

The Holiday Herald

Lake Tahoe, California and Nevada

December 25-27, 2012

*Break Forth,
O Beauteous Heavenly Light*

The Tahoe Christmas blizzard pauses briefly at Sand Harbor in the early morning of Dec. 26 in Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park, Washoe County. You can see a slideshow of these and additional pictures from this trip at www.flickr.com/photos/91637641@N06/sets/72157632366918193/show/.

Happy Holidays

Christmas morning at our house dawned late, gray and drippy this year.

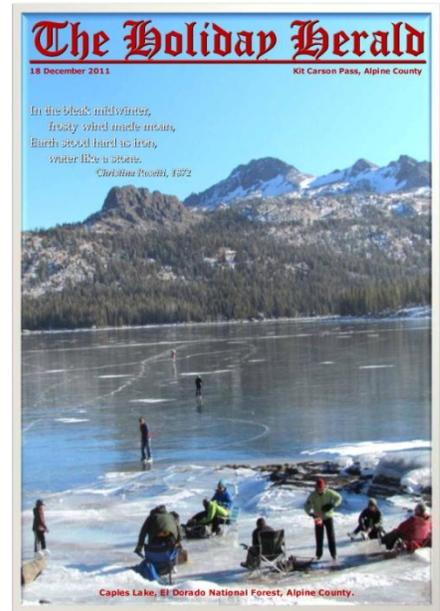
It was a happy day.

Emily and Gordon packed for the plane to North Carolina; I tossed boots and parka into our SUV for my drive to the Sierra Nevada.

Although we were parting temporarily for five days, we had been celebrating our Christmas together for a month at that point, rehearsing Saturdays at church and volunteering at the holiday party that my employer, Working Partnerships USA, puts on each year for kids in need and their families.

Now it was time to make our holidays happier by making other people happy. This fourth annual newsletter is about wishing all of you happiness during your holi- and holy days by sharing scenes and sentiments from ours.

The cover shot of the 2011 newsletter was of skaters on a frozen lake high in the barren Sierra. Until a week or so ago,

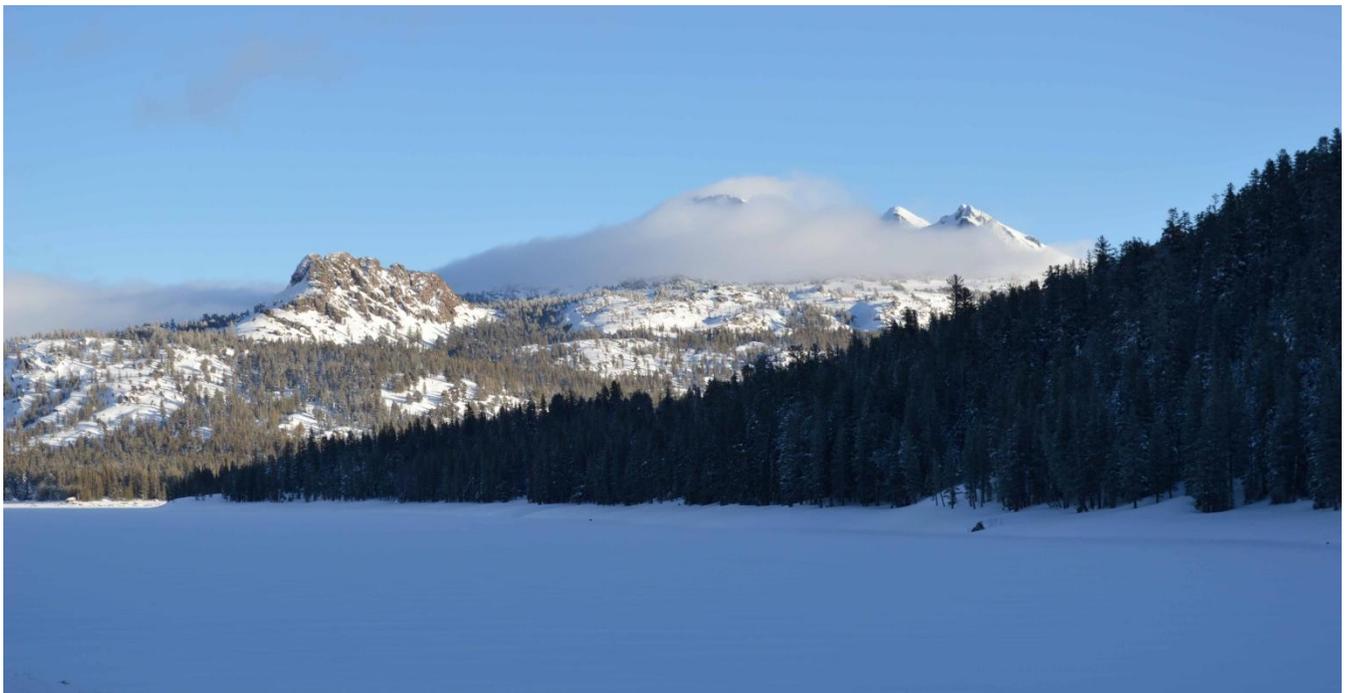


**Caples Lake on the 2011
Holiday Herald cover.**

that would have been the case again.

But then winter descended on the mountains in a series of storms that piled five to 10 feet of holiday scenery around Lake Tahoe in the span of a week.

The pictures in this newsletter were shot Wednesday and Thursday on my drives around the lake in California and Nevada.



Caples Lake this winter.

Christmas miracle 2012



A Union Pacific freight train stops short of the crossing where a family had gotten stuck in the snow.

The snow was waist deep around the railroad grade crossing where I stood at Soda Springs, just west of where the builders of the first transcontinental railroad pushed over 7,000-foot Donner Pass.

The blowing snow and near-whiteout conditions would make a nice newsletter photo when the *California Zephyr* came through loaded with holiday travelers.

The man driving an SUV waved to me as he approached the crossing.

Then, when his vehicle was right on the tracks, he shockingly turned left.

The rails were invisible beneath the snow, and the double-track right-of-way looked just like Donner Pass Road, which was another 50 yards farther ahead, a featureless strip of white.

As soon as the SUV left the crossing, it was up to its axles in snow and going nowhere.

I waved to the driver in his rearview mirror and motioned for him to lower his window.

"You're on a railroad," I yelled through the wind.

He kept trying to get his truck moving without success.

A train's coming!

There was nothing down the track to the west, from where the *Zephyr* would approach, so I looked to the east toward the pass.

There were headlights glowing yellow through the gray-white gloom – either a Union Pacific snowplow or a freight.

"Get out of the truck!" I screamed. "A train's coming!"

– Continued overleaf

Christmas miracle 2012



Amtrak's California Zephyr, eastbound from the Bay Area to Chicago, hustles through Soda Springs over the spot where a family had been stuck in their car not long before.

—Continued from previous page

The driver stuck his head out the window to see the headlights approaching from behind, then opened his door to get out.

“Leave it! Get away from the tracks!”

Over the top of the truck I could see the front passenger's door open and a woman's head appear. The driver moved to his rear door and opened it. A child was inside, strapped in a car seat. The woman opened the far side rear door and leaned inside.

If these people were going to be rescued, they would have to do it themselves. The freight train was moving slowly, but I would never get through the deep snow in time.

The parents were holding both kids now, and I yelled again.

“Get off the tracks!”

Once more I looked back to the freight train, which ground to a halt just short of

the crossing. The parents pushed through the snow to the far side of the crossing where they were out of danger.

Within a few minutes, the freight conductor had gotten on the ground and trudged to the crossing. He had already radioed the Union Pacific dispatcher in Omaha about the fouled crossing, and the dispatcher had set the signals red against the *Zephyr*.

Other drivers stopped at the crossing soon produced some rope that they could use to tie between another SUV and the one stuck on the tracks to pull it out. The conductor borrowed a shovel to dig out the rails where the first SUV had been stuck to be sure they hadn't been damaged and then returned to his train.

It's very rare that a train, even after the brakes have been thrown into emergency, can stop to avoid vehicles on a grade crossing. But the unique topography of this location saved a family's SUV, and perhaps their lives.

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Christmas miracle 2012



Photo taken from the internet

Construction of the "Big Hole" beneath Donner Pass allowed the Union Pacific to abandon this section of the original transcontinental railroad alignment, photographed in October 1989.

The freight train was a mile long, still emerging from the "Big Hole," a two-mile tunnel beneath Mount Judah and the Sugar Bowl ski resort at the crest of Donner Pass. Westbound, the direction the freight train was traveling, the tunnel is uphill.

The train, in effect, was on a giant roller coaster track in which the locomotives and lead cars had just crested the hill but were going very slowly because the rear of the train was still climbing to the top. Otherwise this would have been a very sad story.



The westbound *California Zephyr* stops in Truckee the day before the incident in the story.

St. Nicholas Episcopal Church, Tahoe City



**Brockway,
Calif., on
Tahoe's north
shore**



Skiers at lunch, Squaw Valley

Walking through the base village at Squaw Valley





**Ski school recess,
Squaw Valley**

**"Hurry up, Mom, the lift lines are
getting long." Sugar Bowl ski area.**



Happy Holidays



A father and his son travel home for the holidays the way a kid who got a yellow locomotive for Christmas should travel – on the *California Zephyr*. You can see a slideshow of these and additional pictures from this trip at www.flickr.com/photos/91637641@N06/sets/72157632366918193/show/
Click the “Show Info” button for captions.