

Donner Summit

“...inexpressibly comprehensive, grand, and picturesque. After congratulating ourselves upon the safe achievement of our morning feat, and breathing our mules a few minutes, we proceeded on our journey. A mile brought us to a small dimple on top of the mountain, in the centre of which is a miniature lake, surrounded by green grass.”

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

Donner Summit *is* grand and picturesque. It is unique. You can stand at Donner Pass where Native Americans crossed for thousands of years and left evidence of their crossings in the form of petroglyphs and grinding stones. The first wagon trains to California crossed using the same route. In the same spot you can see the routes of the first transcontinental railroad; the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway; the first transcontinental air route and the first transcontinental telephone line. That’s only a little of the history on Donner Summit. The Donner Summit Historical Society’s 20 Mile Museum, along Old Highway 40, celebrates that rich history with forty-one interpretive signs.

Most of the signs have been placed along Old Highway 40 from the Nyack exit on I-80, over Donner Summit and down into Truckee. A few signs sit on adjacent roads. Each sign highlights history, displays historical photographs and quotes, tells a good story, and lists activities for the location.

The signs highlight our unique history, share the beauty of Donner Summit, encourage visitation, and help revitalize the Summit economy.

The signs are sponsored by local businesses and individuals who paid for their construction and placement.

20 Mile Museum

Nyack Lodge

Emigrant Gap and Nyack have been stopping points for people crossing the Sierra since long before I-80 was built. This sign sits outside the store at Nyack.

Red Mountain

65 million years ago Red Mtn. was an island in the Pacific Ocean. More recently it was a downhill ski contest site and maybe more importantly, it was a fire lookout for the railroad. It’s 360 degree view is spectacular. The sign is 2000 feet below the peak at the Eagle Lakes exit from I-80 on north side of the freeway and just beyond the curve uphill. Conquering Red Mtn. after a hike is a thrill and accomplishment.

39° 19.448N/120° 33.734W

Meadow Lake

Meadow Lake might have become a thriving metropolis had they been able to get the gold out. At one time there were thousands of people and hundreds of buildings there. A little later, Mark Twain said it was a beautiful town, except there were no people. “You can have a house all to yourself merely by promising to take care of it.” Just beyond the Red Mountain sign. 39° 19.472N/120° 33.781W

Forest Gift Shop

The stone buildings at Cisco along Old 40 are curiosities. This sign sits just off the north side of Cisco exit from I-80. 39° 18.672N/120° 32.475W

View of the Lincoln Highway

The Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental highway and the first national memorial to Abraham Lincoln. It ran alongside the Yuba River at Big Bend. From the north side of the river between Big Bend and the I-80 overpass you have a great view of the old route. You can walk it as well with access across the street from the Big Bend fire station. 39° 18.255N/120° 31.475W

Big Bend

The “bend” in the river was a resting stop for wagon trains and then highway travelers. Today there is a USFS fire station along with a Lincoln Highway monument. 39° 18.400N/120° 31.061W

Rainbow Lodge/Tavern

Built in the 19th Century and remodeled in 1927 and subsequently, the Tavern was a stop on the highway. It’s a wonderful old building with wonderful a collection of historical photographs. Enjoy the lodge, the food, the river, and the nearby old houses. Sign is to the right of the lodge at the edge of the parking lot. 39° 18.603N/120° 30.564W

Donner Summit Lodge

Donner Summit Lodge was another of the travelers’ stops on the highway. Today it serves good food and is a good example of the many lodges that accommodated visitors along the old highway. The lodge is at the Soda Springs exit from I-80. 39° 19.513N/120° 23.363W

Soda Springs Store

There has been a succession of stores in Soda Springs over the decades. The current store sells a little of everything including sandwiches and picnic fixings in “downtown” Soda Springs. 39° 19.457N/120 23.017W

Soda Springs Hotel

Built in 1927, the hotel served travelers for decades. The sign sits right outside the Donner Summit Historical Society. The museum there has a huge collection of historical photographs and ephemera. 39 19.408N/120 22.768W

Ice Lakes

Ice Lakes hosted an ice harvesting industry for a few years until the huge snowfalls (35 feet on average) sent the ice harvesting to Truckee. Turn west out of Soda Springs on Soda Springs Rd. at the blinking light and head 2.5 miles west to Ice Lakes (today Serene Lakes). Sign is in the Ice Lakes Lodge parking lot and inside the lodge. 39° 17.697N/120° 22.959W

Soda Springs Ski Area

Here is the oldest ski resort on the Summit and the site of the first Summit ski lift. You can see Soda Springs Ski Area from Soda Springs. Turn at the blinking light and cross the RR tracks. 39° 19.276N/120° 22.758W

Wagon Train Route

On the way out of Soda Springs towards Ice Lakes, just before Pahatsi Rd. at the top of the hill you will come to the actual wagon train route. 39° 18.777N/120° 22.870W

Norden Station

This was the railroad station inside the snowsheds for people wanting to come ski at Sugar Bowl. Across from the Old Norden Store on Old 40. 39° 19.036N/120° 21.196W

Hutchinson Lodge

The lodge was built in 1924-25 by the Hutchinson brothers to serve their new “Sierra Ski Club.” This is a classic Sierra lodge. 39° 19.061N/120° 212.159W

Clair Tappaan Lodge

Built by Sierra Club volunteers in 1935, the lodge has been expanded a number of times and has served skiers, hikers, and

nature lovers for decades. Come up for a look. 39° 19.012N/120° 21.011W

Cal-Lodge

This is a classic mountain lodge belonging to the students of U.C. Berkeley. It was built in 1937 and rebuilt in 1939. 39° 18.997N/120° 21.023W

Tri Lodges

The Cal, Heidelman and Clair Tappaan lodges were the “Tri Lodges” in the middle of the 20th Century. They are classic old style ski lodges.

39° 18.996N/120° 21.022W

Summit Valley Overlook

Summit Valley, Van Norden Meadow, is the headwaters of the Yuba River. Through this valley came Native Americans who left grinding rocks, wagon trains, freight wagons, the railroad, and the first transcontinental highway. It is today an important wayspot for migratory fowl. This sign sits across from Clair Tappaan Lodge. 39° 18.997N/120° 21.022W

Sugar Bowl

Sugar Bowl was the first California destination ski resort and the site of the first chairlift in California in 1939, Sugar Bowl is a popular ski resort. This sign sits on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure. 39° 19.036N/120° 21.194W

Magic Carpet

There were no roads into Sugar Bowl so people took tractor pulled sleighs until the Magic Carpet, the first ski gondola in California, was built. Skiers could ride to Sugar Bowl for 15 cents. Just east of the parking structure on Old 40. 39° 18.793N/120° 20.345W

Mt. Lincoln - Charlie Chaplin's “The Gold Rush”

It was the highest grossing comedy of its day.

Charlie Chaplin filmed “The Gold Rush” partly on

Mt. Lincoln. Sign sits on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure. 39° 19.036N/120° 21.194W

Lodge at Sugar Bowl

The lodge was built in 1939 by William Wilson Wurster, the most “influential unknown architect in California.” Sign sits on Old Highway 40 just next to the parking structure. 39° 19.036N/120° 21.194W

Donner Ski Ranch

The first rope tows on Donner Summit were here and across the old highway. Donner Ski Ranch has been the site of many “firsts.” Sign is in the parking lot. 39° 19.082N/120° 19.808W

Airway Station and Beacon.

Donner Summit was part of the first transcontinental air route. The station and beacon helped guide early planes. On Old 40 at Donner Summit just up from Donner Ski Ranch. 39 19.007 N/120 19.619W

Summit Hotel

This was Summit Hotel II, built in 1895. It was huge and attracted vacationers to Donner Summit for decades. It had a two story outhouse and just one bathtub. It burned in 1925.

39 19 017N 120 19 794W (At Sugar Bowl Rd./Old 40 intersection)

Tunnel 6

Just across from Donner Ski Ranch is the road into Sugar Bowl. Tunnel 6, the longest tunnel of the Sierra crossing of the original Transcontinental Railroad is just below the overpass. It was an incredible feat by Chinese workers working for two years to hew the tunnel from the solid Sierra granite. They went at the job from four directions, from each end and down through the middle and out. There is a very good pamphlet about Tunnel 6 at the DSHS in Soda Springs.

39° 18.019N/120° 19.794W

Roller Pass Wagon Train Route

One final hurdle before crossing into California: Roller Pass was so steep double teams of oxen hauled wagons up one at a time. Then it was all downhill to the emigrants' dreams. The sign is at Roller Pass on the Pacific Crest Trail, a two mile hike from the PCT trailhead just off Old 40. There is a brochure about the Emigrant Trail at the DSHS.

39° 17.627N/ 120° 19.226W

Sugar Bowl Academy Building

This was the old highway maintenance building built in 1932 when Highway 40 was first plowed and became an all season highway. This is at the very top of Donner Summit on Old 40.

39° 18.999N/120° 19.572W

Donner Lake Overlook

This is a wonderful view of Donner Lake, named for the ill-fated Donner Party located just over the Summit on the Rainbow, or Donner Summit Bridge pedestrian walkway. 39° 19.156N/120° 19.118W

Transcontinental Railroad

The Transcontinental Railroad bound the nation together and allowed California to grow. Rainbow Bridge Parking lot.

39° 19.113N/120° 19.115W

Rainbow Bridge

The 1927 Rainbow Bridge is the first bridge built with a curving elevation change, a “grand and compound curve.” Across from the Rainbow Bridge parking lot. 39° 19.138N/120° 19.156W

Petroglyphs

Native Americans crossed the Sierra for thousands of years before the coming of European Americans. They left interesting and mysterious petroglyphs.

Just below Rainbow Bridge on Old 40. There is a brochure about Summit Native Americans at the DSHS.

39 19.056N 120° 19.232W

China Wall

There would have been no transcontinental railroad if it had not been for the Chinese workers. The China Wall was built without mortar by Chinese workers. Just down from Rainbow Bridge on the west side of the road. Walk up to it and look for old tool marks from 1868. 39° 19.048NB/120° 19.226W

Snowsheds

It was thought snow would not be a problem on Donner Summit when the railroad was built. Snow was a problem and soon almost 40 miles of snowsheds protected the tracks from snowfall and avalanche. They also kept passengers from seeing any of the beauty of Donner Summit. This sign sits 4 curves below Rainbow Bridge on Old 40.

You might want to pick up our snowshed brochure at the DSHS in Soda Springs. 39° 19.123N/120° 18.968W

Along Lake Van Norden

The old Lincoln Highway, a dirt road, runs along the edge of Van Norden Meadow. You can access the dirt road from Soda Springs Rd. in Soda Springs. Turn off of Old 40 onto Soda Springs Rd. Just across the RR tracks are dirt parking lots. The Lincoln Highway, now a County road, is just to the left of the dam. It comes out some miles to the east at Sugar Bowl Rd. which is the road off Old 40 just opposite Donner Ski Ranch. You can, of course, start at that end too.

Van Norden Dam

There has been a dam at Lake Van Norden since at least 1874. At one time 5800 acre feet of water was stored behind the dam in a beautiful lake. It was notched in 1976 for safety. 39°19 253N /120°22 653W

Summit Valley Native Americans

Native Americans summered on Donner Summit for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. They left petroglyphs and In Summit Valley they left dozens of grinding rocks and grinding slicks - the most modern kitchen appliances of the time. There is a Native Americans of Donner Summit brochure at the DSHS.

39 19 340N /120 22 26W

Sheep Pens

Lake Van Norden filled each year with snowmelt. Over the summer the water was let out. As the lake receded grass grew and each Fall the meadow was ready for sheep. The sheep pens were the last stop before the sheep boarded the train for their final destination. In the 1940's one family shipped 100,000 sheep out of Soda Springs annually. By the 1970's the

number was only 2,700.
39 18 841N /120 21 281W

Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd.

The Dutch Flat Rd. was built in 1864 to help build the railroad and it became *the* route over Donner Summit. The road carried so much traffic that its imprint is still easily seen in the meadow even though there has been no traffic on it in more than a hundred years.

39 19 008N /120 21 654W

In Truckee:

Barbara Gordon

In 1935 Miss Gordon was the first woman to swim the length of Donner Lake. She was 17 years old. The sign is at the West End Beach.

McIver Dairy

McIver Dairy sat at the Gateway to Truckee and was renowned locally for its dairy products, particularly butter. The dairy produced as much as 60,000 lbs a year. The McIvers donated the land under the hospital and the McIver Arena to Truckee. The sign sits across from the nursery and Gateway Ctr.

Explore all the 20 Mile Museum signs and read the many stories about Donner Summit in our newsletter archives:
www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

Contact the Historical Society at:

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