

Thomas Stevens, 1884
First by Bicycle across the Sierra
First by Bicycle across the country
First by Bicycle around the world

Bicyclists have found the Donner Summit-Truckee area. Any good day will find people bicycling from Truckee to Tahoe City, going out to circumnavigate Lake Tahoe, ride around Donner Lake, or travel over the summit to Cisco and back.

Today's bicyclists follow in the tracks of early bicyclists, the most amazing of whom was Thomas Stevens.

Stevens had never ridden a bicycle when he decided in 1884 it would be a good idea to ride across the Sierra, across the continent and then around the world. The bicycle was a 48 pound Columbia Ordinary, "high wheeler" or "penny farthing" – one of those bicycles with the large front wheel and small back wheel. It cost \$110.00, had wooden wheels and solid rubber tires. Some people called those bicycles "bone-crushers." There were no gears – the bicycles were "direct drive." Stevens only carried just a extra socks, a shirt, bedroll, pistol, and a gossamer rubber coat he could use as a tent.

Stevens solved his lack of experience with a short lesson in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. He started off on his trip in April, not realizing there would still be snow on Donner Summit, and by the time he reached Rocklin people were asking how he would deal with it. Stevens thought, "...the long snow-sheds of the Central Pacific Railway make it possible for one to cross over, no matter how deep the snow..."

On the way up to the summit Stevens stuck mostly to the path that paralleled the railroad track. The path was "occasionally rideable" whereas the roads were not. A railroad employee tried to dissuade Stevens and the streets in Dutch Flat were streams with water pouring "in torrents" but Stevens kept on.

The next day Stevens began to travel through the snowsheds, "built at great expense to protect the track from the vast quantities of snow..." "The section-houses, the water tanks, stations, and everything along here are all under the gloomy but friendly shelter of the great protecting sheds."

Riding through the snowheds was not an option. He had to "trudge merrily along..." Occasionally there were short breaks in the sheds and then he could trace the "sinuous structure" of the sheds as they wound their "tortuous way around the rugged mountains sides, and through the gloomy pine forest, all but buried under the snow." He imagined the snowsheds were "some wonderful relic of a past civilization, when a venturesome race of men thus dared to invade these vast wintry solitudes and burrow their way through the deep snow, like moles burrowing through the loose earth." There were no living things around. He heard only the "occasional roar of a distant snow-slide, and the mournful sighing of the breeze as it plays a weird, melancholy dirge through the gently swaying branches..."

Traveling through the snowsheds was anything but "pleasant going" as he traveled the "gloomy interior" that was both "dark and smoky." When he heard a train he'd "proceed to occupy as small an amount of space as possible against the side, and wait for the "smoke-emitting monsters" to pass. The engines "fill every nook and corner of the tunnel with dense smoke, which creates a darkness by the side of which the natural darkness of the tunnel is daylight in comparison. Here is a darkness that can be felt ; I have to grope my way forward, inch by inch ; afraid to set my foot down until I have felt the place, for fear of blundering into a culvert..." "I pause every few steps to listen" for an approaching train.

When he emerged from the sheds he climbed a pine tree to "obtain a view of Donner Lake, called the 'Gem of the Sierras.'"

Then it was down the Truckee, a "rapid, rollicking stream" along which were dams and mill sites without limit. There was little rideable road down to Truckee but Stevens eventually found good road at Verdi.

After the Sierra it was on to the 40 Mile Desert in Nevada. In Reno "the characteristic whiskey-straight hospitality of the Far West at once asserts itself" and he stopped for a few days to "paint Reno red."

On August 4, 1884 Stevens completed his cross-country jaunt. He had gone 3,700 miles in 103 days. Then it was off to conquer the world. He sailed into San Francisco in January, 1887 completing 13,500 miles of bicycling and walking (he walked about a third of the journey). On the way he'd had to confront a mountain lion, deserts, lack of roads, 130 degree Indian heat, inability to communicate in foreign lands, loneliness and almost being stoned to death. He had to dissuade highwaymen and he had to cross Afghanistan (where he was arrested as a spy and ended up having to take a steamer to India). He lost 25 pounds from his 5' 5" frame on the journey.

After his ride around the world Stevens did more traveling even going to look for Henry Stanley (of "Dr. Livingstone I presume" fame) but that's a different story.

Sidebar or drop quote

Stevens didn't have a train schedule so he had to make do when a train passed. Once he was crossing a trestle when a train approached. "He had to get out on a rail and hang his bicycle over the precipice as the train passed."