

Snowsheds – Other Uses

Snowsheds were and are not just used to snow protection for trains. Today they are “canvases” for graffiti artists both inside and out, host amazing ice sculptures in winter, provide interesting and different walking routes, and are mountain bike routes. One can start on Donner Summit at Tunnel 6 and walk or bike east all the way to Coldstream Canyon where the actual tracks and trains are. Since railroad routes have easy grades, walking or biking either way is easy.

That’s today though. In the old days snowsheds were not just used by trains. Thomas Stevens decided he wanted to bicycle around the world in 1884. The first part of that challenge was the Sierra in the spring. As he approached the mountains people who knew better began to ask him how he would navigate the snow. He replied, “snowsheds” and he walked through the snowsheds to get over the summit. There was little room for him since snow blew in through the cracks in the boards and took up space. Travel in the sheds was gloomy, dark and smoky. Naturally he encountered trains and when he did, he would “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 ; [sic] 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.

In 1895 the Wilson Family returned to San Francisco on a steamer after having biked to Los Angeles. They found that the railroad was on strike so they took a steamer to Sacramento and there hopped on their bikes for the trip over the Sierra to Reno where Nathaniel Wilson was a professor. Their three-year-old rode on Dad’s handlebars “without a murmur.” The family also used the snowsheds when they ran into snow but had a better experience than Mr. Stevens had. There were no trains to worry about since there was a strike and “The temperature in the sheds was a delightful change from that prevailing outside.” They had just traveled up the Sierra from Sacramento in July, the hottest time of the year. The family alternated walking and riding between the rails and on the narrow path to the side. They got to drink the “finest, purest water on earth” as it trickled down in the tunnels between the sheds. Then they came upon a cook car and got some “railroad pie.” They did hear a rumble coming at them in the dark and just got off the track to avoid a hand car as it flashed by.

In 1903 George Wyman had a dream to cross the Sierra on his motor-bicycle. He also did not think of snow when he started out in the spring also from San Francisco. He met the snow and went into the snowsheds. In spring the sheds are covered still with snow which is beginning to melt and Wyman discovered that the sheds were dripping and gloomy. He said the sheds were still covered with 15 feet of snow. He pushed his motor-bicycle through miles of sheds.

Merchants were in a rush each year for the snow to melt and the roads to open. The Tahoe Tavern held an annual contest for a few years awarding a silver cup to the first auto to cross Donner Summit and get to Lake Tahoe. In 1911 Arthur Foote decided he wanted the cup and with some friends, started from Nevada City in his Model T in June. It must have been a horrid trip since at one point they covered only 23 miles in seven days, but that included a trip back to Nevada City for some business.

After crossing the summit Foote and friends were confronted with the drop to Donner Lake. The road was buried under drifts of snow. They realized they’d never be able to keep the car from tumbling down the steep slopes but the adjacent snowshed’s roof was free of snow. They used their block and tackle to hoist the car to the roof and then rode three miles downhill on the snowshed roofs. When they got to usable road they used the block and tackle again to lower the car off the snowshed roof.

Amanda Preuss set a record driving across the country in the summer of 1916. She too used the snowsheds, “Passing over the Sierras, I negotiated three snow-sheds, the last one at the summit, over 7,000 feet above the sea. Coming out of this shed, the road drops 1,800 feet in less than a mile, curving wickedly toward Donner Lake, in the heart of the mountains, Thanks to the car, I negotiated it safely.”

In Automobile Magazine dated May 25, 1916 there is an article about a record transcontinental automobile trip set by Robert Hammond. He bested the old record of 7 days, 11 hours, 52 minutes by going 3485 miles in 6 days, 10 hours, 59 minutes. The old record had been set, ironically, on the day that Hammond left San Francisco. He averaged 22.5 mph on the Lincoln Highway and drove from “Frisco” to Ogden in 36 hours. The important part for this article is:

“At the start Hammond ran into a deep coat of snow on the roads over the Sierras [sic], but overcame this obstacle by following a train through a snowshed for about 40 miles, emerging in Truckee, Arizona. Owing to this maneuver, he was able to make his long turn to Ogden in 36 hours.” Wow. That was amazing speed and death defying. There was more to the story though. The San Francisco Chronicle reported the “rest of the story” in an article titled, “Ghost Car Flits Across Continent Like a Phantom.” “Aside from the fact that the Truckee and the snowsheds are in California, several hundred miles from Arizona, and a few other mis-statements, Hammond’s story is correct. He has at least arrived in New York.” AAA, the CSAA, and the SP knew nothing of the trip and SP said the “stunt was a physical impossibility.” Mr. Hammond’s use of the snowsheds is even more unique, using it to lie.

The San Francisco Call in the July 1, 1910 edition reported on an “Elaborate Tour Arranged to Start Next Saturday for Pleasure Place.” The San Francisco Motor Club was scheduled to head for Lake Tahoe. They would average 17 mph on the trip leaving S.F. by ferry to Oakland. Then they’d overnight in Auburn. The directions told drivers to “Use care going through snowsheds.... A steady climb through snowsheds again.... To Summit house [sic] Follow main road through the snowsheds again [how people crossed the tracks before the underpass], then very rough and steep, two mile grade to sawmill [at the base of Summit Canyon] Cross under mill track bear to the right. Good level road to Truckee...”

The shortcuts through the snowsheds did not always work out. In an article in the San Francisco Call entitled, “Auto Struck by Train in 3 Mile Snowshed,” it was reported that “B.J. Maupin and R.L. Douglas of Fallon, Nev, took a chance in short cutting with their machine through a three mile snowshed on the Southern Pacific at the summit of the Sierras last night and as a result were struck by a freight train. Maupin was probably fatally injured but Douglas escaped with a few minor bruises.”

Then from Overland Monthly and Outwest Magazine in February of 1874 Benjamin Avery gave advice to tourists on Donner Summit in an article called, "Summering in the Sierra."

"The tourist who stops a few days at Summit Valley, will find a walk along the railroad, through the snow-sheds, peculiarly entertaining. These sheds, covering the track for thirty-five miles, are massive arched galleries of large timbers, shady and cool, blackened with the smoke of engines, sinuous, and full of strange sounds. ... Standing in a curve, the effect is precisely that of the interior of some of Gothic cloister or abbey hall, the light streaking through narrow side-windows. The footstep awakes echoes, and the tones of the voice are full and resounding. A coming train announces itself miles away by the tinkling crepitation communicated along the rails, which gradually swells into a metallic ring, followed by a thunderous roar that shakes the ground; then the shriek of the engine-valve, and, in a flash, the engine itself bursts into view, the bars of sunlight playing across its dark front with kaleidoscopic effect. There is ample space on either side of the track for pedestrians to stand as the train rushes past, but it looks as if it must crush everything before it, and burst through every shed.