

THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY

THROUGH
DONNER PASS

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HIGHWAY

“I don’t believe I have adequate words to describe the real beauty of Donner Pass. As we stood looking down I had a floating sensation...I lost all fear as I looked at one of the most beautiful blue lakes [Donner Lake] I had ever seen. Everything below us seemed suspended in shimmering light.”

Thornton Round, 1914
while on his transcontinental auto trip



As soon as there were “automobilists” in the very late 19th century, there were “transcontinentalists” who wanted to push their automobiles beyond the confines of cities. They wanted to travel the country and across America.

Almost as soon as automobiles were invented, autoists attempted to cross the country in them. What could be a better test of the automobile and, given the nature of roads in those days, drivers? The first attempts were in 1899 and 1901. The first successful trips were in 1903, and in 1908, the first average family made the whole cross country trip.

There are only a few routes that go completely across the country. One of those is through Donner Pass, along what would become the Lincoln Highway, a “continuous improved highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, open to ...all...,without toll charges....” In 1913 stretches of road across America were cobbled together into the Lincoln Highway, the first national monument to Abraham Lincoln. One of the cobbled routes was the road over Donner Summit and through Donner Pass down to Donner Lake. The Lincoln Highway improved travel with its modern construction

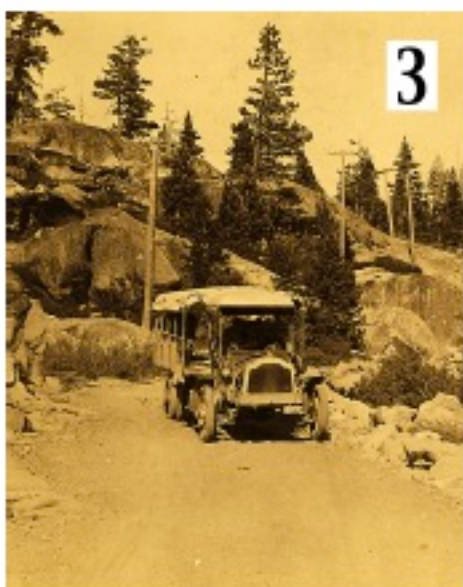


standards, but it was still a rigorous experience.

Crossing Donner Pass the road was narrow and steep. Drivers could only travel the route in summer and early fall because of the snow. They had to cross the railroad tracks through the snowsheds. Some autos didn't make it unscathed across the tracks. Then one of the first automobile underpasses was constructed to prevent accidents.

Imagine having to avoid stagecoaches and their frightened horses and then, sitting at the top gazing all the way down 1000 feet to Donner Lake. It required pressing for all a driver was worth on the inadequate brakes to navigate safely around the curves heading down to the lake.

Despite the designation of the Lincoln Highway, roads



were poor or non-existent and travelers carried all kinds of things we don't today: ropes, axes, revolvers, shovels, and blocks and tackle. The advice was not something we can relate to either. For example, motorists were

advised not to drive through water until someone had waded in to see how deep it was. Cars were very basic too. When it rained passengers got wet and when it was hot they roasted. When it was cold they froze and frequently the autos broke down.

The Lincoln Highway's design was for an average speed of 35 miles per hour for automobiles and 10 miles an hour for motor trucks. Travelers' advice said though, "The usual pleasure party...can make the trip [cross country] in twenty to thirty days with ease, driving approximately ... 18 miles per hour ... as an average." Of course that was way faster than some alternatives, and what independence you had with the wind whistling through your hair.

Today there are stretches of the Old Lincoln Highway on Donner Summit that you can drive or walk.



Donner Summit 1915

Official Guide to the Lincoln Highway:

Summit Pop. 50 Placer County. Two hotels, accommodations for 90. Summit House, \$2.00, Amer.; Soda Springs Hotel, \$2.00, Amer. Gas .30; Oil, \$1.00. Route marked through village and country. Extensive road improvement planned for 1915. Good detour road without mileage increase over L.H. One R.R., 1 general business place, 1 Exp. Co., telegraph. Donner Party monument on north shore Donner Lake

added in 1924: Good camping and fishing.
Unsurpassed scenery. Graded gravel

The best walking section is from the top of Donner Pass down to Donner Lake. As you walk, look closely for old advertisements painted on the rocks. You will find "Steam Heat" at the "Whitney Hotel" and a number of "Tamrak" signs for an inn at Donner Lake in those days.

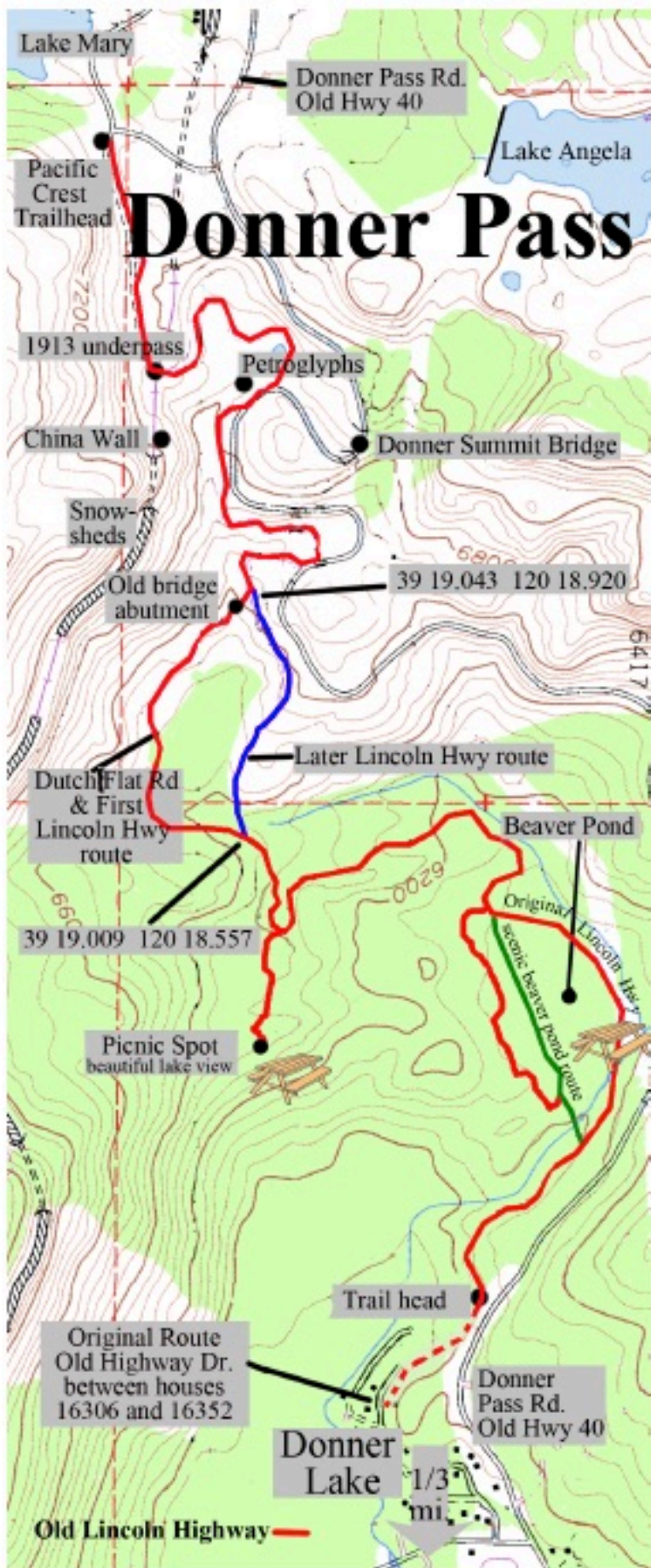


1924 Official Advice Traveling the Lincoln Highway

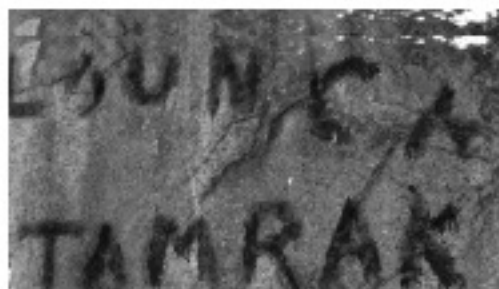
- Don't wait until your gasoline is almost gone before filling up. There might be a delay, or it might not be obtainable at the next point you figured on.
- Don't allow your canteen... to be other than full of fresh water.
- Don't carry loaded firearms in the car.
- Don't forget the colored goggles [sunglasses].
- Don't ford water without first wading through it.
- Don't drink alkali water.
- Don't wear new shoes.

Donner Lake from the Summit, Calif.





You can walk the old Lincoln Highway route from Donner Summit to Donner Lake. Leave a car at the lower end and start at the Pacific Crest trailhead on the Summit. It's 3.5 miles all downhill.



Photographs:

1. Auto on the Lincoln Highway above Donner Lake.
2. Summit House hotel which sat opposite what is now Donner Ski Ranch which is at the top of Donner Pass.
3. Automobile on the Lincoln Highway.
4. Part of a military convoy ("Maxwell Military Express"). The first military convoy on the Lincoln Highway was in 1919 and included Lt. Eisenhower. The convoy averaged only 53 miles a day and it was that bad experience that helped lead Eisenhower to propose the interstate highway system. The underpass may be the first automobile underpass in the U.S. It saved autos from having to cross the tracks through the train sheds which led to accidents.
5. Donner Lake Camp at the lower end of Donner Pass.
6. 1918 postcard showing the Lincoln Highway. Note the lack of trees.
7. An ad which can still be seen today for Tamrak Lodge on Donner Lake.
8. 1913 newspaper headline.
- 9 & 10. An auto trying to traverse Donner Pass before complete snowmelt.

**BETTER
HIGHWAYS**

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LINCOLN HIGHWAY IS WONDER

**Ocean-to-Ocean Road Is No Longer an
Unrealized Dream—Specifications
Not Decided.**



Hurry Up and Melt!

The 34 foot average snowfall on Donner Summit made travel on the Lincoln Highway impossible for months of the year.

Each year the business interests in Truckee and Lake Tahoe were anxious for the road to open and tourists to come. The Tahoe Tavern in Tahoe City ran an annual contest rewarding the first driver over the summit. It was not easy for travelers early in the year.

Sometimes the town of Truckee would send snow shovellers to the summit to speed things along and at least once they spread coal dust on the snow to hurry melting.

The highway route was changed permanently to a more sunny location as well. The blue line on the map to the left shows the more sunny route.

