

Gatekeeper's

Summer 2021

GAZETTE

North Lake Tahoe Historical Society member and community magazine.



Gatekeeper's GAZETTE



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President's Message

— Jim Phelan

Greetings to all North Lake Tahoe Historical fans, members and volunteers. This past year has been a challenge for all of us some more than others but we are hoping that all of you have come through the pandemic healthy and wise.

Gatekeepers events such as the Gathering are still on hold awaiting a decision about how group meetings will be allowed by State Parks but we probably will not hold a home tour this year. Though Snowfest was cut way back this year Gatekeepers was still asked to host the ice carving contest which we did and had several unique carvings. Unfortunately I did not take any photos but I bet Truckee River Winery (the event sponsor) has a bunch. The Lake Tahoe Dance Festival will be held at the Gatekeeper's Museum in late July, so stay tuned for an email blast with the dates.

Though a lot of us had or may still have financial difficulties we would like to ask that you consider at least maintaining your membership with the NLTHS and those that can, please donate at a level that is comfortable with you. You may set up an auto withdrawal program with us (similar to NPR), just by contacting us by phone (530-583-1762) with credit card or bank account info that way you can know that you are continually supporting us. We were successful in participating in PPP, Cares act, and other funding sources to help with last year's difficult times when we could not hold events and needed to either close down or minimally operate the museum.

When you are next up in Tahoe please come by and visit Deborah and Louise as they have remained steady through all of this and would appreciate your thank you. Meet Phil our new Executive Director who started in May of last year right in the middle of the Covid pandemic so was challenged with operational duties well beyond the norm, but brought us through.

Though we will have a low water year at the lake, (the gatekeeper is currently holding 3 gates open), the

summer promises to be a good one and hope all will come up and enjoy as per 'historical' habits. Hope to see you this summer.

— Jim Phelan

Executive Director's Message



It was a challenging winter at the Gatekeeper's Museum. Mostly it was kind of lonely.

In early December, Placer County's Covid restrictions resulted in another closure for our museum, but we were able to keep our store open. Still, we're a museum and historical society, and as important as our gift shop operation is, commerce is not our primary business and we're not in the main part of Tahoe City, so there were long stretches of time when we had no visitors. In February, for various reasons, I was the only staff member here at the Gatekeeper's Museum for much of the time, and though I tend to love being a hermit, it could be a bit challenging.

But as always, we have members and visitors who delight us. I've been thinking a bit about Julie, Steven, and Bow (the dog) Montello, plus their friend Ben, who came to visit us both in December and again in January. They aren't members (yet!) but they like to shop in out-of-the-way gift shops and they've purchased several items from us, which we certainly appreciate.

But what really makes my day, and I hope yours as well, is the card and note that they sent to our Gift Shop Manager, Deborah Hanna, in early March. In addition to a lovely card there was also this note:

... we had the pleasure of meeting [Deborah Hanna] when we stopped in the Gatekeeper's Museum Gift Shop while selecting a few special gift items. Remember the puppet squirrel? I mentioned if I bought it I would put it away until Christmas. My husband Steven and I would give it as a perfect gift for a fun-loving 71 year old. My sister really liked the starry night constellation tee shirt. Yes, you and I chose the right size, after taking time, moving a few tees from your display, from one shelf or

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All images are from the NLTHS collections unless otherwise noted.

Our Cover

A smoky sunrise in mid-July reminds us that the Tahoe basin and much of the Sierra Nevada are part of fire influenced ecosystems. Climate change makes summer days like this more common these days. *Gatekeeper's Gazette, Summer 2021, page 4*

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rack to another. Thank you and your director for the patience and kindness you both showed us, especially me....

... With all our fun memories of two special people operating the museum shop in Tahoe, along with finding a good place to eat, across from the lake, we hope to visit again. We live 1 ½ hours from Tahoe, the distance makes it easy to think, we will all be back in the near future. Lord willing we hope to see you again...

Sincerely,

/s/Julie [Montello], Steven, Bill and Bow, the well-mannered toy poodle.

What a great card to find in our mailbox!

While this is definitely one of the superlatives because Julie was kind enough to send a card to thank Deborah for her work, there are many great experiences we've had with casual visitors.

When things have been as slow as they were then, it's possible to occasionally get into some deep conversations with first time visitors and old hands about our history and culture, and these were opportunities not only for me to share some of what makes the North Tahoe area special, but also opportunities for me to learn from our visitors as well.

In mid-June, California "reopened" and for fully vaccinated people, masks are currently not required in the Gatekeeper's Museum.

Visitation is increasing and it's been delightful to chat with visitors and share some of their delight to see the intricate weaving of Native American baskets, or listen to the echoes of crowds roaring as they examine some of the Olympic memorabilia upstairs, or come face to face with our bear (exhibit.) We're also trying to figure out how to reopen the Watson Cabin on weekends.

If you're familiar with some of the content downstairs, I've placed a QR code that links to the record that's on our Victrola so that visitors can actually hear Ben Black's 1927 recording of "Moonlit Waters." Another QR link on Captain Pomin's Cottage Organ allows visitors to hear the sounds of an Estey reed organ so that they can imagine what an evening's entertainment might have sounded like at Captain Pomin's house in the early 20th century.

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Covid 19 Versus the “Spanish Flu”

How Does Our Experience Compare with the Pandemic of 1918?

— Phil Sexton



Nurses arriving by rail in Truckee during the “Spanish Flu” pandemic (courtesy Truckee-Tahoe Historical Society.)

We have all been affected in one way or the other because of the Covid-19 Pandemic, but 102 years earlier, there was another genuinely global Pandemic—the “Spanish Flu” that hit millions of people just as World War I was ending. There are remarkable similarities—a quick global spread, tragic deaths, some panic, widespread masking and hygiene measures implemented, overworked medical professionals and even doubt about the severity of the illness itself, but the Spanish flu event only lasted a matter of months. By mid-1920, its effects were, for the most part, over.

The name “Spanish Flu” is a misnomer. It was originally identified in Germany, and its early rapid spread was thought to be due to German and Allied troops fighting in close quarters because of trench warfare. It’s thought that the name “Spanish Flu” resulted from early coverage of the disease in the Spanish press.

In the Tahoe Basin a century later, we saw both closures and limited operations as our positivity rate fluctuated. Businesses have closed or changed how they operate. We have found new ways to shop, cooked more at home, learned to bake bread and experiment in our kitchens, and have changed how we travel and interact with others.

Placer County was hit harder in some areas than others, and though total cases in the Tahoe Basin have been relatively low, there have been significant numbers here and sadly, some deaths. As of mid-June 2021, the Placer County has had a total of 24,176

cases with 257 cases in Placer County’s portion of the Tahoe Basin. Our relatively low numbers are the result of being a small community, most people paying attention to mask wearing and social distancing practices, but also because for the first part of 2020, travel to Tahoe was strongly discouraged. Overall, we have been fortunate.

In 1918, the Lake Tahoe Basin was a quite different area than it is today. Access to the Lake was by both train and automobile during the summer, but winter access was severely limited. Tahoe City and other settlements here were much smaller and there were few visitors coming from around the world to visit this beautiful place.

In searching newspaper archives from 1918-1919, there is not much information available about the effects of Spanish Flu on the Tahoe Basin, but on October 31, 1918, the Grass Valley Union printed a call for Physicians to come to Tahoe to help with an outbreak of both Spanish Flu and Diphtheria. At the time, the nearest physicians were in Truckee, which was grappling with a much larger outbreak due to the presence of the Southern Pacific Railroad’s Donner Pass route, which was (and is) a major transportation corridor in and out of California.

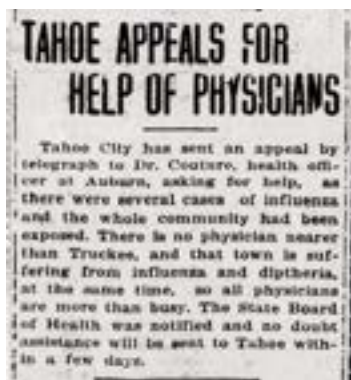
Also during 1918, 24 Red Cross nurses arrived in Truckee to assist and nurse flu victims. No fatalities were recorded until November but starting in October there were as many as 48 Spanish flu cases per week

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in the tiny town. By December, most Truckee residents had become ill, with the number peaking sometime in January 1919. At the same time there was a series of particularly heavy snowstorms which stopped train traffic for a while and made the idea of receiving any relief seem very remote. With most residents housebound and undoubtedly clustering together at their fireplaces and stoves, infection rates soared.

Placer County's first fatality was in Colfax, another railroad town, on October 14, 1918. A few days later, the county health board issued an order prohibiting any public gatherings and closed most businesses except for short open times for vital businesses such as grocers. Saloons closed each day at 6 pm.



Grass Valley Union, October 31 1918.

Tahoe area, but throughout California, emergency orders were issued that required masks be worn in any group setting, along with other mandatory sanitation measures. Throughout California, you could be arrested for being without a mask in many places. Another editorial in the Truckee Republican pleaded with people to act responsibly:

Don't indulge in promiscuous coughing or sneezing.

On October 24, 1918, the Truckee Republican urged readers to wear masks in no uncertain terms:

The man or woman who will not wear a mask is a dangerous slacker...

Physicians and local officials wholeheartedly agreed. A separate hospital set up in a Victorian home near the Truckee depot attempted to treat the increasing

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In Truckee, schools were closed, and churches were urged to suspend services entirely or have them outside in the open air.

Globally, over 17,000,000 people died because of the Spanish Flu. We don't know how many people died or were even infected in the Truckee-

number of flu victims. Dr. Joseph Bernard, Truckee's only physician, caught the flu, while Dr. Bryant, who had come to Truckee to assist Dr. Bernard, soldiered on, overworked and nearing exhaustion. As the winter of 1918-19 drew on, Father Michael O'Reilly, the town Priest, died after contracting the flu while ministering to the sick and dying and their families. Prominent citizens, including Earl McGlashan, the only son of publisher/attorney Charles McGlashan, died. Finally, in February 1919, the pandemic subsided in Truckee, and life slowly began to return to normal.

By late 1919, there were even advertisements in the Northern California press for "cures," including Chiropractic treatment, even advising people to visit "germ-free" resorts in the foothills.

Our experience with Covid-19 has been comparatively



1918 Broadside distributed widely during the "Spanish Flu" pandemic.

less serious, fortunately, and as this is being written, we seem to be on the downhill side of the Covid 19 Pandemic, but it has also lasted longer than the 1919 pandemic for a variety of reasons.

Fortunately in 2021, vaccines are widely available,

and so far over 70% of Californians have received at least their first dose of a vaccine. Most people here at Lake Tahoe were conscientious about observing social distancing and mask guidelines when they were in effect, and though the closure of the Gatekeeper's Museum for most of 2020 has been tough, we believe that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

(Executive Director Report, continued from page 4)

Try them for yourself!

Most smartphones will open a QR code link when you point your camera at the code:



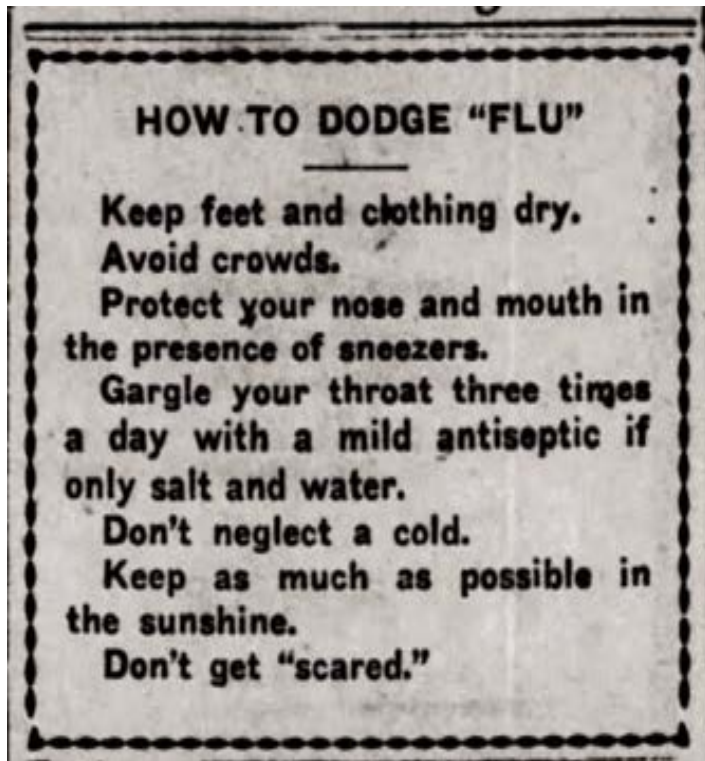
Scan to play "Moonlit Waters" by Ben Black and his Orchestra or go to bit.ly/moonlitwaters.



Scan to hear an Estey Reed Organ or go to bit.ly/EsteyOrgan.

Our newest acquisition, a 15 ½ foot long dinghy built by Ernie Pomin as a fishing boat, has been repainted by volunteers to look much as it did nearly a century ago when newly built. For September, we're planning a member event at the Museum and who knows what else. Heck, we're even looking for some new Board members who can help us move into the future. In its own quiet way, this is an exciting time.

But we can't get this all done without some volunteer help, so as you peruse this issue of Gatekeeper's Gazette, think about how you might be able to help us out to restart our activities after a very strange 2020. Who knows? You just might get as nice of a card as we received from Julie, Steven, Bill and Bow, the well-mannered toy poodle!



Reno Gazette, September 1919.



Sacramento Daily Union, February 1, 1920. Dr. Booth promoted Chiropractic to prevent the "Spanish Flu."



From our Archivist, Nancy Stromswold

The Museum lives to collect important historical material for our archives. It is our goal to capture and preserve as much of our community history as possible, and we depend on our community to help us find these important historical artifacts. Our thanks to all donors!

The Pomin Dinghy

Boating and watercraft use on the Lake is a huge draw for both visitors and locals to the Tahoe Basin, and boating has been common here since the 19th century. Before roads were built around the Lake the easiest way to get to places such as Homewood, Eagle Rock, Zephyr Cove, Canelian Bay or Camp Richardson was by taking the Steamer from Tahoe City. Additionally, natural resources in the Lake were so abundant that the Lake was a commercial fishery in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ultimately, overfishing ended commercial fishing and led to some of the first efforts to study Lake Tahoe ecosystems.

In late 2020, we acquired a 15 foot 6 inch riveted steel fishing dinghy from the former Tahoe Maritime Museum. It was built in the early 20th century by Ernie Pomin, whose family still lives in the North Tahoe area. In a 1966 interview, Ernie Pomin stated "I built 54 boats. Two years I built seven each year. I built 14 for Glenbrook, seven each year." The dinghy we now have is one of the few surviving locally built watercraft, and we're thrilled to have it here.

Tahoe resident Randy Pomin, grandson of Ernie Pomin and local business owner, remembers fishing with his grandfather many times in a handmade red rowboat, setting out from Ernie's Tahoe Park Cottage Resort. Ernie built the boats in the 1920s as a winter "cottage industry" in the old Southern Pacific Shop in Tahoe City, now the Marina or "Roundhouse" Mall. These

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dinghies included a fish box under the middle seat and air-tight flotation boxes under the bow and stern seats so that the boat would float in case it capsized.

Our boat was built for fishing; a remnant of the live well remains in the center of the boat that held both bait and fish as they were caught. The hull is galvanized sheetmetal with wooden seats and gunnel, steel oarlocks and a keel on the bottom of the boat. A brace on the stern tells us that an outboard motor has been used on the dinghy, but it was probably built before outboard motors were common.

At some point in the craft's history, it was taken to



Jim Phelan and crew bringing our "new" boat into the Museum, fall 2020.

Bullard's Bar Reservoir in Yuba County and eventually scuttled, then rescued after 12 years to be returned to Lake Tahoe. Our intent is to preserve, but not restore the boat. The holes in the bottom will remain, but we want to showcase this early example of watercraft on the Lake and interpret some of the marine history of Lake Tahoe.

We found some wonderful people with preservation experience who stripped and repainted the boat in colors that approximate Ernie Pomin's original paint job at a shop in Newcastle. Jeff Johnson, Lew Dobbins and Dan Foster carefully stripped several layers of

paint, gently sanded and smoothed the wooden seats, gunnel and the live well in the center. The grey interior and red exterior colors would be very familiar to Ernie Pomin and others who purchased and floated on the Lake in his boats.

The Pomin family also donated three toolchests used by Ernie, and we're preparing some of his tools to display so that visitors can see some of the tools he used. A breast drill (hand crank), saw set (used for aligning saw teeth when a saw was sharpened), several sets of calipers, taps and dies, used for threading bolt holes, nuts and pipe, and some other specialized tools are being cleaned to highlight Ernie Pomin's craftsmanship and skills.

We are just thrilled to be able to share some of this little known but very important history.



The Dinghy now looks like new!

Postcards!

What Would Life Be Like Without Postcards?

Recently, Judith Martin donated a collection of 12 postcards circa 1913, showing Lake Tahoe scenery, roads and automobiles. Here are a few samples from this collection.



(2021.001.0001) Addressed to Mr. W.A. Couch in Stockton, postmarked in June 1913 at Placerville.

Taken at the lip of the summit looking down into Lake Tahoe. I am having the chills and malaria fever. This is the first day I have tried to sit up. Henry is feeling fine... How are all the children and Will and Yourself?

Your Sister and Bro, Florence and Henry



(2021.001.0002) Written on the back in pencil:

On the road to Lake Tahoe. This place is about 7,000 ft. above sea level, and at present you can't travel the road on account of to [sic] much snow.

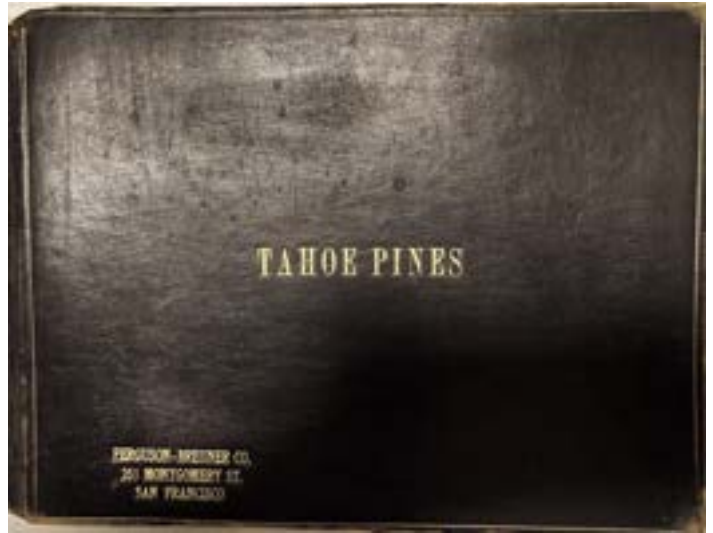


(2021.00..0003) Addressed to Mrs. Bessie Atchison, Abingdon Ill., postmarked in Placerville, Cal., on July 23, 1913.

Written on the back in pencil.

Dear Sister, Got your letter and have been awful busy and Florence has been sick and in the Sanatorium again. So you see I have been busy. She is better now. We had a fine rain here yesterday something strange for this time of year. Will write you a letter soon.

With love to all, H. A.



(inside front cover) An art image of Tahoe Pines portion of the West Shore, drawn by H. Marcus Moran, Pacific Photo and Art Company.



(2021.00..0007) *Written on the front.*

PIERCE ARROW STAGE A.L. RICHARDSON, PROPR.
RUNNING BET. PLACERVILLE AND TALLAC LAKE TAHOE.
FREIGHT CARRIED BY AUTO TRUCK.

Tahoe Pines Album

A black leather-bound album containing 38 images of the West Shore circa 1906-1910. The images inside were used by Ferguson-Bruener Co. to promote real estate sales on the West Shore. Donated by Bo Grebitus, grandson of C. H. Bruener.

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2020.005.03 *(left) An unknown person, perhaps on Eagle Rock.*

The Power of Volunteerism

—Phil Sexton

It's no secret that the NLTHS, along with many other worthy institutions, needs volunteer help to fulfill our mission. Non-profits all over the world largely succeed because of volunteers, and the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society really needs some people to step up and help us re-start much of what we do from a year interrupted by Covid-19.

Annually, about 25% of Americans (that's about 63 million people if you're into numbers) perform some sort of volunteer service in the United States. Although volunteerism isn't exclusively an American tradition, our rate of volunteerism is very high compared to some countries. Did you know:

- In 2016, volunteer time was valued at \$24.14 per hour. This equaled a net benefit of \$193 billion dollars to communities across the US.
- Women volunteer at a higher rate than men, 27.8% versus 21.8%.
- People who volunteer spend an average of 52 hours per year (equals one hour per week!) volunteering.
- 72% of all volunteers are involved with only one organization.

If you're reading this, it's likely that you're a member of NLTHS or know someone who is. The North Lake Tahoe Historical Society exists to hold the history of North Lake Tahoe in trust, preserving and presenting them for all people, and for future generations. However, with only 1.5 employees and a volunteer board, we can't function without your help.

Now midway through 2021, we know we're overwhelmed. The Gatekeeper's Museum needs some maintenance, some new and refreshed exhibit content, and help with research and programs for schools, visitors and community groups. We desperately need some help to serve our membership with events such as the Gathering, public presentations and membership activities. Our archivist needs help just cataloging what we hold that helps preserve the history of this part of the Lake Tahoe Basin. We'd like to dust and tenderly clean our basket collection to help preserve it in perpetuity.

At the Watson Cabin, we could really use some help to open and staff the cabin so that Tahoe City visitors can get a glimpse into the past. This, the oldest building at Lake Tahoe, needs some loving care, but

most importantly, it wants to be open to share its many stories with visitors from around the world. The grounds of the cabin need some loving care as well, so that it can reflect some of what it looked like when it was a home in the tiny village of Tahoe.

As if that weren't enough, volunteers are needed for things that we haven't even imagined yet. How about doing an outline or a full version of a school program that would help elementary students discover a love for cultural history? Or boating? Or the story of early logging and ecological recovery here at the Lake?

I'm aware, from being both a volunteer manager and a volunteer myself, of the power not only of volunteerism but also the power of being a volunteer. You can set your own hours, and you can work with our staff to come up with duties and responsibilities that not only help us out, but scratch your own personal itch in a way to increase your fulfillment in sharing some of your time, talent and skills with others.

So consider volunteering some time for NLTHS when you're able to. You'll be able to do something unique that helps preserve important things into the future. Maybe best of all though, your efforts can help carry the past into the future. I think it's as close as we can come to using a time machine!

Just for Fun



"Happy Day" Spring of 1920. (Left to right:) Ernest Pomin "Mackinaw Trout 24 lbs. caught off Sugar Pine Point" Captain Joe Pomin, "Mary" the deer, Henry Sell, "King of the Woods." [Note: "1911" is also written on this photo.]



You shop. Amazon gives.

You Can Support NLTHS Through Amazon Smile

Did you know that when you make purchases from Amazon, you can also contribute to the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society, and most importantly, it won't cost you anything extra!

By using Amazon Smile when you make your Amazon purchases, Amazon will set aside a tiny amount from most purchases to a non-profit organization that you designate. If you choose to support the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society through Amazon Smile, most purchases you make will also benefit the Gatekeeper's Museum.

Here's how:

- Log on to your Amazon account at smile.Amazon.com/
- Sign into your account with your regular email address and password.

Are You a Member?

It's Good to Belong.

- Choose your charitable donation. In the search box, type "North Lake Tahoe Historical Society" and select it. That's all there is to it!

Now when you shop on smile.Amazon.com (and from the app on your phone,) most items you buy will contribute to your Amazon Smile donation. Each contribution is a tiny amount, but it does add up, and you can support the NLTHS without any extra cost or effort on your part.

As always, thanks for your support!

Joseph's Place and Our Curious Banner

— Phil Sexton

When our Dinghy was removed for preservation work, Archivist Nancy Stromswold had a great idea. She pulled out a large canvas banner used in the 1920s to advertise a resort called Joseph's Place, built and operated by Lewis Joseph in Homewood.

Joseph's Place was one of several lodges built in the 1920s. During this time, highways were being built, many people had acquired their first car, and spending at least part of the summer at Lake Tahoe was a very attractive and not terribly expensive option for many in the lowlands. Portions of Joseph's Place are now part of the "Lodge at Obexer's" in Homewood.

North Lake Tahoe Historical Society

530-583-1762, PO Box 6141, Tahoe City CA 96145. info@northtahoemuseums.org
Gatekeeper's Museum | Marion Steinbach Basket Gallery | Watson Cabin

Please select a membership level Student, \$15 Individual, \$40 Family, \$50 Friend, \$100
 Benefactor, \$250 Silver Circle, \$500 Gold Circle, \$1,000

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____ City/State _____ Zip Code _____

Billing Address: _____ City/State _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone: (____) _____ Email: _____

Your privacy is important to us.

I do not wish to have my name published in membership lists

Payment

Check enclosed

Charge my

Visa

Mastercard

Card Number _____ Three-digit Security Code: _____ Exp. Date: _____



The banner is wonderful for its simple design and wonderful artwork. On its right side is a man looking in a telescope, obviously looking for Joseph's Place. He is wearing pantaloons, knee-high socks, an orange tunic, driving gloves and a driving cap. He also has a rakish handlebar mustache, and is a dapper gentleman. Below his picture, the caption says "I am looking for Joseph", or it least it did originally.

Sometime after this photo was taken, the banner seems to have been modified. Someone added "\$1.00 & UP." More subtly, the bottom sentence has had an 's' added, so that the motorist is now looking for "Joseph's" instead of just "Joseph." Also, in the lower left corner, the name "Max H. Kruse" was added in block letters.

Who in the World was Max Kruse?

Max Kruse was a German sculptor and painter from Hamburg. Biographical information is sparse for Mr. Kruse, but he came to the US in 1904 and settled in San Francisco, where he painted and created sculpture, using both stone and cast metal for his work. Kruse's most famous work is a sculpture of a heroic running figure called "Nenkikamen." He died in San Francisco in 1938.

So all of this begs the question — did Mr. Kruse create the banner and the wonderful man with the telescope, endlessly looking for either Joseph or Joseph's Place? Did he simply make the modifications that we see today? Did Mr. Kruse trade some work for





Joseph's Place at Homewood in the 1920s. Inset: detail of the banner before it was modified. (NLTHS collection.)

a night's stay at Joseph's? Perhaps most importantly, do we have an unknown Max H. Kruse painting?

If the purpose of art is to provoke, then this is certainly art in its purest sense. The mind just reels with possibilities.

JOSEPH'S PLACE
 Homewood, Lake Tahoe. Tents and cottages. Electric lights, showers; store, modern rates. The ideal spot on the lake. For particulars address or phone L. H. JOSEPH, Homewood, Lake Tahoe, Cal.

Oakland Tribune, June 14, 1932

HOMEWOOD
 Boasts of a new clubhouse, splendid dance floor and refreshment parlor. Write for rates. MRS. A. W. JOST, Homewood, Lake Tahoe, Cal.

San Francisco Call, June 17, 1922.



Gift Shop

Now that summer has arrived in full force, it's time to hike and explore.

Two recent arrivals can help with your outdoor explorations. "Strawberry; Valley of Legends" (\$35) is a personalized history of Strawberry, Lover's Leap and the area's role in people traveling over the Sierra via Echo Summit from the 1840s until today.

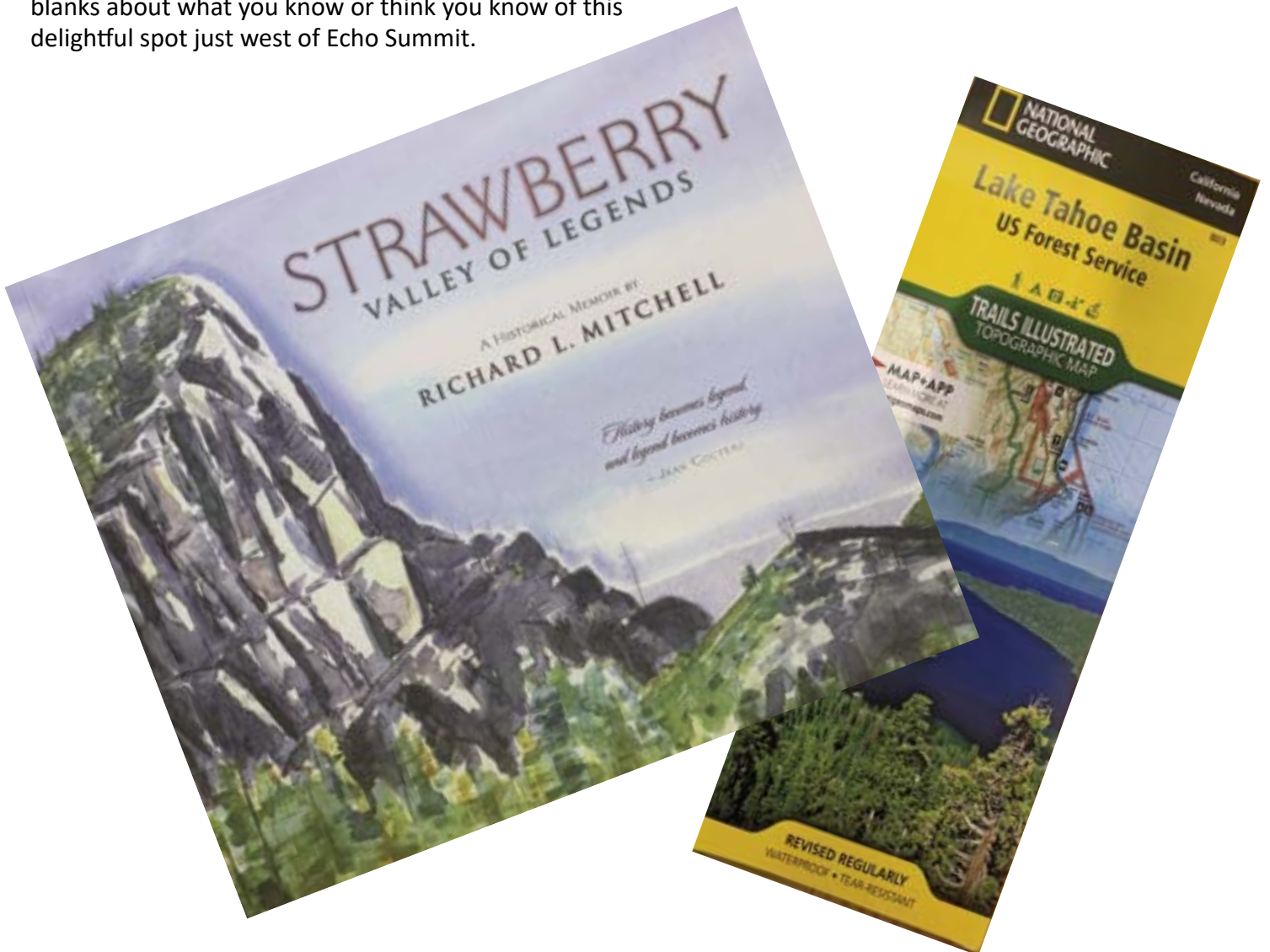
Richard L. Mitchell's book is not only filled with history and legend, but many photographs, drawings, maps and other elements that can help you fill in the blanks about what you know or think you know of this delightful spot just west of Echo Summit.

It took a while, but we finally received some of the Trails Illustrated/National Geographic topographic map of the Lake Tahoe Basin (\$14.95).

National Geographic maps of National Forests and other public lands have become very popular in the last decade, with the incredible detail that we've come to expect from National Geographic. This large scale map includes not only topography, but also bathymetric data about Lake Tahoe's underwater landforms. It also interfaces with a phone app to help you track and record your travels when using maps in this series.

Along with these new items, we have many books, clothing items, posters, souvenirs and gift items for that special someone.

And just for fun, when you next visit, pick up a bag of trout food for only fifty cents. You can make the fish who hang out near the dam very happy!





Detail from Alfred A. Hart 116, Camps near Summit Tunnel, 1866. (Library of Congress.)

A National Landmark for the Chinese Camps at Donner?

—Phil Sexton

For many reasons, I have a special interest in the cultural and natural history of Donner Pass. I've worked at the Pass during my jobs as the Interpretive Program Manager for Tahoe National Forest and made many trips there as the Director of Programs and Training at the California State Railroad Museum. The Pass fascinates me; it remains a major corridor in and out of California, and the many layers of human history, intertwined with the environmental conditions of the Pass are unique in our history.

In 2013, I helped coordinate a continuing education partnership between the Railroad Museum and the History Project office at UC Davis, taking groups of educators up to the Pass as part of weeklong curriculum development programs called *Teaching the Transcontinental Railroad*, workshops for teachers from across the nation. I've also worked with researchers, filmmakers, authors, and even a composer to help them learn about and experience the physical nature of the Pass and its role in our history.

I find it hard to describe just how significant the pass is and how much human history has occurred there. In a very small area, less than one half square mile, are:

- Petroglyphs created by the Martis people, created

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between 2,400 and 4,000 years ago;

- Evidence of some of the first immigrants to come to California over the Sierra prior to the Gold Rush;
- The 1862 Dutch Flat-Donner Lake Wagon Road that connected California with the Comstock Silver Strike;
- The nation's first transcontinental railroad;
- The first automobile route to span the US, and
- A major telecommunication corridor that dates from 1864.

I really can't think of another spot in the State, and few in the Nation, that have so many significant connections to our shared history in such a small area.

Most recently, I've been working with the 1882 Foundation, a Washington DC based educational foundation, to help understand and promote some detailed knowledge about the role of Chinese labor in building the transcontinental railroad and the history of Chinese immigrants who came to California in the 19th century. Since 2018, I've been a consultant and historian for the 1882 Foundation connected with the history of the Chinese experience building a railroad across the Sierra.

The route between Auburn California and Promontory Summit Utah was built primarily by Chinese labor, who made up 85-90% of the workforce on the Central Pacific Railroad. Much of the route built in the 1860s remains in use today by Union Pacific Railroad and Amtrak's *California Zephyr*.



Detail from Alfred A. Hart 196 Shaft House over Summit Tunnel (Library of Congress.)

Since 2018, the 1882 Foundation has been working with the National Park Service to nominate a small portion of the area just east of Donner Pass as a National Historic Landmark (NHL) to honor the work of the Chinese and protect and interpret some of the archaeological evidence that remains. Partly because of this advocacy, NPS has funded an archaeological survey and creation of a formal NHL nomination with support from several groups interested in preserving this history.

Part of the original rail line across Donner Pass was de-tracked in 1993, not because it was unserviceable, but because the Southern Pacific Railroad was in deep financial trouble at the time and the original route over the Pass was an expensive section of track to maintain in winter. Rail traffic was down, and the railroad has a number 2 track that goes through a two-mile long tunnel under Mt. Judah, just a mile or so south of the original route. Because the second track is in such a long tunnel, it's not avalanche prone like the original route is. About five miles of the original roadbed, built between 1865 and 1867, was de-tracked but not formally abandoned.

The easy access from Donner Pass Road and the obvious cuts and fills and tunnels at the Pass mean that thousands of people each year casually explore the area, rock climb, hike, and for several years before a substantial gate was installed, some even drove motorized vehicles along part of the roadbed. More recently, the graffiti in and adjacent to the Summit tunnel has become a major issue, not only marking up the rock and concrete avalanche walls, but damaging the historic patina on tunnel walls, obscuring and damaging historic surfaces that still bear the marks of tools and blasting done by the Chinese between 1867 and 1993. For nearly 130 years, as Leland Stanford once remarked, "the wealth of half the world" traveled across this roadbed and through these tunnels.

Since the 1990s, I've explored, researched and led many groups in this area, showing people not only evidence of the construction techniques used, but also building and habitation sites used by the Chinese laborers and the white engineers and supervisors. In the same area, early roads, remnants of telegraph lines and other cultural features not directly on the railroad right of way can be found.

The habitation sites have also been looted and damaged, but most casual visitors do not find

them or don't know what they are, so the relative damage and destruction is much less than what is found on the roadbed itself.

At these sites, there are clear outlines of rock foundations for wooden structures. Hearth remnants, square nails, fragments of liquor bottles, tin cans and buckets flattened by over 150 years of heavy winter snows.



Hearth foundation at Summit Camp (Phil Sexton.)

There is evidence of Chinese life, such as fragments of rice bowls with a clear "double happiness" pattern. Brownware, a unique kind of glazed pottery, unique to the Guangdong province of China, used to transport sauces, dry goods and food stuffs from China, can be found. Most remarkably, I have even found Chinese coins dating from the Ping dynasty. These artifacts not only prove the presence of Chinese at the site but are pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle that helps us understand the story of the people and activities that happened here.

When I find evidence like this, I always leave it on-site, caching or burying the objects at what I hope are places where they will not be found.

Collecting artifacts from public lands is illegal of course, but perhaps more importantly, removing them is like taking a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. When a piece is missing, the puzzle is frustratingly incomplete, and the entire story is lost.

Because railroad construction in this area took nearly two years, this was more of a village than a camp. The changes to the landforms and artifacts that remain today are evidence of daily life that provokes a sense of wonder about the people who built a 1,654 foot long bore through the summit of the Sierra Nevada, as well as hundreds of miles of roadbed and more

than a dozen additional tunnels. In 1867, and for many years afterward, tunnel 6 itself was the longest and highest elevation railroad tunnel in the world.



*Class bottle fragment showing lettering in the glass.
(Phil Sexton.)*

Perhaps the most prominent feature here is China Wall, a 75-foot tall dry laid, interlocking stone wall that supported a railroad bed for over 130 years. Studying the granite blocks closely, you can see not only quarry marks, but marvel at the intricate pattern of how the wall was assembled without mortar, tilted back at about 75 degrees, with anchor stones in each course, extending deeply into the fill behind the wall to help anchor the entire structure.

In addition to the wall's function, the very design, patterns and varied colors in the rock are nearly hypnotic, yet when it was built, there was no thought given to aesthetics; after all, it was built in a furious race against the Union Pacific building westward from Omaha.

The tunnels and roadbed are the mega structures here, the result of nearly two years of work by thousands of unknown men using hand tools, black powder and (for a short time) newly-invented nitroglycerin, blasting through some of the hardest rock in North America and changing the nation as a result. Charlie Crocker, the Construction Superintendent, was known to charge through work sites with an axe handle, hollering at his laborers to work as if heaven was before them, and hell right behind them.

The roadbed, tunnels and China Wall, even de-tracked, are still private property, owned today by Union Pacific Railroad, and though the railroad recognizes this history and its importance, for many

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reasons they are not interested at this point in a designation or programs that would encourage trespass onto their roadbed.

As the NHL nomination is being developed, part of my job is to reach out and stay in contact with major stakeholders, organizations and people who would be interested in preserving this area's history. At Donner Pass, in addition to the Union Pacific, the major landowners are USDA Forest Service and Sugar Bowl Ski Area, both of whom have been closely involved with the development of the nomination.

The Donner Summit Historical Society, Truckee-Tahoe Historical Society, Placer-Sierra Railway Heritage Society are also important stakeholders, as well as the county supervisors for both Placer and Nevada Counties, since the county line bisects the site, and I am thrilled that both Supervisors are generally supportive of the NHL proposal.

Still, it has been challenging to explain the importance, not only of the specific history itself, but also of the need to preserve and protect the site and its resources. There are possible conflicts between wanting to preserve and protect an important site, while at the same time welcoming visitors and helping to interpret and educate people about the important things that happened here.

In early June, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Chinese Camps, portions of the tunnel and the China Wall complex one of the eleven most endangered historic sites in the United States. This was particularly good news for everyone involved with the NHL project. It helps some people and groups understand the need for a formal historic designation, interpretive activities and more protection for the site and its resources.

This summer, an archaeologist is doing a field survey and literature search related to all known and documented cultural resources at the site. He is also in touch with academics and historians who are sharing their knowledge of the area. A photographer for National Geographic magazine is doing a photo essay about the geography of the transcontinental railroad to be published in spring 2023. My colleagues in Washington have been talking with Congressional offices and staff at the Department of Transportation to keep them in the loop and ask for support.

One of the Biden administration's current emphasis items is transportation infrastructure, and their goals

are in some ways very similar to President Lincoln's goals when he authorized construction of the Pacific Railroad in 1862.

On the 100th anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1969, Philip Choy, then President of the Chinese-American Historical Society, was invited to Golden Spike National Monument in Utah, to be one of the speakers at the celebration on May 10. At the last moment, he was scratched off of the program because John Wayne had unexpectedly arrived and wanted to wave to the crowd. Mr. Choy was told that as a result, there was no time for him to make his remarks.

He sat silently on the dais as President Nixon's Secretary of Transportation, John Volpe, gave a speech, saying "who else but AMERICANS could drill tunnels and build roadbed across mountains covered with thirty feet of snow? Who else but AMERICANS could chisel tunnels through miles of solid granite? Who else but AMERICANS could have laid ten miles of track in twelve hours?"

Though he stayed silent while on the dais, Mr. Choy was furious. His colleagues knew of and understood his frustration. For the rest of his life, Mr. Choy continued his work to promote and make people aware of the role of Chinese people in American history.

Philip Choy died in 2017, but his friends, colleagues and many others have continued his quest to put the contributions of Chinese in context with other people in American history.

Now, more than fifty years later, Mr. Choy's work continues. A national historic landmark would help further his long-held goal, and though my role is relatively minor, I'm thrilled to be part of this decades long effort.

Additional Information

Videos:

USDA Forest Service. *Legacy*, (2018, 22 min.) explores the legacy of the work done by the Chinese and some of the history of Chinese and other people of color that connect to public lands today.
<http://bit.ly/TNFLEGACY>

P2P (French Television.) *Masters of Railway*, (2018, 52 min.) This is an English dub of a French documentary showing outstanding examples of railway technology. The section regarding the transcontinental railroad and the work of Chinese labor begins at approximately 19 minutes.
<https://bit.ly/MastersOfRail>

National Trust News Release

National Trust for Historic Preservation News Release. *Discover America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places for 2021*.
<https://bit.ly/SavingPlaces>

Feature Articles

Moonshine Ink. November 13, 2020 *Honoring the Work of Giants at Donner Pass*,
<https://bit.ly/HonoringChinese>

National Parks & Conservation Association. *Golden Spike Redux*, May 2019,
<https://bit.ly/GoldenSpikeRedux>

Books

Chang, Gordon. *Ghosts of Gold Mountain. The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad*. Mariner Books, 2019. 320 pages. (And sold in our Gift Shop!)

Chang, Gordon, and Shelly Fisher Fiskin (editors.) *The Chinese and the Iron Road*. Stanford University Press, 2019. 560 pages. A collection of essays developed during Stanford University's Chinese Railroad Workers in North America project.

Websites

Explore APA Heritage-- Chinese Heritage Sites of the American West--
Summit Tunnel at <https://bit.ly/APAheritage>

Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at <https://stanford.io/3rhIQI3>
The project record of the Stanford University project to document all known information about Chinese Railroad Workers.

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