



Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass Transcontinental Railroad

History

It was a race. The Union and Central Pacific Railroads were crossing the continent with steel rails each trying to build the most miles and so get the most money from the government. The rugged Sierra and its winter climate were challenges. 15 tunnels were needed – each through solid granite, all with black powder, nitroglycerine, and hand labor.

In 1866 the railroad came to Summit Valley. 8,000 Chinese workers and a few whites, toiled on the grading, rail laying, and tunnel building. There were camps up and down the route along with the support needed to maintain them.

The wail of the train whistle comes through Summit Valley many times a day now. Once it was only a dream but America was growing, and people were coming to California, the land of promise. A railroad would encourage migration and enable California's bounty to be shared with the rest of the world. Theodore Judah was sure he could conquer the Sierra and he set to work to lay out the route. He did and the railroad was built overcoming labor shortages, strikes, accidents, floods, geography, fire, and avalanche. When it was done, a ribbon of steel joined the nation.

The completion of the railroad in 1869 meant that for \$140 you could travel from New York to San Francisco in 6 days, 20 hours - much less than the six months it had taken the wagon trains not long before.

A Good Story

The CPRR was so powerful it could even move mountains. In order to get the higher fee for construction of track in the Sierra versus in the flat Central California, the CPRR forced a change in the definition of where the Sierra began. They moved the mountains miles west and closer to Sacramento.

Theodore Judah, having surveyed the local trees, did not think snow would be a problem over Donner Summit. He was sure accumulations would not be much and could easily be pushed out of the way. He was wrong. There were 44 snowstorms the winter of 1866. On the Summit 35 feet of snowfall is average and 60 feet possible. Not long after, there were 40 miles of snowsheds protecting the tracks from snow and preventing passengers from seeing the majestic Summit scenery... but that's a story for another sign.

