

Lake Van Norden - Circumambulation

Lake Van Norden is the jewel of the Northern Sierra. It is the source of the South Fork of the Yuba River. It is a nesting spot and way point for migrating fowl. Coyote prowl it and frogs are underfoot. Its geology is interesting. Here, we'll focus on the fascinating history.

People have been crossing Summit Valley for thousands of years. There are old hotel sites (B), an ice harvesting site (A), and cabin sites (E) but nothing of those remain.

There are old roads. On the map the dark blue line is the original Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. built by the railroad. The first dam was built about 1870, rebuilt in 1890, and expanded about 1915, covering that original road. Now uncovered, you can walk it slightly above what, in early spring, are marshy areas.

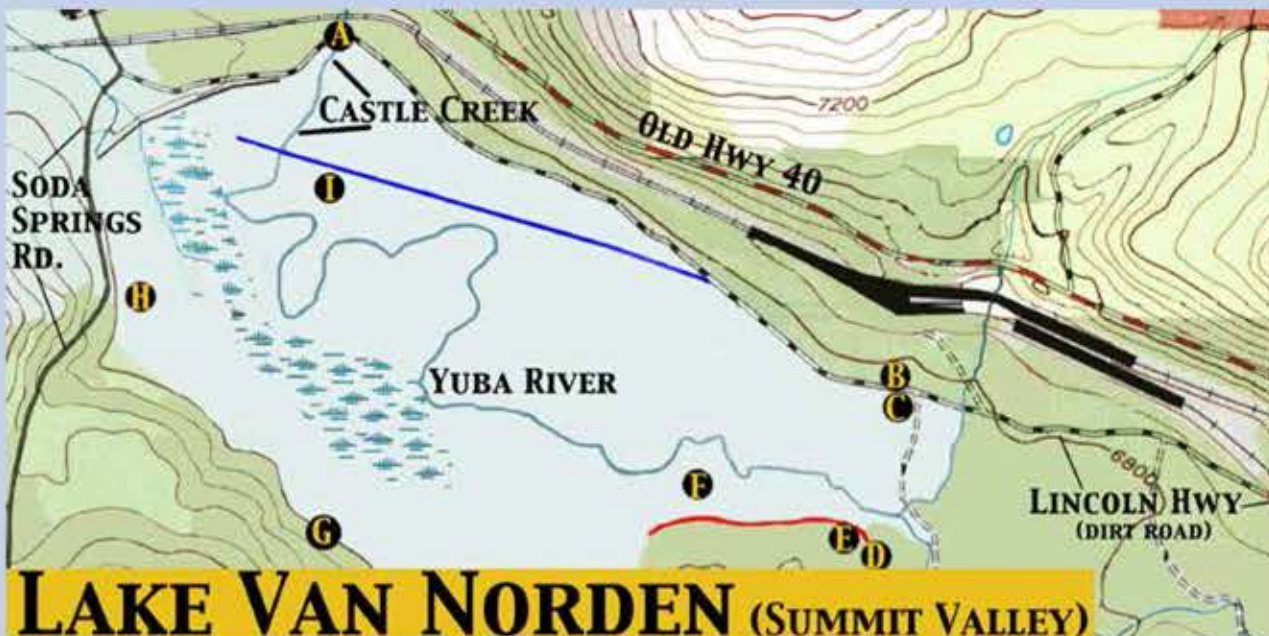
There is an older road remnant on the south side, the red line. The old Emigrant Trail from Roller Pass went that way. Some parts are really well defined. See if you can follow the whole route. Imagine taking your wagon through in 1849, only a few miles left of your 6 month journey! Soon the kids will stop asking, "Are we there yet?"

Of most recent vintage are the sheep pens (C) and old shepherd's shack (D). Soda Springs used to be one of the top sheep shipping centers in the U.S.

What is most interesting are the many, many grinding rocks left by Native Americans (e.g. F, G, H). Looking at any of the dozens and one pauses. For how many generations was that same mortar used? How long does it take to grind such a depression into the solid granite?

Imagine, around the groups of grinding rocks, the women for thousands of years talking and preparing meals. Why are there single grinding holes away from the groups?

This hike is different each time you take it as the water recedes during the summer and Fall. So we have not marked a route. Follow the shore line when you can, otherwise walk outside the tree thickets. Watch for the thousands of frogs in summer and millions of grasshoppers. One good route is to start at the sheep pens, 1.6 miles from Soda Springs Rd. Then head across the valley to the south side and go west. There are two peninsulas (F & H) that would have stuck out into the lake. The eastern one has a couple of grinding rocks, the western one, dozens. Have a picnic with beautiful meadow views right where Native Americans prepared their meals for millennia.



Selected GPS readings for Van Norden	
Sheep pens (C)	39°18.772, 120°21.253
Peninsula w/ 2 mortars (F)	39°18.725, 120°21.673
Rock w/many mortars (G)	39° 18.783 120°22.384
Multiple mortars & metate (I)	39° 19.150, 120°22.345

Peninsula w/ many mortars (H)	39°18.990, 120°22.587
Old Road (red line)	39°18.640, 120°21.668
Old Cabin site (chimney hearth)	39°18.673, 120°21.485

The Catfish Pond & Beyond



Most of the workers on the western end of the transcontinental railroad were Chinese. They lived much healthier lives than the white workers. They bathed regularly, drank tea (the water had been boiled) and their diets were much more varied and healthful.

All along the railroad route are ponds with catfish. Catfish are not natural to Donner Summit. No one knows for sure how they got there but one guess is they were planted by or for the Chinese. (There was fish aquaculture and planting at the time.)

Take some bread on this short hike to Catfish Pond (pictured above) also known as "Maiden's Retreat." You may not see anything when you arrive but if you throw some crumbs in the water swarms of catfish will arrive. If you are feeling energetic, then head off for Lakes Flora and Azalea. They are beautiful little lakes. The trail is well defined and the hike is easy.

Instead of heading for those lakes, head east. There is an Emigrant Trail marker (39 19.294, 120 19.46 - .11 miles) for a possible emigrant wagon route. Scramble over the rocks nearer Old 40 and admire the Junipers that are possibly more than a thousand years old.



Start the hike from Old 40 (park along the road) at an old road just west and downhill from the PCT crossing: 39° 19.030'N 120° 19.696'W. It's 1/2 mi. to the pond.

Catfish Turnoff from main trail:	
	39° 19.352'N 120° 19.456'W
Catfish Pond:	39° 19.354'N 120° 19.404'W
Flora Lake:	39° 19.894'N 120° 19.516'W
Azalea Lake:	39° 20.044'N 120° 19.647'W

Historic Hikes of Donner Summit

The Most Important Square Mile

Donner Summit is the most important historical square mile in California and maybe the entire western U.S.

Native Americans crossed Donner Summit for thousands of years moving from winter to summer quarters and to trade. They left behind the evidence of their passing in petroglyphs, grinding rocks, and other artifacts.

The first wagon trains to reach California with wagons, came over Donner Summit.



The first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, and the first transcontinental telephone line all crossed Donner Summit. The first transcontinental air route crossed over Donner Summit, the route delineated by beacons, signs, and a weather station to aid pilots.

The history of Donner Summit is extraordinarily rich. So we have put together some hikes which will take you through the history, from the Native Americans to the wagon trains and on to the railroad and the early highway.



As you take these hikes you will be walking on history, past petroglyphs thousands of years old, on the old Lincoln Highway, and along the old wagon route.

Front panel: The Coldstream Valley side of Roller Pass with the meadow in which wagons waited their turns at the bottom and Mt. Judah in the background. Roller Pass is the bare spot just above the "o" in Donner.

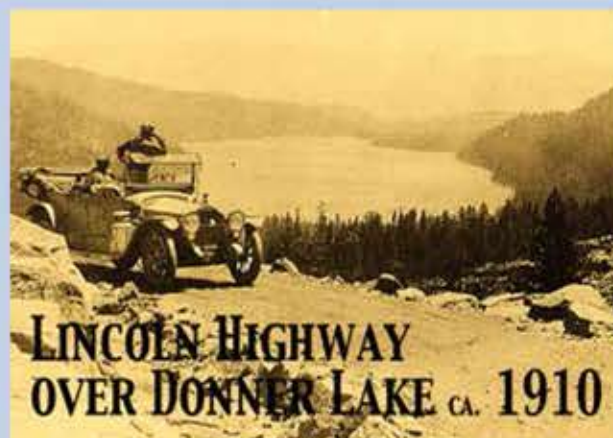
Summit Canyon

Summit Canyon, the area from the top of Donner Pass down to Donner Lake, is the easiest hike and the most fascinating for the historically minded. You will travel along the Old Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway. You will go through the 1914 underpass built so early autos would no longer have to cross the train tracks through the snowsheds and risk collisions. That sits under the route of the first transcontinental railroad. You will go past the 1867 China Wall built without mortar or machinery. Look for tool marks and drill holes. You will pass ads painted on rocks in the early 1900's - Steam Heat at the New Whitney Hotel in Truckee. You will see petroglyphs thousands of years old. Be sure to admire the views on your way to Donner Lake.

This hike is easy. It's 3.5 miles downhill, assuming you place a car at the bottom and start from the top.

Start at the Pacific Crest Trailhead (see "Access" under the "Donner Pass Hikes" on the other side). Instead of taking the trail to the right that goes up, go to the left. That's the old Lincoln Highway.

There is a whole brochure devoted to this hike at the Donner Summit Historical Society in Soda Springs or on the website, www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org



Our publications department gives special thanks to Art Clark for mapping all the routes for us.

