

# Donner Summit's Scenic

Donner Summit is unique. It is culturally and scenically rich. The wide open vistas and rich history make it a recreation destination for skiing, hiking, backpacking, boating, wildflower and bird watching, enjoying history, rock climbing, and mountain and road biking.

Here in the center of the page is a map of Donner Summit from Cisco Grove to Donner Lake focusing on the scenic Old Highway 40 which was the transcontinental route before I-80 took its place in 1964. Taking the scenic route rather than the interstate, extraordinary vistas will roll out before you. You will have the opportunity to experience unparalleled recreation, and you'll get to see history from the ancient to the near present.

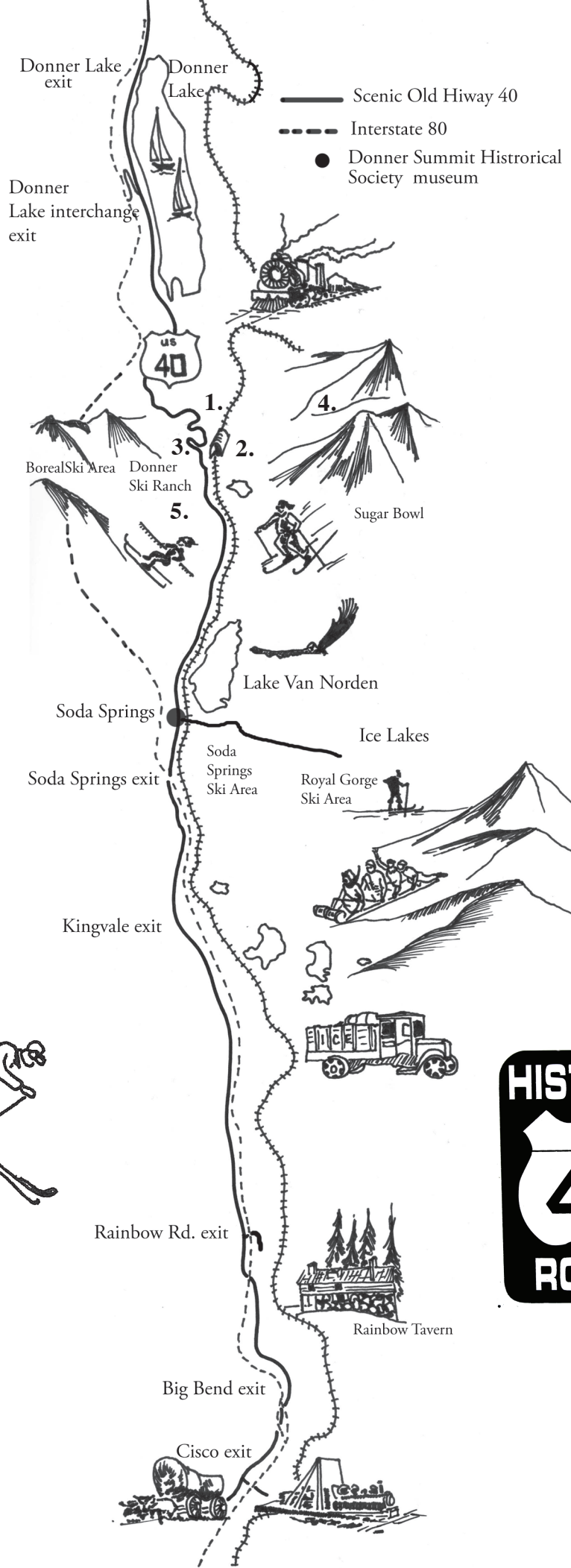
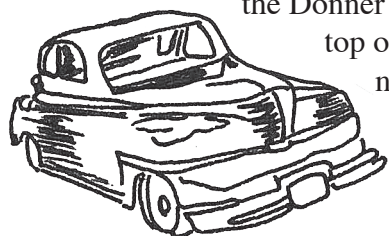
Native Americans traveled the Summit thousands of years ago leaving the evidence of their presence in petroglyphs and grinding rocks.

Wagon trains began crossing the Summit in 1844 heading for California. The ill-fated Donner Party crossed in 1846. The first transcontinental railroad crossed the Summit in 1867. The first transcontinental Highway, the Lincoln Highway, followed in 1913. One of the first interstates crossed the Summit in 1964. The numbered paragraphs below match the numbers on the maps.

1. China Wall: built by the Chinese for the Transcontinental railroad in 1867. Leave Old 40 and hike over to it. Hike up the hill a bit west and explore for Native American petroglyphs carved into the granite rock.

2. Tunnel 6: the 1867 railroad tunnel now has no tracks. Leave your car opposite Donner Ski Ranch and walk through it. Heading east when you come to the road that goes under the former tracks you have come to the Lincoln highway remnants from 1913.

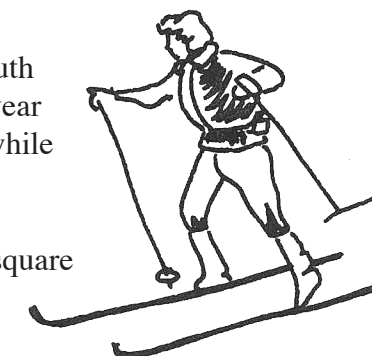
3. Rainbow Bridge (pictured under the headings here): Completed in 1927 by the Forest Service, it opened up transportation allowing trucks to cross the Sierra and lumber to be marketed out of the Tahoe Basin. It is the first bridge built with a compound curve. Leave your car at the parking area on the east side and admire the views of Donner Lake to the east. Donner Peak is immediately south and named for the Donner Party. A great hike is to take the Pacific Crest Trail to the top of Donner Peak and look straight down 1000 feet to Donner Lake. The (Pacific Crest Trail) PCT can be accessed just down the dirt road that runs next to the Alpine Skills Institute at the top of Old 40. There's a map posted just off the road.



# Old Highway 40 Bypass

To the north of Rainbow bridge is Mt. Stephens, named after the leader of the first wagon train over the Summit in 1844, the Stephens Townsend Murphy party. The first American baby born in California was part of that group.

Looking down to Donner Lake from Rainbow Bridge, the south side ridge is called Schallenberger Ridge named after the 17 year old member of the Stephens Party who wintered by the lake while the rest of the party headed for California.



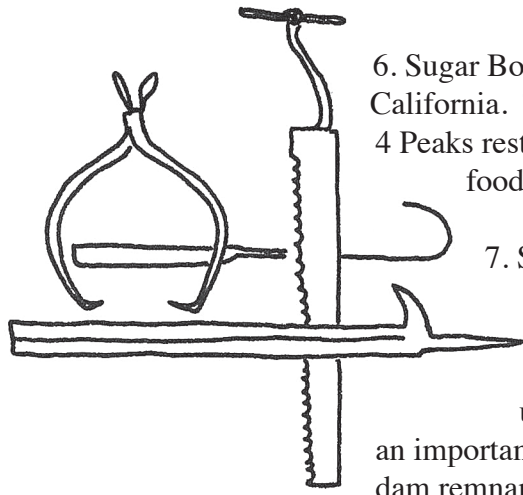
Just west of the Alpine Skill Institute and just off Old 40 is a square covering sitting on the ground. This covers an entrance to Tunnel 6. When it was being built by Chinese laborers, time was key because the railroad got paid by miles completed and they were competing with the Union Pacific coming east. Instead of tunneling from one end, they tunneled from both ends and from the square covering down so that four faces could be worked at once. Once the tunnel was completed, the opening served to allow steam engine smoke to escape. If you walk the tunnel, take a flashlight and shine it up when you get midway.

Incidentally, because the two railroads were in competition to get Federal money, the Central Pacific, building through California and Nevada, could not wait for tunnel 6 to be finished. They hauled a whole locomotive over Donner Summit so it could work the track being built on the other side. There are still signs of that endeavor on Mt. Donner if you know where to look.



4. Taking the PCT up the hill towards Mt. Lincoln and you will pass Mt. Judah, named after the engineer who set the transcontinental train route. The Judah Loop, signed, is a spectacular hike with lots of wildflowers in early summer just after the snow melt. It offers spectacular 360 degree views. Continue past Mt. Judah to the notch between Lincoln and Judah and you'll find a sign commemorating the main wagon train route. Go to the edge and look down. Imagine hauling wagons up that steep grade. Look at the sign to see how it was done.

5. Donner Ski Ranch and Lake Mary on opposite sides of Old 40 are the sites of the first rope tows on Donner Summit circa 1936. The remains of one of those tows is just off the PCT where it levels out after switch backing up from the Pass. The cafe at Donner Ski Ranch serves meals and has cold drinks.

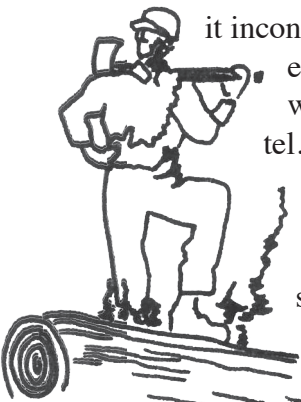


6. Sugar Bowl, built in 1939 is the site of the first chair lift in California. This is one of California's premier ski areas. Their 4 Peaks restaurant offers views of the mountains and great food and service.

7. Soda Springs Hotel was built in 1927 and is now condominiums.

8. Lake Van Norden used to be a PG&E lake until the dam was breached in the 1960's. Now it is an important wetlands for migratory birds. If you park by the dam remnants and walk to the top, you can sometimes see bald eagles or other birds of prey circling overhead. Flocks of pelicans have even been seen sitting in the waters.

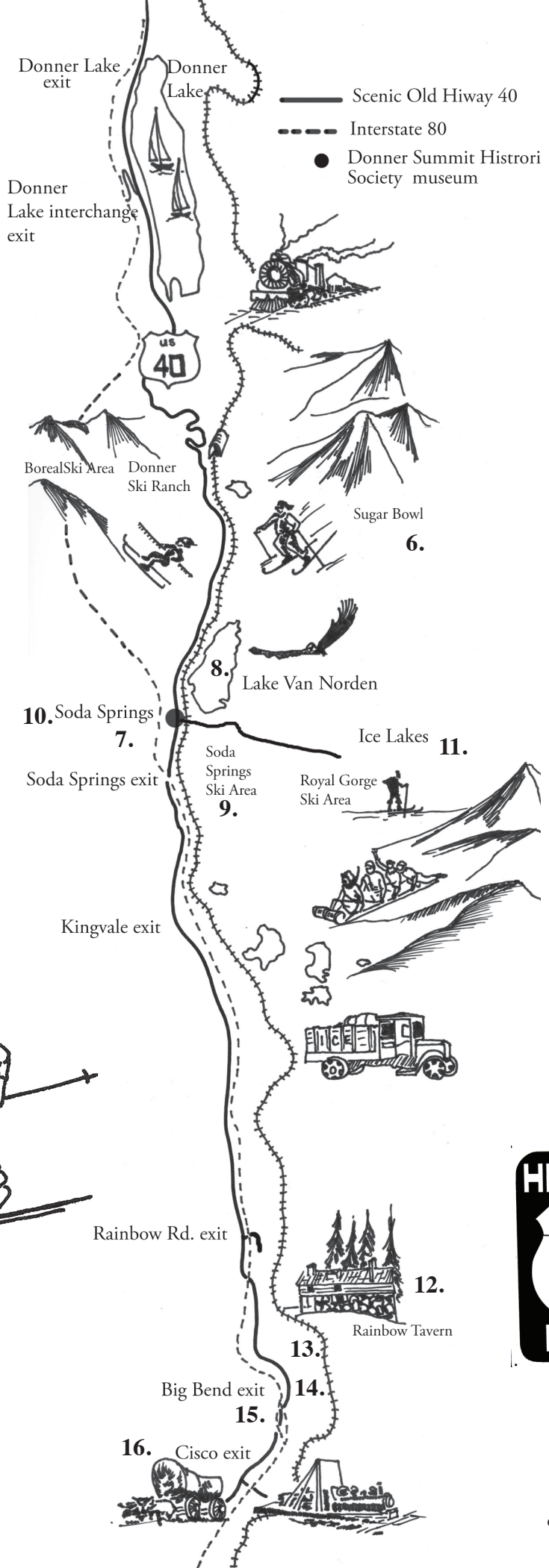
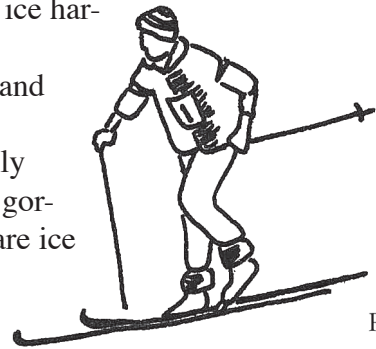
9. Soda Springs Ski Area, the oldest ski area in California, dates back to 1938 when it was called Beacon Hill after the aircraft beacon that sat atop it. In those days airplanes flew from beacon to beacon, each beacon flashing a different signal. At least three planes missed their beacons but found Donner Summit in ways they probably wished they hadn't. Soda Springs was also the site of the first ski lift on Donner Summit. It consisted of two toboggans, one pulled up while the other went down. Not only was it inconvenient because skiers had to remove their skis, but it did not work every well. One of the first ski schools operated at Beacon Hill was well run by Dennis Jones. Dennis' father built the Soda Springs Hotel.



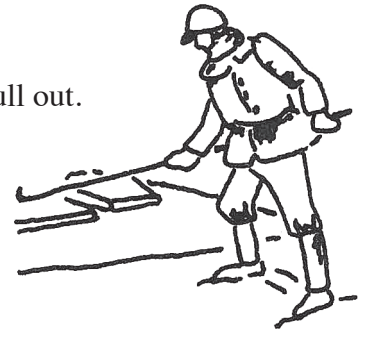
10. Soda Springs, formerly a station on the railroad, was a top sheep shipping center in California. The Soda Springs Store can supply your picnic needs and down the road the Donner Summit Lodge provides sit down meals.

11. Ice Lakes (Serene Lakes), just south of Soda Springs on Soda Springs Rd., was the location of the first Summit ice harvesting operation from 1869-1872. The road past the Ice Lakes Lodge will lead you down past the Cedars' historic settlement and ultimately to Auburn past turn-offs to Gold Rush town sites and interesting geological formations. 27 miles of the 60 mile length is dirt but highly recommended. Ice Lakes Lodge, sitting at the end of Serene Lakes with gorgeous lake views, serves meals and rents rooms. The tools on this page are ice harvesting tools.

12. Rainbow Tavern was built in 1927. This is a good place to stop and park. Walk around the pond, walk into the lodge with its 1920's decor and look at the historic pictures on display in the bar. Rainbow serves meals and rooms can be rented. Somewhere in the neighborhood \$25,000 in gold coins is still buried following a murder which followed some gambling in the Rainbow Tavern. If you walk up the road a few hundred yards and look to the left, maybe you can tell us what the chimney shaped stone "sculpture" is all about. It looks like a chimney but has not place for a fire or smoke. Nearby is a stone monument with a "C" incised. You tell us what they are.



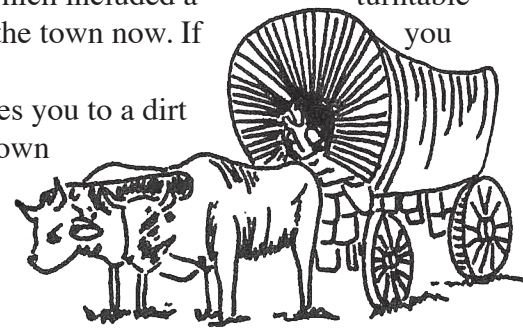
13. Between Rainbow and the Big Bend ranger station is a pull out. Just north, towards the river, you can find a marker and part of the route of the wagon trains. Across Old 40 from the turnout is a trail head leading to Loch Leven Lakes, among others. That is a rewarding but uphill hike. It's all downhill coming back though.



14. Big Bend Ranger Station has a museum inside and information. There is a trail out back so you can see where the wagon trains came down the hill to cross the river. You can even see old rust marks on rocks. Across Old 40 from the ranger station note the Lincoln Highway sign on the garage. Walk behind the garage to see a Lincoln Highway memorial and one of the markers placed all along the highway by the Boy Scouts in 1928. You can follow the Lincoln Highway for a ways west as it winds among cabins and along the Yuba River.

15. Traveling along Old 40 just west of the ranger station look across the river just before the overpass. The road remnants you see are from the Lincoln Highway. Model T's used to travel it taking vacationers to Donner Summit a little more slowly than the interstate does today.

16. Cisco Grove was the terminus for the railroad before it was completed over the Summit. Behind Cisco there was a railroad town which included a turntable to turn the helper engines. There is nothing left of the town now. If you go back across the overpass and turn left, the first right takes you to a dirt road. This was one access to a short lived mining town called Meadow Lake (1866-67). Thousands of people were drawn to Meadow Lake during its brief existence hoping to get rich. In winter snowshoers (what we'd call skis) were the method of transportation to Meadow lake.



17. Eagle Lakes turnoff (the next exit west from Cisco). Take this turn off and turn left under the first overpass. Between the two directions of the freeway look to the right along the river. Here is a section of the Lincoln Highway you can walk. Fish are in the river and this could be a good picnic site. This part of Old 40 is not connected to the route from Cisco to Donner Summit. You will need to take the freeway from Eagle Lakes to Cisco. On the north side of the overpasses is a road which you can follow to Indian Springs campground. There you can head steeply uphill to Red Mtn. or Signal Peak. From that spectacular spot, railroad men occupied a stone building which is still there as they watched fires in the wood snow sheds. Sparks coming from wood fired steam engines made that a necessity. This is a steep hike. The "road" rises two thousand feet over three miles and almost a thousand feet in the first mile and a quarter. The views are worth it. Red Mtn. looks very different from the surroundings because it was an island in the Pacific 65 million years ago (Assembling California by John McPhee.)

