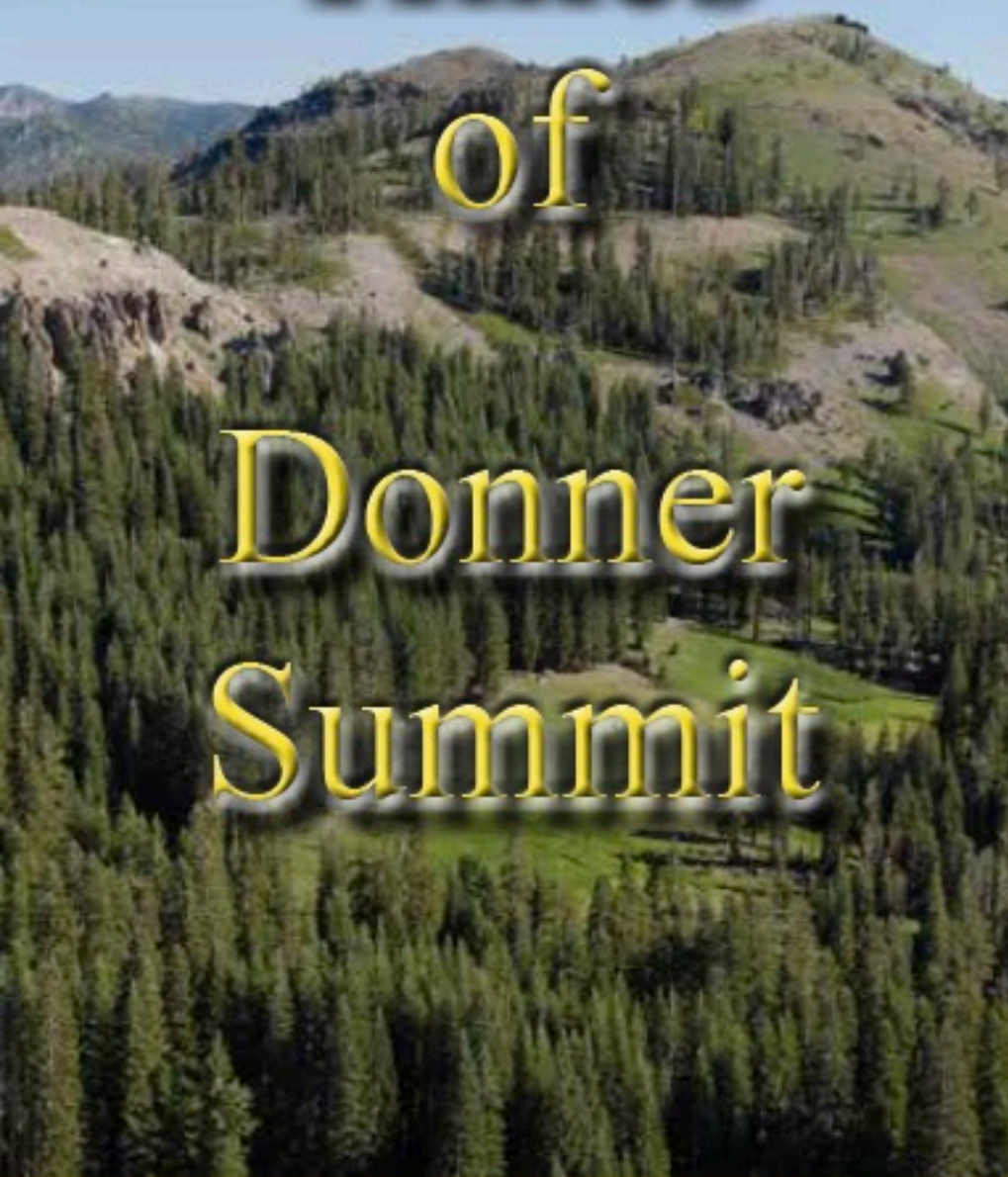


Historic Hikes

of

Donner Summit



HISTORIC



ROUTE

Donner Summit Historical Society

P.O. 1 Norden, CA 95724

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The Most Important Square Mile

Donner Summit is the most important historical square mile in California and maybe the entire western U.S.

Native Americans crossed Donner Summit for thousands of years moving from winter to summer quarters and to trade. They left behind the evidence of their passing in petroglyphs, grinding rocks, and other artifacts.

The first wagon trains to reach California with wagons, came over Donner Summit.



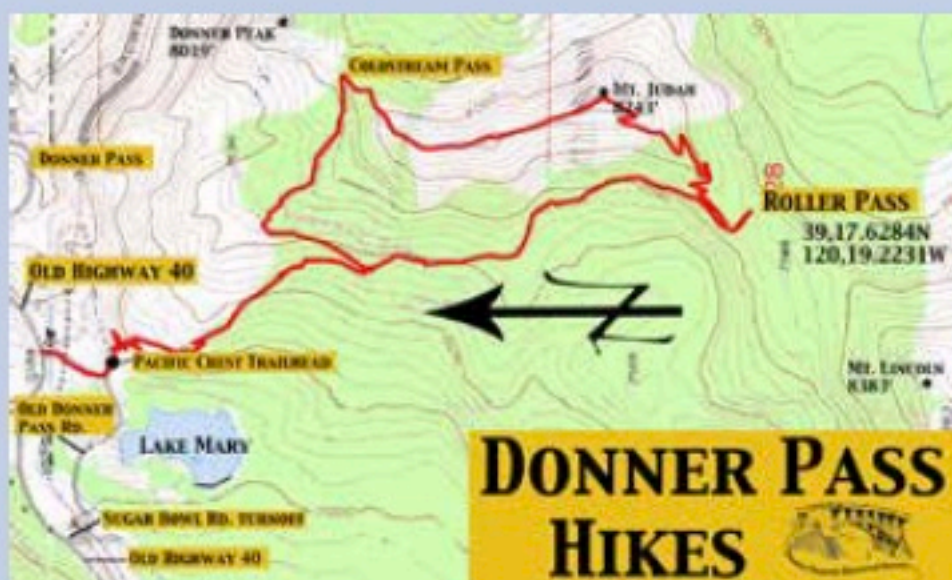
The first transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental highway, and the first transcontinental telephone line all crossed Donner Summit. The first transcontinental air route crossed over Donner Summit, the route delineated by beacons, signs, and a weather station to aid pilots.

The history of Donner Summit is extraordinarily rich. So we have put together some hikes which will take you through the history, from the Native Americans to the wagon trains and on to the railroad and the early highway.



As you take these hikes you will be walking on history, past petroglyphs thousands of years old, on the old Lincoln Highway, and along the old wagon route.

Front panel: The Coldstream Valley side of Roller Pass with the meadow in which wagons waited their turns at the bottom and Mt. Judah in the background. Roller Pass is the bare spot just above the “o” in Donner.



One of the variations of this hike, the Mt. Judah Loop, is the most popular hike on Donner Summit.

Roller Pass (4 miles RT)

The Roller Pass hike is a fun hike. You have nice views of Summit Valley (top photo here) as you go up and you find a piece of California history at the top. You also have a great view of Coldstream Valley. Then it's all downhill on the way back.

Take the Pacific Crest Trail (see the "Access" sidebar in the right hand column) two miles to the saddle between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. Instead of continuing on the PCT along the side of Mt. Lincoln, head further into the saddle, east. You will find markers for the Emigrant Trail. Take a look down the steep incline leading up from Coldstream Valley. They actually took wagons up that! The picture to the right shows the slope. They were a lot tougher in the old days. As wagons waited to be pulled up one at a time, the others camped down below (pictured on the front panel of this brochure). You can hike down the incline and then back up to see what it was like. Imagine doing it many times as you helped oxen pull the wagons. In early summer after snow melt, there are lots of wildflowers further along the PCT below Mt. Lincoln.

Donner Peak (2 miles RT)

Instead of heading for Roller Pass, take the first Judah Loop turnoff from the PCT. It goes left and will take you up to the saddle between Mt. Judah and Donner Pk. That's Coldstream Pass, discovered after Roller Pass had been in use. There is a trail marker there as well. Where you see the first Judah Loop turnoff from the PCT you are directly above the current railroad tunnel. It is about 666 feet beneath you through solid rock.

Scramble up the granite to the top of Donner Peak and then look down a thousand feet to Donner Lake.

On the way up you probably noticed snow banks on the shady side of Judah. If you brought some fruit punch and cups, you can make some good snow cones.

Judah Loop

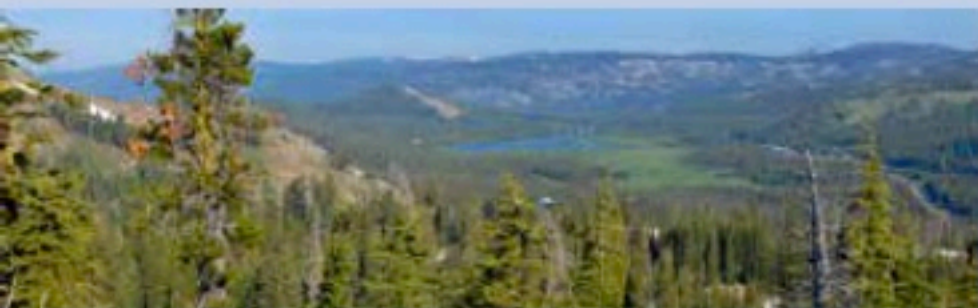
To take the Judah Loop trail (4 miles), take the PCT up towards Roller Pass. There are two turnoffs for the two ends of the Judah Loop. Take either one and wind your way up to the top of Judah. The views are spectacular for 360⁰ and the wildflowers after snow melt are wonderful. Mt. Judah is named for Theodore Judah who laid out the route of the western end of the first transcontinental railroad. The Donners (Donner Peak), you've no doubt heard of.

Access

Access the Pacific Crest Trailhead

Access for these hikes begins at the Pacific Crest trailhead (PCT). Just opposite Donner Ski Ranch is the Sugar Bowl Road. Just down that, past the overpass and Tunnel 6 is Old Donner Summit Rd. Turn left and drive up to the parking area. The trailhead is at the sharp 90⁰ turn just beyond.

There is no water on these routes.



Summit Valley from the flank of Mt. Judah

Roller Pass in 1852

About nine o'clock we doubled teams and began the ascent for the summit.. While the teams were slowly toiling up the summit, Father, Mr. Buck, Margaret and I climbed one of the highest peaks near the road [Donner Peak] and were well repaid for our trouble by the splendid view. On one side the snow-capped peaks rise in majestic grandeur, on the other they are covered to their summits with pine and fir, while before us in the top of the mountains, apparently an old crater, lies a beautiful lake [Donner lake] in which the Truckee takes its rise.

Eliza McAuley 1852

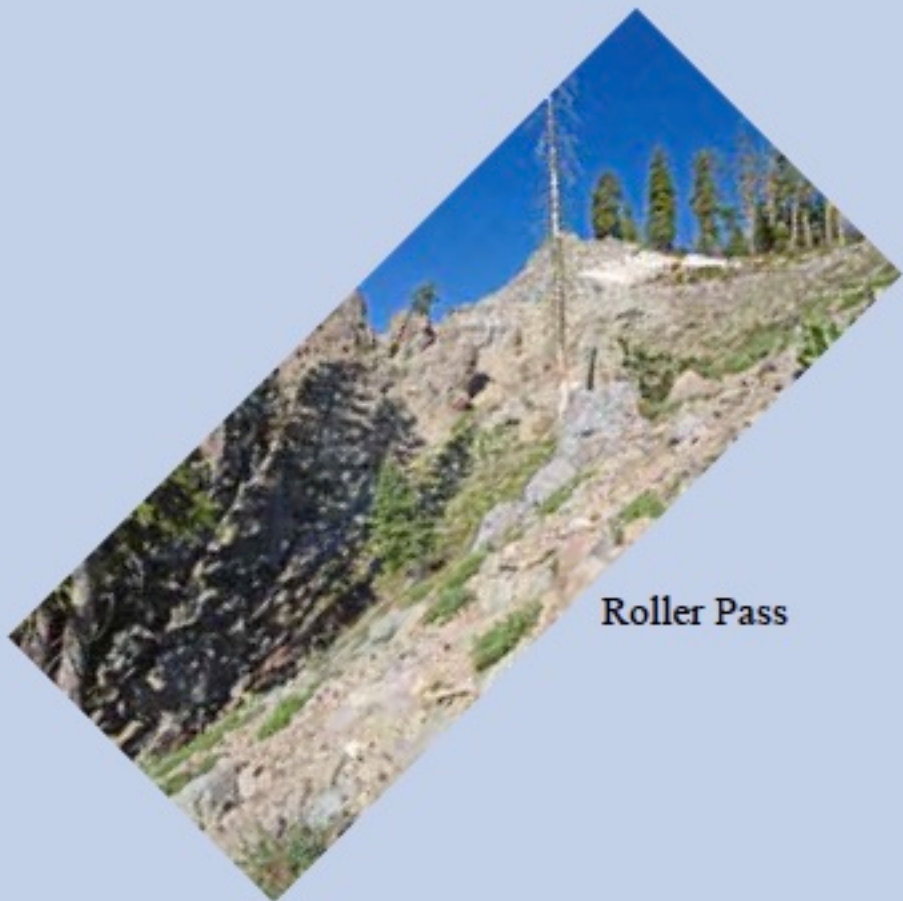
Hiking Donner Summit in the Old days

A Trip to Donner Peak

Last Wednesday morning a party of sixteen from Donner Lake united in a picnic expedition to Donner peak [sic]. Following up the summit road as far as Lake Mary, some engaged in gathering flowers, and others admiring the grand scenery of the summit peaks, towering up like some grand castle, far above the snow sheds. After leaving Lake Mary the party proceeded a short distance, when lunch was served out under pine trees, which aided the mountain air as an excellent tonic for sharpening appetites. The party then proceeded up the mountain trail near the summit of Donner peak, passing over large banks of snow. Here a gay game of snowballing was indulged in by the entire company. After fully ascending Donner peak some grand scenery was presented to view. In the distance could be seen Truckee, Martis Valley, Tinker's Knob, Castle peak, Summit Valley, Red Mountain, Devil's peak and six lakes. From off this peak fair Donner reminds one of a mirror spread out beneath amid the mountains.

The party, satisfied with sightseeing, returned to former levels, greatly pleased with the trip.

Sacramento Daily Union July 31, 1885



Roller Pass



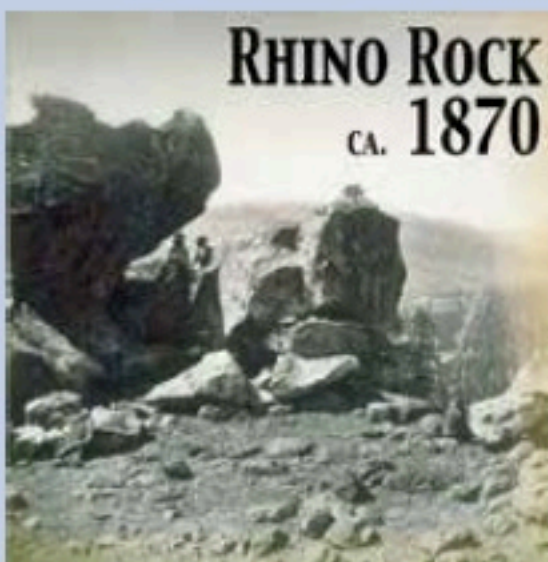
Crater Lake and Rhino Rock

Crater Lake - remarkable geology

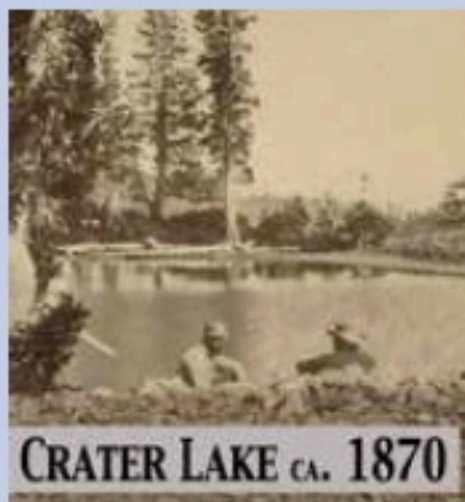
On top of Boreal Ridge there are some great views. There are also two surprising features: Crater Lake and Rhinoceros Rock. You've seen slow motion videos of something splashing into a liquid. For a short time there is a crater in the liquid. That is exactly what Crater Lake looks like. It is *really* slow motion because the crater is not moving. Splashed in a ring around the outside are the rocks from the interior. In the early morning, with the water still, it's beautiful (above). Rhino Rock is a quarter mile further along. The rock looks like a Rhino head and has a nice view of Devil's Peak beyond it.

Eadweard Muybridge (spellings vary) visited both features in the 1870's as you can see here. To get to the top of the ridge, start at Sierra Club's Clair Tappaan Lodge on Old Highway 40 a couple of miles east of the Soda Springs exit from I-80. Park in the large parking lot on the south side of the road. Head up the paved driveway, not the dirt walkway. At the top of the driveway take the dirt path past the Nature Friends lodge on the right and the Cal Lodge on the left. You will pass the front door of Clair Tappaan. Stay on the wide trail, called, "Main Drag." Go past the backside lifts of Donner Ski Ranch. You will pass Lytton Lake on the left and a new log lodge. Just past the last lift on the right you will go uphill to a saddle. The other side drops to Donner Ski Ranch's front side. Go left on the road and head up to the ridge top. On the ridge top you will pass two lifts on the left, the back of Boreal, and three lifts on the right, Boreal's front side. You are on National Forest land. Keep going past the last lift heading west and go to the trees. Just beyond the trees is Crater Lake. You can't miss it. Leaving Crater Lake, go to the south side and drop down then head west a quarter mile and look for the rock that is shaped like Rhino head. You'll have to look around unless you have a GPS.

There are Geocaches on Boreal Ridge.



Rhino Rock:
 $39^{\circ} 19.467'N$
 $120^{\circ} 21.710'W$



Crater Lake:
 $39^{\circ} 19.478'N$
 $120^{\circ} 21.408'W$

The Catfish Pond & Beyond

Start the hike from Old 40 (park along the road) at an old road just west and downhill from the PCT crossing: 39° 19.030'N 120° 19.696'W. It's 1/2 mi. to the pond.

Catfish Turnoff from main trail:

39° 19.352'N 120° 19.456'W

Catfish Pond: 39° 19.354'N 120° 19.404'W

Flora Lake: 39° 19.894'N 120° 19.516'W

Azalea Lake: 39° 20.044'N 120° 19.647'W

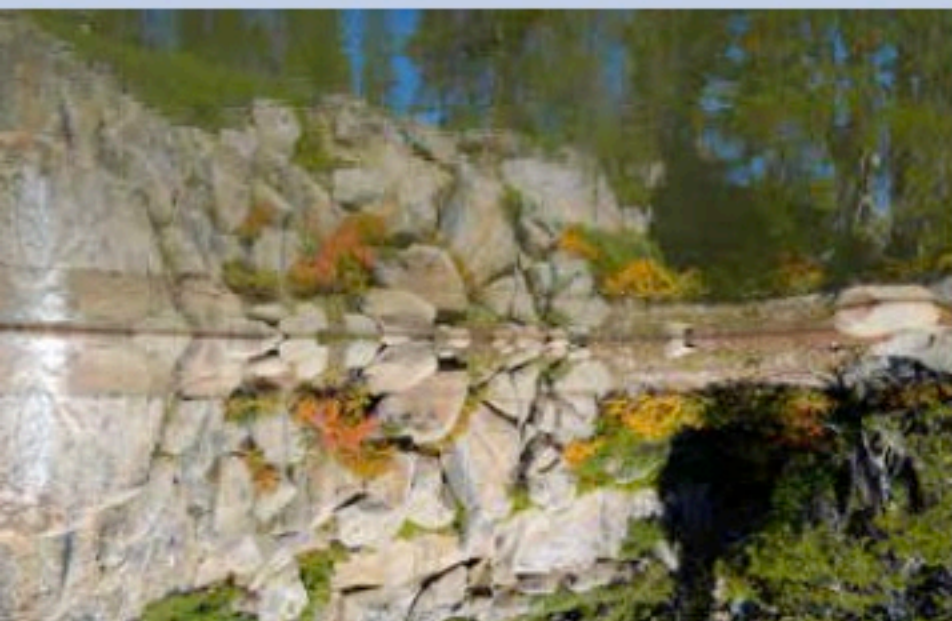


Most of the workers on the western end of the trans-continental railroad were Chinese. They lived much healthier lives than the white workers. They bathed regularly, drank tea (the water had been boiled) and their diets were much more varied and healthful.

All along the railroad route are ponds with catfish. Catfish are not natural to Donner Summit. No one knows for sure how they got there but one guess is they were planted by or for the Chinese. (There was fish aquaculture and planting at the time.)

Take some bread on this short hike to Catfish Pond (pictured above) also known as "Maiden's Retreat." You may not see anything when you arrive but if you throw some crumbs in the water swarms of catfish will arrive. If you are feeling energetic, then head off for Lakes Flora and Azalea. They are beautiful little lakes. The trail is well defined and the hike is easy.

Instead of heading for those lakes, head east. There is an Emigrant Trail marker (39 19.294, 120 19.46 - .11 miles) for a possible emigrant wagon route. Scramble over the rocks nearer Old 40 and admire the Junipers that are possibly more than a thousand years old.



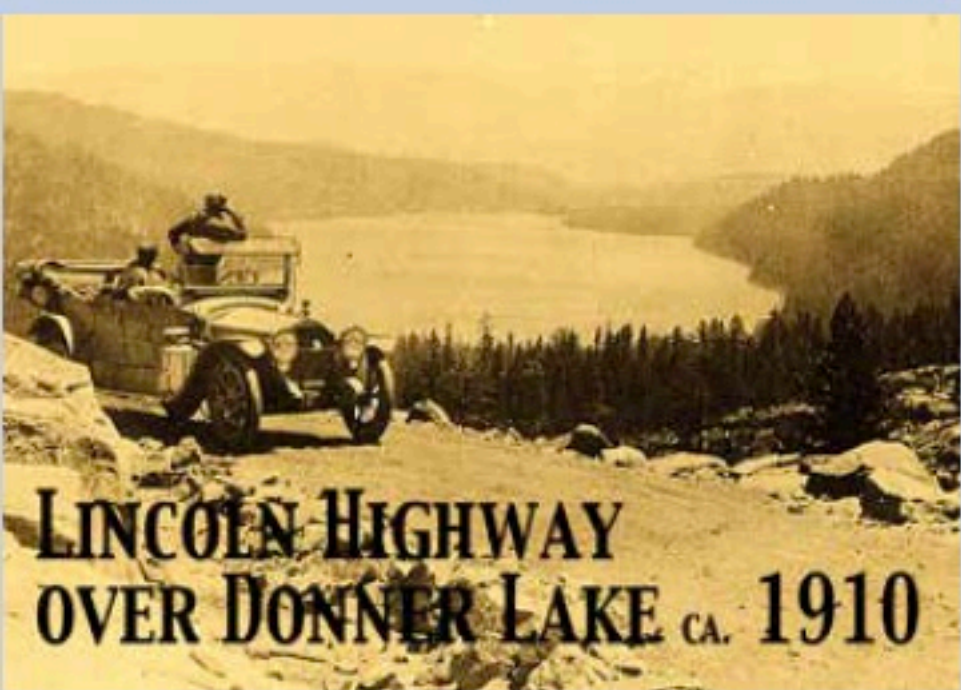
Summit Canyon

Summit Canyon, the area from the top of Donner Pass down to Donner Lake, is the easiest hike and the most fascinating for the historically minded. You will travel along the Old Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway. You will go through the 1914 underpass built so early autos would no longer have to cross the train tracks through the snowsheds and risk collisions. That sits under the route of the first transcontinental railroad. You will go past the 1867 China Wall built without mortar or machinery. Look for tool marks and drill holes. You will pass ads painted on rocks in the early 1900's - Steam Heat at the New Whitney Hotel in Truckee. You will see petroglyphs thousands of years old. Be sure to admire the views on your way to Donner Lake.

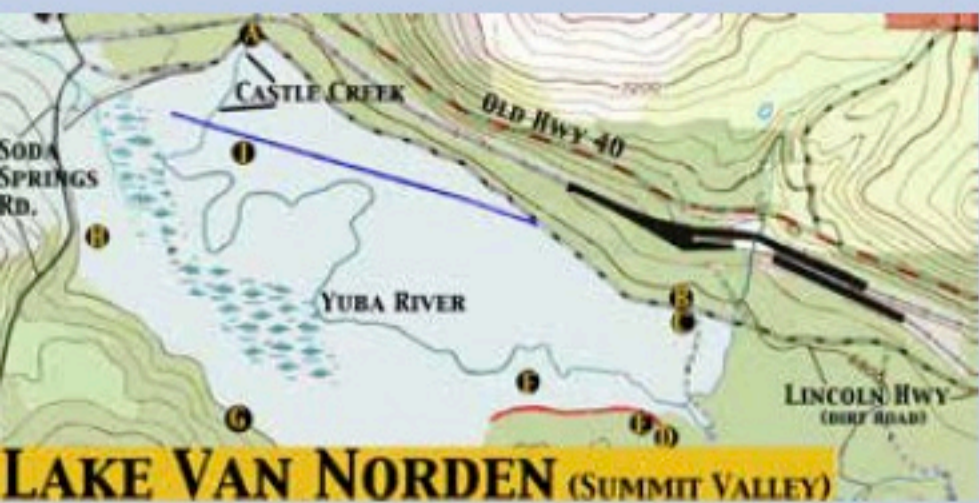
This hike is easy. It's 3.5 miles downhill, assuming you place a car at the bottom and start from the top.

Start at the Pacific Crest Trailhead (see "Access" under the "Donner Pass Hikes" on the other side). Instead of taking the trail to the right that goes up, go to the left. That's the old Lincoln Highway.

There is a whole brochure devoted to this hike at the Donner Summit Historical Society in Soda Springs or on the website, www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org



Lake Van Norden - Circumambulation



Of most recent vintage are the sheep pens (C) and old shepherd's shack (D). Soda Springs used to be one of the top sheep shipping centers in the U.S.

What is most interesting are the many, many grinding rocks left by Native Americans (e.g. F, G, H). Looking at any of the dozens and one pauses. For how many generations was that same mortar used? How long does it take to grind such a depression into the solid granite?

Imagine, around the groups of grinding rocks, the women for thousands of years talking and preparing meals. Why are there single grinding holes away from the groups?

This hike is different each time you take it as the water recedes during the summer and Fall. So we have not marked a route. Follow the shore line when you can, otherwise walk outside the tree thickets. Watch for the thousands of frogs in summer and millions of grasshoppers. One good route is to start at the sheep pens, 1.6 miles from Soda Springs Rd. Then head across the valley to the south side and go west. There are two peninsulas (F & H) that would have stuck out into the lake. The eastern one has a couple of grinding rocks, the western one, dozens. Have a picnic with beautiful meadow views right where Native Americans prepared their meals for millennia.

Lake Van Norden is the jewel of the Northern Sierra. It is the source of the South Fork of the Yuba River. It is a nesting spot and way point for migrating fowl. Coyote prowl it and frogs are underfoot. Its geology is interesting. Here, we'll focus on the fascinating history.

People have been crossing Summit Valley for thousands of years. There are old hotel sites (B), an ice harvesting site (A), and cabin sites (E) but nothing of those remain.

There are old roads. On the map the dark blue line is the original Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd. built by the railroad. The first dam was built about 1870, rebuilt in 1890, and expanded about 1915, covering that original road. Now uncovered, you can walk it slightly above what, in early spring, are marshy areas.

There is an older road remnant on the south side, the red line. The old Emigrant Trail from Roller Pass went that way. Some parts are really well defined. See if you can follow the whole route. Imagine taking your wagon through in 1849, only a few miles left of your 6 month journey! Soon the kids will stop asking, "Are we there yet?"

Selected GPS readings for Van Norden

Peninsula w/ many mortars (H) 39°18.990, 120°22.587
Old Road (red line) 39°18.640, 120°21.668
Old Cabin site (chimney hearth) 39°18.673, 120°21.485

Sheep pens (C) 39°18.772, 120°21.253
Peninsula w/ 2 mortars (F) 39°18.725, 120°21.673
Rock w/many mortars (G) 39° 18 783 120°22.384
Multiple mortars & metate (I) 39° 19.150, 120°22.345