

Old Time Sunday Drive

on Old Hwy 40 Scenic Byway

Rocklin to Donner Pass and Truckee

Think back to Grandma and Grandpa. Think back to the old days when cars had lots of chrome and huge tail fins. Water bags hung from their fronts for the radiators. Burns and Allen or Jack Benny and Rochester were on the radio. There were Burma Shave signs along the roads and lots of billboards. There was plenty of time to read them too because traffic went more slowly. There were roadhouses and fruit markets and meat markets. There were even service stations with real service and air!

Take an old time Sunday drive at slow speed along Old Highway 40 from Rocklin to Truckee.

And be sure to take Grandma and Grandpa!

The route has been set up in “legs” so that you can do any parts you want without having to do the whole. Each “leg” begins and ends at an easy to find location and each could make an interesting trip.

Leg 1: Rocklin to Old Town Auburn and the Auburn courthouse.

Leg 2: Old Town Auburn to Colfax.

Leg 3: Colfax to I-80 at Baxter

Leg 4: Cisco Grove to Donner Summit and Truckee.

GPS coordinates are in (parentheses). Mileage from the start of each leg is in [brackets]. Be sure to pick up the museum list if you are interested in visiting the various historical societies and museums along the route. Their approximate locations are noted with “M’s” on the maps here.

Leg 1: Rocklin to Old Town Auburn

Leave I-80 at Rocklin Rd. which is exit 108 (38 47.260 121 13.323)

Head north to Pacific Ave.[.8 mi] and turn right (38 47.457 121 14.144).

When you turn on Pacific Ave. you are on Old Highway 40. This starts the mileage at 0 for this leg. The route existed prior to 1928 but it was in 1928 that it received its designation as U.S. 40. It remained the main route over the Northern Sierra until the building of Interstate 80 in 1960. In previous incarnations the route, or parts of it, were the Victory Highway, the Lincoln Highway, the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon road, or simply wagon train or commercial routes.

Pacific Ave. will become Taylor and you will stay on it until you almost reach Auburn.

Town of Loomis [3.0 mi] There are restaurants and art galleries in Loomis. Check out the city hall building (38 49.260 121 11.622). Griffith Quarry Historic Park [5.6] (38 51.067 121 09.849)

Just outside Auburn on Taylor Rd. you will come to Newcastle. You can turn off the old highway on to Old State Hwy [7.8 mi.] (38 52.475 121 08.273) just before the 1932 tunnel and drive through downtown Newcastle where you will find a delicatessen, art studios, the Cheese Shop and the Newcastle Packing Shed (small shops). This was the State highway before 1928. Afterwards Newcastle was bypassed.

Back on Taylor Rd. continue through the tunnel and stay on Taylor until it runs into Ophir Rd. and the Lincoln Highway [8.4 mi.] (38 52.753 121 7.575) Turn left on Lincoln Highway (Ophir Rd.).

P.G.& E. Wise Power House [10.2] Continue on The Lincoln Highway/Ophir Rd. which will sweep you on to I-80 just outside Auburn. The old route does not exist for just a short distance.

Immediately after entering the freeway, take the Maple St. exit [11.5]. You can go right immediately where you see the statue of the miner panning gold. In this part of historic downtown Auburn there are shops and restaurants and interesting things to see while walking around.

Leg 2: Old Town Auburn to Colfax

Maple Street is also a good place to start your trip on Old 40 so this will begin Leg 2 with the mileage starting at 0 again at Maple and Lincoln Wy, the Maple St. exit from I-80 where the statue is.

Head up the hill on Maple St. from the Maple St. exit. The historic courthouse (38 53.818 121 04.587) is on the right after you turn right at the corner on to Auburn-Folsom Rd.

It was built in the early 1900's. Inside there is a small free museum on the first floor.

Outside the courthouse note the structure at the Lincoln Way intersection in front of the museum. This used to be a water fountain that could serve two horses at once and sat in the intersection.

From the courthouse, go left at the light, Lincoln Way. Follow Lincoln Way turning left on "High St" which is still Lincoln Way and then in one block bear right at the "Y" at the clock tower. (38. 53.918 121 04.215). You are in modern downtown Auburn with more shops and restaurants.

Follow Lincoln Way to the end of the downtown and it will bear left and run into El Dorado.

Turn right and you will immediately go under the railroad. The old RR station to the right on the other side of the tracks is the current Chamber of Commerce.

Emerging from the underpass on El Dorado, turn left at the signal and continue on Lincoln Way.

Stay on Lincoln Way past the Foresthill Rd. intersection (the signal) and I-80 overpass [2.4 miles from the courthouse]. Here there are fast food restaurants, gas stations, a supermarket, and stores. Two doors west of the Jack in the Box is a California Welcome Center with tourist information at 13411 Lincoln Way (hours: M-S 9:30-4:30, Sunday 11-4:30).

You can turn right at the signal, Foresthill Rd. The road will take you on a nice side trip to Foresthill, Michigan Bluff, Gold Rush town sites and lots of roads for exploring (including the most northern stand of redwoods in the State). Foresthill, 15 miles away, also has a small museum.

Instead of turning at Foresthill Rd., just after the fast food restaurants on Lincoln Way you will pass Lou La Bonte's restaurant which has a collection of historical photographs, and Ikeda's Fruit Stand which has great produce and pies among other things.

Continuing with our route, stay on Lincoln Way until you go left on Bowman Undercross Rd. [3.1]

Go right after the overpass on Bowman Rd. Here you will see Machado's Produce Stand off to the left. [3.3 miles from the courthouse]

As you continue Old 40 meandered back and forth across and along the I-80 route but you will stay on the north side on Bowman Rd.

Turn right at the intersection with Dry Creek Rd. [5.2] (It's Dry Creek going left and Lake Arthur Rd. going right). You will pass Lake Arthur dam, built in 1909.

In Clipper Gap [6.5] just east of Lake Arthur, there is a motor court and gas station from the US 40 era. Just east there is a large two story home which was the superintendent's home when there was a blasting powder factory at Clipper Gap.

Turn right at the next signal. Continue to the Clipper Gap/Placer Hills overpass/exit (exit 125). (38 58.227 121 01.150). At the intersection with Placer Hills Rd., cross the freeway to Applegate Rd. and go left. You will be passing Lake Theodore. You are on

the south side of the freeway.

At Applegate [9.3] look to the left and you'll see a classic bungalow style motel, the Applegate Motel.

At the Heather Glen overpass, exit 129, [11.1] (39 01.134 120 58.986) Old 40 again meandered along the now I-80 route but you will stay south of the freeway on Applegate. Continue until Applegate crosses the freeway and bear right. You will be on Giesendorfer Rd. On the way along Applegate keep your eyes out for the railroad underpass dated 1927.

U.S. 40 continued to meander along the I-80 route here and cannot be followed exactly. The easiest thing to do is continue on Giesendorfer to where it ends at W. Paoli. You will go past the Weimar Institute. [12.4]. (39 2.088 120 58.527)

Go right to go over the freeway and turn left immediately (this is also the W. Paoli Ln. exit 130). Take the first hard left to stay on Paoli Ln. and follow that the very short distance to Ponderosa Way. [12.7] (39 02.118 120 58.347). Go left.

You are now headed for historic Colfax. Ponderosa Way becomes Canyon Wy. Take Canyon Wy. to the Colfax overpass, exit 135 (also highway 174) [17.5 from Auburn or 4.9 from exit 130] (39 05.744 120 56.956) and go left turning right on S. Auburn St. just across the overpass.

Follow South Auburn St. veering left and down the hill to downtown Colfax [18.1].

Colfax is named after the 17th vice president of the United States, Schuyler Colfax. There's a statue in the plaza by the historical society. Enjoy historic downtown Colfax where you will find shops, restaurants, and the Colfax Historical Society/museum in the current train station (39 06.307 120 57.002) across the street from the historic Colfax Hotel.

There are public restrooms at the old train station now called Colfax Junction, which also has shops and a candy store. Colfax Junction is across the street from the the downtown stores.

Leg 3: Colfax (exit 135) to Baxter and I-80

Here we will reset the mileage to 0. Head east on Main St. to Highway 174 and turn left when Main St. dead ends. [.3 miles from downtown Colfax at Main St. and Grass Valley Rd.]

You will now follow Rollins Lake Rd.

Stop and see the Cape Horn Promontory View next to the Red Frog Bar. [0.6 miles from Colfax] Cape Horn is famous because Chinese workers cut the rail bed into an almost perpendicular face. They did not hang by baskets, however, as the sign says.

Stay on Rollins Lake Rd. veering right when Hwy 174 goes left.

If the lake level is down when you get to the Rollins Lake Bridge you may be able to see some cabin floor slabs along old Red Dog Rd. just south of Rollins Lake. You may also see a concrete highway bridge which is usually submerged.

If you want a nice stopping point, stop at Rollins Lake at the Long Ravine Resort. Turn on You Bet Rd. Here there is a store, campgrounds,

picnicking, swimming, boating, duck feeding, etc. for a \$6.50 day use fee.

Stay on Rollins Lake Rd. unless you'd like a side trip along the even older Victory highway route, the Norton Grade Rd. (39 07.263 120 56.835). This is a scenic but curvy 3.8 miles and will bring you back to Old 40 at the Magra Rd. I-80 exit. (39 08.872 120 54.521)

As you continue on Rollins Lake Rd. you will come to an overpass [5.3] (Secret Town Rollins Lake Rd. exit 140) on I-80. Cross the freeway on the overpass and continue on Magra Rd. until you cross the freeway and turn right.

This is Gold Run Rd. [9.3miles from Colfax]

Stay on Gold Run Rd. for .4 miles and then turn left on to Lincoln Rd. [9.7] (39 10.505 120 51.499) Just across the railroad tracks turn right on Lincoln. You cannot follow the oldest part of the route because it runs into private property.

Turn left on Ridge Rd. [11.3] unless you make the side trip to the Monte Vista Inn (.1 mile to the right). The Monte Vista Inn is at the Dutch Flat exit 145 (39 11.410 120 49.893)

Going left at the intersection [11.3] of Gold Run Rd. and Ridge Rd., not going to the Monte Vista Inn, you are heading towards the Dutch Flat turnoff [11.5].

A visit to Dutch Flat [12.6] is worth it to see its historic “downtown,” general store, old hotel, and Golden Drift Historical Society. You can continue through Dutch Flat to get back to the Highway 40 route (2 mile loop) or you can retrace your steps to the turnoff from Ridge Rd.

Back at Ridge Rd. [14.1 from Auburn], however you have gotten back to it (through Dutch Flat or retracing your route), turn left.

Stay on Ridge Rd. (this is the route from 1914-1928) going past Lake Alta and you will run into the freeway (Alta exit 146) but you want to turn left just prior, on Alta Bonnybrook Rd. [14.2]

Alta Bonnybrook Rd. will lead you to Alta and the Sugar Pine Deli [14.5], just over the railroad tracks in Alta. Continue on Alta Bonnybrook. Turn left onto Baxter Rd. [16]. You will come to Baxter which will lead you to the freeway [16.6]. Baxter overpass (exit 148B): (39 12.429 120 48.639)

The Old route 40 meandered along the I-80 route until Cisco Grove. You will stay on the freeway over the hill past Blue Canyon, Nyack, Site of Nyack Lodge – there is a view spot north side of freeway, Laing’s Crossing, Emigrant Gap, the turnoff for Highway 20.

At Eagle Lakes exit you can pull off the freeway. In between the west and eastbound routes, along the river, is a stretch of Old 40. Fishermen and picnickers stop here. Take the dirt road on the south side and take the right turn just up the hill and you will find yourself on the earlier Lincoln Highway. Imagine yourself traveling it in an old Model T. You can follow that up to the railroad tracks but on the other side of the tracks the Lincoln Highway route disappears into private property. The 20 Mile Museum begins at the Eagle Lakes exit with two interpretive signs north of the freeway and around the corner.

On the north side of the freeway is Red Mountain which was an island in the Pacific 65 million years ago. At the top is an old stone house used as a railroad lookout to check for fires in snow tunnels. There is a spectacular 360 degree view but the road up from Indian Springs campground is very steep and rough. The hike is 3 miles but the route goes up 2000 feet.

There is no connection to Cisco on Old 40 so you must get back on the freeway.

Leg 4: Cisco Gove to Donner Summit and Truckee

At Cisco Grove exit the freeway (exit 165), 16 miles from Baxter, and turn left to cross the overpass. We’ll start leg 4 here at 0 miles. Cisco was the end of the line for the railroad while the Summit tunnels were being dug. Behind the Cisco gas station and up the hill was a bustling town. Today there is nothing left. Later, the lower portion of Cisco became a ski center where the Auburn Ski Club was headquartered until I-80 took the land and the club moved to Boreal.

Just over the overpass is Cisco Gould Park which has restrooms.

Turn right on Hampshire Rocks Rd. (Old 40 and Donner Pass Rd) and head to Big Bend (2 miles from Cisco). Just after the turn you will see some stone buildings on the left, the old Forest Gift Shop dating from the 1930’s. The buildings now belong to Placer County. If you look closely on both sides of the road as you go towards Big Bend, you will see the remnants of old building foundations dating from when Highway 40 was the main route. There were inns, gas stations, and restaurants – all gone now.

As you drive along from now on, you will come across more of the 20 Mile Museum interpretive signs.

As you go under east bound lanes of I-80 look to the right along the river and you see the original Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway. At Big Bend there is a ranger station [1.8], small museum, and Lincoln Highway marker. You can take a

nice walk out of Big Bend across from the ranger station. You will walk along the river on the old Lincoln Highway. Look at the old stone houses, the river, the forest, and old bridge abutments

Big Bend was the “bend” in the river where wagon trains rested and one of the first white babies was born (1844). There are rust marks from wagon wheels still on rocks nearby. Later there were inns and a gas station.

Up the road from Big Bend is the Loch Leven Lakes trailhead [1.9]. There are restrooms at this very popular hiking spot.

Rainbow Tavern/Lodge [2.3 miles from Cisco]. Here is good food, a classic 1920's lodge (1927), and historical photographs. (39 18.612 120 30.554)

Stay on Old 40 going east and uphill going left under the freeway and the road becomes Donner Pass Rd. Continue to

Kingvale [5.7 miles from Cisco],

Pla-Vada [6.1], and Soda Springs [9.3].

In Soda Springs [2.4 miles from Kingvale and 9 miles from Cisco] are the Soda Springs Store, Donner Summit Lodge (meals), and the Donner Summit Historical Society (DSHS) [9.5 from Cisco and .8 miles from the Soda Springs exit.]

A side trip from Soda Springs on Soda Springs Rd. will take you to the Ice Lakes Lodge in 2.1 miles. They have rooms and food. Ice harvesting was done on the lakes there for a few years until it was realized that the 35 foot average snowfall made it just too hard. You can read about the history there.

Back on Old 40 leaving Soda Springs, you are going east heading up towards the Summit. Look to the right and admire Van Norden Meadow, the route of the wagon trains and the source of the Yuba River. Native Americans used the valley for thousands of years leaving behind grinding rocks. 11.8 miles from Cisco and 2.3 miles from the DSHS is the Sugar Bowl lookout. The Summit is 12.6 miles from Cisco and 3.3 miles from DSHS.

At the Summit you are at 7039 feet. There are great hiking opportunities here. Pick up information at the Historical Society in Soda Springs. Across from Donner Ski Ranch you can turn right off Old 40 and head in to Sugar Bowl where there is a very good restaurant and refreshments.

At 3.1 miles from DSHS look to the right and see the creative rock sculptures next to the house. (39 19.027 120 19.704)

Continuing over the Summit, admire the view of Donner Lake and head for the visitors' parking at Donner Summit (Rainbow) Bridge [13.1 from Cisco and 3.7 miles from DSHS].

Donner Pass is unique. It is historically the most important quarter square mile in the State. Standing on Donner Pass you see where the Native Americans crossed for thousands of years moving from summer to winter grounds. It's the site of the first wagon train crossing, the Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party in 1844 (led by 80 year old Caleb Greenwood). The peak immediately north of the bridge is named for Elisha Stephens of that party. The remnants of the Donner Party crossed in 1846 and Mt. Donner, immediately south is named for them. The peak immediately east of Stephens is Stewart Peak, named for the George Stewart who wrote so many books** about Donner Summit and Highway 40. The first formal road crossed the Summit here followed by the first transcontinental railroad (Mt. Judah, just north, is named for Theodore Judah who designed the route – and it makes a great hike). The first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway, followed in 1913. There are also a gas pipeline and fiber optic cable that cross the Summit here in modern times.

There is more than the above and the view of Donner Lake. You can see walkable traces of the Lincoln Highway and Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. Note the interpretive signs on the bridge and in the parking lot.

Watch the rock climbers, extreme snowboarders, and lunatics on bungee cords. Look for the historic China Wall [13.3 miles from Cisco and 3.9 miles from DSHS] built by the Chinese workers in 1867 (39 19.052 120 19.226), the Native American petroglyphs, the snowsheds and the original transcontinental railroad tunnel #6. The last four have interpretive signs as does Rainbow Bridge. Hike

across the rock faces looking for petroglyphs which are thousands of years old. Walk up to the China Wall and imagine splitting the rocks and stacking them. See if you can see tool and drill marks.

Continuing on Old 40 you are heading fo Truckee. At 6.1 miles from the DSHS and 15.6 from Cisco is the West End Beach of Donner Lake, a good place for picnicking, boating, swimming, and playing in the playground.

At 9.3 miles from DSHS and 15.8 from Cisco you will come to the Donner State park which has a museum with bookstore, beach, and campground.

Historic Downtown Truckee is 12 miles from DSHS and 21.5 from Cisco. In Truckee you will find all the conveniences of modern life: fast food, supermarkets, restaurants, and shops. In the historic downtown you will also find the visitors' center in the train station and the Truckee Donner Historical Society at the old jail.

At the Bookstore at Hooligan Rock, in the Safeway shopping center on Donner Pass Rd. before you get to downtown Truckee, you will find a fine section of books focused on the Truckee-Donner-Lake Tahoe area.

****Stewart's books:** Ordeal by Hunger (Donner party), Donner Pass, Names on the Land - A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States, The California Trail, Storm, Fire, U.S. 40, Earth Abides, and more.