



Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass Petroglyphs ●

History

California must have been an interesting place in pre-Columbian times. It was the most populated area on the continent and the most diverse ethnically and linguistically. There were nine language families in the Sierra alone.

Native Americans left us a record of their presence in the Donner Summit area: petroglyphs. The pictures to the right are Donner Summit area petroglyphs enhanced in black and white. Similar symbols are found in many places in the northern Sierra Nevada, usually on gently sloping granite slabs.

Just above this sign on the granite slab, you see a collection of petroglyphs. This is an extensive petroglyph site that contains over 200 rock art elements, including a bear track (see top photo). The petroglyphs here are hard to see but fascinating.

Archaeologists estimate that the petroglyphs in this area were made 1500 to 4000 years ago. They were created by pecking through the surface of the glaciated bedrock using a tool called a hammerstone. Most are geometric shapes – wavy lines, circles, and zigzags. Human and animal forms, such as stick figures and deer or bear tracks, are less common. Although no one knows what the petroglyphs mean, many people believe they have a spiritual or ceremonial significance.

Ancestors of the Washo People created these petroglyphs. Like all Great Basin Indians, they were nomadic. The Washo traveled all over the Sierra, and used Donner Pass as a corridor for travel to and from Lake Tahoe. Adapted to life in the Great Basin and the Sierra, they made annual rounds hunting game, gathering and trading food, clothing materials, salt and obsidian. They probably carried dried trout and pine nuts to eat and they would have hunted.

The rock art sites are exposed to the harsh environment of the high Sierra. The natural process of exfoliation (peeling away of layers of rock due to the freezing and expansion of water) is at work on Sierra granite. This leaves the petroglyphs fragile and vulnerable to destruction. To preserve these sacred symbols:

Walk around, not on, the petroglyphs.
Don't make rubbings or tracings—this wears away the rock surface.
Leave rocks, plants and artifacts where they are.
And of course remove your trash.

Someday the petroglyphs will be gone and along with them will go the tangible record of the first visitors to Donner Summit.

There are many good sources for information about the earliest visitors to Donner Summit as well as the rock carvings. A particularly good source is *Ancient Rock Carvings of the Central Sierra* by Willis Gortner. You have to be really lucky to see a copy since it's out of print - but you may run into someone with a copy.



Things to do right here

Walk up to Rainbow Bridge and admire the view.
Hike to the top of Mt. Stephens just north of Rainbow Bridge.
Watch the rock climbers on the different rock walls. The Summit is a destination for rock climbers.
Trace the Lincoln highway and walk the route. It is the road cut you see above. Go up through the underpass and then through the train tunnel - the original Tunnel 6 built in 1867 for the transcontinental railroad.

If you are even more ambitious, go to the Summit and take the first left after the Alpine Skills Institute. Go down to the turn and park. To the left is a trailhead for the Pacific Crest Trail which you can take. Turn-offs will lead you to the tops of Mts. Donner and Judah for spectacular views. From Donner you can look 1000 feet straight down to Donner Lake.

