

After the First Emigrants

After the first wagon trains reached California emigrants continued to use the passes. During the Gold Rush about 28% of all wagons heading for California used one of the Donner Passes.

Imagine the emigrants' thoughts as they looked down on Summit Valley after crossing the pass (pictured below from Mt. Judah). There was water and feed and they could rest. It would be all downhill to California from there. It wasn't though.

One emigrant, D.B. Wood said, "The western slope of the Sierra is rough beyond description. The mountain breaks off in immense granite ridges from the main summit. Streams heading in near the main divide, plunge down impassable Kanyons...fierce and terrific descents you should not deem it possible for wagons to pass. This rough country continues for 10 miles from the summit."

After the emigrants people, continued to use Donner Pass. It is the route of the railroad, became the route of the Lincoln Highway and later U.S. 40. Today people who want a more leisurely trip take Old 40 instead of the Interstate.

"The view from the crest of the Sierra..., is 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.

Edwin Bryant 1846 What I Saw in California



Even though the crossing was grueling the magnificence of Donner Summit could not be missed by the emigrants.

Roller Pass 1852

About nine o'clock we doubled teams and began the ascent for the summit. While the teams were slowly toiling up the summit, Father, Mr. Buck, Margaret and I climbed one of the highest peaks near the road [Donner Peak] and were well repaid for our trouble by the splendid view. On one side the snow-capped peaks rise in majestic grandeur, on the other they are covered to their summits with pine and fir, while before us in the top of the mountains, apparently an old crater, lies a beautiful lake [Donner lake] in which the Truckee takes its rise.

Eliza McAuley 1852

Summit Valley 1849

It was bitterly cold, but from the almost pointed summit, the grandeur and wild, confused desolation of the prospect was sublime indeed. North, east, and south peak rose beyond peak in endless succession.

Isaac Wistar 1849

Hike to Roller Pass (4 miles RT)

The Roller Pass hike is a fun hike. You have nice views of Summit Valley (below left) as you go up and you find a piece of California history at the top. You also have a great view of Coldstream Valley. Then it's all downhill on the way back.

Pacific Crest Trailhead

Just opposite Donner Ski Ranch is the Sugar Bowl Road. Just down that, past the overpass and Tunnel 6 is Old Donner Summit Rd. Turn left and drive up to the parking area. The trailhead is at the sharp 90° turn just beyond.

Take the Pacific Crest Trail two miles to the saddle between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. Instead of continuing on the PCT along the side of Mt. Lincoln, head further into the saddle, east. You will find markers for the Emigrant Trail. Take a look down the steep incline leading up from Coldstream Valley. They actually took wagons up that! They were a lot tougher in the old days. As wagons waited to be pulled up one at a time, the others camped down below. You can hike down the incline and then back up to see what it was like. Imagine doing it many times as you helped oxen pull the wagons.

In early summer after snow melt, there are lots of wildflowers further along the PCT below Mt. Lincoln. You can return the way you came or at the first fork on the way back, a few hundred yards down the trail, you can turn uphill and go to the spectacular views on Mt. Judah. Then continue down the other side between Donner Pk. and Mt. Judah and go left. The trail will take you back to the PCT trailhead.



THE EMIGRANT TRAIL



OVER DONNER PASS



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