon? At this point we should address the Heirloom's looking into this since it is well known that the Heirloom's mandate for stories is limited to Donner Summit. We don't address stories not related to Donner Summit. Elisha Stephens is clearly related to Donner Summit though, given that he took his wagon train over Donner Pass. Moses Schallenger, a member of the train spent most of the winter of 1844-45 at Donner Lake and then crossed the pass. The women and children of the wagon train spent most of the winter at Big Bend which is clearly on Donner Summit. There's a bit more so now we have the connection for the Heirloom to include this story. So we can imagine the readers' sigh of relief that she will be able to find out about the Overton Steam Wagon because it is at least tangentially related to Donner Summit.

There started a hunt for the Overton Steam Wagon which ended up focusing on old newspapers which, in 1857-1859, including copious references to the Overton steam wagon which always seemed on the cusp of operation and great things. We won't say

Story Locations in this Issue

Lake Mary Summer Fun pg 10

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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.

<http://bit.ly/418lhxN>

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Overton Steam Wagon as imagined by Chat GPT from the description in the [Daily Alta California](#) (5/19/1857) and the [San Joaquin Republican](#) (5/21/1857)

anymore so we don't have any "spoilers."

We start first with, ironically, a story from the [Sacramento Union](#) in 1923 looking back at the steam wagon of 1858.

Steam Wagon Built Here in '58

"FROM the files of the [Sacramento Union](#) bearing the date of June 26, 1858, comes the story of what was probably the first automobile ever built and what is more it was a steam car. On that date The [Union](#) records an item to the effect that Overton's steam wagon 'upon which so much money was foolishly expended' was shipped by the steamer New World to New York, where further attempts would be made to get it to perform satisfactorily. Nothing further is mentioned as to the later performances of the wagon. The vehicle was built at the Union Iron Works here."

[Sacramento Union](#) 7/1/1923

Unfortunately even in 1923 no picture was provided; but that leaves an opening for us today. Keep reading.

Now we can go back to 1857
The [California farmer and journal of useful sciences](#)

(9/18/1857) carried a good description of the steam wagon and starts us off. For more from the newspapers of the time see the timeline article that follows on page 8.

"The Overton steam wagon (a California invention) is pronounced by most of the practical and scientific men who have examined it, to be an invention of superior excellence, and one which promises ere long to take the place of all other wagons for heavy transportation, and may perchance be applied to farming

purposes of every description. If so, who will attempt to estimate its value? With its iron tread and untiring step it will become the advance guard of civilization and refinement,

by removing the heavy burdens from the limbs of men, which have ever been so heavily taxed in the cultivation of the soil. If this invention possesses the qualities claimed for it by the inventor and those enlightened and prejudiced persons who have examined it, the day is not far distant when it will be seen moving majestically over our broad fields with only one or two skillful hands to direct its course... How far these glowing results are to be realized, time

It is firmly believed by Mr. Overton, that these wagons can be made available even in our mountains, for hauling heavy loads.

[Daily Alta California](#) (5/19/1857) and
[San Joaquin Republican](#) (5/21/1857)

has yet to determine. But there are other inventions of our citizens which have been more thoroughly tested....”

Another article gives us our first description of the machine.

“THE STEAM WAGON.--The Sacramento Item gives an interesting description of the Overton Steam Wagon, now being constructed in that city. The machine, when completed, will be nominally of ten and a half horse power, but practically of much greater capacity. The entire length of the wagon bed will be 23 feet, and the width 7 1-2 feet. It will run upon four wheels of six feet diameter, 18 feet apart from centre to centre, and nine feet apart in width. The frame work is supported by leather and steel springs. This frame supports a boiler of 11 feet in length and 3 feet in diameter, in front of which is a water tank, to contain 500 gallons of water. The station of the "pilot" is in front of the boiler, and his duty is to steer the wagon. The position of the engineer is at the hind end of the boiler, at which the fuel is carried, and the fires are kindled. On each side of the boiler is a cylinder which by their action through crank and cog-wheels, turn an eccentric shaft beneath the bed, by which eight substantial 'legs' are made to 'walk.' They raise and descend alternately, four of them always being on the ground at once. They are set at the proper angle, so that with each revolution of the shaft the entire power of the steam is applied to pushing the wagon forward. These legs are hollow, and contain India rubber cushions, for the purpose of preventing jarring. It is firmly believed by Mr. Overton, that these wagons can be made available even in our mountains, for hauling heavy loads. Gentlemen of ample means are engaged in the enterprise.”

Daily Alta California 5/19/1857 and
San Joaquin Republican 5/21/1857

(It was very common for newspapers to copy each other's articles.)

The Heirloom Tries AI

Those references and descriptions made us long for a picture but nothing of the sort seems to exist in any of the newspapers we consulted. In fairness, there were really no illustra-

tions in newspapers in those days. In any case no one seems to have taken the time in 1857 to show us what the machine looked like.

About the Overton Steam Wagon

Should the idea of the inventor ever become reduced to practical operation, the world will be benefited by it, and none will more deserve to reap the reward of the enterprise and ingenuity than Mathew Harbin, the principal patron, and Mr. Overton, the inventor. At the same time that we are not too sanguine upon the matter, should the affair fail, neither will we laugh at the folly but rather praise the public spirit that sacrificed much private means for a noble object, whose only fault was want of success.

Sacramento Daily Union 7/17/1857

where one can look at old bridge abutments, sidewalks, etc. and find WPA stamps. That idea of finding WPA projects was a bust since we were introduced to the endearing ability of AI to "hallucinate," an AI term for making things up. Both AI Programs we tried said there were WPA projects on

...The Overton steam wagon exhibits mechanical skill and inventive genius of a high order; and it will, when completed in accordance with the plans of the inventor, travel over common roads at a rapid rate, and be as easily guided as a common team. This invention is one in which the people of the State of California are deeply interested, as many years must necessarily elapse before railroads, to any considerable extent, can be completed within our borders; and it is believed by many scientific and practical men, who have given this subject their attention, that the Overton steam wagon will in a great measure answer as a substitute for railroads and locomotives

Sacramento Daily Union 4/7/1858

left hand column on this page.)

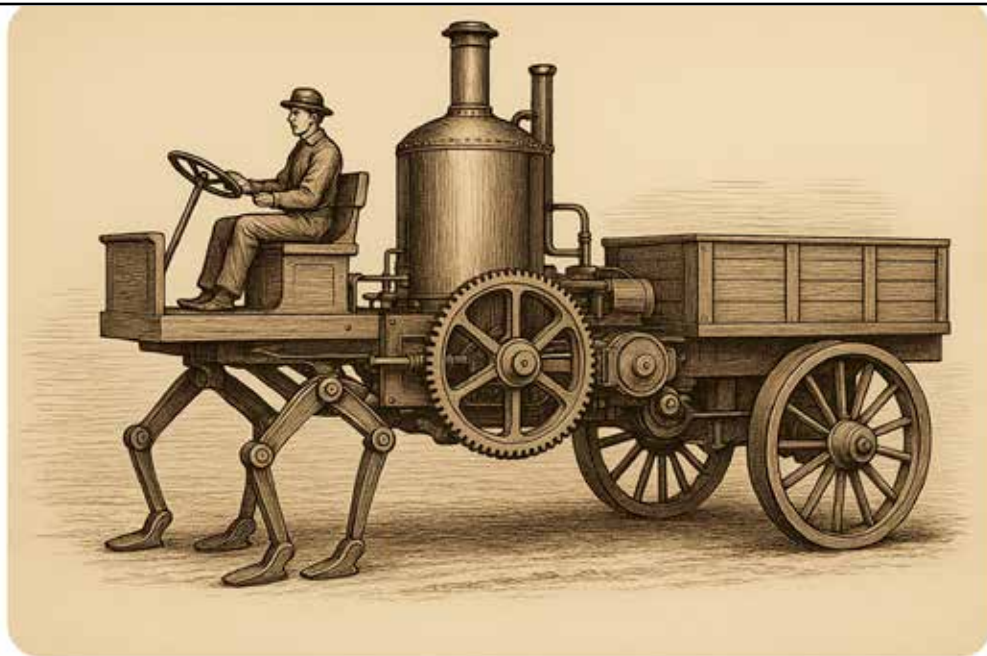
We pasted the text into Chat GPT and sat back to see what would happen. The result was the illustration on page 3 which seems like a reasonable depiction. Note the method of propulsion, the substantial "legs" that allow the machine to "walk." In essence the machine is a locomotive that doesn't use tracks. Why the inventors chose "legs" rather than wheels we don't know since the Overton Brothers didn't leave any notes.

Artificial Intelligence has recently come along, though, and recent improvements even allow some AI programs to draw pictures. We'd first tried AI a few years ago to see what all the hype was. We tasked a couple of programs to tell us what WPA (Depression era Works Progress Administration) projects there might have been on Donner Summit. Else-

where one can look at old bridge abutments, sidewalks, etc. and find WPA stamps. That idea of finding WPA projects was a bust since we were introduced to the endearing ability of AI to "hallucinate," an AI term for making things up. Both AI Programs we tried said there were WPA projects on Donner Summit during the Depression. One said a project was the construction of Sugar Bowl and the other said a project was the construction of Donner Ski Ranch. Nice try AI.

To find out what happened to the steam wagon take a look at the article, "Overton Steam Wagon Time Line" on page 8.

We decided to see what AI could do with the very detailed description of the Overton Steam Wagon (see the



Overton Steam Wagon as imagined by ChatGPT from a description in the Sacramento Daily Union (7/17/57)

Here we have another description, just in case you'd like to build you own, of the Overton Steam Wagon from another newspaper which we also pasted into Chat GPT and from which we got the illustration above.

OVERTON'S STEAM WAGON.

The object of the invention of this machine is to accomplish the locomotion of wagons or other vehicles for the purpose of transportation or conveying passengers or merchandise over common roads. In order to accomplish this object, he makes use of steam as a motive power, and a mechanical invention peculiarly his own (and for which he has applied for a patent) as a motor.

The trial wagon now being executed in Sacramento is in the shape of an ordinary wagon, running on the usual number of wheels. The body is formed of a strong, hard wood bed-frame, seventeen feet long, six feet eight inches wide, and two feet three inches deep, to be covered with one-eighth inch iron outside-set on strong half springs,. double spoked wheels six feet in diameter, having a six-inch tire.

The general arrangement of the machinery is as follows: Over the front end will be a seat for the pilot, who brakes, steers and guides the machine. Two feet eight inches back from the front end will be an upright boiler, placed with its bottom flush with the bottom of the wagon. The boiler will be forty-four inches in diameter and seven feet six inches high, with one hundred and twenty-five feet sup. [sic] of heating surface and seven feet sup of fire grating. On each side, attached to the bed-frame, will be a cylinder seven and three-fourths inches in diameter, with fourteen inch stroke, giving a nominal high pressure engine of eleven-horse power, capable of working a gross indicator of twenty-five horse-power. The two cylinders work a shaft across the wagon bed immediately behind the boiler, having a cog wheel in the center of the shaft sixteen inches in diameter at the pitch line; behind this shaft is a second, containing a cogwheel in the middle three feet in diameter gearing into the former wheel. On each side of the bearings of the wheel of the second shaft are four ten inch cranks, eight inches center, with bearings between of two inches, and set quadrantly to each other. Upon each of the pins or outside bearings of these cranks one end of the propelling legs work, having their opposite ends upon the ground, which, pushing backward as the wheels and cranks rotate, propel the wagon forward.

The ultimate rate of speed calculated by the present machinery is twelve miles an hour. There is an apparatus for backing the machine on the same principle as the forward propellers. Over the hind axle is a water tank which fills out the remaining space of the wagon. Behind the boiler the wagon body will be covered flush, having a bulk-head, framing, &c., to divide the space on top into compartments for fuel, &c., sufficient, if necessary, for a distance of one hundred or one hundred and twenty miles. The tractive force of the wagon, according to these calculations, is estimated to draw a weight of thirty-five thousand pounds on

wheels of similar size with the locomotive upon an incline of one in four--steam being at eighty pounds to the inch, and the unit of a horse's traction one hundred and fifty pounds. Its extreme capability may therefore be set down to drawing a load of seventy thousand pounds. The above description and calculations are obtained from Wm. Patton, architect, its designer and superintendent, under whose care the work is proceeding to completion.

In view of the somewhat large anticipations expected to be realized by the above, it may not be amiss to add a few words. Should the idea of the inventor ever become reduced to practical operation, the world will be benefited by it, and none will more deserve to reap the reward of the enterprise and ingenuity than Mathew Harbin, the principal patron, and Mr. Overton, the inventor. At the same time that we are not too sanguine upon the matter, should the affair fail, neither will we laugh at the folly but rather praise the public spirit that sacrificed much private means for a noble object, whose only fault was want of success.

Sacramento Daily Union 7/17/1857

Other adventures into steam at the time

Many learned and ingenious mechanics, since the application of steam to machinery, have devoted their means and time to the completion of such a machine as the present, and of those which failed to accomplish their purposes, a few were certainly mechanical triumphs, inasmuch as they performed all that was expected of them in the matter of locomotion.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, some years ago, a stage coach was made to run by steam, and to carry its load of passengers, &c. The principle of propulsion was that of a series of levers, working perpendicularly, attached to the hind axle; it was, however, a pecuniary failure.

In London, England, eighteen years ago, a similar apparatus was tried, with a somewhat different application of the same means of propulsion. This machine fulfilled exactly the same results as before.

Some years later, the steam omnibus was invented, with propelling legs, which ran to perfection, but tore up the streets, and the authorities forbid its use.

There is one great point of difference between the propelling apparatus of Overton's machine and all others that have preceded it, which it may not be amiss to point out. Whereas, the propelling power has heretofore been attached to the vehicle, so as to measure the distance of its locomotion and confine its progress to the rate of the working of the motive machinery, in the present instance, the propelling power, although attached to the same framework, is entirely independent of the wheels and axles sustaining the wagon. Thus it does not at all complicate with the inertia of the machine. In conclusion, it is the opinion of a scientific gentleman of this city that, if it should fail everywhere else, it cannot fail to be useful upon the plains as a pioneer to the railway that will one day connect us more closely with the East.

Sacramento Daily Union 7/17/1857

Thomas Stevens and AI

It's been a few years since we first tried AI on the WPA project. Before diving in with AI on the Overton Steam Wagon we thought to try it out on another good Donner Summit story, Thomas Stevens. You can read about him in last month's [Heirloom](#). He was the first to bicycle across the Sierra, then across the country, and finally around the world. He rode a Columbia Ordinary, generically called, among other things, a High Wheeler, Bone Crusher, or Penny Farthing.

Not all AI programs can do drawings but Chat GPT can and here you see two version of Thomas Stevens riding his Columbia Ordinary across the Sierra from ChatGPT's imagination.

The top illustration was the first attempt. In both attempts you will note Chat GPT's unfamiliarity with bicycles and their method of propulsion. There are no pedals. The reader should understand that this failing is understandable since we think no AI programs have ridden bicycles.

There are many AI programs now. Google Gemini is one of those programs that doesn't have the ability to draw actual pictures but did a nice job of drawing a vivid picture in prose:

Imagine this:

The year is 1884. A lone figure, Thomas Stevens, is making his way across the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains. He's not on a horse, or in a wagon, but on a bicycle - a high-wheeled Columbia Ordinary, also known as a penny-farthing.

The sheer size of the front wheel of the bicycle is striking, dwarfing the small rear wheel. Stevens, a determined look on his face, is perched high above the ground.

The landscape is a dramatic mix of towering granite peaks, steep rocky trails, and patches of snow. In some places, he's able to ride, the large front wheel bumping and jostling over the uneven terrain. In other sections, the terrain is too steep or treacherous, and he's forced to walk, pushing the heavy bicycle along.

He's dressed in the clothing of the time - perhaps a sturdy wool shirt, breeches, and high boots. He might have a small bag attached to the bicycle, carrying his meager supplies.

The image captures the pioneering spirit of the time, the beauty and challenge of the Sierra Nevada, and the sheer audacity of Stevens' adventure.

It was then that we aimed AI at the Overton Brothers' invention.



All AI programs are not created equal. We gave the request for a Thomas Stevens illustration to Claude AI and that program generated pages of code before coming up with the illustration to the right.

Based on our little work it appears that AI has a way to go before it begins to take people's job.



Overton Steam Wagon Timeline

Here we have a timeline of only some of the many newspaper article and notices about the Overton Steam Wagon. Here you can trace the progress of the implementation of the invention that apparently started in Elisha Stevens' yard in Cupertino, California.

To Begin with: Unbridled optimism

The Overton steam wagon, (a California invention,) is pronounced by most of the practical and scientific men who have examined it, to be an invention of superior excellence, and one which promises ere long to take the place of all other wagons for heavy transportation, and may perchance be applied to farming purposes of every description. If so, who will attempt to estimate its value? With its iron tread and untiring step it will become the advance guard of civilization and refinement, by removing the heavy burdens from the limbs of men, which have ever been so heavily taxed in the cultivation of the soil. If this invention possesses the qualities claimed for it by the inventor and those enlightened and unprejudiced persons who have examined it, the day is not far distant when it will be seen moving majestically over our broad fields with only one or two skillful hands to direct its course....

California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences
9/18/1857

The boiler is being made in Sacramento and "is expected to be completed in a few days; and, it is said the wagon will be in running order by Christmas."

Sonoma County Journal 12/25/1857

It will probably be in running order within a week.

Sacramento Daily Union 1/27/1858

The work on the steam wagon has been suspended in consequence of a want of the "sinews." ... Doubtless means will be provided to enable the work to proceed.

Sacramento Daily Union 3/20/1858

Financial difficulties eased "through the kind offices of a San Francisco capitalist" "If any one is disposed to dispute the power of the "almighty dollar," he should reflect that the steam wagon even has been compelled to await its movement."

Sacramento Daily Union 2/5/1858

STEAM WAGON. - Work has taken a fresh start on Overton's Steam Wagon. The papers have been saying for about a year, "it will probably be finished in about two weeks."

Chico Enterprise Record 3/24/1858

THE STEAM WAGON.-The machinery of the Wagon has been placed in position, and steps will be applied thereto to-day.

Sacramento Daily Union 3/31/1858

STEAM WAGON, - Steam was applied to the running machinery of the steam wagon yesterday afternoon. The result was less satisfactory than was anticipated, in consequence, it is said, of an imperfect adaptation of one or more of the valves.

Sacramento Daily Union 4/1/1858

THE STEAM WAGON.-The Sacramento papers say that Overton's steam wagon will probably be ready to make a trial trip in two weeks, as it is rapidly approaching completion.

Mariposa Democrat April 1 1858

The inventor applies to the State legislature for funds to continue the development of the steam wagon:

The special committee to whom was referred the petition of J. T. Overton, praying for an appropriation of three thousand dollars, to enable him to complete his steam wagon for common roads, having carefully and minutely examined the same, respectfully ask leave to report that, in their opinion, the Overton steam wagon exhibits mechanical skill and inventive genius of a high order; and it will, when completed in accordance with the plans of the inventor, travel over common roads at a rapid rate.

Sacramento Daily Union 4/7/1858

STEAM WAGON TO-DAY.-We understand that the proprietors of the - Overton steam wagon intend to take it out to the Louisiana race course this afternoon, by horse power, and try it for the first time, on the track.

Sacramento Bee 4/9/1858

THE STEAM WAGONS. — The experiments with the steam wagons have thus far been unsatisfactory. It was hauled out upon Front street on Saturday afternoon, and an attempt made to propel it, without success. About seven o'clock p. m., with the aid of three yoke of oxen, it proceeded to K street, through

K street, and thence to the Central Race Track, with an American flag streaming at the stern, as though the enterprise had been triumphantly accomplished.

,...

Notwithstanding these failures, we learn that Mr. Whipple, one of the proprietors, has offered to bet that the wagon will beat any trotting horse, and that a party has signified its intention of accepting the wager. We will thus have a fine chance to test the respective merits of steam and horse flesh.

Sacramento Daily Union 4/12/1858

For the last six or eight weeks, nothing has been done in the way of work upon her. The contemplated enlargement of the boiler was never made, and, to all appearance, she seems to have been entirely abandoned. The power of the sun upon her wood work is manifested by the warping and cracking of the panel work around her. We are not advised as to the intentions of her proprietors.

Sacramento Bee June 5 1858

LATEST DATES FROM THE STEAM WAGON.—The celebrated steam Wagon (Overton's) upon which so much money has been foolishly expended, was removed from the yard of the Union Foundry yesterday and shipped to the Bay on the steamer New World.

Sacramento Daily Union 6/26/1858

THE GREAT NO-GO-CART.—The Morning Call states that the "Overton Steam Wagon" is reposing, in all its useless dignity, in the yard of the Pacific Foundry, San Francisco, where it was taken for the purpose of having its manifold defects remedied.

San Andreas Independent 7/24/1858

The Ignominious end

The Sacramento steam wagon has been converted into a locomotive, and will start on the Market street track this week.

Sacramento Daily Union 12/12/1859

From there the machine gets lost in history.

Summer at Lake Mary on Donner Summit

Pat Malberg



Pat Malberg

My parents bought our cabin on Lake Mary in 1945 [see below right]. The next summer was the first of most of my childhood summers spent entirely there with my Mom (Anne), while my Dad (Frank Nast) commuted up each weekend on the Greyhound bus. We had no automobile until 1950 because it was after the war and not much was available prior to then. We were able to get a nice Chevy pickup, a 1300 DeLuxe (which meant it had those rounded windows in the corners of the cab) and my Dad created a canopy which was very useful in winter, but was stored in the garage at home, in San Francisco, for the summer.

Dad arrived via bus every Friday night, late, at the Summit where there was an official Greyhound stop. It had been a 7-hour trip and he smelled like an old ash tray, because smoking was allowed. From the highway, Dad walked in to the cabin, slept awhile, and then got to work the following morning. He worked all day, with my Mom and me as his helpers, sifting sand and mixing cement, and at the end of the day, we always swam across the lake to clean off the dust and looked forward to the delicious dinner Mom had prepared.

One summer, my Mom undertook the project of sanding off the black surface of the interior walls of the cabin. Beneath that blackness, the wood was absolutely beautiful, heart pine and fir of varied hues, and the transformation was remarkable [see the next page]. Now the gloom was replaced with light and beauty. My parents were really into light – the original windows were of small panes of glass in squares that would let in some light, but not as they envisioned. So each



Right away, my Dad started upgrading the cabin. It was constructed during the mid-30's of huge black timbers from the railroad snow sheds, each 8 inches thick and anywhere from 18 to 28 inches deep, stacked one on top of the other, with re-bar to secure them, and chinked with treated rope and a cement seal. In time, the cement shrank and even fell out, and the wind was able to sneak into the interior, so that the cabin really needed some work if it were to be at all comfortable in winter. (In addition, the commode was outside!) One of the solutions Dad came up with was to cover the exterior with a façade of rock, so he became a stone mason and we became rock gatherers. We borrowed a pickup whenever possible, and fortunately, at the time, the highway department was widening old 40, blasting a lot of granite. So during the week, my Mom and I would gather rocks for his walls. We ended up with a huge pile outside the kitchen window, which was entertaining because the chipmunks and other creatures loved to hide and run in among them. We even saw a pine marten. When we had access to a pickup, we also drove down to the Sugar Bowl Creek where we could collect nice sand from the banks.



summer for a time, we had a big hole where there had been one of the original windows, expanded for a better view, and it seemed as though we always raced to have that hole filled before the first snows.

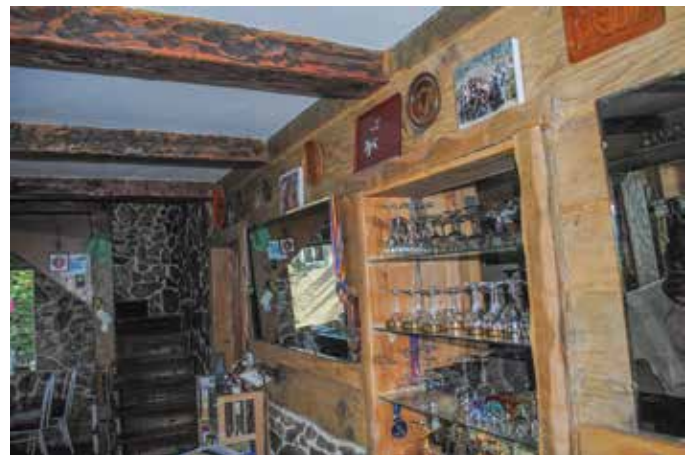
Early on, my Dad decided to construct a rock fireplace and chimney on the south side of the cabin (to replace the pot-bellied stove that sat in the middle of the living space downstairs). He had finished about 4 feet of it when a guy came by and said, "The first time you make a fire in that, your cabin will burn down!" So my Dad asked for his help, and it turned out the guy was none other than Pop (Lester) Hammond, the famous stone mason who had built all the beautiful cabins in Cisco Grove. Pop helped my Dad to correct the fireplace design, and they subsequently became close friends. Pop later worked with my Dad to construct the huge dormer which expanded and lightened the upstairs sleeping quarters, along with giving us a nice deck to escape the mosquitos.

It was not "all work and no play" for me, and sometimes even my Mom. As I was an only child, she made it known that if her friends wanted to go on vacation without their offspring along, the child or children could be left with her. She charged \$1 a day, room and board, and I had some companionship. Some days she never saw us – we were out on the lake in a boat or on a raft, fishing or swimming, catching frogs, and getting sun burned. The evening was torture as Mom would dab our skin with glycerine and rose water, which was supposed to heal the sunburn, but man, did that hurt. No matter – out the next day. The lake had a lot of catfish then, each about 6-8 inches long, which when caught, we would put in a big tub and Mom cleaned some of them and prepared them for dinner. That had to be a pain. She would also lead us on hikes in the area, often to Lake Flora or Azalea, or to Maidens' Retreat, with hot dogs and marshmallows, and we'd make a day of it. As we grew up and were stronger, we would go up the Sierra Crest Trail which was accessible at the end of the Lake Mary Road and follow what later became the Pacific Crest Trail on up to Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. The return to Lake Mary and the awaited swim was always a treat.

One of our favorite short hikes was to what we called the "trestle", which wasn't a trestle at all, but rather the 1914 automobile underpass between tunnels 7 and 8. At the time, the track was still live, so we would put our ear to the track to hear if a train was coming. When Mom went with us, we'd gather some of the coal that fell from the coal car, and use it in our wood and coal stove. Mom cooked exclusively on that big old stove, and it was our source of hot water, as well, with a "water back", that is, pipes affixed to the inside wall of the



The Lake Mary cabin today



"Beneath the blackness, the wood was absolutely beautiful"



stove that were heated and then led to the hot water tank.

When we needed bread, milk or eggs, Mom would send me with some change to the little café that was just on the other side of the railroad tracks on Old 40, across from Ski Ranch. I had to go through a covered walkway that led down to the tracks I had to cross, and past the several residences of railroad workers. There were usually children and dogs to distract me, so I had to remind myself to hurry along or I'd get in trouble with my Mom. The owners of the café were very nice; they kept their prices right for us.

Once we had a pickup of our own, we did a lot of "scrounging", including driving down the Lincoln Highway to the "trestle" to collect some of the timbers that the railroad just threw aside when they replaced their snow sheds. Most of the timbers were in good enough shape and could be used to construct many of the buildings one sees in the area, if only one could get to them. Well, we did, and my Dad used them to construct a make-shift boat house on the lake water front. It served perfectly well for a good 50 years, and then was de-constructed and cut up for kindling.

We later upgraded to a 4x4 Dodge pickup that could go seemingly everywhere. A logging company somehow got permission to punch a road in and up beyond the



Summer friends

Lake Mary cabins onto Mount Judah, where they did selective logging for one summer. That road was very rough until it got to the saddle where it later was used as part of the maintenance road for Sugar Bowl's Mt. Judah lift. Anyway, my Dad would drive the Dodge up to collect left-over logs and thick red fir bark, which my Mom loved to burn in the wood stove, almost like coal. Those rides were jarring and we always ended up with a sore bottom. But it was an adventure. Now that road is completely eroded and impassable, even the mountain bikers won't attempt it, which is fine with us.

From the Archives of Sugar Bowl

We've noted before that Elissa Hambrecht, Sugar Bowl resident, has been on a 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. At this writing she had gathered information on 900 items which is quite an achievement.

Her database 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 starts back in April when Elissa arrived at our Donner Summit Association (she is a board member) meeting with 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 trans-continental 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.



"Snowshed at entrance [sic] to tunnel 6 at Summit in the Sierra Southern Pacific photos X1188

This photo appears to be from the 1920's. We actually had a copy of this one, right. Here you have the view looking east. Donner Lake is over the pass and down a thousand feet. The tracks are covered with snowsheds. As your eye follows them right to left you come to the round house with the conical roof in which helper locomotives turned around. Looking closely to the right of the roundhouse you can see a branch of the sheds heading off to Tunnel 6. Note the snowsheds connecting all the buildings. Traveling through the sheds was how people moved around in winter. The Summit Hotel was off to the right but not in this view.

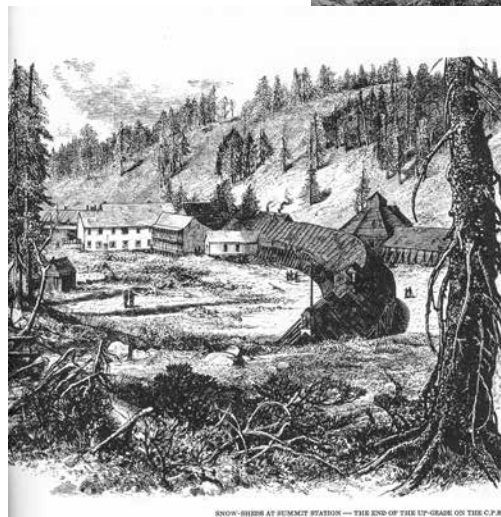
The winter scene, right is a wider view with the hotel.



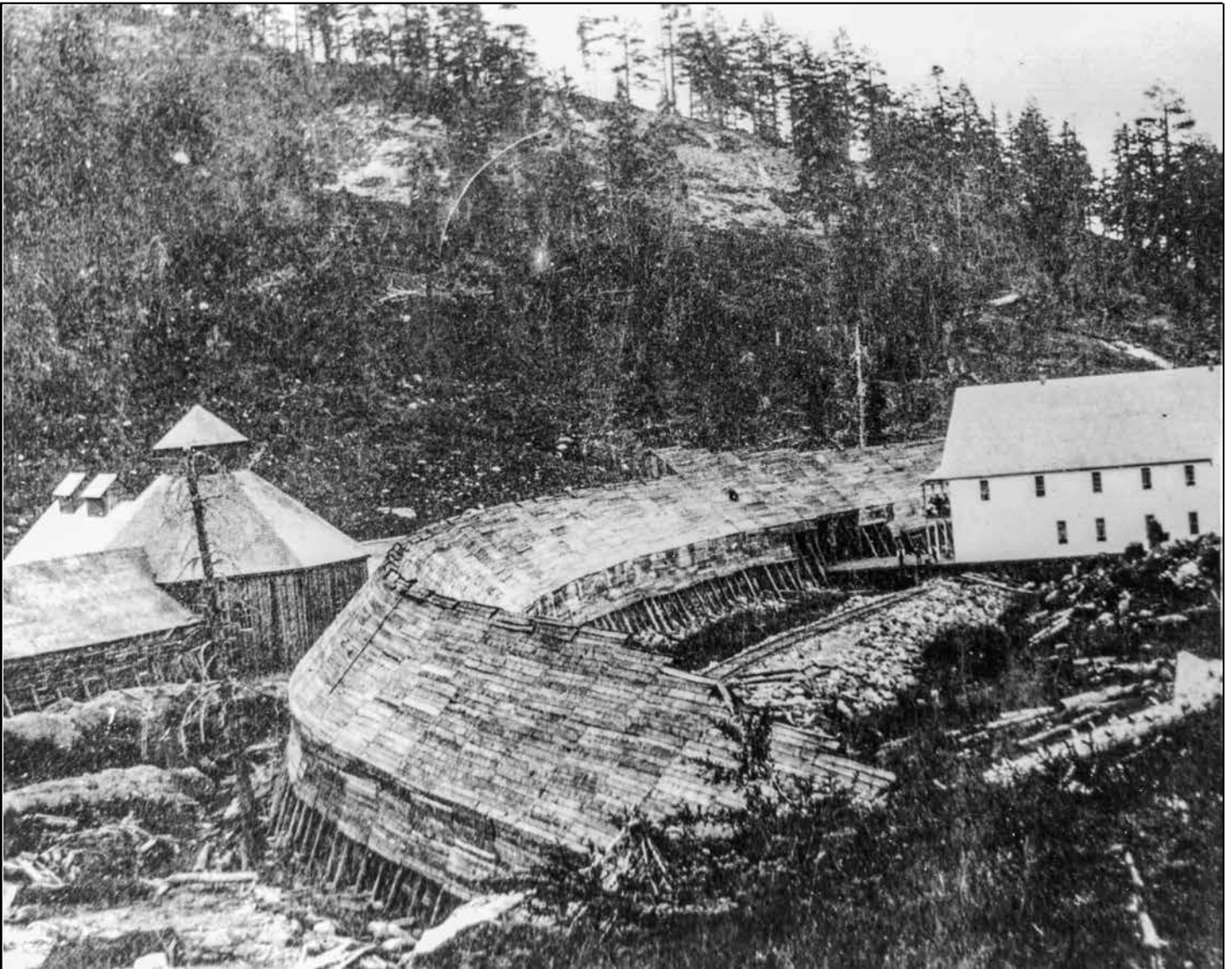


"snowsheds at entrance to Tunnel 6 at Summit in summer, about 1900 the Sierras. Southern Pacific photo X1188"

This photo is looking west. Here you see the round house on the right under the conical roof. The snowsheds stretch off west to where the Summit Hotel was until it burned. It then moved south. We have several pictures like this one with the hotel before it burned. In the foreground the snowsheds lead to the Tunnel 6 entrance. Yes, this picture has the same Southern Pacific catalog number as the one on the previous page.



We even have a drawing of the scene from Out West on the Overland Train, a book published in 1877. See our website or the 9/22 Heirloom



--Snow sheds during construction of the Central Pacific Railroad, mid 1860's Southern Pacific photo X-144

The picture above is an Alfred A. Hart railroad photograph. In the picture above the roundhouse is on the left with an early version of the first Summit Hotel on the right. The picture is reversed from the original view. We can suppose the technician who printed the pictures for Mr. Walker flipped the negative by mistake.



Book Review

Americas Wonderlands 1893

James W. Buel

This is a picture book with hundreds of pictures of America's Wonderlands as captured by a cross country trip organized by the publisher in 1890. Interestingly this uses text from Our Native Land which was published ten years earlier. (See the August, /25 Heirloom).

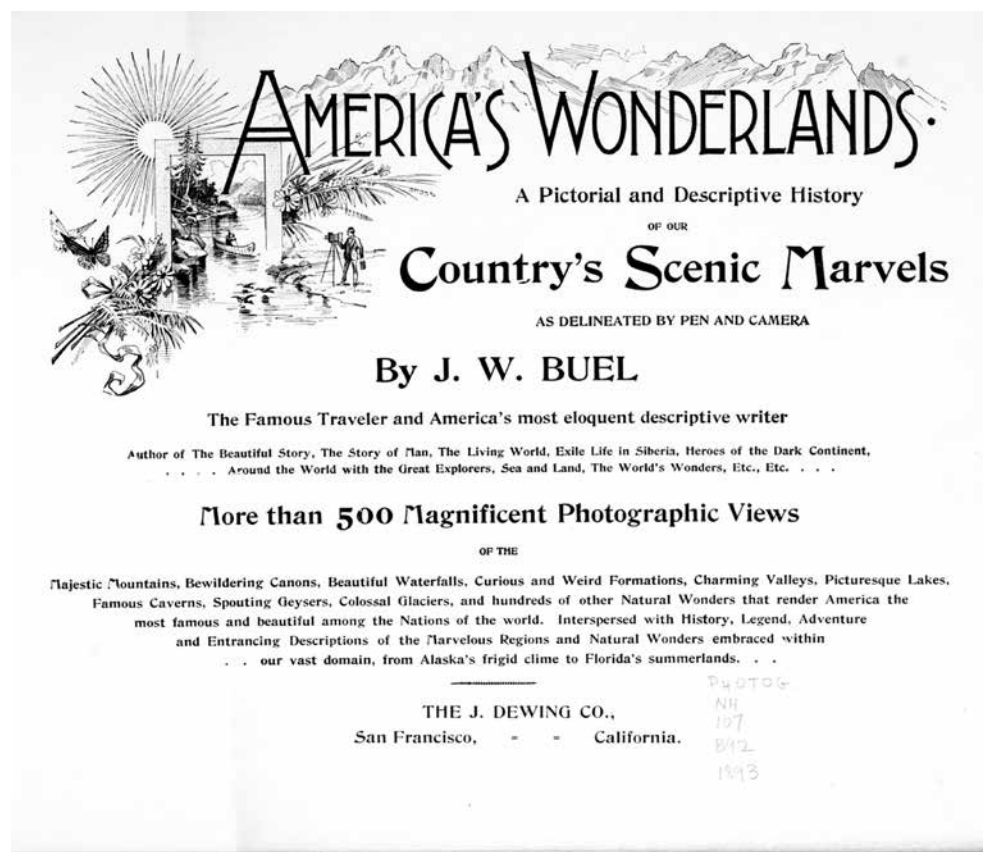
There's a lot to see all around the world "But if we except the associations which make these places of the Old World memorable, the student of nature will find a thousand greater charms in the picturesque, grand, marvelous and sublime scenery that diversifies our own country No picture has ever equaled the real, and no book has ever vividly described the wonders that God has scattered over the American landscape."

"Travel is no longer necessary for the masses in order to behold the marvels of American scenery for the camera has gathered them all and lays every inspiring scene upon even the poor man's table, to minister to the delight of his family circle. But photography likewise blesses the traveler, for study of the picture establishes acquaintanceship with that which is represented, while accompanying description quickens his understanding and gives a more intelligent conception of the pictorial subject."

In 1890 "the publishers engaged a corps of artists, consisting of three of the best out-door photographers in the country. A passenger car was next chartered, which was remodeled so as to provide comfortable sleeping quarters for the men in one end, a kitchen in the other, while the center was fitted up as an operating-room for taking, developing and finishing pictures. Three cameras, of as many sizes, were also provided, with three thousand prepared plates, and a great quantity of paraphernalia which might be found useful for the expedition. Then the party traveled the country by train, stagecoach and donkey."

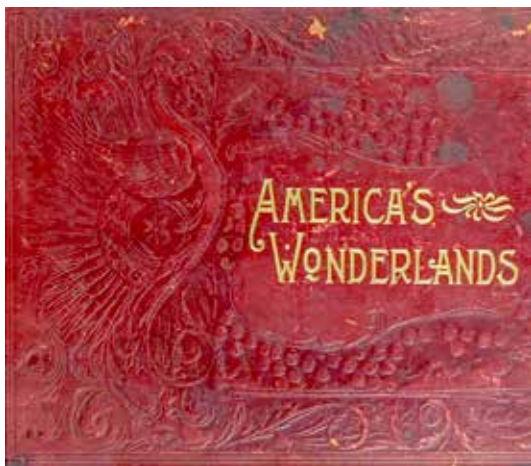
We've included here some of the pictures of California which are also of Donner Summit, or nearby. You can see the author has a way with words.

About Donner Summit the author says, "The road begins to descend rapidly after leaving Summit, but the most wonderful scenery in all California is passed in the next 150 miles. Donner's Peak comes into view as the first suggestion of a dreadfully tumultuous condition of nature, wrought by the great glaciers that in the early centuries came grinding their way over the mountains. There is Emigrant Gap, through which the first gold-seekers found their way into the Golden Valley, and American Canon, along the dizzy edge of which the train runs at a free and almost reckless pace. The way is broken with quarreling cas-



acades, fast-dashing creeks and beautiful blue cañons, in which an autumn haze perpetually lingers. Giant's Gap, in the American Canon, is a vast rent in an opposing mountain, that looks like it might have been torn out by the hand of the Thunder God to make a way for the trolls. Chasm after chasm comes into view with grandeur and awfulness as a background until presently the train runs out on a ledge that appears to passengers inside the coaches to have no more substantial support than a bank of clouds. We are away up high on the breast of a mountain that shoots upward 2,000 feet perpendicularly, and looking out of the car windows there is nothing but clouds bowling along on the same level, and below forests of pine, stunted by distance, until the trees are no bigger than whisk-brooms, and American River is a white thread not too large to run through the eye of a darning-needle. This is Cape Horn, where the ledge is so precipitous that in making the road-bed it was necessary to lower the first workmen by means of ropes, which were held fast at the summit while the suspended men plied their picks and crow-bars until a footing was made."

You can buy this book or: https://archive.org/details/gri_33125003532781/page/192/mode/2up



As we proceed up the Sierras the cold increases, until when the town of Summit is reached snow lies upon the ground throughout the year, and it is perpetual winter there, 7,000 feet above the sea. The route is for many miles enclosed by snow-sheds, but the snow-plow has plenty of work to do in keeping the intervals clear. Formerly this work was performed by three or four engines pushing a big machine, somewhat resembling a shovel-board plow, through the heavy banks of snow, but it is now more speedily and effectively accomplished by a rotary snow-plow, as shown in one of our illustrations. The machine is in fact a giant auger, which is run by steam supplied by the engines behind and being set in motion, rapidly bores its way through the drifts, throwing the snow at an angle of forty-five degrees, and with a force sufficient to deposit it fifty feet from the track.



CASCADE BRIDGE AND SNOW-SHEDS ON THE SIERRAS.

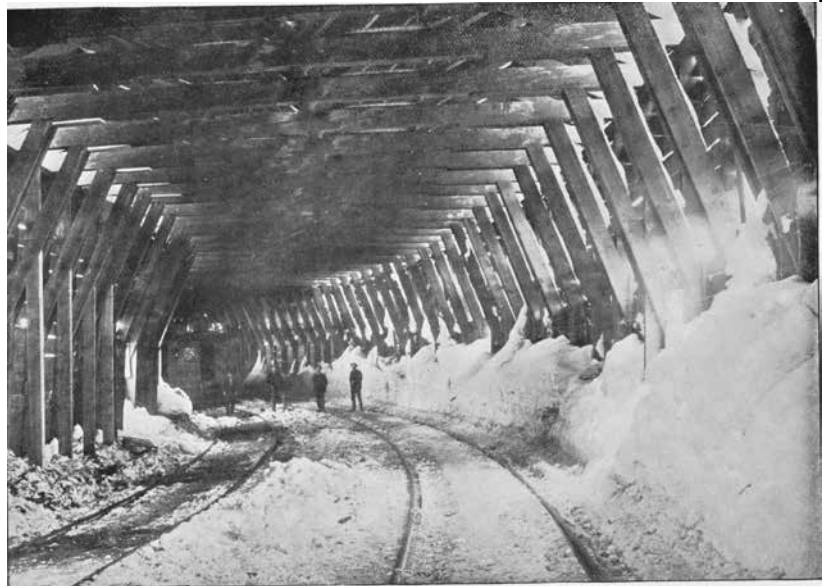


DONNER LAKE, NEAR TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA.



The author had previously traveled the country and remarked on the difference between Nevada and California, wondering why anyone would make the trip.

"Then out of the plain of dearth, and up mountains we sped; suddenly, as it were, the atmosphere grew chill, flakes of snow began to descend; the way led out of hot summer into severe winter, and the landscape became a picture of tumult, mighty, wonderful and picturesque. Then we rolled down the Sierras into a land of indescribable beauty, into a garden as lovely as that of Hesperides—and the answer was plain."



INTERIOR OF SNOW SHED, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS.



SNOW SHOVELERS CUTTING A BLOCKADE ON THE SIERRA NEVADAS.

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