

The Holiday Herald

Donner Pass, California

16-17 December 2016

A Sierra Holiday

On the third and last day of its trip from Chicago to the San Francisco Bay Area, Amtrak's *California Zephyr* has just emerged at Norden from the "Big Hole," a two-mile tunnel beneath Mount Judah in the background. The Big Hole was bored in 1925 by the Southern Pacific Railroad as an alternative to the avalanche-prone original route of the Transcontinental Railroad, surveyed by Theodore Judah, through Tunnel 6. It was finished in 1868 to carry the railroad beneath Donner Pass. Both tunnels were used until 1993 when Tunnel 6 was abandoned. The stretch of snow on the left of this picture is the abandoned route to Tunnel 6.

Exclusion in the season of peace and good will

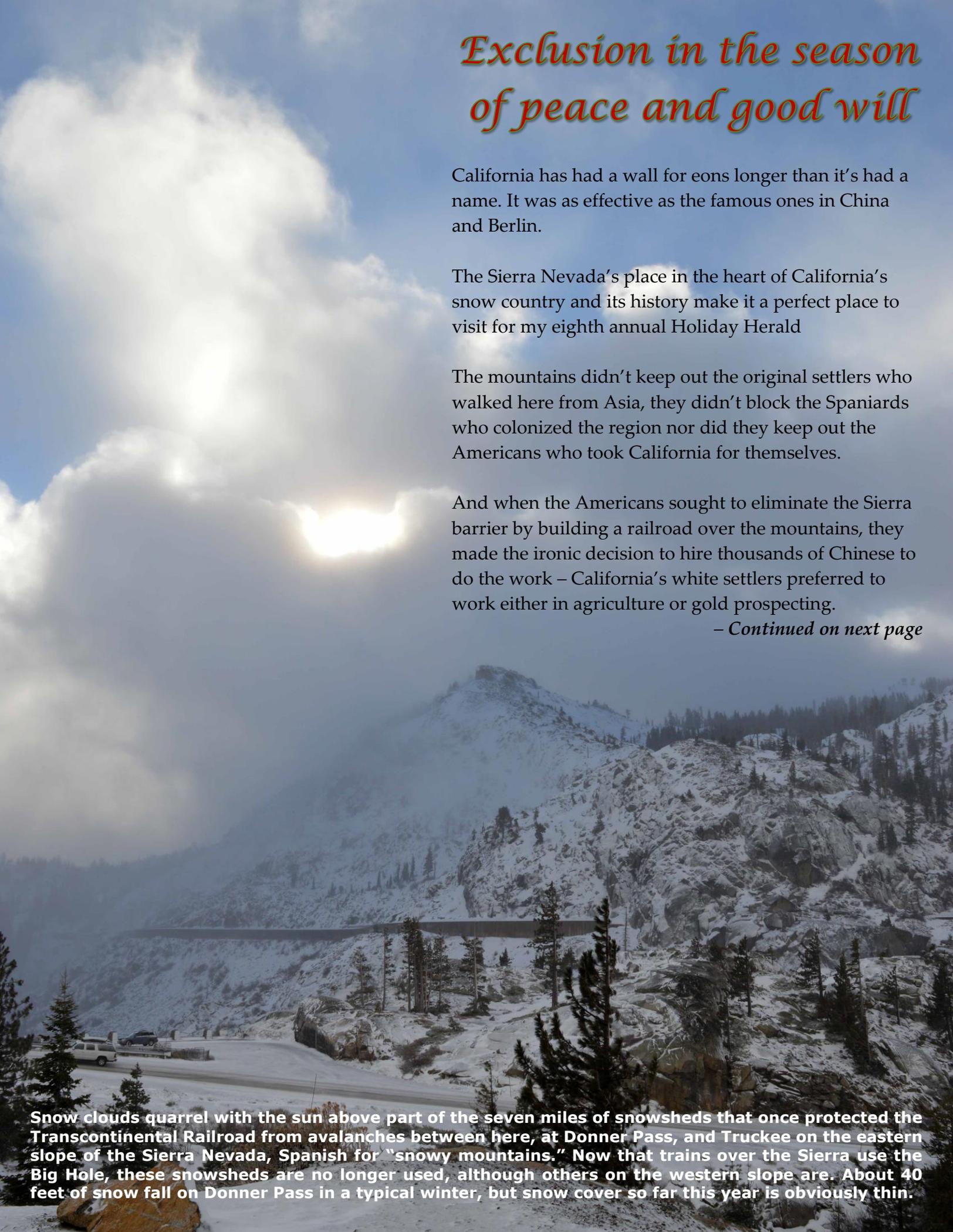
California has had a wall for eons longer than it's had a name. It was as effective as the famous ones in China and Berlin.

The Sierra Nevada's place in the heart of California's snow country and its history make it a perfect place to visit for my eighth annual Holiday Herald

The mountains didn't keep out the original settlers who walked here from Asia, they didn't block the Spaniards who colonized the region nor did they keep out the Americans who took California for themselves.

And when the Americans sought to eliminate the Sierra barrier by building a railroad over the mountains, they made the ironic decision to hire thousands of Chinese to do the work – California's white settlers preferred to work either in agriculture or gold prospecting.

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Snow clouds quarrel with the sun above part of the seven miles of snowsheds that once protected the Transcontinental Railroad from avalanches between here, at Donner Pass, and Truckee on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, Spanish for "snowy mountains." Now that trains over the Sierra use the Big Hole, these snowsheds are no longer used, although others on the western slope are. About 40 feet of snow fall on Donner Pass in a typical winter, but snow cover so far this year is obviously thin.



Exclusion in the season of peace and good will

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But once the tunnels were dug and the tracks were laid, the Chinese were met with discrimination. California barred them from employment, testifying in court and voting. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the nation's first immigration restriction, which lasted for 61 years until 1943.

By then, Japanese-Americans had been confined in internment camps for a year following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

For a nation with a constitution guarantees equal treatment under the law, we have remarkable capacity and irrepressible ingenuity in finding new groups for whom we demand exceptions be made. It could be their sex, their sexuality, their religion, their race, their ancestry, what someone who looks like them has done, what someone who looks like them might do – but we seem to think this solves problems rather than creates them.

There are so many ironies here.

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This view is just inside the west portal of the now abandoned Tunnel 6 beneath Donner Pass. The bridge outside carries skiers to parking lots at Sugar Bowl ski area on Mount Judah. At 1,659 feet, this is the longest of 15 tunnels dug by Chinese immigrant workers to get the Transcontinental Railroad over the Sierra. Digging with dynamite and nitroglycerin, work progressed simultaneously at either end for two years. After a shaft was bored down from the top of the mountain so that workers also could dig from the center outward, progress reached a record 27 inches a day. The inset picture above was taken from this same spot facing east. I hiked the length of the tunnel to shoot the photo on the next page.

Exclusion in the season of peace and good will

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One that strikes me this Christmas is that most of us are descended from people who came to this country because they suffered this kind of from arbitrary discrimination from where they came. Another is that egged on by fear of the hypothetical, the rights, freedoms and lives of Americans are almost always more at risk from our frightened selves than from any outside group.

Rather than seeing equal rights as our strength and security, we fall for the temptation of them as indulgences.

On this newsletter's email list of more than 200 relatives, friends and colleagues there are Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, a Hindu and non-religious whose holidays I only vaguely understand.

But my understanding of Christmas is that the season is about a certain way of treating each other. And that way – based on how we'd like to be treated – is a moral precept widely shared regardless of religion.

Using Christmas as a feel-good opportunity to ignore the massive injustice embodied in the philosophy of our incoming president's administration would be wrong, both from my religious perspective and my citizen's perspective.

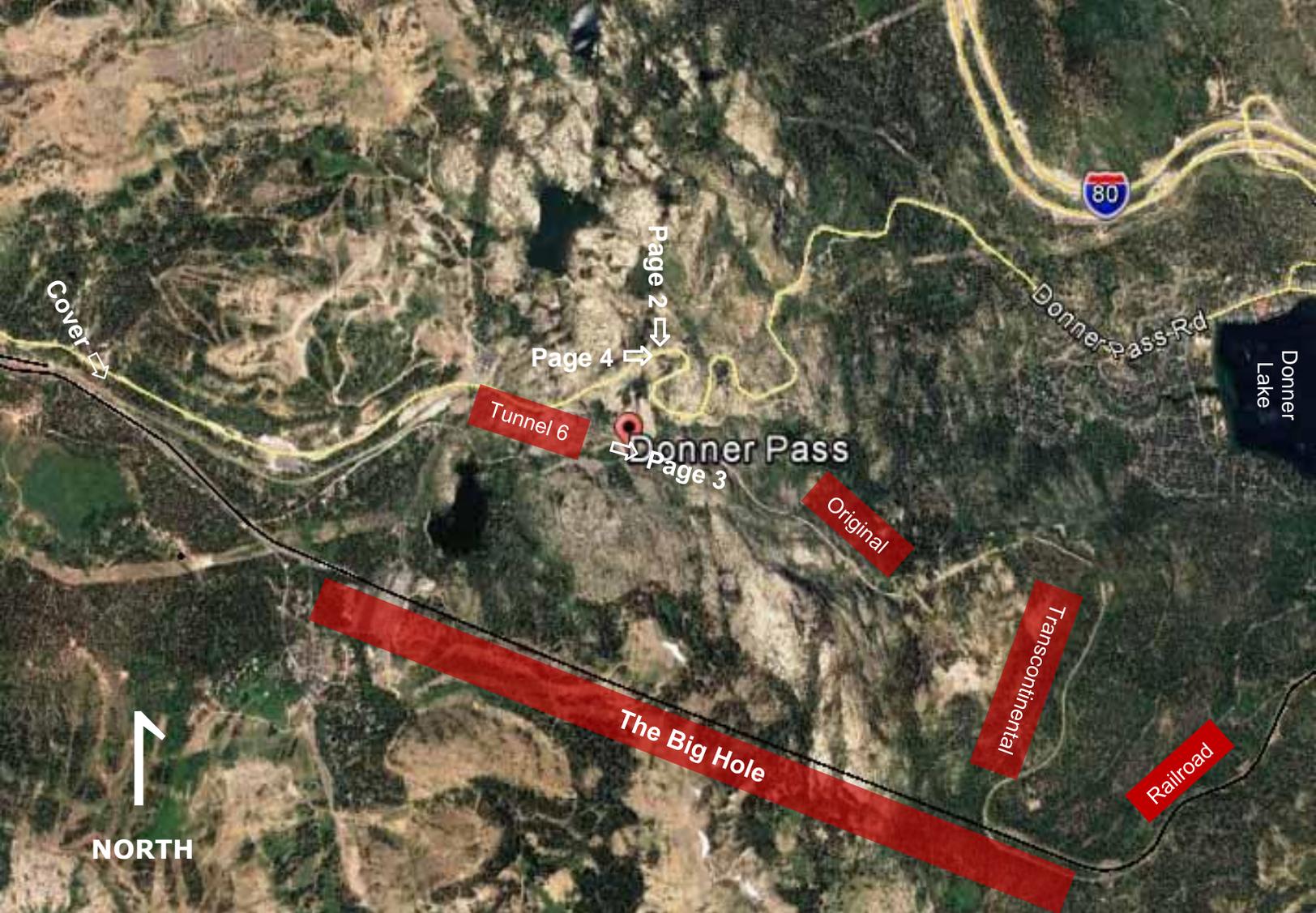
That's the message that came to me from my two days on Donner Pass. My holiday wish for you is that your holidays are as meaningful for you as mine have been for me.



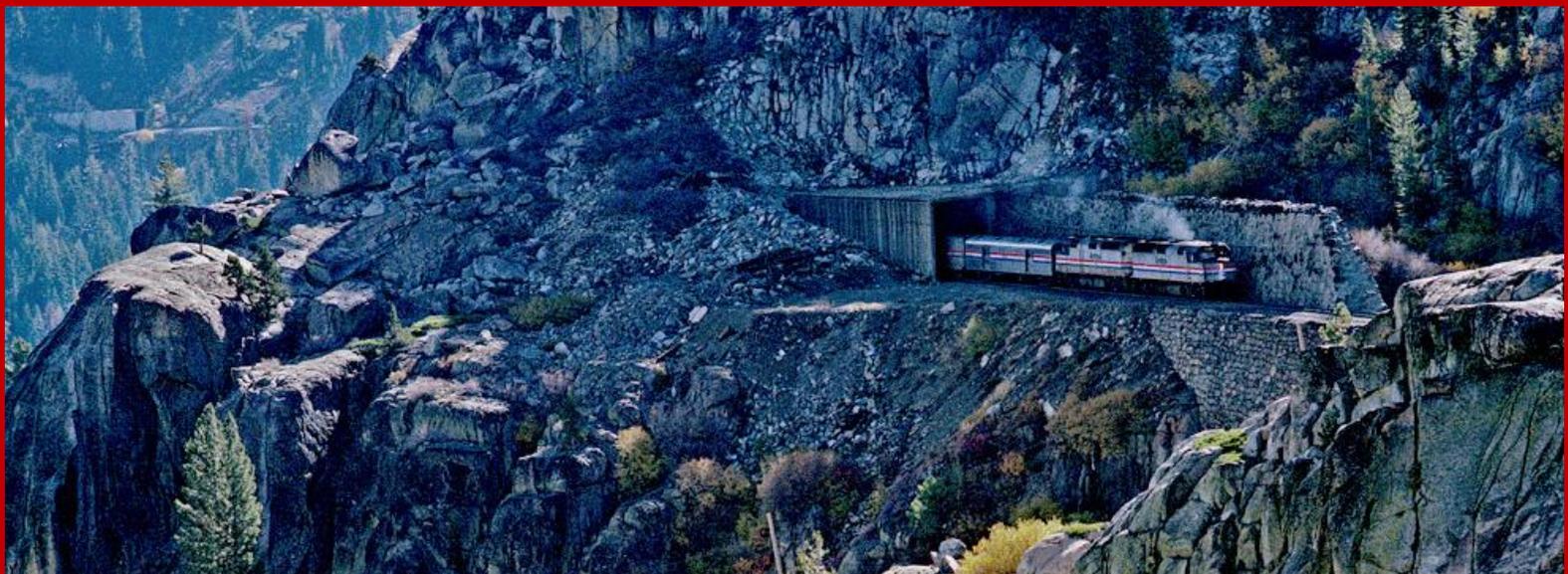
Emerging from the east portal of Tunnel 6, this is the right-of-way of the Transcontinental Railroad leading downhill toward Truckee. The tunnel portal ahead leads into the snowsheds on the second page of this newsletter.



This bridge was completed in 1926 bringing U.S. 40 over Donner Pass. The highway parallels the railroad down to Donner Lake – which is about a thousand feet lower than the pass – and the town of Truckee just beyond. U.S. 40 travels along the north shore (left side) of the lake; the railroad is out of sight to the right. Most motorists now use Interstate 80, about two miles to the north of Donner Pass, over the Sierra. Part of the interstate is visible just above the left end of the bridge. The mountains in the distance are in Nevada.



The Google Earth view above is centered over Donner Pass. The crest of the Sierra Nevada range runs north-south. The location of each photo in this newsletter and the direction of the view is indicated by these arrows ⇒. The black line is the current Union Pacific Railroad route through the Big Hole. The white line it merges with on either side of the image is the route of the Central Pacific Railroad, which was created to build the Transcontinental Railroad east from Sacramento. The Central Pacific was taken over by the Southern Pacific in 1885. The Union Pacific, which was formed to build the Transcontinental Railroad west from Omaha, acquired the Southern Pacific in 1996, three years after the Central Pacific rails over Donner Pass were removed. The photo below is the westbound *California Zephyr* on the old alignment in 1989 at a point called the Chinese Wall. The tunnel portal it is emerging from is the same portal you're looking into in the picture on page 4.



Happy Holidays



Truckee, a railroad town turned ski resort at an elevation of 5,800 feet on the east side of Donner Pass, has more holiday lights than snow this winter. Some of the snow removal equipment that the Union Pacific Railroad uses to keep the railroad open over the Sierra is based here.