



## Donner Summit Historical Society

**“...inexpressibly comprehensive, grand, and picturesque.”**

from What I saw in California by Edwin Bryant in 1849 upon reaching Donner Summit

Edwin Bryant was right. Donner Summit and Donner Pass are special.

# Donner Summit, An Introduction

With 40 feet of snow falling annually here at the top of the Sierra, winter is what most people think of when thinking about Donner Summit. We also have unparalleled opportunities for recreation and scenery at other times of year. Just a short distance from the freeway are open lands with lakes to explore, granite faces to climb, hiking to do, mountains to conquer, routes to bike, fish to catch, photographs to make, and lots more.

## Donner Pass – Unique and Important

On Donner Pass you can stand in one place and see the parade of history. For thousands of years people have been crossing the Sierra at Donner Pass and have left behind evidence of their activities.

Arguably Donner Pass is the most important square mile in California with many firsts:

- The first wagon trains to California
- The first transcontinental railroad
- The first transcontinental highway
- The first transcontinental air route

They all crossed Donner Pass, entry to California, the land of opportunity.

Many of the people who built California came over or left their mark on Donner Pass.

## Native American Petroglyphs

All over Donner Summit Native Americans left petroglyphs (example to the right) and in a couple of places grinding rocks. The petroglyphs are fascinating. Why were they made? What do they represent?

The most accessible petroglyphs are right beside Old Highway 40 just around the first turn below Rainbow Bridge. For a quick explanation and pictures: <http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org/pages/petroglyphs.html>





## The First Wagon Train

The first wagon train to California was not the Donner Party. They came years later.

The first wagon train to reach California, the Stephens Murphy Townsend Party led by 80 year old Caleb Greenwood, came over Donner Pass. Nearby geographical features, Stephens Peak and Schallenberger Ridge, are named for members and the first white baby born in California came from that train. Elizabeth Yuba Murphy was born at Big Bend, the big bend in the Yuba river just below Donner Summit. Moses Schallenberger was 17 years old when he was left behind by the Stephens Party to winter at Donner Lake.

Over the following decades thousands of people crossed Donner Pass using various routes.



## The first transcontinental Railroad

The first transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, came through Donner Pass. It took carving 15 granite tunnels to get over the Sierra. The railroad still crosses, but under the Summit now. All over the Summit are pieces of railroad history.

Tunnel 6, the great 1867 tunnel is at the top and is the longest tunnel by far. It took two years to build, is 1500 feet long and was blasted out of solid granite from four directions by Chinese workers. They used black powder and the first non-accidental use of nitroglycerine on the west coast.

Meanwhile, during building, 40 miles of track, engines and train cars were hauled over the pass on wagons to continue the building into Nevada. Time and the race with the Union Pacific could not be lost. The railroad builders had such power they were able to have Congress move the Sierra 30 miles. It's true!



Chinese workers battled extremes in temperature, blizzards,

avalanche, accident, and disease to build the railroad, their enduring monument. The remains of Chinese camps are in many places.

The biggest monument to the Chinese, besides the railroad itself, is the China Wall, pictured right. Rock excavated from the great Summit tunnel filled in the ravine and was faced with perfectly fitted quarried granite. There is no mortar in the cracks.



The snowsheds are the most obvious part of the railroad, above left. Stretching along the railroad and once forty miles long, they protected the railroad from snow and avalanche but also ruined passengers' views.

As older snowsheds had to be replaced Summit residents would gather the old timbers to use for buildings. Some of those houses still exist and one long time resident remembers her mother sanding and sanding and sanding to remove the locomotive soot.

The railroad was a major industry in Donner Pass with a number of communities, turn tables, fire trains (to fight common snowshed fires), many workers, and helper engines (to help trains get over the 7000 foot summit). Today those communities are gone, but the railroad remains, a major commercial artery.



"I don't believe I have adequate words to describe the real beauty of Donner Pass. As we stood looking down I had a floating sensation...I lost all fear as I looked at one of the most beautiful blue lakes [Donner Lake] I had ever seen. Everything below us seemed suspended in shimmering light."

Thornton Round, 1914 on the Lincoln Highway

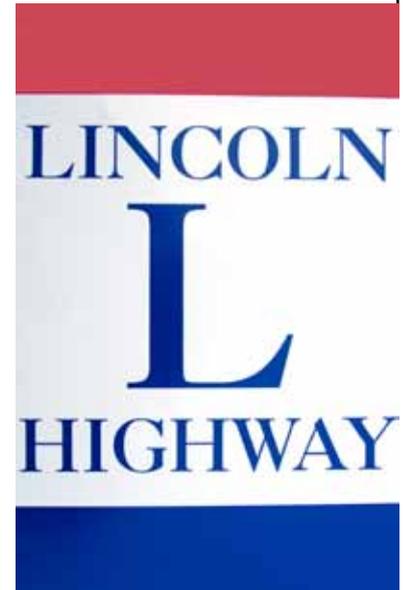
## The first transcontinental highway – The Lincoln Highway

The first transcontinental highway, and the first public memorial to Abraham Lincoln, was put together in 1913. Remnants can be seen in many places on the Summit, particularly the dirt road coming down from Donner Summit and winding under the railroad.

As soon as people could drive cars they wanted to travel and go over the Sierra. The Lincoln Highway was strung together from many smaller routes and stretched all the way across the country.

Travel was different by automobile in those days. Lincoln Highway travelers were advised:

- 35 MPH was the top speed and only on the best sections.
- One could travel over the Sierra only from June to November due to snow.
- Don't travel until roads have had a day or two to dry out.
- Don't wear new shoes.
- Don't ford water without first wading through it.
- If you get into trouble light a bonfire.



Even with the difficulties, The Lincoln Highway beckoned, "New sensations and a few thrills await the dweller of the East when first he makes the transcontinental tour over the Lincoln Highway."

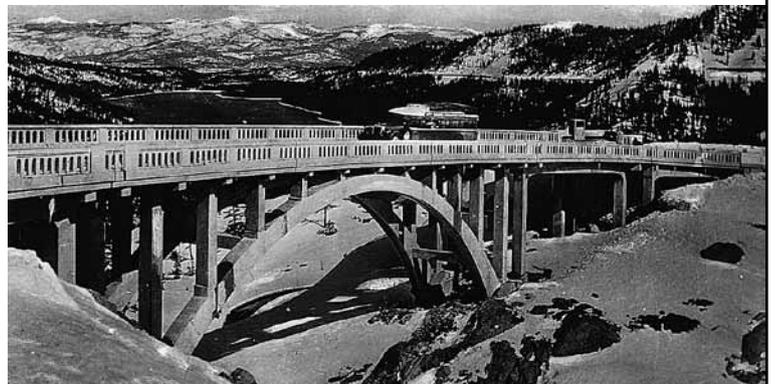
from The Lincoln Highway California by Gregory Franzwa pg 7

The Lincoln Highway, dirt and gravel, steep and hard, crossed Donner Summit but improvements had to be made. The Forest Service wanted to get lumber out of the Tahoe Basin but the route up Donner Pass was too steep so they commissioned the Donner Summit or Rainbow Bridge, perhaps the most photographed bridge in the United States besides the Golden Gate.



It's been used in commercials, been the subject of countless photographs by tourists and commercial and art photographers, and it's been used as a prop in movies.

Sitting just below Donner Pass Rainbow Bridge (below) was completed in 1926 and was an engineering feat. It was the first bridge with a compound curve on a grade.



### Pictured previous page:

Top: Stephens Party going over Donner Summit  
The coming of the railroad  
Snowsheds on Donner Summit  
China Wall  
Snowsheds and the Summit Hotel circa 1880

**This page** above right: Lincoln Highway sign  
Center left: Maxwell Military Transport going under the 1913 underpass under a snowshed - Donner Pass.

## The first transcontinental air route

When pilots first started flying it was a "Seat of the pants" exercise. They flew along what they could see following roads and railroads. Flying was not done in bad weather or at night but the demand for airmail and from pilots changed that. The Federal Government "built" the first transcontinental air route and it went right over Donner Summit. The route included emergency air fields, lighted beacons, radio beacons, signs and arrows, and manned air stations. In 1931 a manned air station was built on Donner Summit (pictured right) and

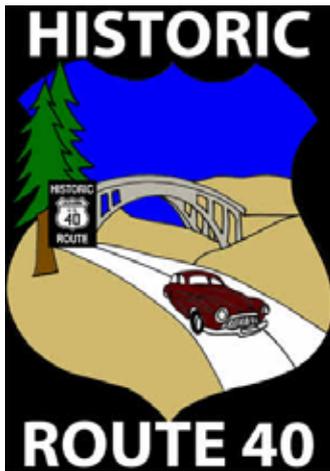


beacons led pilots across. One of those beacons still sits atop Signal Peak (Donner Ski Ranch). Despite that a number of air crashes have occurred on the Summit like the one left on Lake Van Norden.



## Interstate 80 and the end of a way of life

Today Interstate 80 crosses Donner Summit a few miles from the first highway. It brings tourists and immigrants and takes California products to the rest of the nation. It also changed the face of the Summit. People drive more quickly on the four-lane superhighway and are less likely to stop. Old Highway 40 was no longer the main route and the little towns, the stores, shops, lodges and inns, the restaurants and service stations, and the small ski areas disappeared along with a way of life.



Above, one of the many communities along Old Highway 40 that catered to travelers before the coming of Interstate 80 and the end of a way of life.

Left: Winter auto traffic on Old Highway 40 in "downtown" Soda Springs in front of the Soda Springs Hotel.

Right: the first chairlift in California. Sugar Bowl, 1939



## Other Things About Donner Summit

### The first California Chair Lift

Sugar Bowl is the first ski resort built as a destination ski resort in California. There were other ski areas before Sugar Bowl but they were just ski areas. Sugar Bowl, built in 1939, included the first chair lift in California, a skating rink, rope tows, and lodge. The Sugar Bowl Lodge was designed by William Wilson Wurster, a famous California architect and still serves as a lodge, restaurant and bar. Some of the original houses still exist as do pieces of that first chair lift.



### Ice Harvesting

Before there was refrigeration ice was imported into California. Then the snow and cold temperatures of the Sierra were discovered and ice harvesting in the Sierra started. A couple of ice harvesting enterprises existed on Donner Summit. One that harvested ice on Ice Lakes left the Summit for Truckee after only two years because the 35-40 foot annual snowfall was too great. Presumably they spent all their time clearing snow rather than harvesting ice.

### Ski Industry

The ski industry is the major commercial enterprise on Donner Summit now. The Summit is home to four downhill areas: Donner Ski Ranch, Boreal Ridge, Soda Springs, and Sugar Bowl. It is also home to a major cross country area, Royal Gorge. Skiing isn't the only snow activity however. Boarding and tubing are also popular.

Those who prefer to go skiing away from the established areas can go backcountry on the National Forest lands which make up much of the Summit. There are organized back country activities but many skiers like to conquer nearby peaks on skis or simply go out and enjoy.

### Activities

Donner Summit is a premiere destination for all kinds of activities: hiking the Sierra, cross country and downhill skiing, rock climbing on the granite cliffs, snowboarding, trainspotting, lepidoptery, birding, history exploration, and road and mountain biking. For descriptions of these and locations go to <http://www.exploredonnersummit.com/pages/activities.html>



### For more information

[www.exploredonnersummit.com](http://www.exploredonnersummit.com)  
[www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

contact: [info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@donnersummithistoricalsociety.org)

For quick stories about Donner Summit history and for pictures go to the 20 Mile Museum:  
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>

