

The First Automobile Over the Sierra

As soon as people were able to buy automobiles they wanted to see how far they could go, how fast they could go, and where they could go. The automobile companies were interested too because showing their automobiles going to remote locations was good advertising. Alexander Winton owned the Winton Motor Car Co. and he thought it would be good advertising to take one of his automobiles across the country in 1901. What could better show his automobile's capabilities than the Winton was a "practical power carriage for road work"? This would only be the second transcontinental attempt. This was a time when there were no cross-country roads. In fact the United States had very few roads at all and the road over Donner Summit was more of a trail than a road.

Winton and an employee, Albert Shanks, left the San Francisco Ferry building on May 20, 1901. Winton and Shanks did not appreciate that Donner Summit was still covered by snow in May.

A trip away from population centers in those days required some extra preparation. In addition to clothes and camping equipment, the pair carried extra necessities such as rope, block and tackle, an axe, a cyclometer, a Winchester, and two regulation army revolvers. They also carried a letter of introduction to the SP railroad that they could use to get assistance.

Traveling up the Sierra there were rocks, boulders, unbridged streams, washouts, fallen trees, and when they got high enough, snow. By the time they'd gotten to Gold Run they were averaging ten miles an hour.

Getting closer to the summit they traveled along the Yuba River. "Up, and up we went, winding around and turning in many directions- but always up." The grades got steeper and to make it worse, rain and snow fell making the trails "dangerously slippery."

"...the machine took to the water like a duck in high spirits. Splash she would go in, and drenched she would come out. The water would many times come up as high as the motor and up would go our feet to prevent them getting wet."

Approaching the summit there was a "supreme and awful test." At Cascade Creek the car hit something and the front end popped into the air. A front wheel had come off. The railroad and telegraph were nearby so Shanks hiked up to the nearest railroad station and ordered a new part from Cleveland. Next they used a sapling to pry up the front corner of the car. Winton "drove" and Shanks pried the car up the creek bank. Then they went to Emigrant Gap to wait. Winton was impatient, however, and the next day he was back at Cascade fixing the automobile.

Repaired, the pair set off to cover the last few miles to the summit. It would take all day to go 17 miles. They slipped and slid in the snow, once almost overturning. They used ropes to get back on track. Then it began to snow and hail.

At the summit they were warned of the "fearfully steep downhill" that was coming. Winton and Shanks continued on but the softened snow trapped the car, "the machine sank through so deep that it could not be extricated with ease by ropes or shoveling."

The next day railroad men helped the pair dig out the car. Shanks said the experience was an “ugly nightmare.” “During the entire day, working up there among the clouds, we were cold and drenched. When it did not rain it snowed and hailed.”

Just outside of Truckee there was a “terrific downpour” and they stopped in Hobart Mills where they spent the next day drying clothes. Winton also disassembled the motor and welded the crankshaft which had just broken, providentially in front of the blacksmith’s shop. They also strengthened the axle broken at Cascade.

Winton and Shanks were able to get past Reno and into the Nevada desert, but 530 miles from San Francisco they had to call it quits. The sand was just too soft and the block and tackle used too much. Later automobilists would carry temporary bridges made of canvas tarps and wood, or cotton filled canvas tires so they could navigate the sand.

The second attempt by anyone to cross the continent by automobile was over. but the Sierra had been conquered by automobile for the first time.

Sidebar/drop quote

Driving was fun in those days.

Pull out block and tackle, wade around in the mud, get soaked to the skin and chilled from the effects of the deluge, make fastenings to the fence or telephone post and pull. Pull hard, dig your heels into the mud and exert every effort at command. The machine moves, your feet slip and down in the mud you go full length. Repeat the dose and continue the operation until the machine is free from the ditch and again upon the road.

Albert Shanks in Scientific American Supplement, August, 1901