

An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

What is a Doctor's Phaeton?

May 2014

Were you able to solve our History Mystery: What is a Doctor's Phaeton?

Well, a **Phaeton** is a small lightweight horse drawn carriage or buggy that is easily recognized by its open body style with four large wheels. It is very fast – some say dangerously fast. The name comes from a Greek myth about the famously disastrous ride of Phaeton, son of Helios, who attempted to drive the chariot of the sun and nearly set the earth on fire doing so. Very Dangerous! In the 19th and early 20th centuries Doctors still made house calls and they needed a fast vehicle. They found that a Phaeton could get them to their patient quickly. So, a simple, lightweight, phaeton usually drawn by a single horse became known as a Doctor's Phaeton or, in more common terms, a Doctor's Buggy.



In January 2013, the Alpine Historical Society asked for donations to purchase a Doctor's Buggy, and the community responded generously. Then, Don Walker, a third generation descendent of Fredric and Bevie Walker said he had a buggy in storage just like the one we were going to purchase except that it was closely associated with Alpine history. So Don donated the buggy and that's when we discovered that it was in truly remarkable condition but in need of restoration. We also learned that it had been used daily at the Willows Resort, and made at least one trip to Oregon and back.

Well, it turns out this Doctor's Phaeton was built by Larkins and Company at 631 and 633 Howard Street in San Francisco. Between 1865 and 1900 Larkins and Company won four gold and nine silver medals for excellence in craftsmanship from the Mechanics Institute of San Francisco. Then with the rising popularity of the automobile, Larkins and Company got into automobile construction while continuing to repair old buggies. Eventually, they stopped working on carriages altogether.

Now our Museum Volunteers are painstakingly restoring the buggy by removing rust and old paint, filling and repairing cracks in wooden members, and preparing to repaint the buggy in colors that match the original. The fabrics for the seat upholstery and "convertible" top will be replaced by a local expert who specializes in vintage auto upholstery. The final detail, if funding permits, will be to apply pin striping to the wheels and carriage gear to match the pin striping we discovered when we gently removed layers of paint to uncover the original details.



You can see our handiwork at the Alpine History Days celebration on June 7, from 11 am to 2 pm. Volunteers will be there to show you our "work in progress", and we will have a slide show illustrating what we have been doing. The FREE History Day event will also feature Model T Fords, live music, a western comedy skit, a beekeeping presentation, ice cream sundaes, food, and more. And at this event you can also join the Alpine Historical Society – but you don't have to be a hundred years old like our buggy.