

“The average passenger journeying over the Sierras usually utters a deep sigh of relief -when his train emerges from the snowsheds.”

San Francisco Call October 15, 1905

Stories of the Snowsheds on Donner Summit



Telescoping Snowsheds

The snowsheds could act as chimneys with the drafts spreading fire with tremendous speed. To give the fire trains time to get to the fires before miles of sheds were destroyed telescoping snowsheds were developed. The picture above is a postcard from 1910 showing a telescoping snowshed near Lakeview, just a bit east of Donner Summit.

Circus Animals Escape

In May, 1904 a circus train was traveling over Donner when some of the circus wagons came loose and fell off the railcars in a snowshed just past Donner Summit. A railroad worker, walking home through the sheds was shocked to see a tiger and he ran for his life. A posse captured the tiger and a couple of lions “meandering about in the snow for some hours, disconsolately”. A snake charmer was called in to coax a boa constrictor from the rafters. Monkeys scampered about in the branches of nearby trees for months after.

Recycled Snowsheds

The snowsheds were built out of two inch thick planks. When the wooden sheds were replaced by cement sheds, locals took the discarded wood and used it as building material. There are some beautiful houses on Donner Summit that incorporate snowshed timbers.

Mole People of Donner Summit

In Winter on Donner Summit people moved from building to building from home to work, and kids even went to school, by traveling through the snowsheds. There was even a restaurant in the snowsheds. In the picture below the entrance to the Summit Hotel can be seen through the snowsheds. One newspaper called the residents the Mole People of Donner Summit.



Hunting Icicles

In Winter and Spring melting snow caused continual dripping through the shed roofs. At night that dripping water would freeze forming large icicles that could damage train cars. Railroad personnel traveled the sheds with shotguns to blow away the icicles.

Cover panel, Snowsheds under construction. The first sheds had peaked roofs but snow pressed unevenly causing collapse. Designs were changed which then called for hundreds of snow shovelers to keep the new flat roofs from collapsing.



GREAT FIRE IN THE SNOW SHEDS. The Cisco Railroad Hotel Burnt Down.

Cisco, June 29th. — [T]o-day a fire broke out in the snow sheds completely destroying the Cisco Hotel, Western Union Telegraph Office and a number of other buildings, together with about three-quarters of a mile of snow sheds... The telegraph wires ... were completely destroyed. ... The fire spread so rapidly that there was very little property saved, the operators not having time to save the telegraph instruments. The track is badly damaged the whole distance. The up-train was detained eight hours in consequence... The fire was caused by a spark from a passing locomotive.

Daily Alta California June 30, 1871



Pictured in this panel, snowsheds at Summit Station

