

ORIGINAL TRUCKEE CHINATOWN

I. Early Chinatown

Samuel Coburn's waystation, later known as Truckee, flourished as a colorful settlement on the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road until it burned in 1868. Thereafter Coburn sold his land and moved away. Truckee prospered as a booming and notorious high Sierra station stop on the Transcontinental Railroad. At its heart was the flamboyant district where the wagon road met the railroad depot and Plaza. Visitors today find only a wide intersection at Donner Pass Road, Spring and Jibboom Streets where once a confluence of lifestyles thrived. Caucasian businesses stretched along Front Street facing a Plaza and the depot hotel of William Campbell. Just behind them to the northwest, Chinese merchants erected their own stores. A dense Chinese settlement crowded into the hill above on land leased from the railroad. Below, to the west of this 'Chinatown,' businesses and residences grew out of the ashes of Coburn's. To the east brothels and saloons arose along the part of the old wagon road that ran behind Front Street leading toward Gray's Station. At the center of all this--where the open intersection now stands--entrepreneurs hawked every sort of entertainment from gambling to booze and from theatre to prostitution. Places like the Magnolia Theater, the Truckee Brewery, Ohio House, Mountain House and China Hotel coexisted in a potpourri of diversions for rail workers and wood choppers with plenty of money to spend. Travelling theater groups performed, hostelers hosted balls and white folks indulged in the Chinese merchant's opium.

In spite of the harsh Sierra winters and short growing season the Chinese managed to develop and sustain a large produce garden east of town. In 1874 the town fathers persuaded the CPRR to give part of that land to the County for purposes of constructing a road through the "China Gardens."¹ This was a preview of future actions to suppress Chinese business in Truckee.

Present-day Spring Street did not yet exist at this time. What is now Jibboom Street was called Main Street East. The north side of the road contained 46 lots starting at lot 1 at the corner of Bridge Street. Lots 37 to 40 spanned what is now Spring Street. What is now Donner Pass Road was called Main Street West. Its lots started at lot 1 just west of and adjacent to lot 46 of Main Street East. (See Fig. 1, following)²

Access to Chinatown was through an alley between lot 1 Main Street West and lot 46 on Main Street East.³ In 1875-6 Charles Crocker and other Front Street businessmen bought up lots 37 to 40 and demolished the structures in an effort to contain Chinatown.⁴ The street named "West Street" (now "Spring") was born.

II. Prosperous Chinese

The true "old" Chinatown has nearly vanished from Truckee history. When speaking of "old" Chinatown in Truckee most refer to the "second" Chinatown located on the south side of Truckee. The only remaining structure clearly of Chinese origin is the shed that once housed an herb shop. It sits on the south bank of the Truckee River on the east side of the Bridge. To believe that the history of the Chinese in Truckee started on the south side of the river, is to miss the whole history of Chinese in Truckee. Deed and tax records supplemented with vivid news stories tell a far different story.

Fong Lee stood out as one of the most prosperous Cantonese businessman in Truckee. He was also apparently more astute than many of his white neighbors. They hated him, called him "old slobber mouth." The newspaper

¹ *Truckee Republican*, July 25, 1874, 3:2, "Title to Plaza;" CPRR to donate to the County, title to land for road through China Gardens. The Plaza was located within the railroad right of way. The gardens may have subsequently relocated to a site east of town. *Nevada Daily Transcript*, Feb. 3, 1876, Nevada County Delinquent Tax List states that Sing Sing China Gardens adjoined the smelter located on the river east of Truckee.

² See original lot numbers on present-day NC Assessor's Parcel Map 19:9-10 (Jibboom Street and Donner Pass Road at Spring).

³ See NC Deeds 35:600, Charles Crocker to various grantees referring China Hotel separating East and West Main Streets.

⁴ "Fire Committee," *Truckee Republican*, May 29 and June 5, 1875; Bancroft Early Newspaper Microfilm collection, University of California, copy at Truckee Branch Library, Truckee, CA.

wrote slanderous and cynical editorials about him.⁵ Fong Lee was among the first to take a lesson from the fire that struck Coburn's and built two new stores of brick. The great majority of white owners continued to use the cheapest most available material--timber--to erect their buildings. Fong Lee was not the only prosperous Chinese property owner--tax rolls show several in the period 1867-1870.⁶ Other property owners included Loon Tung & Cheong Company and Quong Sing Lung.

Nevertheless most of the Cantonese servants and day laborers were impoverished by low wages. They built their cramped shops and dwellings out of scrap material--most of it highly flammable.

III. Fires in Truckee

Inevitably the new Truckee was as susceptible to fire as had been Coburn's. Catastrophic fire plagued the town nearly every year. The Front Street businessmen blamed Chinatown because of its flimsy construction, population density and lack of water. In 1875 a particularly devastating fire struck the town and consumed much of Chinatown. The white reaction was immediate and vehement: Chinatown was to be confined to an area northwest of Front and Main Streets.⁷ A group of town fathers led by Joseph Gray, John Moody, W.H. Kruger and Frederick Burckhalter bought out the Chinese property owners whose lots extended beyond the new limit. They also petitioned the County Board of Supervisors to declare the very heart of Truckee--the junction of East and West Main--to be forever after a broad street extending up to High Street. The intent was to create an open space buffer between Chinatown and the Front Street businesses.

IV. Chinese Removal

Despite the best effort of Caucasian businessmen, fire and the Chinese persisted in Truckee. In 1878 Chinatown burned again. Once again the Chinese began to rebuild. The white businessmen vowed to drive the Chinese from the town once and for all. Without ceremony they tore down the new structures--board by board.⁸ They bought land across the Truckee River from the CPRR and sold it to the Chinese, forcing them to build a "new" Chinatown on the River's south bank.⁹ Several years later they provided for a water system for 'new' Chinatown.¹⁰

The story of the Chinese removal did not end there. Fong Lee refused to leave 'old' Chinatown and put up pig styes on his property. Incensed, the town fathers proceeded with their original plan to replace his property with a broad street.¹¹

The invective against Fong Lee increased. He was now called "the Boss Chinaman of Truckee," and as before, "old slobbermouth."¹² At the same time the editor referred to him as "Toy Hong" an imposter claiming to be heir to the fortune of Fong Lee. The real Fong Lee, the editor mocked, was a wealthy man who had died years before.¹³ Finally the "601" vigilantes issued Fong Lee a 'ticket to leave'.¹⁴ He knew the '601' did not make idle threats.

Even in the early years the local newspaper displayed only contempt for the Chinese culture. The rhetoric had varied from editor to editor. In 1874 editor, David Frink, made mildly cynical comments when Judge Peel

⁵ *Truckee Tribune*, March 13, 1869; 24 Feb. 1874, "A New Legal Luminary," 3:1"

⁶ Some of the names written down on the rolls sounded quite prosperous: "Ching Chang Chong" and "Ty Coon."

⁷ *Truckee Republican*, May 29, 1875, "Lucky Trucky;" June 2, 1875, 2:1; "New Chinatown;" June 19, 1875, 3:2, attachment of property.

⁸ *Truckee Republican*, Nov. 2, 1878, 3:3, "Chinatown Burned.;" Nov. 6, 1878, 2:1, "Will Chinatown be Rebuilt;" also 3:2, "The Chinese Must Go," Nov. 20, 1878, 3:2, "Chinatown Demolished"

⁹ *Truckee Republican*, Nov. 16, 18778, p.3, col. 3: "Chinatown Notes," Safety Committee appoints men to purchase land across River from CPRR to sell to Chinese. Quong Sing Lung purchased four lots for a fire proof building. (See map following.)

¹⁰ NC Deeds 57-253, Wah Lee to Joseph Gray et al and NC Deeds 63:507, Joseph Gray et al to Yeck Yu Co. for water system. See also *Republican*, Aug. 1, 1881, 2:6, Grazier and Stoll to buy Fong Lee Co. two brick buildings and convert to brewery

¹¹ *Truckee Republican*, Jan. 11, 1880, "Declaring a Highway;" see also NC Deeds 57:253, Wah Lee to Joseph Gray et al part of Lots 44, 45, Feb. 25, 1879.

¹² *Truckee Republican*, Nov. 16, 1878, 3:4, "The Boss Chinaman of Truckee," Fong Lee

¹³ *Truckee Republican*, Nov. 20, 1878, 3:3: "A Heathen Imposter" appears to be a cynical attempt to berate Fong Lee by saying he died in the early days of Truckee and a man named Toy Hong is posing in his place.

¹⁴ *Truckee Republican*, Nov. 28, 1878, 3:2, "601"

married Gah Ock to Me Hoe and then kissed the bride.¹⁵ The editorials grew more vicious as time passed especially under W.F. Edwards. The public reacted with acts of personal cruelty. A drunken man cut off the cue of a doctor from Hong Kong.¹⁶ When the Reverend Ewing came to the doctor's defense he was labeled a Chinese sympathizer. Sentiment against the entire Chinese community reached a crisis fired by inflammatory editorials in the local newspaper, claiming that the Chinese were arming themselves with Henry Rifles and revolvers.¹⁷

Statewide the Chinese were accused of undercutting white labor. Anti-Chinese sentiment flooded across California and Caucasian Leagues rose up everywhere. Members took oaths to hire no Chinese and mounted a viscous campaign to intimidate white businesses hiring Chinese labor. The State was urged to prohibit Chinese labor on its contracts. Truckee's prominent lawyer, Charles McGlashan, took a leading role in the statewide campaign to add a section to the new State Constitution prohibiting the employment of Chinese. Nevada County enacted such a policy. Big business became a primary target of the anti-Chinese labor movement. The Caucasian League in Truckee forced Sisson and Wallace Co. to stop its Chinese labor trade. Truckee prided itself in its leadership role in the "Chinese Boycott". Active and violent intimidation of the Chinese in Truckee throughout the early 1880s culminated in driving the Chinese from their riverfront Chinatown in 1886.¹⁸ The program became known throughout the state as "The Truckee Method." Without jobs and facing violent intimidation, the Cantonese people of Truckee vanished into the backwoods of the Sierra Nevada or wherever else they could find refuge.

All that remains today of the Chinese period is the herb shop shed. The historic site of the original or "old" Chinatown has been systematically disturbed and covered over with demolition and development without a single monument to its contribution at that location to the town of Truckee.

¹⁵ *Truckee Republican*, July 25, 1874, 3:1, "Chinese Wedding," performed by Judge Peel; see also marriage notice p.2, col. 4

¹⁶ *Truckee Republican*, Jan. 6, 1886, "Cue Cutting," drunken James Van Buren cuts off Dr. Pun's cue

¹⁷ *Truckee Republican*, Nov. 16, 1878, 2:1, "Trouble Brewing"

¹⁸ See *Showdown at Truckee*, Chapter 11, for detail.

Selected Chinatown Deeds

Editorials in the *Truckee Republican* from 1872-1878 frequently described the location of Chinatown as on the hill behind West Main Street (Donner Pass Road west of Spring Street). The *Truckee Republican*, May 29 and June 5, 1875 contain detailed discussions.¹⁹ Several Chinese merchants purchased lots on East and West Main Street. The parts of Chinatown built on land rented from the CPRR lay behind these lots. The "China Hotel" was built by CPRR's agent, Sisson Wallace Co. The following deeds demonstrate that Chinatown was located at the intersection of what is now Jibboom, Spring and Donner Pass Road.

Deed Book 35, p. 600, from Charles Crocker to Sisson Wallace & Co. Nov. 1, 1869: \$100 for a piece of ground on the north side of West Main St., 25-feet on an alley between West Main [lot1] and East Main, [lot 46] extending Back 50-ft, now occupied by China Hotel building. (Sisson Wallace & Co., a firm doing business at various places on the railroad.)

Deed Book 45, p. 376 from Fong Lee to Pembroke Murray, Aug. 10, 1872: Writ of Execution by J. Keiser, judgement of recovery in favor of Murray, March 18, 1872, Sale Aug. 10, 1872. Property description: Fire-proof brick house and lot, Fong Lee and Company Brick Store, north side East Main Street. Sold by Constable J. R. Cross to S. P. Hall of San Francisco.

Deed Book 53, p. 147, 148 from Charles Crocker to Toy Hong, Feb. 1, 1876: \$50 for east 16 ft, lot 6, north side Main St. West. And [\$25 for] 14 ft frontage on north side Main St. commencing 4 ft. west of the west boundary line of lot 45, Main St. East, and extending west the said 14 ft. from said point and extending back from the frontage line of said Main St. 90 ft.

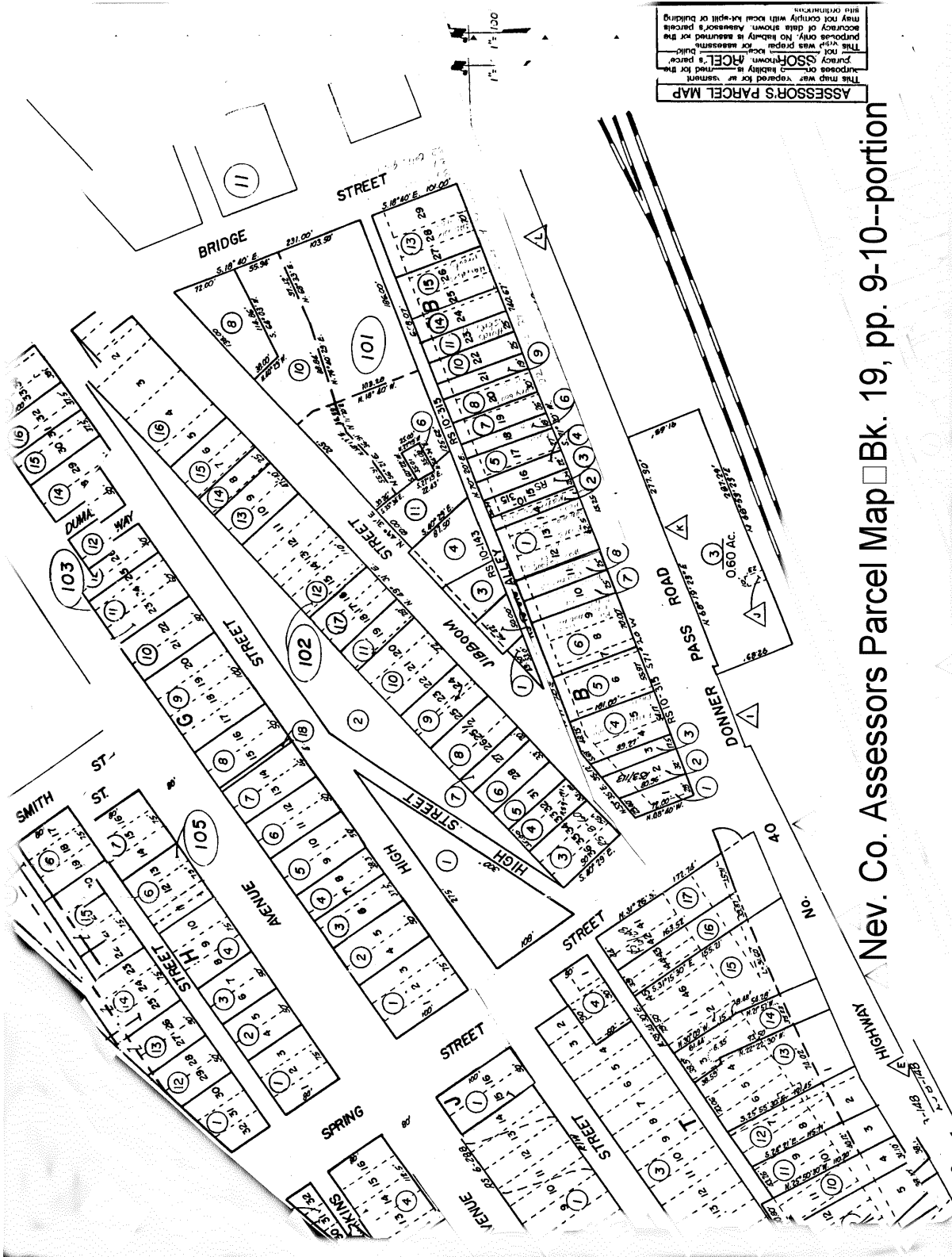
Deed Book 53, p. 149 from Charles Crocker to Loon Tong Chung , Feb. 1, 1876: \$1 and lot 40 on Main St. East, north side for west 22 ft, lot 41, north side Main St. East [for creation of "West Street"]

Deed Book 51, p. 676 from Charles Crocker to Quong Sing Lung , Sept. 23, 1876: \$200 for west 15 feet 3 inches, lot 2; and east 2 ft. 9 inches, lot 3, fronting on north side Main Street West in Chinatown.

Deed Book 57, p. 253 from Wah Lee to Joseph Gray, et al. Feb. 25, 1879: \$166.50 for portions of lots 44, 45 Main Street West 30 ft. west of west line of Fong Lee's brick store and extending west 22 ft, then at right angles 100 ft. toward the hill, then east 22 ft, then at right angles to beginning [to Joseph Gray, E.J. Brickell, F. Burckhalter and John F. Moody]

Deed Book 63, p. 507 from Joseph Gray, J.F. Moody, E.J. Brickell, to Yeck Yu Co., May 26, 1883: \$600 for a certain Spring in the seven-acres south of Truckee Land Assn and a certain spring in the hill in back of said 7 acres in the rear of Chinatown on the south side of the Truckee River for erecting a tank etc. for a water system

¹⁹ The 1870 and 1880 census document a population of only 200-300 hundred Chinese living in Truckee. But it has been suggested that thousands of Chinese actually lived here--based on the numbers hired by the CPRR. The census may have substantially undercounted the number of Chinese living in and near Truckee.



ASSASSOR'S PARCEL MAP
 This map was prepared for use in connection with the assessment of property for the purpose of levying taxes on the same. It is not to be construed as a warranty of accuracy of data shown hereon. The Assessor's Office is not responsible for any errors or omissions which may appear hereon. This map was prepared for the purpose of levying taxes on the same. It is not to be construed as a warranty of accuracy of data shown hereon. The Assessor's Office is not responsible for any errors or omissions which may appear hereon.

Nev. Co. Assessors Parcel Map Bk. 19, pp. 9-10--portion

Fig. 1 Nevada County Assessor's Map

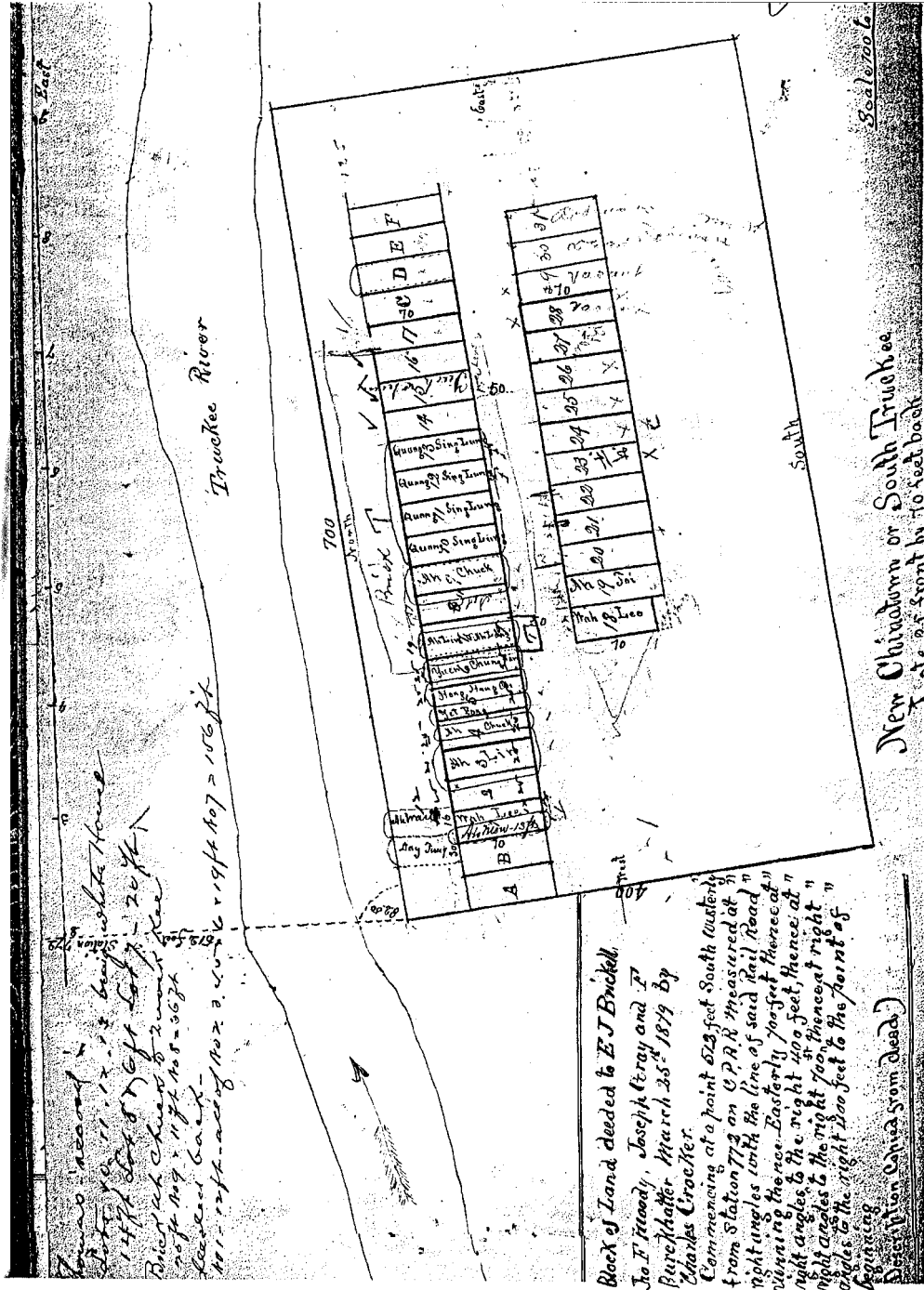


Fig. 2 Map of New Chinatown ca. 1879
South Bank, Truckee River
Truckee-Donner Historical Society Collection