



Hwy 40 Scenic Bypass

Thomas Stevens

History

Thomas Stevens had not even ridden a bicycle before he got the idea to ride one across the country. In 1884 he became the first person to cross the Sierra, cross the country, and then go around the world with a bicycle. Stevens' "Columbia Ordinary" weighed 49 lbs., had no gears, and just one brake. The 50 inch front wheel and 18 inch back wheel were made of wood and the tires were solid rubber. These bicycles were affectionately known as "bone crushers."

When Stevens started his trip in San Francisco in the spring, he had no idea there would still be snow in the Sierra. The solution, "...the long snow-sheds of the Central Pacific Railway make it possible for one to cross over, no matter how deep the snow..." When he emerged from the sheds he climbed a pine tree to "obtain a view of Donner Lake" which he called the "Gem of the Sierras."

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. He walked about a third of the whole journey and two-thirds of the Sierra crossing.

A Good Story

Stevens could not ride in the snowsheds but could "trudge merrily along..." Occasionally there were short breaks in the sheds and then he could trace their "sinuous structure" as they wound their "tortuous way around the rugged mountain sides..." 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 poetic. Snowsheds were "gloomy", "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...[sic]" "I pause every few steps to listen" for an approaching train.



Hanging from a railroad trestle while the train passes during the Sierra crossing

Things to do right here

riders like to go from Donner Lake to Cisco and back. Mountain bikers like the many trails on the summit. You might like to stop in here at NancyO Glass or the Donner Summit Historical Society.

