



Founded July 24, 1968 and  
designated a 501(c)(3) in July 1971

**Truckee Donner Historical Society**  
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530-582-0893  
[www.truckeehistory.org](http://www.truckeehistory.org)

# ECHOES FROM THE PAST

DECEMBER 2015      ISSUE 4

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Winter is back! Or it is teasing us anyway, but nice all the same. We have had some great storms to help in the Sierras but we are still below what we need so keep on coming.

I have had 'writer's block' for awhile now, but thanks to the minds of others I was given an idea. I went back One Hundred Years ago and looked at Truckee News Articles to see what was happening then.

The local news centered on the people and growth in Truckee, with a mention of our very own Wilma Wilkie becoming a movie star. Wilma was the daughter of William Wilkie and Elizabeth Edwards. She was married to Frederick William Vollmar; she starred in *The Deathlock* with Fred Butler. She also starred the next year in *The Code of the Mounted* with J. Warren Kerrigan. On the wider scale, May 18, 1915, the road between McKinneys and the West End of Donner Lake was declared to be a state highway. It became LRN 37 and 38.

Growth was essential in that time frame; now it becomes a concern. I was looking over our accomplishment list for this year and I can only hope the membership is pleased with all we are involved in. It is a test of our skills to be able to help so many college students with their theses and provide historical information to companies to fill their biographies. We try not to make mistakes, but on occasion we are proven wrong; so graciously accepting the criticism, we double check and move on.

The talk continues about the possibility of a Truckee History Community Museum and re-creating our museum into a history of our law enforcement. Although this is still just in the talking stages it does motivate the Society to

become better stewards of Truckee's History.

The amazing donations we have been entrusted with have enriched our knowledge of the core of Truckee. The newest members of the research team are getting their feet wet in projects and work to be done in the cabin; we have gained interest from the public in becoming docents in the museum so all in all we are doing well.

The new driveway goes in this coming Spring which will include more improvements to the garden. We are looking forward to what treasures will be revealed when that happens.

As the end of 2015 comes nearer and the anticipation of what 2016 will bring I wish all of you a prosperous New Year and a wonderful Holiday season spent with those you love and remembering your life with wonderful and happy thoughts.

Respectfully, Chaun Mortier, President

## CALENDAR

Please check back with us after the holiday season as 2016 events are still in the planning stages.

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Echoes From The Past Newsletter

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*TDHS eNews Editor*, [Heidi Sproat](#)

Truckee Donner Historical Society ("TDHS") Board meetings are held on the fourth Thursday of each month at 2:30 p.m. at the Joseph Research Library at 10115 Donner Trail Road, Truckee. Board meetings are open to the public.

TDHS does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of the information in these articles.

TDHS retains the right to republish submitted material. Please contact TDHS for permission to use any content in this publication.

**Notice to Members**

The TDHS Board of Directors recently approved a change in membership renewal to reflect the Society's bi-annual renewal schedule. For specific details, please visit our website.

**THANK YOU TO BAR OF AMERICA**

Once again, we take this opportunity to extend a very warm THANK YOU to the Bar of America for the successful collaborative Fund Raiser "No One Goes Hungry" on October 29, 2015. The fundraiser netted some \$1,500 which Bar of America presented a check to TDHS.



(Above) With Tom Ballou, Bar of America — with Greg Zirbel, Chaun Owens Mortier, and Chelsea Walterscheid - receiving fundraising check



**SEEKING SUMMER DOCENTS FOR OLD JAIL MUSEUM**

Summer will be here before you know it and starting Memorial Day through Labor Day, Truckee's Old Jail Museum will be open on the weekends, holidays and Truckee Thursdays. We are looking for docents to give visitors jail tours, some of the history of the jail and museum and Truckee in general. You don't have to be an expert in the history. The Historical Society trains and mentors docents. If you are interested please call 530-582-0893 and tell us how to contact you or e-mail the "docent master," Karl Pape at [kdpape@me.com](mailto:kdpape@me.com).

*Please get involved with your Truckee Donner Historical Society (TDHS). The only way we can offer programs and events is if YOU, as a volunteer, step up and get involved. TDHS is an all-volunteer, 501(c)(3) organization so any and all donations are gratefully appreciated and tax deductible. Our mailing address is Truckee Donner Historical Society, P.O. Box 893, Truckee, CA 96160.*

**2015 OLD JAIL MUSEUM VISITOR INFORMATION**

Once again out of curiosity, the Editor decided to review the list of visitors who came to the Old Jail Museum during the summer of 2015. Intrigued as to visitors' homes, we thought you might be interested as well. In the summer of 2015, we had a record total of 4,259 !!!!! visitors mostly from the greater San Francisco Bay Area. There were 39 pages of entries, 14 on each page! However, there were some notable exceptions. There were visitors from as far away as the New Zealand family, South Africa, Nicaragua, and Sweden. Some of the more celebrated comments noted in the Visitor Log included: "Celebrating my family's Truckee heritage" from Alexandria, Virginia; "excellent artifacts and very knowledgeable docents;" "awesome;" "thanks for keeping it going;" "amazing photographs;" "having too much fun;" "amazing stories;" and our two personal favorites, "live life to the fullest – try not to get arrested;" and "I'm glad I'm not in Jail!"

Unofficial Count per Guest Book of Old Jail Visitors and Origin for 2015 for those signing guest book: **USA**

S.F. Bay Area	127	Truckee area	27	Florida	6
Sacramento area	47	Texas	10	Washington state	6
Reno, NV	35	Utah	9	Wisconsin	6
Southern CA	35	Oregon	8	New York	4
Northern CA area	28	Pennsylvania	6		

and from **overseas:**

England	5	Austria	1	Germany	1
Sweden	2	Nicaragua	1	France	1
Canada	2	South Africa	1	New Zealand	1(family)

Number of Docent Hours for 2015 - 214 hours. A special thank you to Karl Pape who has been the docent bedrock!

Number of "clicker" Visitors for 2015 – **4,259** – a new record!!!! (In 2014, there were 2,593 visitors)

The Old Jail Museum is one of the oldest jails in California and one of the few remaining original buildings in Truckee.

It is presently registered as an official Point of Historical Interest (Nevada004) with the Nevada County Historical Landmark Commission and is considered a Class A Historical Structure. ([Link 1](#); [link 2](#).)

**TRUCKEE TRIVIA**

- \* What was the "Snowball Special" that visitors from San Francisco could ride to Truckee for \$4.65?
- \*\* Name the ice structure that was located in the middle of Truckee which was constructed by Charles McGlashan during the winter of 1893-94.

(answers below)

**UPDATE ON GEORGE C. SELLON**

Back in the June 2014 issue of *Echoes From the Past*, we wrote an article on Truckee Memorial Veterans Building and Mr. Sellon's architectural contribution to this building. We recently came upon the architectural drawings and thought you might be interested in seeing the date on the drawings - August 21, 1939.

The Veterans Memorial Building is a unique physical asset that proudly stands and serves many in the Truckee hills.



**Answers:**

\* Train. The "Snowball Special" ran until 1940, when the automobile and improved highways finally put it out of business. To see an actual newspaper ad from January 1935, see this link.

\*\* Ice Palace. Constructed of chicken wire, this structure had 5 foot walls and was sprayed multiple times with water which froze and produced a solid wall of ice. Inside the structure was an ice skating rink.

Source: *Truckee Trivia*, Scott O'Connor

## Echoes From The Past Newsletter

**The Fire God - By Heidi Sproat**

Serendipitously, TDHS received some correspondence back in 2013, but it was only when one of our volunteer members starting transcribing the letters that she noted, eerily, the two contemporary fires burning in August 2015 – the Butte and Valley fires – were on the same day as this Donner Ridge Fire of 1960. Most serious mountain fire threats generally run from July to October, and it was very uncomfortable to reread letters written in 1960 about the “Donner Ridge Fire.”

“Every building was burned,” wrote Jessie Payen in a letter to a friend in September 1960. “We had to leave there [her ranch] and go to Loyalton later in the night when the mountain at the head of Sardine began to burn,” she continued. The human toll is what stands out in these letters. According to another letter, it seems that “Jessie has lost three homes by fire in about ten years.” When we realized that it was the former Payen ranch that had been destroyed by this fire, we started more serious research.<sup>1</sup>

After winter seasons of low snow pack and little rain, this Truckee area can become a tinder-box, and the summer of 1960 was no exception.

But mountain weather dynamics here in the Sierra Nevada - Carson Range also have a unique characteristic. These mountains can create a downslope wind on the east slope that can fuel devastating and catastrophic fires. Often referred to as “Washoe Zephyrs” these winds seem to come out of nowhere but can be absolutely calamitous for even the smallest of fires. Even Mark Twain referred to these afternoon winds as “Scriptural” in that no man ‘knoweth whence it cometh’ [where it originates].<sup>2</sup> Washoe Zephyr winds usually kick up about 2 p.m. and they can create a wind-tunnel effect that can easily blow a small fire sideways; fires can soon develop into huge infernos in a matter of hours. Fires like this can also “crown” in trees and soon the trees can explode into fireballs.

This was the case when the Washoe Zephyr winds kicked up on August 20, 1960 – just a few months after the 1960 Squaw Valley winter Olympics.

Recall that Interstate 80 was still under construction (it was completed in 1964) and the segment between

Donner Lake and the east end of Truckee was not yet then completed. The area was known as Negro Canyon (most recently Johnson Canyon), above Armstrong Tract.

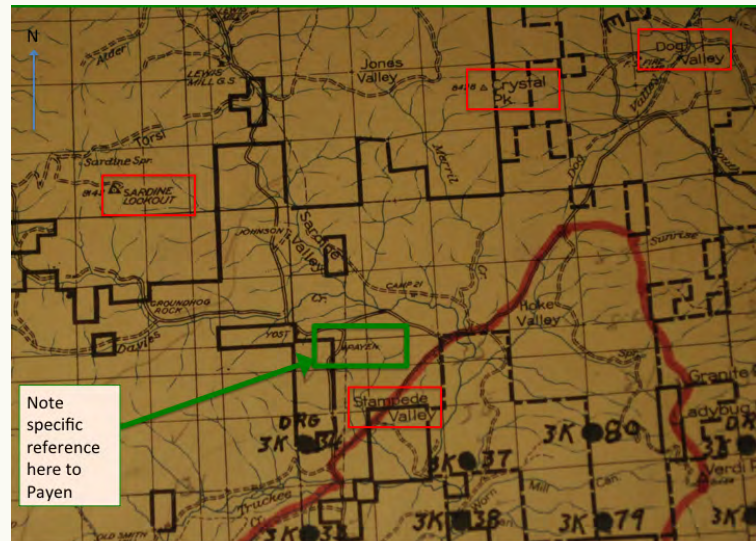


U.S. Forest Service map excerpts

While construction road crews generally burn slash and debris as they proceed along a construction path, apparently in August 1960, a few errant embers found their way into granite troughs. With wind speeds gusting to over 60 – 70 mph, the fire was soon out of control and eventually burned almost 45,000 acres, from the originating site near where Interstate 80 meets Donner Lake (Negro Canyon). The fire burned in a northeasterly direction toward Crystal Peak, Verdi, Stead AFB, and Peavine Mountain, but fortunately, the fire was halted just shy of Nevada. Although the fire ravaged parts of the Tahoe National Forest, Toiyabe National Forest also suffered from this fire as it raced through Nevada County, then Sierra County and threatened parts of Washoe County, NV as well.

The fire raged over a 55 mile perimeter (some reports of 75 and 100 mile perimeters), and at one point was 23 miles long. It burned through four parallel power lines and cut off electricity to a 15,000 square mile area causing a 28 hour outage in northern Nevada and parts of California for over 90,000 residents. Fire suppression efforts alone for just Tahoe National Forest tallied at least \$870,000 (1960 dollars; in 2015 dollars, about \$6.9 M) and about \$3 million in blackened lost timber, about 150,000,000 board feet. (Some reports put the cost at \$4,850,000.; in 2015 dollars, \$39,970,000!). Due to herculean firefighting efforts, an area just east off Highway 89, the historical Donner Party encampment area was spared. But the fire raged on towards Stampede, Sardine, and Dog Valleys and they were the areas

hardest hit. Although there were no deaths directly attributed to this Donner Ridge fire, the toll it took on area residents was life-altering. This Editor spoke to a gentleman who had actually fought the fire as it raced over what is now known as Fjord Rd. in Tahoe Donner, and to someone who was *on* Donner Lake that very day who saw the fire race uphill. There was even a helicopter rescue of a mother and daughter stranded at Verdi Peak Lookout.



Donner Ridge fire was one of more than 4,000 caused by man in California in 1960. There were more than 3,200 men on the fire lines for this Donner Ridge fire. There were 5 borate planes, 74 bulldozers, 49 tank trucks, 2 light planes for spotting flare-ups, 6 helicopters and 7 standby aerial spray planes. Even with area fire lookouts, like Sardine Peak Lookout, spotting a fire and getting the required fire fighting apparatus in place is no small feat – especially in 1960. And this was before they routinely used helicopters for both aerial surveillance and water bucket and borate dropping for fire suppression, as we are familiar with today.

The area we know today as Tahoe Donner was not yet developed.<sup>3</sup> Located on the western edge of Truckee, if you look around, you can still see the fire scars of this burn. And you'll also notice that there are no trees older than 55 years in many areas of the Tahoe Donner area – all because of this fire. In the fall of 1960, Channel 3 TV station's Stan Atkinson produced a documentary called the "Black Harvest," the first documentary about the fire and the first time aerial photography was used to document the devastation.<sup>4</sup>

Reviewing back issues of the *Reno Gazette* and the *Nevada State Journal* we learned that even a 30 year veteran forester had never seen a fire move with such intensity.

In researching this article, we also came across another horrific fire in 1910 – The Great Fire of 1910 - ironically starting on the same day – but fifty years earlier - August 20, 1910 in Idaho. Often referred to as the Great Burn, or the Big Blowup, unbelievably, over 3 million acres were burned and sadly 86 lives were lost. There was a hero in that fire, Ed Pulaski, a U.S. Forest Service ranger who led a large group of his men to safety by forcing them into an abandoned mine. The Pulaski fire tool is named after him.<sup>5</sup>

There was also a time when the terms "defensible space," "forest management," "fuel breaks," and "mastication and thinning" were not terms used in conversations of owners who had mountain property. We know these concepts today as Best Management Practices to insure that our homes – and lives - are as protected as possible. Up until the 1950s, Truckee and the surrounding areas did not have a *formal* cohesive cooperative fire prevention program in place designed to alert - and train - residents on how to effectively manage their property and keep it – and them - as safe as possible in this otherwise fire-prone area.

After the 1960 fire when "Tahoe Donner" was being developed, fortunately, formal fire protection measures were put into place to create defensible space. Although initially part of the Maintenance Department, the Tahoe Donner Forestry department was created in 1988 and is maintained by the Tahoe Donner Association.<sup>6</sup> In this time, defensible space has been created and active fuel breaks are vigilantly maintained by the small forestry department led by Bill Houdyschell. Without the Forestry Department's proactive fuel break work, the 2003 and 2007 fires would most probably have consumed the Tahoe Donner area.

Once you read about the effects of the 1960 fire – and subsequent fires – you must agree that it is everyone's responsibility to insure our own safety and that of our

## 2015 TDHS ACCOMPLISHMENTS

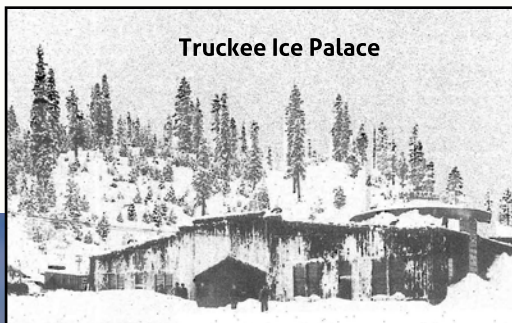
Thank you to all our volunteers who have dedicated their time, talents and energies to continue to serve the mission of preserving our rich Truckee history:

- \* Prepared Old Jail Museum inventory
- \* Enrolled and participated in Blue Star Museum program
- \* Continued *Echoes From the Past* quarterly newsletters publication
- \* Created a collaborative committee, Truckee Donner Historical Museum Committee, between TDHS and Truckee Donner Railroad Society, exploring possibilities of a proposed joint museum
- \* Replied to numerous community research requests on questions of historical interest and significance, including Trout Creek area, Elle Ellen lumber operations, Carpenter Valley community
- \* Maintained Old Jail Museum weekend opening for a summer count of 4,259 visitors – a new record! (see separate article)
- \* Fulfilled numerous book orders taken through our website and our PayPal interface
- \* Renewed and co-hosted six 2015 *Truckee History Alive!* Series (City of San Francisco by Barbara Czerwinski, the stranded 1952 train; Jerry Black and trains; Ghost Stories; Cowboy Poetry; and Mark McLaughlin (postponed))
- \* Installed displays for P.U.D.
- \* Attended various meetings relating to TDHS historical efforts: TDMA, Truckee Public Arts Commission (TPAC) regarding Rocks Opening Reception
- \* Participated in Mystic, Summit Canyon Hike, Truckee River, Donner Party Hike, Boca town walk, and Trestle Tour 2
- \* Hung historic photos at Parks and Recreation
- \* Celebrated Nick Sassarini's 90th birthday
- \* Attended Victory Plaza Ribbon cutting
- \* Manned TDHS table at TDMA Bingo Snowfest
- \* Arranged special showing Hobart Mills Time Capsule
- \* Picked up bar back for Tom Ballou
- \* Attended Truckee in U.S. History class at Sierra College
- \* Conducted private Old Jail Museum tours, including for Truckee Elementary
- \* Initiated membership renewal transition to bi-annual schedule
- \* Cleaned up Schaffer Cemetery
- \* Installed additional plaques behind Old Jail Museum
- \* Trainride behind the restored locomotive "Glenbrook" in Carson City at the Nevada State Railroad Museum
- \* Participated in grand opening of Donner Memorial State Park - Visitor Center
- \* Manned TDHS information booth at Truckee Air Show and Fair
- \* Coordinated Historical Art Show at Vets Hall
- \* Participated in "Branding Truckee" initiative
- \* Participated in Kids Rodeo Day
- \* Facilitated and moved McGlashan Butterfly collection to the Truckee Parks and Recreation Community Center
- \* Opened and maintained a presence in the Joseph Research Cabin weekly on Thursdays for public access and individual research
- \* Performed historical research for Martis Camp signage, Anchor Steam
- \* Participated in Dwight Teeter Cemetery ceremony
- \* Participated in Truckee Day Parade on July 4th
- \* Hosted Old Timers' Picnic in July
- \* Continued to coordinate partnerships with area businesses to better reflect historical significance (Greg Zirbel, Neatweets), Bar of America and three panoramas, and Alpine Mounting to finish TDHS photo orders
- \* Attended various preparation meetings regarding Truckee Springs Historical Foundation site and removed invasive weed species and general site cleanup at site of 'Glad U Kum'
- \* Set up and manned a booth for Truckee Thursdays, and simultaneously opened the Old Jail Museum
- \* Celebrated Veterans Day celebration with the Town of Truckee, artifact presentation and luncheon at Veterans Hall
- \* Assisted with and participated in the first Annual collaborative "Fund Raiser" for the Historical Society by Bar of America, "No One Goes Hungry"; this will be an annual fundraiser
- \* Represented TDHS at Sagehen Research Center with Truckee Public Arts Commission regarding the

Continued from page 6

use of Art in Science and History; attended Sagehen Creek field station site review

- \* Facilitated a History Art Show in connection with Truckee Open Artists Studio Tour (T.O.A.S.T.), and Honoring Our Military
- \* Assisted with a Celebration of Veterans in connection with T.O.A.S.T. program
- \* Facilitated and judged the first annual "Click-Off", a photography contest with four categories; the all-around winner this year was Rolf Godon in the history category
- \* Planned and participated in TDHS Annual Dinner
- \* Participated in Streets of Truckee celebration with Richard Blair at Cottonwood
- \* Represented TDHS at Chamber of Commerce Mixers to create a larger networking system for TDHS
- \* Represented TDHS at Tahoe Silicon Mountain presentations to create a larger networking system for TDHS
- \* Received historical artifacts (wood sections) from Cal Trans and Town of Truckee from the New Mini-Mouse hole on Hwy. 89, sections of old wood railroad trestle
- \* Received artifacts and preserved this year: large collection of clothing from 1920-25 from Tiernan Family; Civil Defense Cards, and others
- \* Created new garden spaces behind the jail using rock from the Old Fire Wall behind Moody's, and garden work
- \* Provided tour & lunch for Ritz Carlton conference attendees
- \* Enhanced and launched TDHS new website - anticipated



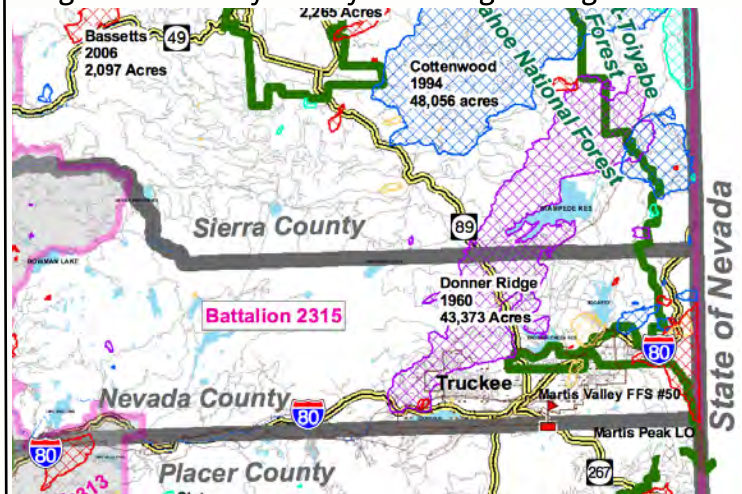
(Left) "Click Off" Winner, Rolf Godon

Echoes From The Past Newsletter

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mountain homes by being proactive with defensible space initiatives and to be vigilant in fire safety. No one wants a repeat of the horrific losses in South Lake Tahoe's Angora fire of 2007. It is because of proactive fire protection plans that we are even able to live in such a beautiful area graced by such majestic trees and natural beauty. Take the time to understand that defensible space is everyone's responsibility. So remember to thank a firefighter for their help.

A comprehensive list of footnotes, articles and sources consulted for this article is posted on our TDHS website. We have also included some additional images there that you may find enlightening.



(Above) Courtesy of Battalion 15 Fire History, excerpt <http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/pub/fireplan/fpupload/fpppdf1024.pdf>



Courtesy of U.S. Forestry Service 1962-63



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### Membership Application | Renewal Form

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Make checks payable to TDHS | Mail to: P.O. Box 893 Truckee, CA 96160|

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\* (a valid email address is required) \*\*Pay by Check or Credit Card (you choose your payment method)

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Enclosed please find my check for: **MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES** (please check one)

Individual \$20\_\_\_\_ Family \$30\_\_\_\_ Business \$40\_\_\_\_

Non-Profit Organization \$25\_\_\_\_ Sustaining \$75\_\_\_\_ Contributing \$100\_\_\_\_ Other Donation \$\_\_\_\_

Select renewal month \_\_\_\_ January or \_\_\_\_ July (see TDHS website for membership details)

**SPECIAL DONATIONS:** Gift Membership \$\_\_\_\_ In the Name of \_\_\_\_\_

MEMORIAL DONATION \$\_\_\_\_ In Honor of \_\_\_\_\_

Other \$\_\_\_\_ ( ) Old Jail Museum ( ) Joseph Research Library ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Contact me on ways I can volunteer  Are you willing to docent at the Old Jail Museum? Yes / No

Areas of Special Interest and/or Comments/Suggestions: