



Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass

Tunnel 6 Central Shaft

History

Boring Tunnel 6 from two directions at once was not fast enough for the Central Pacific Railroad. They earned money by constructing contiguous miles of track but they were stuck on the summit blasting tunnels out of solid granite instead of collecting money by laying track. Just to the east was Nevada with beautifully flat land where the Big 4 could collect money easily but they couldn't get there. Worse, the Union Pacific, coming from the east, taunted the Central Pacific, saying they'd get to California before the Central Pacific even got out of the Sierra. So the Central Pacific got creative. Not only would they work from the outside in on Tunnel 6, they'd work from the inside out.

Almost 90 feet below you is Tunnel 6, the longest of the Sierra transcontinental railroad tunnels. It took two years to build. To speed construction the Central Pacific sank a shaft down the middle so they could work from the inside out.

The shaft was eight feet by twelve feet and workers progressed on it at less than a foot per day. The shaft was started on August 27, 1866. By December workers could work laterally. Eventually the job of hoisting rubble from the shaft by hand derrick was too hard. The solution was the first locomotive in California, the Sacramento. It became a hoisting engine, renamed the Black Plucked Goose, and it sat over the central shaft of Tunnel 6 (in the large building in the picture to the right). Other buildings nearby were for shelter, storage and blacksmithing.



A Good Story

Even working four faces at once the Chinese railroad workers did not make much progress on the 1659' tunnel. According to Samuel Montague, chief engineer, in his testimony before the Pacific Railway Commission in 1887, progress on the central shaft was only 85/100 of a foot per day (about 10 inches).

Imagine working in that shaft day after day with only candle light to light the work, pounding away at the granite eight hours a day six days a week. The air was acrid with the remains of the black powder from the last blast. There must have been fear too - that the fuse for the next blast would not be long enough to allow everyone to escape.

Things to do right here

Explore the area. Look for the bolts that used to anchor the donkey engine (left). Look at the old rail lying around. Can you find any dates? Walk up to the knoll behind the large building on the east side of the parking lot for another sign and a great view. Go find the Tunnel 6 sign across from Donner Ski Ranch to read about the work in the tunnels. Go find the catfish pond still stocked with catfish descended from those planted by the Chinese (pick up the brochure "Historic Hikes of Donner Summit" either on-line or at the Donner Summit Historical Society at blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs).



Above: the bottom of the shaft looking up.

"The drillers are all Chinamen, and most excellent hands they make, as will be seen when I state that a gang of three can drill three holes of one and a quarter inches in diameter and two and a half feet deep in twelve hours."

Sacramento Union
April 22, 1867

