



Donner Summit Historical Society

October, 2010 issue #26

*Newsletter*

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# Something Different Part II

**Where Is This?**

**It's Historic & It's on Donner Summit**



You will remember that for our last month's issue, our editorial staff decided to do something a little different. We went to the archives and selected interesting pictures for the newsletter. We didn't have room for all the pictures so that set the stage for this month's issue. We still didn't get everything in that was planned but there are always future issues. This month's issue is a little different too, starting with the picture above. It's historical. It's on Donner Summit. What is it? Where is it? To have seen it you have to walk off the roads and pay attention to details. It's not a trick by taking really small detail. The picture above is some feet wide and tall in real life. See page 10 after you give up.

# DSHS News

## Letter to the Editor

Today on my ride from Cisco to Serene Lakes I saw along the way very cool interpretive signs. Each sign dealt with the history of the area around the location of the sign. Curious, I stopped in at the 20 Mile Museum right at the junction for the Soda Springs ski area. I had a cappuccino at the museum and enjoyed talking to the two men responsible for this project. It's purpose is to educate people about the history of the area and hopefully attract more people to take the Historic Route 40 and bring more customers to the businesses along the route. Oh, I also saw a bald eagle soaring over Serene Lake. I was told that it's been hanging out there all summer. On the ride back to Cisco, I had a few raindrops which sweetened the air for a refreshing downhill run. I hope everyone who rides up old 40 will stop in for a cappuccino and take in the history displayed in the museum.

jerry henderson

## 20 Mile Museum - Our Experiment Needs Improvement

The letter to the left is just one of the many comments people have made about our 20 Mile Museum, the 26 interpretive signs placed so far along Highway 40. You can see the signs on our web page if you have not had time to see each one personally: <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20milemuseum.html>. It's particularly nice to see families stopping by the roadside to read and enjoy the signs.

We hope you are as happy as we are with the project.

We were experimenting. We'd never done something like that before. As the summer progressed we saw that despite the recommended UV shields, the ink in many of the signs just did not stand up to our Sierra sun.

Doing some further research we were connected to a company that can print signs with ten year guarantees using a better twelve ink process. Their signs are used in many National and state parks as well as in other outdoor locations. Their sample is absolutely vivid and the ten year guarantee is very attractive.

We will be reprinting our first year's crop of signs. Most will be reprinted this winter and others next summer because they are still functional.

Reprinting the signs on one piece plastic, enabling us to dispense with the UV covering and the attendant condensation will cost us \$192.00 each. So we are looking for a little help to pay for the replacement signs.

If you'd like to help, you can send a check to our PO box 1 Norden CA 95724. Please note on your check that you are directing this to our 20 Mile signs.

Thanks for the help.

## Thanks Ed Bubnis

Ed Bubnis welded and painted the most beautiful caps to put on our 20 Mile Museum sign receptacles when the signs are pulled from the ground for Winter storage. They are gorgeous.

## History Rendezvous

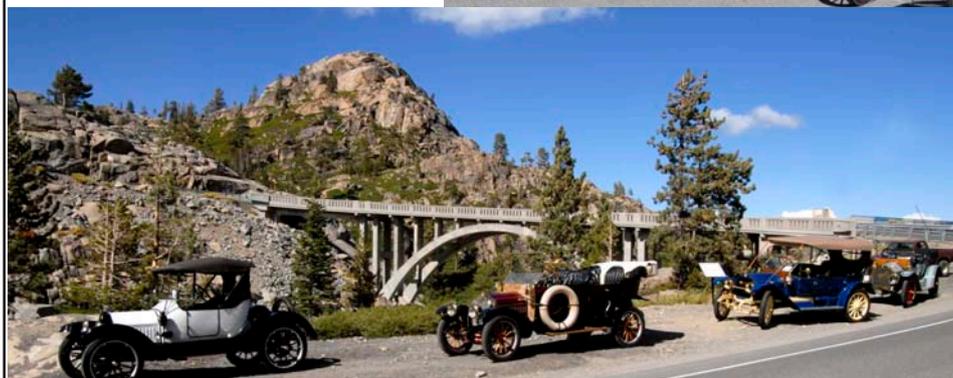
A brilliant idea. It may be that we've come up with a signature annual event for the Donner Summit Historical Society - a history rendezvous celebrating the rich history of Donner Summit. We envision "encampments" of old cars, trappers, wagon trains, historical societies, and old trucks. There would be refreshment booths, maybe manned by local restaurants and arts and crafts booths. During the multi-day event we'd celebrate next year's crop of Summit Pioneers.

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If you have some ideas, contacts to old car/truck/motorcycle clubs, or contacts to arts and crafts groups, let us know. If you'd like to help work on this positive family oriented event, let us know. The email address below is a good connection.

# Not Really DSHS but historic anyway

On September 20 the Horseless Carriage Club of Nevada hosted their Silver State Tour. Vintage, pre 1916 automobiles assembled at the Hampton Inn in Truckee and then headed up Old Highway 40 to Rainbow Bridge. About thirty automobiles made the journey and populated the scenic overlook just like the old days. Participants heard a talk about the transcontinental railroad and provided an addition to the scenic spot.



# Lincoln Highway Trip

As you know the Lincoln Highway (you can read about it in our December, 08 edition) was the first transcontinental highway and as such it crossed Donner Summit.

The Lincoln Highway Association is a national organization dedicated to commemorating the old highway, the first national memorial to President Lincoln.

The California chapter hosts a number of tours of different sections of the Lincoln Highway. The August tour started in Sacramento and followed the various sections of the highway up to Donner Summit and down to Verdi. It was a long but interesting trip. That trip covered the northern route. Other tours cover the southern route (highway 50 area) and Central Valley portions. You can look for information at <http://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/ca/tours>.

The last tour this season is October 30 and covers the Central Valley.



One of our stops was at the Nyack Lodge which in addition to a Burger King and gas station included a small display of historical pictures which includes the stranded City of San Francisco (see our 11/08 edition), and gas station paraphernalia. It's worth a quick stop the next time you're passing by on I-80. On this page are pictures of their cigar store indian, an old Kendall Oil sign, and a picture of chaining up on Donner Summit. You will have to guess the vintage of the chaining up picture.

A few stops later was Big Bend where you can walk along the Lincoln Highway (see the next page), see a Lincoln Highway monument and see a display in the Big Bend museum. We also stopped along the river and viewed one of the new DSHS 20 Mile Museum signs which marks the Lincoln Highway.

We stopped too at Donner Summit at the Historical Society museum before moving on to Tunnel 6 which we drove through. On the other side we explored the old

Lincoln Highway route and the 1913 underpass.

We also learned interesting facts like did you know how the Lou La Bonte restaurant in Auburn got its name? Lou La Bonte was a musical arranger in Hollywood until he got burned out in the 1950's. He came north and opened the restaurant. The restaurant was originally in Weimar. You can check out their menu on the web and stop in to see their display of old pictures.





There was great speed on the Lincoln highway – 45 mph in a Model A and maybe 25 in a model T. There were lots of accidents. People not used to the high speeds.

At Big Bend you can view an exhibit about the Lincoln Highway in the ranger station. Across the street there is a Lincoln Highway sign, but keep going behind the garage. There is a Lincoln Highway marker and a stretch of the Lincoln Highway you can walk and from which these pictures were taken. Here is an example of going slowly. We miss a lot on I-80 but even taking Old 40 would miss this nice section of the original highway unless you actually stop and go walking.

## Along the Lincoln Highway at Big Bend



Another section of the Lincoln Highway is at Big Bend too. Cross the street from the ranger station and head west just a little ways to the dirt road that goes to the left. It's the only dirt road there. You can follow that road past old stone cabins and along



the river. You can go a half mile or so until you get to the I-80 overpass. There are nice spots along there for picnics and there are old bridge abutments to find. You can see stone supporting work for the old roads.

Take a walk along the Lincoln Highway.

# China Wall

“They were a great army laying siege to Nature in her strongest citadel.”

Beyond the Mississippi 1869

Building the Transcontinental Railroad across the Sierra was an amazing feat. Everyone just accepts that but consider the trials. The mountains are high and the weather is extreme. Consider trying to find a route, not just pieces, where the entire run will have not more than 3% grades. Imagine plotting a route through and around mountain peaks. Laying out the route through the geography was a huge challenge. That was not the end however. They had to find financing. They had to find labor. They had to fight rock slides and avalanche, freezing weather, storms, huge falls of snow (35 feet or so in a season at the Summit), desert, and fire. The workers had to face black powder and nitroglycerine. They had to face isolation, accident and sometimes a lack of food. The Asian workers had to face racism. They were prey for white thieves and riots aimed at evicting them. Then there was the race between the two railroads, one heading east and one heading west. The prize was more miles laid and so, more money from the Federal Government.

Tunnel after tunnel (15 total) went through the Sierra mountains and then they built more tunnels to shelter the line from the snow. We see the tunnels and we can see the trestles bridging the canyons and rivers. But there was also the opposite – the filling in of low spots.

Traveling Old Highway 40 over the Summit we can see the old highway, snow tunnels, the railroad, climbing rocks, famous peaks, Rainbow Bridge, the petroglyphs, and the Pass. Almost ignored is the wall off to the south, just before the string of snowsheds, China Wall.

As they dug and blasted the Summit Tunnel 6 (an article just waiting to emerge from our Historical Society’s research computers) they carried the rubble to the ravine just east. There they filled and fitted a dry fill (no mortar) rock retaining wall.

I’ve driven past it innumerable times and walked atop it a few times. Then one day I thought I’d pay attention to the details. If you walk up from Old 40 take a look at how beautifully the rocks are laid together. Look at the tool marks from pry bars and star drills. The color is beautiful too, especially if you admire the wall after a rain which saturates the colors. Then contrast that 1867 China Wall with the modern concrete/gunite wall at the start of the snowshed above and just a bit east. There’s beauty in China Wall as the pictures here show.

Go up and take a look. China Wall is the subject of one of our 20 Mile Museum signs (<http://www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20milemuseum.html>).

Chinese workers worked six days a week, 52 weeks a year. There were more



above and bottom right next page are some of the many tool marks you can find on the rocks of China Wall. Bottom left next page is a drill hole that was never filled with black powder.



than 8000 of them and without them, the railroad would not have been built.

They endured avalanches, blasting accidents, rock slides, blizzards, icy cold, exhaustion, and prejudice. Ironically, it was first thought Chinese workers would not be acceptable. They were too small of course. Leland Stanford supposedly said though, “They built the Great Wall” didn’t they?

In the Sierra, they built a great railroad.

All along the railroad there were temporary Chinese camps and even today Chinese artifacts can be found at some locations. The Whites took care of themselves individually but the Chinese divided themselves into groups hiring one man in each group to be a cook. The Chinese suffered less from disease than the whites, perhaps because they included baths regularly and they drank their water as tea after boiling.



“I wish to call to your minds that the early completion of this railroad we have built has been in large measure due to that poor, despised class of laborers called the Chinese, to the fidelity and industry they have shown.”



Judge E.B. Crocker



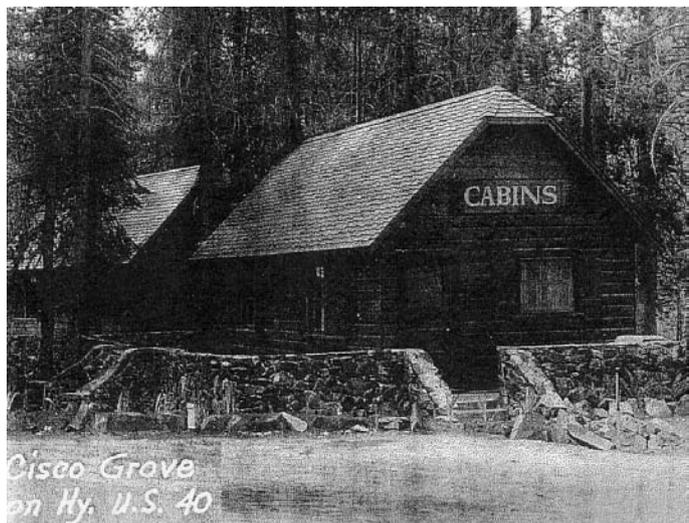
# Interesting Pictures Part II



The picture above, "waiting for train" is from Ingrid Wicken who runs the California Ski Library in Southern California. It's captioned, "Sierra Club members awaiting Southern Pacific train two miles west Soda Springs, February 11, 1934 after three days skiing trip." In the old days you could flag the train and it would stop if there was time in its schedule.



The Shell truck picture and the two pictures of Cisco Grove were donated by Starr Walton Hurley. The Shell truck is in Soda Springs across the street from the current store. You can guess where the other two pictures were taken.



The "rocket" in the picture here is from a movie filmed at Sugar Bowl in 1939 just as the resort's construction was being completed.

Red Rockholm (see our 11/09 edition for Red's Story and the building of Sugar Bowl) says the pictured vehicles were part of a "movie sequence, 'Ski Birds', 'Batman', 'Men from Mars' or something of that nature (page 4 of Red's Story on file at the DSHS). The purpose of which was to publicize the new resort and add emphasis to the promotion effort.



The men from Hollywood "were unused to this cold and deep snow but...they enjoyed the merriment at Dennis's bar there at Soda Spring [sic] Hotel.....

"The camera and equipment was stored in a little makeshift shelter of sticks and pine boughs at the location site, and had to be thawed out each morning." Red said some pictures existed of skiers coming "off rock overhangs with arm [sic] outstretched displaying a black sheath attached from neck to the wrists ...Also men riding a bicycle frame mounted with short skis coming down the hill – a real hospital filler. Finally a few good skiers ...squeezed into those torpedo shaped stainless steel shells [above] with small windows in front and raced down the mountain." It was impossible to slow those "contraptions" down and "It was a miracle that we didn't have to use tin shears to get those fellows out after a few roll overs.

Hannes Schroll, who was always in vehicle number one and who was remaining sober during the entire filming, "had visions of setting a record ...using one of these outfits." To prevent that from happening, "we wrapped the torpedo helmets in canvas for secrecy and packed all the gear back to the highway thus ended the first movie to be filmed at Sugar Bowl."

Of course that was not the first movie to have been filmed at Sugar Bowl. Charlie Chaplin's Gold Rush was filmed there earlier.

Maybe someone wants to ferret out the actual title. An added clue is that Red signed on with the Pete Smith special gang making the movie.



## Answer to page 1's query:

The picture is looking up at the ceiling of the 1913 underpass on the Lincoln Highway

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# Gateway to California

You have seen the underpass, pictured right, just east of the Summit train tunnel as you travel Old 40 over the Summit and down to Truckee. It is an historic structure, being possibly the first underpass for automobiles dug under an operating railroad. It was completed in 1913 and can be considered a “gateway to California.” How many emigrants from the east traveled through it looking for the opportunities that California offered? The picture below shows the underpass as it appeared not long after its construction. Note the snowshed on top.



Before the underpass it was a dicey proposition to cross the railroad.

### How to cross the railroad on Donner Summit prior to 1913:

Drive up in a model T or something fancier.

The tracks are covered by a snowshed

Open the barn door on one side.

You are on the down slope from the Summit for trains going east – they’re going faster in this direction.

Look for trains east and west.

Walk across the tracks.

Open the barn door on the other side.

Check for trains again before re-crossing the tracks.

If there are no trains coming,

Crank the motor on your car.

It’s running.

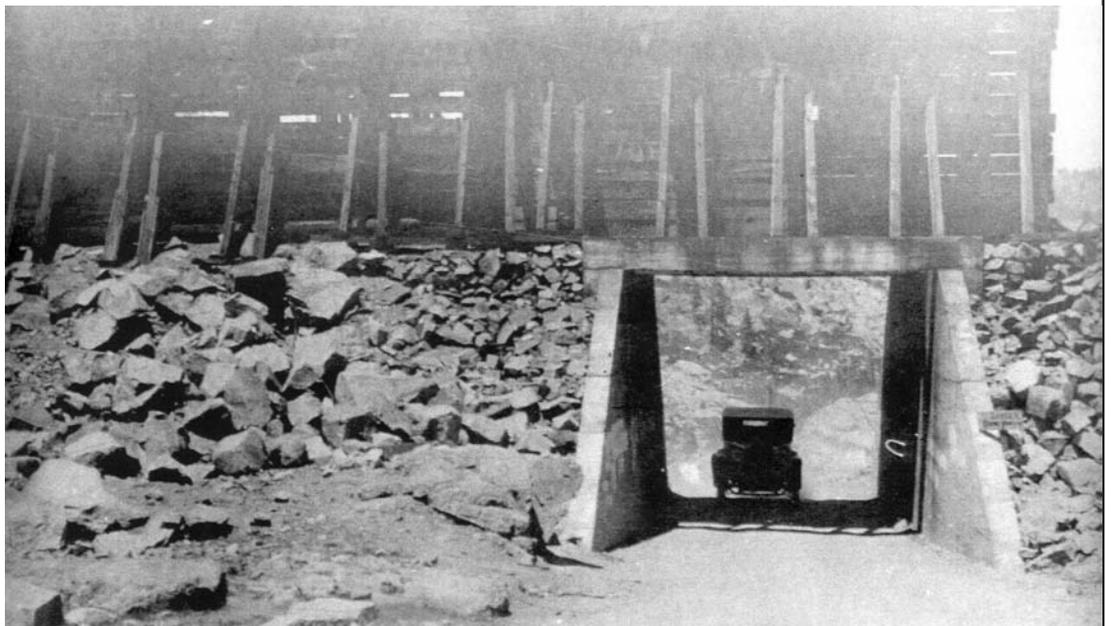
Run around to the driver’s seat and hop in.

Over the noise of the auto engine you can’t hear approaching trains that are gaining speed downhill.

There were a lot of accidents at the crossing.  
In 1913 the State built the undercrossing - maybe the first one in the nation built under an existing railroad track.

Another first for Donner Summit.

It was widened the next year.



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

[www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org](http://www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org)

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(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

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More under the 1913 underpass. Again this is some feet wide and tall. Yes the colors were enhanced a bit.

**Help the 20 Mile Museum replace our graphics with 10 year  
guaranteed vivid signs - a better solution (see page 2).**

**P.O. 1 Norden CA 95724**