

# The Holiday Herald

18 December 2011

Kit Carson Pass, Alpine County

In the bleak midwinter,  
frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
water like a stone.

*Christina Rossetti, 1872*



Caples Lake, El Dorado National Forest, Alpine County.

# Happy Holidays to you



**Charlotte, sisters and a hockey stick.**

There was barely any snow Saturday morning when I reached Caples Lake below Kit Carson Pass, 7,800 feet up in the Sierra Nevada south of Lake Tahoe.

The pictures I wanted to shoot for this holiday newsletter couldn't be shot because the mountains are not yet decorated for the holidays.

In this part of California, snowfalls don't count unless they're measured in feet, and the last snowfall here was in October.

But I had known that before I headed to the hills. Maybe – perhaps somewhere shaded by the trees – there would be a good snow scene. Something would show itself.

The thermometer read 1 degree above zero when I reached the lake. It was in the 20s a few hours later when I noticed cars beginning to park along the highway shoulder.

Families piled out of pickups and four-wheel-drives with folding chairs and ice chests like they were going to a summer picnic.

The ice skates and hockey sticks said otherwise.

This looked right. The trip was worth it.

The snowy pictures in this newsletter were shot in previous winters on my holiday drives to the Sierra and the Cascades, and those are noted with the dates in the captions.

The friends who receive this newsletter follow many faiths and celebrate a wide range of holidays this time of year.

From a family in the midst of Advent and which soon will celebrate Christmas, I send you best wishes for your holidays and the coming New Year.

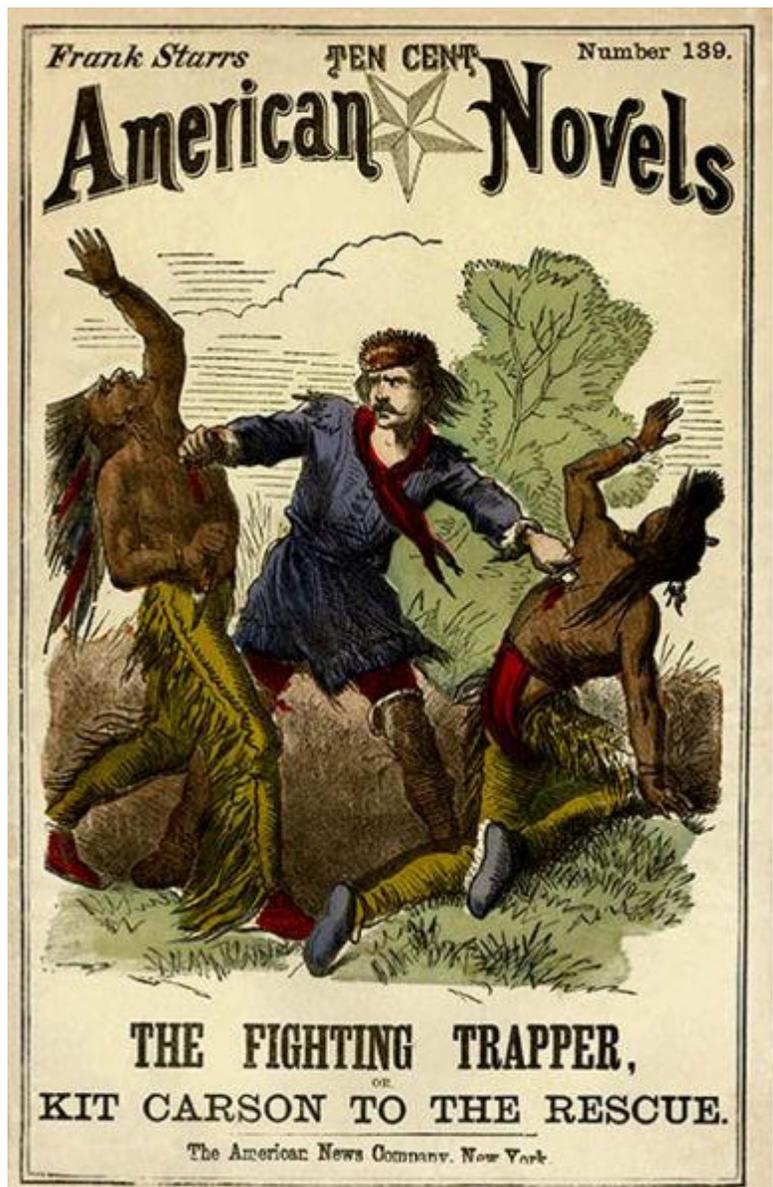
# Mountain county, mountain men

Part of the fun of doing these holiday newsletters is introducing myself and you to parts of California that defy the media-perpetrated stereotype that it's merely the West Coast's Florida except with more freeways, blonder beach babes and fewer alligators.

Alpine County, where I spent most of Saturday shooting pictures of our so-far snowless winter, is a good place to do that. The population of the whole place is fewer than 1,200 people (1.6 people per square mile) and there's not a single incorporated town in its territory. The county seat is the settlement of Markleeville, which claims 200 residents on its highway sign but was credited with 210 in last year's census.

There are two heroes in Alpine County history: Kit Carson, whose name was given to the county's 8,650-foot pass over the Sierra, which he scouted, and Snowshoe Thompson (real name Jon Torsteinson-Rue), a Norwegian immigrant who brought the sport of skiing to California.

Carson, a mountain man, trapper and Indian fighter (who was married three times to Indian women) wandered all over the West. His part in county and state history was to guide the first U.S. Army troops into California in February 1844 over the pass that now bears his name, beginning the process



**Kit Carson's exploits were popularized first in dime novels, then later in a TV show and movies.**

of wrenching the territory from Mexican control.

Between 1856 and 1876, Thompson carried up to 100 pounds of mail over the Sierra between California and Nevada twice a month each way. In winter this meant enduring sub-zero

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# Mountain county, mountain men

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temperatures and drifts up to 50 feet deep.  
He said he never carried a blanket or a gun.

Rather than using the large woven snowshoes invented by American Indians to walk in deep snow, he used a 10-foot board strapped to each foot on which he could slide downhill.

The Americans called these boards snowshoes as well. But Thompson had brought them from his birthplace in Telemark, Norway, where their use is recorded in rock drawings 5,000 years old.

The Norwegians called them skis.

The inscription on the obelisk monument to Thompson on Kit Carson Pass was written by a reporter for *The Territorial Enterprise* in 1876:

*"... There ought to be a shaft raised to Snow-Shoe Thompson; not of marble; not carved and not planted in the valley, but a rough shaft of basalt or of granite, massive and tall, with top ending roughly, as if broken short, to represent a life which was strong and true to the last. And this should be upreared on the summit of the mountains over which the strong man wandered so many years, as an emblem of that life which was worn out apparently without an object ..."*

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Maureen Chandler for the loan of her camera.

And thanks to skater Dwayne Hamburg of Meyers, Calif., who found my lost cell phone by the highway at Caples Lake.



Internet photo  
**Snowshoe Thompson's statue (above)  
at the Western SkiSport Museum,  
Boreal Ski Area, Nevada County, and  
his monument (below) on Kit Carson  
Pass, Alpine County.**

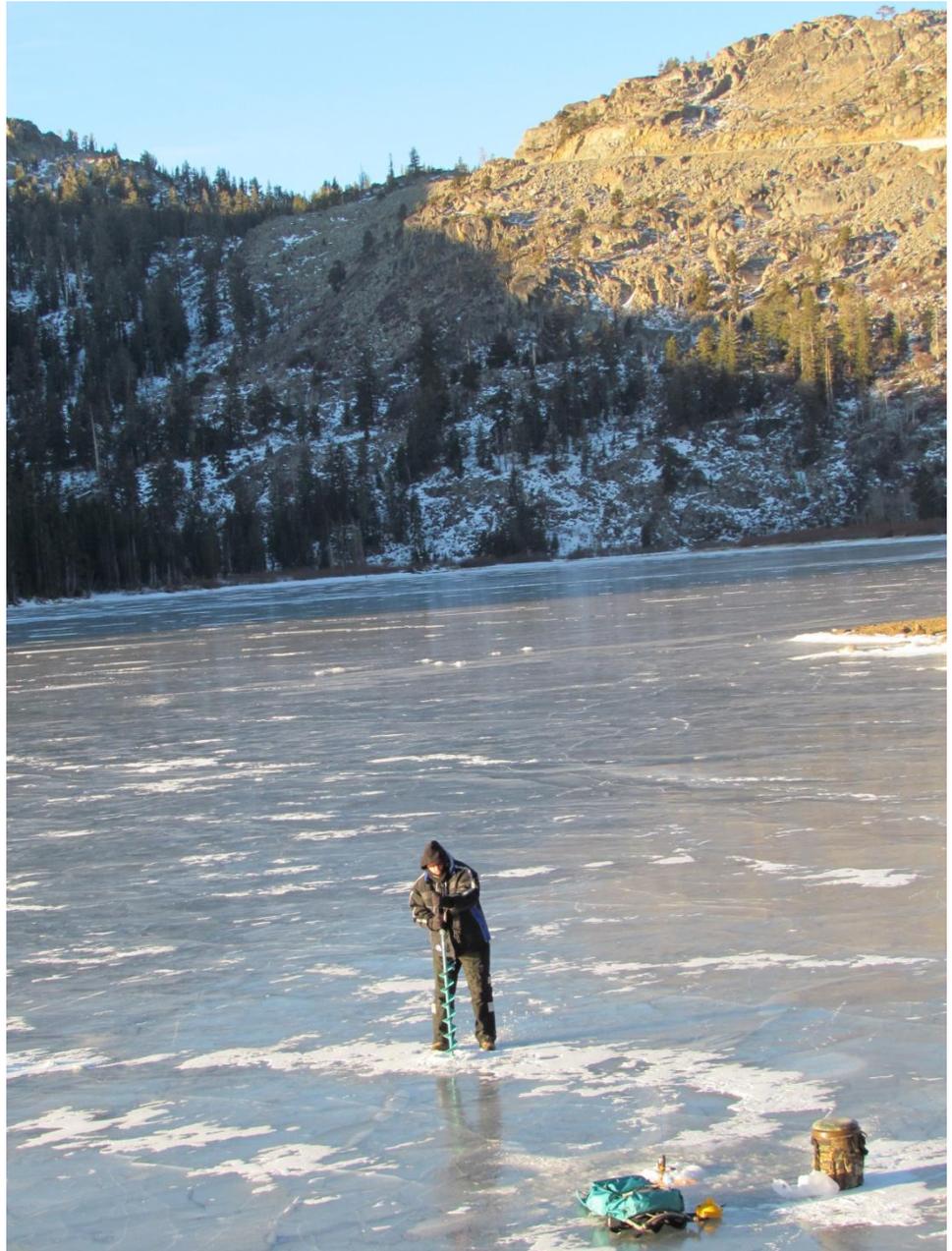


# Today's picture pages

## Where we get frozen fish

On the opening day of California's ice fishing season an angler uses an ice screw to bore a hole for his line. In all the winters he has fished for rainbow and cutthroat trout in the Sierra, he said, this is the first that he didn't have to dig through snow to get down to the ice. He had never realized how many cracks there are in the ice, and it made him nervous standing there. Kit Carson Pass and Highway 88 leading to it are at the top of the photo.

Red Lake,  
Toiyabe National  
Forest, Alpine County





**The first transcontinental railroad (now the Union Pacific) crosses Donner Pass inside these avalanche sheds. Tahoe National Forest, Nevada County, 2009.**



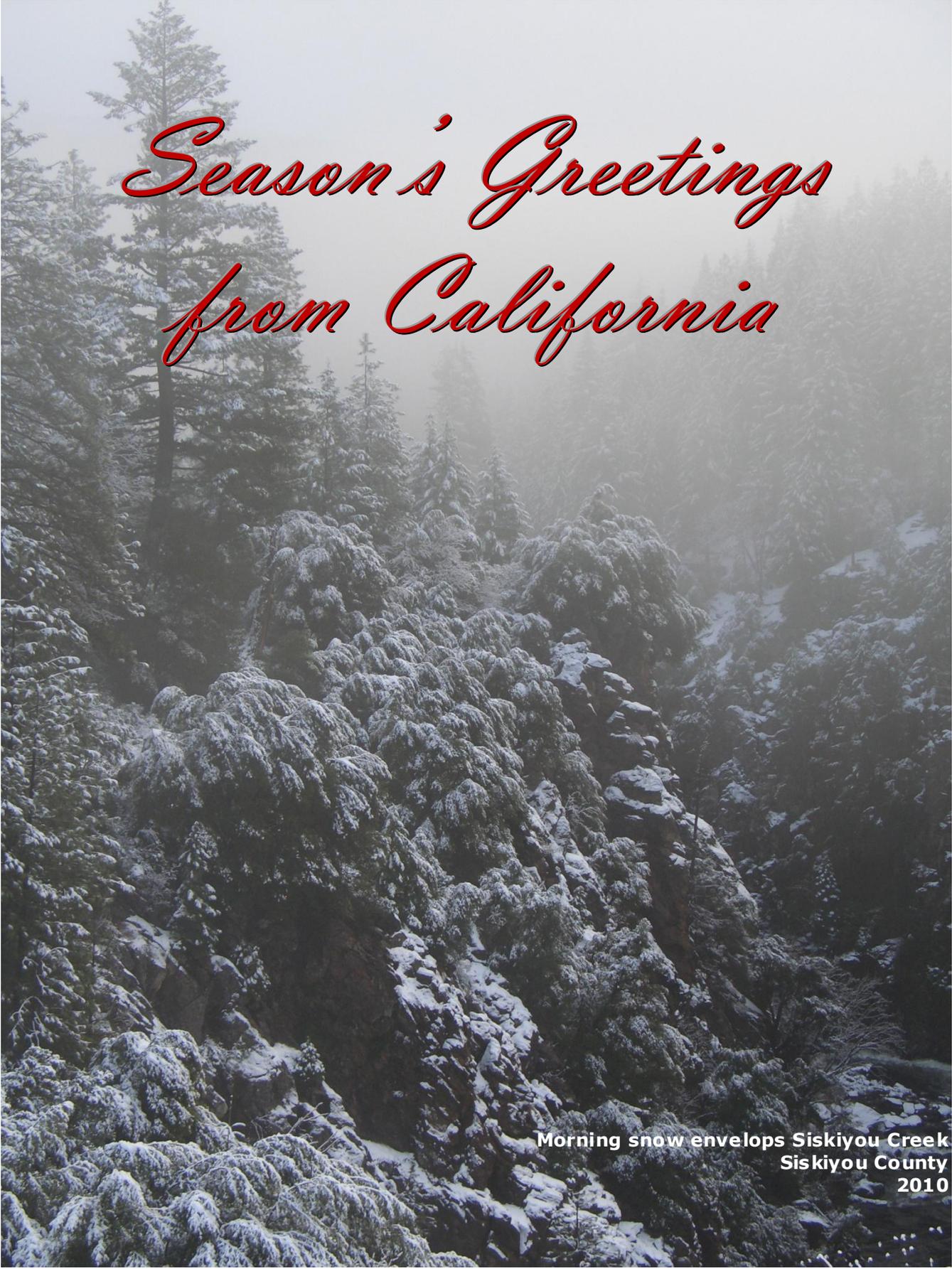
**Donner Creek flows down the eastern side of the pass, joins the Truckee River and flows into Nevada, where it disappears into the ground. Most of Nevada and Utah are contained within the Great Basin – a giant bowl-shaped desert region between the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada – from which no streams escape to the ocean. 2009.**



**Emerald Bay, Lake Tahoe, El Dorado County, 2009.**



**Trees shedding snow, Lassen Volcanic National Park, Tehama County, 2010.**



*Season's Greetings  
from California*

Morning snow envelops Siskiyou Creek  
Siskiyou County  
2010