

Donner Museum captures region's history



Exhibits at the Donner Museum tell the story of the region's past. Photos/Denise Haerr

By Denise Haerr

TRUCKEE – Hundreds gathered to be a part of history in the making in the impressive shadow of the Pioneer Memorial, whose own dedication occurred 97 years ago to the day. The grand opening of the Donner Memorial State Park Visitor Center on June 6 was a 20-year, \$9.6 million endeavor that was a testament to collaboration.

Even its theme, “Crossing Barriers Changes Lives”, was clearly evidence by the emotional blessing prayer given by Washoe elder Steven James, encouraging everyone to continue to work together the make things better.

The High Sierra Crossing Museum – a 9,400-square-foot structure – has sat empty for about a year because of lack of

funding to operate it. It replaces the Emigrant Trail Museum.

The state-of-the-art facility is full of innovative and engaging programs and exhibits. It is destined to be a much-visited park. It honors the ill-fated Donner Party, telling the history of the Donner region, including: Washoe settlements, Chinese workers building the transcontinental railroad, and early motoring experiences over Donner Pass. This is not just a look at museum. It's something to experience, a place to learn about those who came before us.



Hundreds of people turn out for the June 6 museum opening.

The audience was asked to raise a hand if anyone was a descendant of the Donner Party. Dozens of hands rose.

Later, Tamara Anderson told of her relative, Sarah Graves, who was part of the Forlorn Hope, an offshoot of the original group. Graves was one of the few survivors. An exhibit in the museum titled "Why Women Survive?" gives insight into Anderson's family legacy.

More women than men lived through the Donner Party ordeal.

While there were many dignitaries present on Saturday, the ceremony began with a flag raising, with the help of two little girls, Cora Medhurst and Abigail Quadros. They are the

great-great-granddaughters of Louis De Rome, a pioneer bronze manufacturer and the caster of the Pioneer Memorial. While De Rome created the impressive statue, it was the Native Sons of the Golden West that secured the lands for the location in 1918. Members from all over California convened for this the 139th Grand Parlor Annual Meeting. As tradition dictates, the members combined sand, gravel and water from the far reaches of California to make cement. They then affixed part of the historic marker with the cement, a custom symbolic of the society's original mission since its forming in 1875 – to preserve California's historic resources with informational markers and fundraising for landmark restoration work. It was a memorable display of the magnitude of this endeavor.



Displays show items from days gone by.

“Donner Memorial State Park is a jewel in our system, and it’s recognized worldwide for its historical value. The new visitor center will enhance our visitors’ experience, and will allow us to showcase the significance of the park in a more interactive and innovative manner,” Lisa Mangat, acting director of California State Parks, said. “Giving our visitors an array of different experiences will help us instill a strong sense of pride for the wonderful cultural and historical resources there are at Donner Memorial State Park.”

Truckee Vice Mayor Joan deRyk Jones added an economic element

to the dedication. She shared that for every \$1 spent at a California State Park, \$17 goes into the local community's economy.

Team effort was the key description of the work involved for the grand opening.

Moderator Don Schmidt quoted past National Park Service Director William Penn Mott Jr., "A vision is a powerful thing. It is a dream based on a clear perception of the future combined with a commitment to take the necessary steps to make it happen."

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Notes:

- More information about the park may be found online.