

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

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

February 2025 issue #198



Back Home to Sugar Bowl The Gondola Car Rescue of 2024

There's history everywhere on Donner Summit (Have we mentioned that it's the most historically significant square mile in California and maybe the entire Western United States?). This is a story of repatriation in which the Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) of the Donner Summit Historical Society played a small part last fall.

Unfortunately for immediacy the DSHS [Heirloom](#) publishing team works some months ahead so that exigencies that might delay publication of an issue do not impact our readers. There will always be an issue ready for dissemination. Hence this story is in the February 2025 [Heirloom](#) even though it happened last fall. The November – January [Heirlooms](#) were already done.

Avid readers of the [Heirloom](#) will remember that our January, '16 [Heirloom](#) included an article about the MHRT's discovery of one of the first Sugar Bowl Magic Carpet gondola cars up above Rainbow Lodge. Rainbow Lodge used to have ski runs on the hill behind the lodge and perhaps the gondola car was used for employees operating at the top of the rope tow or the J Bar. On the other hand, the car's location was not near the lifts' tops.

In the fall of 2016 the MHRT set off from the Rainbow subdivision just down the road from Rainbow Lodge (formerly Rainbow Tavern). We had been invited down by Sue Ellen Benson who has a cabin in the subdivision. She said she could guide us to some Chinese railroad workers' camps near the railroad. We found the camp sites and wrote about finding Hilda's Camp in the December, '16 [Heirloom](#). It's on our website.

While we were walking along both Sue Ellen and Art Clark mentioned that they had come across an old gondola car in the forest. So, having accomplished our day's objective we went off in search of the gondola car. As we came over the crest of the hill high up above Rainbow Tavern where the top of their ski run used to be, there was the gondola car. Interestingly it had been moved about fifty yards from where Sue Ellen and Art had previously seen it and had been set upright. The thing weighs six hundred or more pounds so that move was not done lightly. It took seven big



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DONNER SUMMIT



Finding Your Way Through Donner Summit History

We're closing in on two hundred 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 <http://bit.ly/418lhxN>

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

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The gondola car where it sat for decades high above Rainbow Lodge. The freeway, I-80, is in the background

Sugar Bowl guys to lift the thing – but that’s getting ahead of ourselves. Read on.

The finding of the car made a good story for our January, '17 [Heirloom](#) and then the gondola car sat awaiting the next episode in its life. The owner of Rainbow Lodge, Christopher Peatross of San Francisco, found the car and it became a clue for his family’s annual Labor Day scavenger hunts.

We should repeat a little history of the Sugar Bowl Magic Carpet for context.

The Magic Carpet was installed for a half million dollars at Sugar Bowl in 1952 by Jerome Hill, scion of the Great Northern Railway family. He was tired of the previous method of getting to Sugar Bowl, riding the tractor pulled sleighs. The first cars had the “toaster” design. It cost 15 cents one way and 25 cents round trip.

The Magic Carpet was re-engineered in 1958 and the gondolas became four passenger cars. The third iteration of the gondola came in 1982 and is still in operation today. Where gondola cars went when they were done being gondola cars is a mystery except for some. One became a lift shack at the Soda Springs Ski Hill. Maybe others did too. John Slouber, who was Royal Gorge CEO, is said to have bought a number

of them for warming huts. but you can see from the pictures here that may not be practical.

The found gondola car sat high above Rainbow Lodge (above) which was part of Royal Gorge for a short time and which sometimes had a cross country trail leading to it from Summit Station. That ski trail did not go near the spot above. In 1940, according to a Southern Pacific brochure advertising the Norden Ski Hut, Rainbow Lodge (Rainbow Tavern in those days) had two ski lifts behind it, a J bar and a rope tow, 1300 feet long. Imagine holding the rope or J bar all the way up a steep 1300 feet. Skiers must have been worn out but imagine the upper body exercise. Rates were twenty-five cents a ride or five rides for seventy-five cents and fifteen cents thereafter with “good ski runs from top of lift.”

Recently Sugar Bowl has embarked on a quest to gather all the history of the resort it can find. In charge of the endeavor is Elissa Hambrecht, now a full-time resident of Sugar Bowl. Naturally that sounded like a worthwhile project and the DSHS offered to help gather history and by the way, we asked, did she know that one of the original Magic Carpet gondola cars resided on the hill above Rainbow Lodge? Elissa was immediately enthused and went to Bridget Legnavsky, Sugar Bowl’s CEO, who was also enthusiastic. Elissa approached Christopher Peatross, who owns Rainbow



from a 1947 advertisement for the fun on Donner Summit showing Rainbow Lodge and the ski hill behind.

Lodge, and after some discussion he agreed to donate the car to Sugar Bowl.

There followed details and planning with the idea of getting the car off the hillside and to Sugar Bowl before 2024 snow fell. Elissa quickly raised almost twelve thousand dollars from Sugar Bowl residents to pay for the transport by helicopter. In very early October the helicopter landed at Sugar Bowl in preparation. A crew of seven Sugar Bowl workers hiked up the mountain with Elissa, a drone photographer for pictures to commemorate the story, and this correspondent in tow. After about twenty minutes that included some scrambling over rocks and a steep hillside we came to the gondola car. The guys maneuvered the car out from near a tree, spread a net on the ground, put the car on top, and wrapped it in the net. The helicopter arrived and the net was hooked on. Off went the helicopter and the car to Sugar Bowl.

The next steps are to raise money for restoration and find someone who can do an authentic restoration job.

Short video of the gondola rescue mission: <https://youtu.be/5r1r3JLuV2o> It was filmed by the drone videographer, Vinnie Zacha-Herthel of Cousin Media in Reno.



Gondola car on the hillside with Art Clark, member of the MHRT, investigating its condition.



It was a beautiful fall day with fall colors just peaking as the rescue team from Sugar Bowl, Elissa Hambrecht, the drone videographer, Vinnie Zacha-Herthel, and this correspondent headed up to the gondola car. It was a rugged twenty minute hike during which one member of the group got temporarily lost - but that's another story.



For more about Sugar Bowl's history including the Magic Carpet see the January, '25 [Heirloom](#).



For more about Sugar Bowl's history including the Magic Carpet see the January, '25 [Heirloom](#).

Sugar Bowl guys wrapping up the gondola car.





And away it goes.



Elissa Hambrecht telling the Sugar Bowl guys the story of the gondola. They were excited to be part of history.





At the end, Elissa Hambrecht in the gondola car parked temporarily at the parking structure at the Magic Carpet.

The Skier magazine, November, 1952 carried the story about Sugar Bowl's new ski lift on Mount Disney and the coming new Magic Carpet. Subsequent editions carried ads for the Magic Carpet. It took skiers from Highway 40, across the railroad tracks and to the Sugar Bowl Lodge. This was more convenient than tractor pulled sleighs.

Sugar Bowl Lays Magic

Popular Sugar Bowl atop Donner Summit at Norden, has broken out in a rash of rejuvenation certain to tingle the hearts of skiers patronizing the Sierra resort. Constructed during the summer was a new Herron double chair lift that will replace the old low capacity lift. It extends to the very top of Mt. Disney, from which point several new runs have been opened. The capacity of the new lift will be 600 skiers per hour and it is hoped this will eliminate any more long waiting lines.

In addition a long awaited development of better transportation into the Sugar Bowl from Highway 40 is under construction. Under the direction of Hannes Schroll and Jerome Hill, the Magic Carpet Corporation is building an aerial tramway that will start next to Kiski Lodge and the terminal right behind the Main Lodge at the Sugar Bowl. The magic Carpet will have eight cabins. A transportation service between the tramway and the Norden railway station, as well as other resorts in the vicinity, will be run by the Magic Carpet Corporation. For those who come by car, Pratt's Garage on Highway 40 will, as usual, store the car and transport the guests up to the tramway.

Every effort will be made to give Sugar Bowl visitors a quick and effortless entry to the skiing area, according to Walter E. Haug, new manager of the Sugar Bowl, who many skiers remember from Squaw Valley and Aspen.

The Ski School will again be under the able guidance of Bill Klein, and Katie Starrett returns again as Sports Director.

The Magic Carpet

The Magic Carpet is a slow and maybe inconvenient way to get to Sugar Bowl but it has the charm of a time gone by. Until fairly recently it was the only way to get into Sugar Bowl in the winter. Before the Magic Carpet it was even tougher to get into Sugar Bowl. People had to walk in from the Norden train station, or during different time periods be hauled in by sleigh, mortorized sled (.15 one way 25 round trip), or a 1932 Ford station wagon with skis in place of front wheels.

Jerome Hill, one of the original investors of Sugar Bowl was an accomplished artist, musician, and film maker (he won an Oscar for his documentary on Albert Schweitzer) as well as the grandson of the Great Northern Railroad tycoon. He got tired of the annual conversations about improving access to Sugar Bowl and so in 1953 he financed the Magic Carpet. It was the first ski area gondola on the west coast. Originally it was operated independently of the Sugar Bowl.

Originally there were 12 or according to Skier magazine there were only eight) cars holding 6 people each and capacity was 450 passengers per hour. When Jerome Hill died in 1972 the gondola went to the Alpine Winter Foundation which sold it to Sugar Bowl. Today's version was built in 1983 and can accommodate 1000 passengers per hour in fifty cars

From the Serene Lakes newsletter Winter, 2000

For more about Sugar Bowl's history including the Magic Carpet see the January, '25 Heirloom.

Magic Carpet Gondola Cars Over the Years.

First iteration 1952-1958



Today's gondola cars went into service in 1982

For more about Sugar Bowl's history including the Magic Carpet see the January, '25 [Heirloom](#).



Second iteration 1958-1982



Donner Summit Art from Homer Alaska

From the "Art of Skiing"
1941



Milli Martin is a long time member of the DSHS and her uncle and aunt, Herb and Lena Frederick, owned the Norden Store and Lodge for a long time. The lodge and its owners have been the subject of a number of [Heirloom](#) stories. Some by Milli, (see our [Heirloom](#) article and picture indices on our website). Milli spent summers with her aunt and uncle on Donner Summit at the Norden Store.

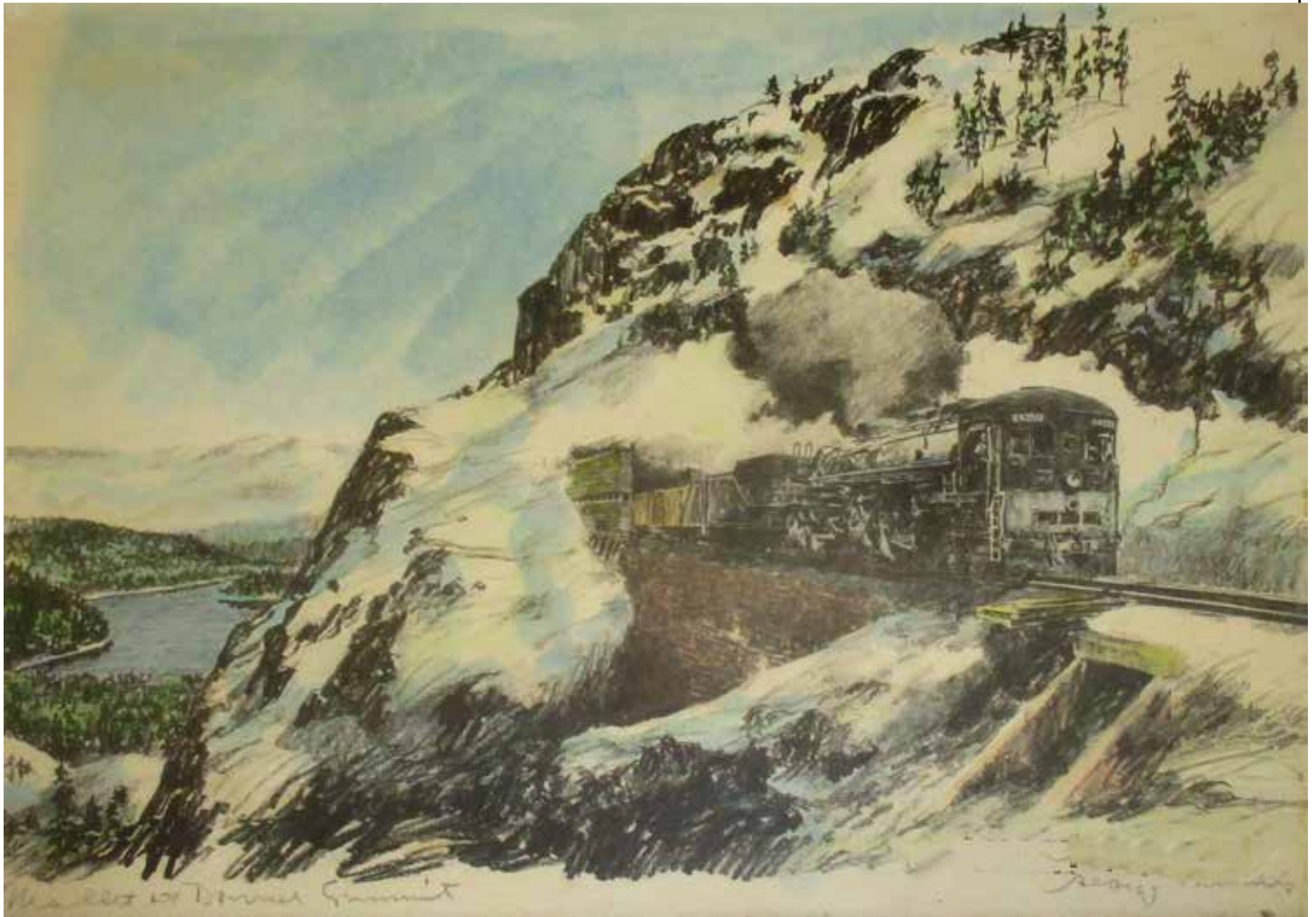
Today Milli lives in Homer, Alaska where she reads the [Heirloom](#). This month Milli is sharing five pieces of Donner Summit art work that she inherited from her aunt and uncle.

Lena bought the print of Goofy skiing in the early 40's as part of a fund raiser for World War II. The picture comes from Disney's the "Art of Skiing" (see our January, '10 and October, '24 [Heirlooms](#) for a review and an article about Goofy's skiing). The picture provides good ski advice from that expert, Goofy, "Eyes should be kept to the front because objects sometimes appear with amazing suddenness."

The other two pictures are by George Mathis and Tyler Micoleau Mathis (1902-1977), a nationally renowned artist, is known

as the “Pictorial Historian of the Mother Lode” since he had documented the Mother Lode and Donner Summit in his paintings and illustrations. The first painting is titled “Mallet on Donner Summit” and depicts the forward cab locomotives that were built so engineers wouldn’t choke on smoke in the tunnels and snowsheds. The second, titled “Donner Lake” depicts emigrants coming to California over Donner Pass much more easily than it really was.

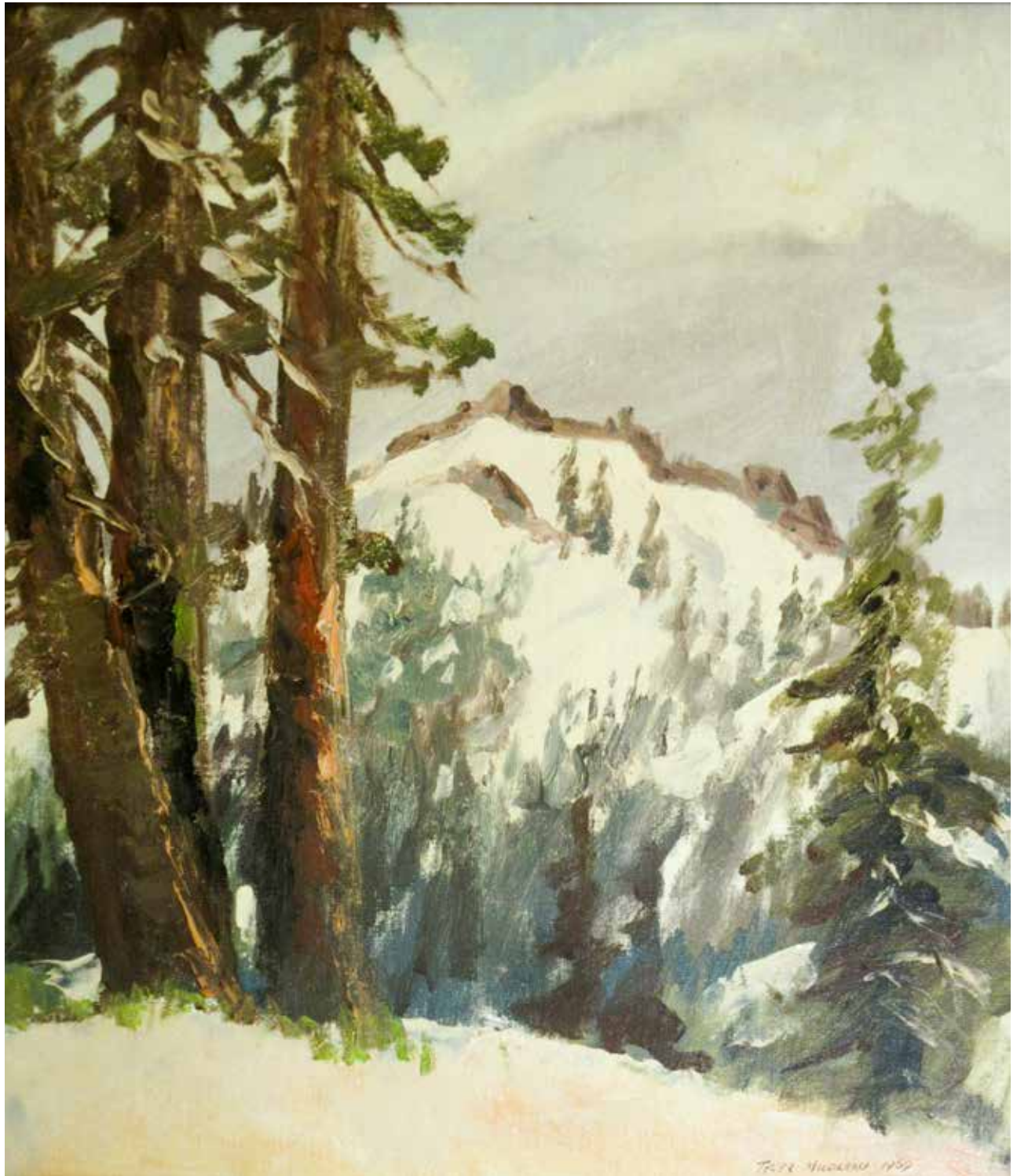
Tyler Micoleau (1911-2001), the painter of the last two pieces of Milli's artwork, painted the towns and countryside of Nevada County for fifty years. He had moved to Nevada City in the early 1950's. You can read about him in [Tyler Micoleau: Nevada City Artist](#). The first one is Crows Nest (1969) on Donner Summit about which Milli says, “The one of Crows Nest was her [Lena's] favorite and she was so excited when they went to pick it up. Lena had commissioned Tyler to paint her favorite mountain as she could see it from her bedroom window.” In another email Milli said, “I was visiting when the painting was done and I still recall Herbert driving us up to his house on Banner Mtn. Road in Nevada City to pick it up.” Much as Lena knew she had to leave Norden, she loved it there as much as Herbert did, and it was seeing that mountain [in the painting] every morning from her bedroom, that clinched her leaving for lower elevations. The second painting is the Yuba River (1968) which Lena saw at a sale and which induced her to commission Micoleau to paint her favorite mountain. We can think that Castle Pk. is in the background.



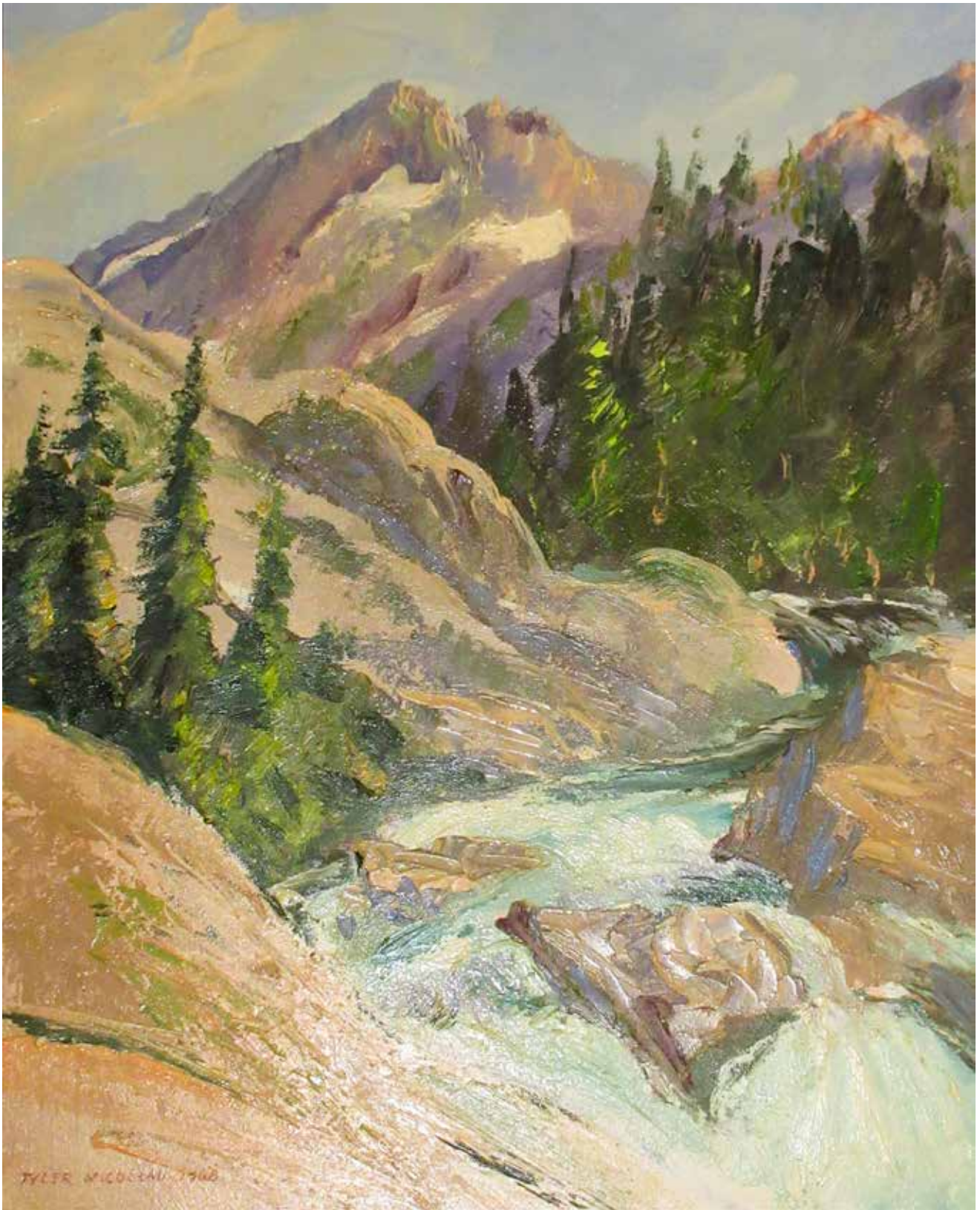
George Mathis Mallet on Donner Summit



George Mathis Donner Lake



Tyler Micoleau Crows Nest 1969



Tyler Micoleau Yuba River 1968



The Remarkable China Wall

They were a great army laying siege to Nature in her strongest citadel.” Beyond the Mississippi, 1869

Building the Transcontinental Railroad across the Sierra was an amazing feat. Everyone just accepts that but consider the trials. The mountains are high and the weather is extreme. Consider trying to find a route where the entire train run could not have more than 2.5% grades. Imagine plotting a route through and around mountain peaks. Laying out the route through the geography was a huge challenge. That was not the end however. They had to find financing. They had to find labor. They had to fight rock slides and avalanches, freezing weather, storms, huge falls of snow (35 feet or so in a season at the Summit), desert, and fire. The workers had to face black powder and nitroglycerine. They had to face isolation, accidents and sometimes a lack of food. The Asian workers had to face racism. They were prey for white thieves and riots aimed at evicting them. Then there was the race between the two railroads, one heading east and one heading west. The railroads were paid based on the miles of track laid. Therefore, the more track placed gave them more money from the Federal Government.

Tunnel after tunnel (15 total) went through the Sierra mountains and then they built more tunnels to shelter the line from the snow. We see the tunnels and we can see the trestles bridging the canyons and rivers. But there was also the need to harness gravity and fill in low spots.

Traveling Old Highway 40 over the Summit we can see the Lincoln Highway, snow tunnels, the railroad, climbing rocks, famous peaks, Rainbow Bridge, the petroglyphs, and the Pass. Almost ignored is the wall off to the south, in the midst of the string of snowsheds, China Wall. This was used to cross a canyon using real rock to stand the test of time.

China Wall

As they dug and blasted Summit Tunnel 6 (through 1659 feet of solid granite) they carried the rubble to the ravine just east of the tunnel. There they filled and perfectly fitted a dry fill (using no mortar) rock retaining wall that is 150 feet tall. I've driven past it innumerable times and walked atop it a few times. Then one day I thought I'd pay attention to the details. If you walk up from Old 40 take a look at how beautifully the rocks are laid together. Look at the tool marks from pry bars and star drills. The color is beautiful too, especially if you admire the wall after a rain which saturates the colors. Then contrast that 1867 China Wall with the modern concrete/gunite wall at the start of the snowshed above and just a bit east. There's beauty in China Wall as the pictures show, not so much in the gunite wall made by the white men.

To build the wall and the railroad path, the Chinese workers had to work six days a week, 52 weeks a year. There were more than 8000 workers and without them, the railroad would not have been built. Ironically, it was first thought Chinese workers would not be acceptable. They were too small but Leland Stanford supposedly said, "They built the Great Wall" didn't they?

China Wall is a testament of their work, passion and being a part of our community.

Visit China Wall

In the Sierra, they built a great railroad. And a great wall. The fact that it still stands is a testament of the caliber of work that was completed.

To get there take I-80 to the Soda Springs exit. Turn left (or right if coming from Sacramento) and go about three miles to the top of the pass. You will pass the trailhead of trailheads, the Donner Summit Hub, then down the hill. go over Rainbow Bridge and the China Wall is visible on the right. Park and walk up the granite slabs to the wall - see the pictures, right.

To get the real history

Sign up for a Donner Party Hike which will be next fall. Some of the hikes will take you onto the wall and you can hear about the history of the area from local historians.

Sign up at

<https://donnerpartyhike.com/> beginning April 1.



From the DSHS Archives

Ride The Magic Carpet To The Sugar Bowl

Opening December 18th

New Heron Double Chairlift — 2 Ropetows — 10 Runs From Mt. Disney —
New 2-Mile Beginners' Run — Rooms — Dormitories — Midweek Specials —
Sugar Bowl Ski Weeks — Bill Klein Ski School — 40 Miles From Reno.

For information and brochures write

SUGAR BOWL NORDEN, CALIF.

Tel. Soda Springs 2282

The Skier magazine
December, 1952

9NIXI1S 3R0FEB 3E010
**SKI THE
SUGAR BOWL**
On Donner Summit
NORDEN, CALIF.
*California's Favorite
Winter Resort*

PHONE
SODA SPRINGS 2281

**Ride the
Magic Carpet**
Aerial Tramway
From Highway 40
to the
SUGAR BOWL

THE OHIO MATCH CO.

At one time matchbooks were ubiquitous and made good advertisements. Here the matchbook cover advertises the Magic Carpet.

Ride The Magic Carpet from Highway 40 To The Sugar Bowl

on Donner Summit

excellent

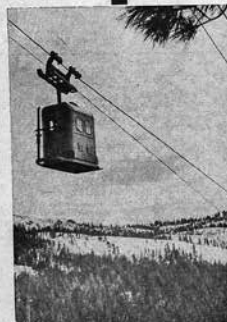
snow conditions . . . new Heron double chairlift . . .
two ropetows . . . ten runs from Mt. Disney.

new

2-mile beginners' run . . . Bill Klein's ski school . . .
rooms . . . dormitories . . . reduced mid-week rates.

information

brochures, rate sheet or posters write to:



Norden, California
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Book Review

One More River To Cross

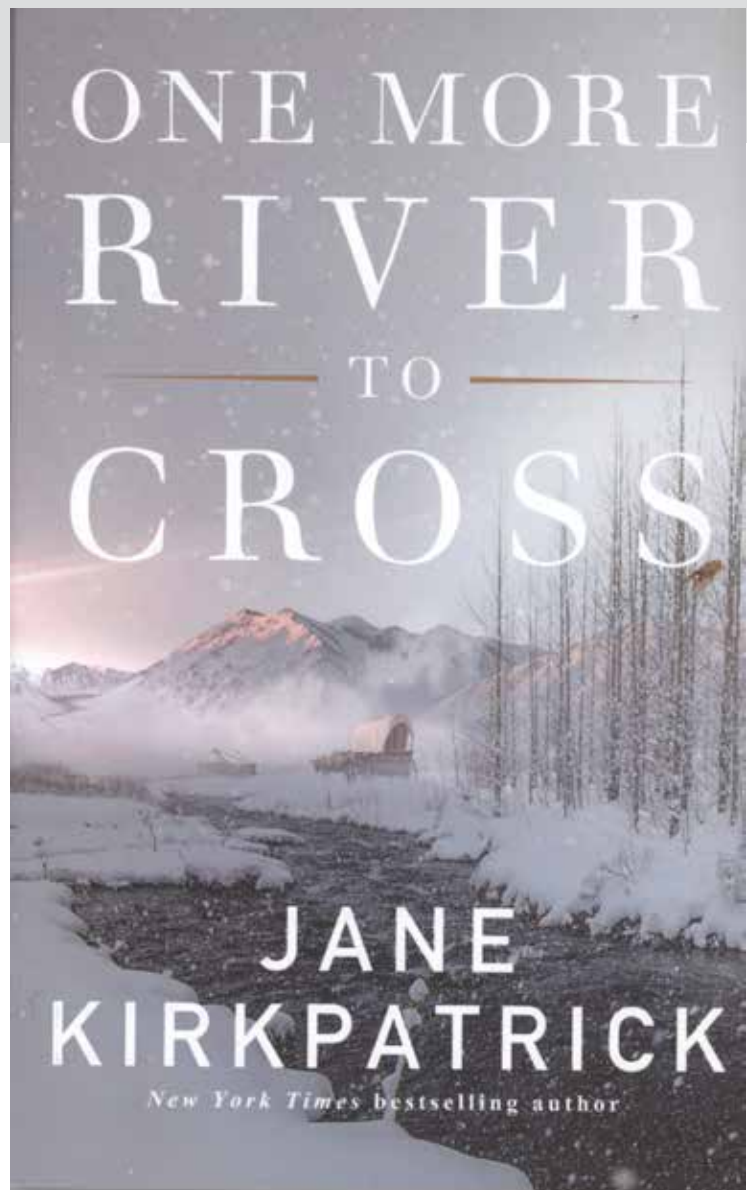
Jane Kirkpatrick 2019 341 pgs

In all the many good stories about Donner Summit the story of the Stephens Murphy Townsend party is one of the best. It's a story of tenacity, courage, strength, and survival as the party members faced the Sierra winter and the Sierra itself. The people did most things right and survived while "discovering" the Truckee route over Donner Summit and becoming the first group to reach California overland with wagons. They should have given their name to Donner Pass, Donner Lake, and Donner Summit. Instead, a less deserving group came along two years later and left their name everywhere.

Relatively few people know the story of the Stephens Party's crossing of the Sierra. The reason is that it wasn't news. They all survived with the party even increasing in size by two during the trek. We don't report on things if they work out right. No one grabbed the survivors and wrote their stories as happened with the Donners. Even years later their story has been overshadowed by the Donners.

The story is amazing though, and deserves to be told. So, over recent years there's been more attention. A video "Forgotten Journey" tells the story as does a novelized telling, Truckee's Trail (which the Heirloom reviewed in our February, '09 issue and which is on our website). We recently found One More River to Cross by Jane Kirkpatrick (2019) which is also a fictionalized account of the Stephens Party.

To quickly recap, the Stephens Party was aiming for California in 1844, two years before the Donners' ill-fated trip. At the end of November they'd arrived at Donner Lake. There six people, including two women, broke off and followed the Truckee River to Lake Tahoe where they crossed the mountains and arrived at Sutter's Fort. That's story one. The rest of the party realized they'd not be able to get over the pass with all their wagons so they left half of them at Donner Lake. Seventeen year-old Moses Schallenberger volunteered to stay and guard the wagons with two other men. That's story two. The rest of the party summited the pass and got as far as Big Bend, about twelve miles from the pass, where they realized they needed more help. The men volunteered to go ahead to Sutter's Fort for food. They would then come back and rescue the women and children. That's story three. Eight women and two men stayed at Big Bend with seventeen children, including two babies, one a newborn who was the first white baby born in California. They'd wait for the men to return. That's story four.



That's all rich fodder for an exciting retelling. Unfortunately, there's little information from real life to flesh out the stories. Not much was written down. Therefore authors wanting to tell the story have wide latitude to tell their own versions and must make up the details.

Before we even get to what Mrs. Kirkpatrick has done with her novel, we can consider our expectations. Each of those stories is compelling in the abstract and if we're good at detail we can make them even more compelling. What was it like to be part of the six who broke away initially, one the sister of Moses Schallenberger? Why did they decide to break away? Were there arguments about it? Elizabeth Townsend left her brother at the lake and then left her husband who stayed with the main group. What were the dynamics of that? How did they get over the Sierra? They had no maps and only vague information from a Native American. Which route was the right one, among the many

canyons to follow to the crest and which river drainage should they follow coming down the west side? How could they ever find Sutter's Fort in the immensity of Mexican California? What was it like to camp out in the snow every night, weather every storm, and find food?

Then there's Moses at Donner Lake in a rudimentary cabin that didn't even have a door. He ended up spending the winter alone. What kind of a person would volunteer to let the main party go on while he remained behind? What was it like to part with his friends all of them thinking they never would see him again after he took sick and headed back to the lake? How did he survive day to day? What was it like to be all alone for months in a cabin without even a door to keep the weather out? How did he deal with the continual loneliness? Spoiler alert: how did he react when he saw a man approaching in the distance, who'd been sent by his sister to rescue him?

What about the women and children at Big Bend? How did they react when the guys said they'd go for help and leave the women and children to fend for themselves in an even more makeshift cabin? What went through their minds over the ensuing months? How did they keep the children occupied? How did they keep their spirits up? How did they deal with the never ending cold? How did they react as their store of food diminished day after day? Worries must have compounded worries. Could they save their children? What if the men never came back?

Then there are the guys who got to Sutter's Fort and were dragooned into a small "army" to help fight Mexico. How did they feel knowing their families were waiting and they were being sent off to fight? When would be they able to get back?

It all comes out ok at the end and One More River takes us to the end of the story (as does Truckee's Trail). So the question becomes how well did Mrs. Kirkpatrick do?

Since there are few details about the Stephens party's trip across the continent Mrs. Kirkpatrick had a broad canvas on which to paint her stories and to come up with stories or details to put on the skeletal framework. One strength of the book is the characters. First there's a focus on the women who are empowered throughout the story which is not typical in Western literature. Kirkpatrick has written dozens of books, many from the woman's point of view, so that theme in this book has been well-practiced.

Another thing that's well-practiced is character descriptions and Kirkpatrick describes her characters well from the very first sentence and does it through the characters' actions and speech rather than the author's descriptions. For example

Mary Sullivan was washing clothes by the river thinking to herself about standing on her head, her poetry, and fulfilling her responsibilities including "expressing decorum." Little details build characters over time, such as Allen Montgomery spending too much time on his mustache. Characteristics of the people come out a little at a time over the course of the book. That kind of description is so much more powerful than an author's listing personality traits of what the characters look like.

Kirkpatrick's narrative also contrasts, through their actions, the Stephens Party with the Donner Party of two years later. If we know the story of the Donner Party we can hardly imagine people helping each other with laundry or inviting someone to dinner as happens with Kirkpatrick's Stephens Party. One can't imagine the Donner Party singing or having laughter "sprinkled through the company" in an effort to keep singing going. There are other contrasts too: good leadership, good planning, good dispute resolution, and cooperative decision making. To highlight those differences, for example, one of Kirkpatrick's little vignettes has Mary Sullivan reading a story with relevant morals to her two younger brothers. She compliments the boys as they think through

the possible morals. The final thought is "God will weave into your future as long as you are willing to share your fortune with others." The members of the Donner Party, in general, didn't subscribe to that. Joe Foster, in Kirkpatrick's telling,

considers the trip was charmed. They'd had no deaths, no Indian problems, no lost animals. That sounds like good luck as opposed to the Donner's luck, but then too, how much did the characters of the participants factor into the luck? Captain Stephens noted the families supported each other. The various Donner Party tellings cannot mention anything like that.

The Stephens Party had many major decisions to make: splitting up just before Donner Lake, leaving wagons at Donner Lake along with guards, and leaving the women at Big Bend so the men could go off for supplies. Kirkpatrick does well reporting realistic conversations about the decisions and how we might react to the ideas.

Then there are details that show Kirkpatrick has studied the topic. Mary Sullivan's wagon was painted, a common thing among the emigrants but a detail seldom noted elsewhere. There was blood on Mary's knuckles from using the washboard on laundry. Sarah Montgomery had strong nails meaning she was eating the right food.

Those little details enrich the story. Not all the details are true though. For example the wagons were used for carrying things and were full of those things. In Kirkpatrick's telling

there seems to be a lot of room for meetings, for the dog to go bounding between people in the wagon during a meeting, and for people to stand “shoulder to shoulder.” There are beds in the wagons. Here we’ll include some pictures of emigrant wagons taken from an outdoor museum in Genoa, NV. The wagon beds were scarcely four by ten feet. There’s no room for a bed and for people to stand “shoulder to shoulder.”

Then there’s what the people decided to bring when they left half their wagons at Donner Lake. There were trunks with extra clothes, a number of butter churns and even a rocking chair. The people were in trouble. They had to leave everything not important to survival behind. Were they really going to carry a rocking chair up the mountain through feet of snow? One character even carries a large two volume dictionary. That’s life saving?

Kirkpatrick says of the cabin built at Donner Lake that the occupants were “snug as a bug as could be” which one can’t imagine given that the thing barely had a roof, no chinking between the logs and not even a door. The weather inside must have been very close to the weather outside until the snow built up against the walls and then nearly as cold even with a fire. There’s an ox in a five foot trench. It needs to be staked so it doesn’t escape?

Kirkpatrick also didn’t visit the geography she describes. She remarks on a thirty foot stone wall that prevented the party’s moving forward but where they found the cleft for the oxen to travel up. There isn’t one in real life. The Greenwoods were gone for two days looking for the cleft. It couldn’t have taken that long for a distance of just three miles and how were they looking for a cleft all that time? One also cannot see the lake from the cabin built for Moses Schallenberger and his friends.

The horseback group of four men and two women broke off just before the party reached Donner Lake. They got to Lake Tahoe and then up over the ridge. The author has the group riding horses that swam across a river. There is not a river that large on the west side of Lake Tahoe. It had just snowed five feet at Donner Lake so it would have done the same on the horseback party so there would have been no muddy bank. It would have snowed more at Big Bend and as the party was summiting the pass. How was that dealt with?

That brings up another issue which is what was left out. There’s a lot of talking among the characters as each of the main stories (highlighted by the author as: the horseback group, wagon guards, wintering women, and cross country men) but there’s not much detail of the main conflict in the book, the characters against the weather or the environment. We’re told it snowed and it got cold but how exactly did that affect the characters? What was it like to slog through feet of snow to get to the top of Donner Pass? It must have been exhausting. How did they encourage the oxen or the seventeen children? What happened at the top? They must have been wet outside from melted snow and wet inside from

sweat. How did they warm up, keep their spirits up, and keep going? How did they go the next ten or twelve miles to Big Bend? Evocative descriptions are missing as they are from the group left at Big Bend, from the three guarding the wagons, and from the horseback group. A baby was born at Big Bend. It sounds like it was the easiest thing and the children, all seventeen were so tractable. Today kids can’t go a few miles before whining about arrival time. The Stephens Party children must have been saints.

There’s a problem with some of the vignettes Kirkpatrick draws. For example, as the horseback group is working their way along the west side of Lake Tahoe they stop at one point and a horse steals someone’s hat. That’s then taken by the dog. That’s cute but is it a good substitute for the travails facing the small group?

Then there are some lapses in logic. Moses didn’t want to kill an ox because “that would be the end of their food supply.” That’s nice of Moses to want to protect “Bill” but it makes no sense. Whether alive or dead the food is still there and arguably more food would be there with the ox dead than kept alive to waste away.

Unless you’ve lived a winter in the Sierra you can’t understand what it’s like. In the middle of winter a warm breeze will not come up and take away most of the snow in order to buoy the spirits. And there are no grouse in the mountains in December.

Another lapse has some of the women and kids leaving Big Bend and just happening to run into the rescuers. How did the women know the route to Sutter’s Fort and how did the rescuers end up on the same route?

How did the wagons at Donner Lake where Moses was get crushed but the wagons left at the other end survive?



emigrant wagons on display at Genoa, NV.



Making History Colorful



Steam engines at the rail yard in Truckee. Undated.



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

George Lamson

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Here we have maybe the largest of the Donner Summit Odds & Ends, the dam on the Yuba River above Rainbow Lodge. It used to impound water in a pond (top left of the picture above) that was then diverted through a large pipe down to a little cabin on the river (see the next page's bottom picture) where an electrical generator generated electricity for the Lodge. The large pipe was supported by concrete structures (see the pictures below and to the right).



George Lamson used his drone to get the overhead shots and then combine a couple of them into the panorama. The picture to the right is the same view as the top but has the route of the pipe delineated.



Eventually PGE or one of its predecessors came along and the lodge joined the utility. Meanwhile the remnants still occupy space along the river.



More of the Odds & Ends at Rainbow



Top picture: more concrete supports for the pipe from the reservoir/pond to the generator building. Middle: a view of the dam late in the season. Bottom: the last concrete support with the generator building in the background.

As long as we're at Rainbow on the Yuba River, here are pictures George Lamson sent along of the flooding of 2012. The top two pictures are the little building that used to house the electric generator for Rainbow Tavern. The bottom two are the red house at the pond that's formed by the dam.



Donner Summit Historical Society

www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

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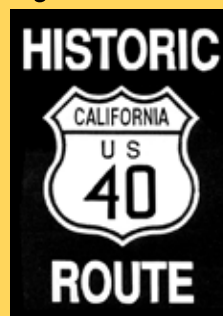
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