

Winter Fun—Ski Tows, Winter Resorts, and Ice Palaces By Corri Jimenez

Winter snow and Donner Summit have had an adventurous relationship for years. Every local who lives in the Sierra can relate to and commiserate about it, whether it is shoveling feet of snow off a driveway or chaining up just to get down the hill. Since its beginning, winter has been a profitable industry in the area. Ice plants, like the Nevada Mountain Lakes Ice Company in 1870, harvested ice blocks on Trout Creek in downtown Truckee that were shipped on railroad cars across the U.S. Harvesting ice involved scraping fresh snow off frozen ponds with horses, scoring ice in a checkerboard pattern, and lifting blocks to be stored in large industrial icehouses.

Since the 1890s, the Southern Pacific and Truckee hotels, with Truckee's biggest promoter C.F. McGlashan (who also owned the water works and the *Truckee Republican* newspaper), developed winter events locally. The Ice Palace, a one-story wintery structure with an interior skating rink and an icy exterior, was the centerpiece located on Front Street/Commercial Row and east of the railroad depot. Tobogganing and ski races were typical activities around the palace in these early days.



Caption: Ice Palace Toboggan, 1895. *Fire & Ice* (Truckee: Truckee Donner Historical Society, 1994).

McGlashan saw the success of the Ice Palace on a local level and decided to promote it to a broader audience. He traveled to San Francisco to bring tourists via the train to the winter event. A new Ice Palace was constructed on the south side of the Truckee River below Hilltop Lodge in 1909, tutoring people on Nordic skiing; however it was the 1910 Winter

Carnival, that was a huge success. This carnival attracted 2,000 visitors, half traveling from Sacramento, and offered ski jumping, toboggan slides, sleighing, and other wintery themed events. The carnivals in Truckee promoted winter fun bringing travelers to the area for the first time. However, by the 1950-60s, the events lost traction, trumped by commercial skiing on the summit.

Beside all the events in downtown Truckee, skiing and lodging increased on Donner Summit in the 1920s through the 1930s. The Jones family was an investor to the area, building hotels, service stations, and ski slopes. In 1922, Oscar Jones purchased land to build the Soda Springs Hotel, which would be the first hotel on Highway 40 between Colfax and Truckee. Oscar's son, Virgil, built a service station adjacent to his father's hotel. Both the Soda Springs hotel and station were completed by 1927. In addition to this hotel, Oscar's brother Herstle built the Nyack Lodge, Monte Vista Inn, and Canyon Inn. Concurrent to the opening of the ski lodges, Oscar's son Dennis improved the promotion of skiing as a winter sport. He cleared the first ski run in the area, known as Beacon Hill in the 1920s (which was adjacent to the Soda Springs Hotel). Dennis also opened the first ski rental shop and built an "Up-ski" lift that consisted of large sleds on a pulley system. His ski style, known as freestyle skiing, was introduced in 1934 using metal and leather bindings.



Caption: Soda Springs Hotel and filling station, 1940s (Donner Summit Historical Society, Heirloom newsletter February 2009).

The Auburn Ski Club, currently the Boreal Ski Resort, was established in 1928 by Wendell Robbie for its members, popularizing winter sports in California. At the club's second venue in Cisco Grove, they constructed ski jumps, trails, slalom courses, and a lodge for visitors. A "jig back lift," which was a backwards-facing sled, pulled skiers up the hill's incline. In promoting the club, ski jumping competitions became a huge attraction, enticing many from the Bay Area. The club's popularity increased such that ski jumping was

brought to the UC Berkeley campus in 1934-35 and the 1939 World Exposition in San Francisco's Treasure Island, and crazily, included the transport of Donner snow.



Caption: Auburn Ski Club, 1930s (<https://auburnskiclub.com/asctc/about-us/asc-legacy/>).

In addition to the Auburn Ski Club, Stephen and Jennie Pilcher procured 700 acres from the Southern Pacific Railroad for \$10.00 in establishing Sugar Bowl in 1923. In 1936, ski classes first developed there at Clair Tappaan Lodge, attracting thousands of skiers from San Francisco to ski. Film mogul Walt Disney invested \$2,500 in Sugar Bowl in 1938 and installed the first chairlift in the state, a 3,200 feet long lift. Opening on December 15, 1939, Sugar Bowl cultivated the ski industry from small club-operated hills to big ski areas, which charmed top European and American skiers by 1940.

Traveling to the snow for a day of winter fun was a huge challenge. U.S. Highway 40 was first plowed in 1931-32 with the popularity of the Auburn Ski Club. Besides driving, the Union Pacific Railroad offered "Snowball Specials" in 1932 between the Bay Area and Sacramento in getting people up to Donner Summit and Truckee. A round trip ticket from San Francisco to Truckee was \$4.85 with a sleeper berth running from \$1.35-1.60. As cheap as that sounds, today it is the equivalent to \$91.00 and a sleeper would be a little less than \$20.00. In 1931, the Auburn Ski Club invited State Senator Bert Cassidy to visit and see ski demonstrations, which propelled thousands up and created the area's first traffic jam on U.S. Highway 40. The number of automobiles traveling up to the summit fostered the Auburn Ski Club to ask the state to keep the road open year-round. Most travelers stayed in the local resorts and lodges built on the summit that offered co-living quarters

with shared chores, communal meals, and a little bit of dancing. Single-family houses as rentals were later built for longer and private stays.

As winter sports prospered, thousands upon thousands now commute, visit, and enjoy Donner Summit events every winter. Western Ski Sport Museum, founded in 1969, is located in Boreal Ski Resort and is open every winter.

Sidebar:

- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. For additional information, check out *Fire & Ice* by the Truckee Donner Historical Society (Truckee: Truckee Donner Historical Society, 1994), and Sugar Bowl website (<https://www.sugarbowl.com/history>), Boreal Resort website (<https://auburnskiclub.com/asctc/about-us/asc-legacy/>), and Donner Summit Historical Society *Heirloom* newsletters (February 2009, December 2012, and November 2017) at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Newsletters).