23 miles in 7 days

The 1911 Tahoe Tavern Auto Race make today’s chain restrictions look like child’s play

By Gary Noy
Special to Tahoe In Depth

Imagine ascending the western slope of the Sierra, trudging through places as spectacularly remote as Desolation Wilderness, and contending with gorged rivers and massive drifts of spring snow along the way.

Now imagine that instead of a backpack and trekking poles, you are hauling your car with you as you go.

If this sounds like the kind of thing you would only do on a bet, then your enthusiasm for getting to Lake Tahoe could’ve matched the legendary feat of two turn-of-the century Grass Valley residents who in 1911 did just that.

Bear in mind in the early 20th century, most roads in the Sierra were treacherous, not to be traveled by the faint of heart. In 1901, the Bureau of Highways described the skinny tentacle over Sonora Pass as “22 miles over granite formation that is little more than a creek bed.” One wag depicted another highway as so muddy in winter and spring that it measured “130 miles long and 5 feet deep.”

Driving a car through the range in the first 15 years of the 20th century was an adventure on par with an attempt at traversing the remote Sierra High Route—a trip both challenging and potentially deadly.

Still, in the early years of car travel, novelty and a rugged spirit drew car enthusiasts to precarious places. Perhaps to capitalize on this, in spring of 1911, the Tahoe Tavern in Tahoe City offered a 3-foot-tall silver trophy to the first party to drive eastward over the Donner Summit Road from California to the luxury resort. The Sierra had just endured a severe winter—by March of that year nearly 40 feet of snow had fallen at 8,000 feet—so it was not until June that anyone dared attempt the exhilarating but arduous race over the trackless, snowy Sierra.

Unable to continue.
With an overwhelming lead, the dynamic duo from Grass Valley continued onward. Two days later, Foote and Starr were once again stuck in the snow, but, still confident that success was within reach, they returned to Grass Valley by train to retrieve more equipment before pressing on. On June 7, they were back with their stranded auto, which they yanked into position and fitted with wooden runners on the wheels. The car now turned into a sled, the adventurers pushed it over the snowpack, and by June 9, they had reached Soda Springs, where they spent the day making repairs.

The next morning, Foote and Starr pulled their vehicle over Donner Summit and then manhandled it to Donner Lake, where they enjoyed a well-earned breakfast. With nothing left but the open road from Truckee to Tahoe City, the triumphant contestants reached Tahoe Tavern at noon. Overall, the outing had taken eight days. The 3-foot-tall trophy was theirs, and so were bragging rights.

The Tahoe Tavern proprietors were astonished to see Arthur Foote and George Starr. On June 11, the Grass Valley Union reported on the front page: “The victors enjoyed the consternation which they caused by their unexpected arrival. The resort management had not expected these men from Grass Valley to achieve their success by shoving, tugging, and hoisting their Model T over seemingly impassable mountainous terrain.”

May the spectacular allure of Lake Tahoe and the spirit of adventure in getting here live on.

Gary Noy has taught history at Sierra College in Rocklin since 1987. In 2006, the Oregon-California Trails Association named him Educator of the Year. This story is excerpted from Gary’s new book “Sierra Stories: Tales of Dreamers, Schemers, Bigots and Rogues” (Heyday Books and Sierra College Press, 2014)