

## Auto Travel to Donner Lake on the Lincoln Highway

By Corri Jimenez

Before there were whizzing cars and big-rig tractor-trailers speeding 65+ mph on Interstate 80, the first transcontinental highway was the Lincoln Highway, commemorating the 16<sup>th</sup> U.S. President, Abraham Lincoln. Today much of this historic 100+ year-old road is accessible, however it was replaced in 1926 by U.S. Highway 40. If a traveler gets off the interstate's beaten path, segments can be visited!

Established in 1913 by the Lincoln Highway Association, automobile-invested companies, such as Packard, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company and General Motors, supported and endorsed the roadway, as did the California State Automobile Association. The highway crossed through 14 states, 128 counties, and approximately 500 cities between San Francisco and New York. The original length between these two cities was 3,388.6 miles and much of present-day Interstate 80 parallels or is laid top of the historic route in California. With the wonders of technology, a casual Google Map search shows that the current road distance between these two cities is 480 miles less than the original Lincoln Highway. Over the years the route has become more and more direct.

Along the Lincoln Highway, concrete underpasses were built beneath the 1869 Transcontinental Railroad tracks of the Central Pacific Railroad. Prior to this underpass, travelers would have to stop on one side, place their ear on the rails, and listen for trains, prior to driving across.



**Caption:** Lincoln Highway 1913 underpass near Soda Springs (Donner Summit Historical Society, October 2010 *Heirloom* newsletter)

Traveling on the Lincoln Highway in the Donner Summit area was surrendering to driving less than 45 mph, taking your time, and even packing survival gear. Almost a hundred years ago, automobiles moved slowly, for example Ford's Model T, manufactured from 1908-1927, went around 25 m.p.h., whereas the Model A, manufactured from 1927-31, did a-whopping 45 m.p.h. In 1924, only 826 miles of the highway were paved, undoubtedly in cities, and 1,650 miles were graded with gravel. The majority of the Lincoln Highway's roads, 3,143 miles, were neither graded nor graveled. Because the highway's conditions varied, the speed limit on the road was 35 m.p.h. in most sections;

however, most drove 10 MPH, which was the average speed. Overall, to drive across America, it literally took 19 days, averaging 18 miles an hour.

Prior to making the trip, there were extensive “Don’ts” to heed by in making the trip both comfortable and safe:

- Don’t wear wool next to the skin. Wear linen or cotton underneath.
- Don’t wait until the gasoline is almost gone before looking for more.
- Don’t allow the water can to be anything but full.
- Don’t allow the car to be without food at any time.
- Don’t fail to put out your campfire.
- Don’t forget the yellow goggles.
- Don’t forget camphor ice.
- Don’t ford water without first wading through it.
- Don’t drive more than twenty-five miles an hour.
- Don’t carry your good clothes. Ship them ahead.
- Don’t drink alkali water.
- Don’t wear new shoes.

Thankfully, “yellow goggles” are no longer needed, wading through “fords” is not required, and visitor centers are available for snacks and bathroom breaks. Gasoline to drive the 3,400 miles in 1914 cost \$240.00, the equivalent today of \$6,041; therefore, only the affluent could afford to drive the Lincoln Highway. Since it was expensive and not everyone owned an auto, there were a mere 150 transcontinental trips by automobile in 1913, but ten years later the number of trips jumped to 25,000, which is approximately 2,080 vehicles a month. What once took 60 days to travel now could be completed in 20 days.



**Caption:** Pioneer Monument “canteen service station” at the Donner Memorial State Park (Donner Summit Historical Society, November 2012 *Heirloom* newsletter).

Lodges and restaurants were slowly were added to the Lincoln Highway for weary travelers. San Franciscan T.C. Wohlbruck opened “canteen service stations” for drivers in need of refreshments and souvenirs. In 1913, he built three on the Lincoln Highway at Emigrant Gap’s Lookout Point,

Echo Summit, and Truckee's Pioneer Monument. Wohlbruck's lodges had tearooms, soda fountains, and lunchrooms where visitors could get 15-cent lunches. Built on the westbound side, Nyack Lodge was the first hotel establishment on the route, overlooking Lake Spaulding. Currently, the lodge site is a Caltrans' vista lookout. A 1915 Lincoln Highway guide of Donner listed: "Two hotels, accommodations for 90. Summit House, \$2.00 Amer.; Soda Springs Hotel, \$2.00 Amer. Gas, 30 cents; Oil, \$1.00. Route marked through village and county. Extensive road improvement planned for 1915. One R.R., 1 general business place, 1 Exp. Co., telegraph. Donner Party monument on north shore of Donner Lake." At the Pioneer Monument, 5,000 vials of wood from the Murphy cabin, candies, curios, and other photographs were souvenirs sold. By 1920, the lodge's guest register recorded 3,500 visitors in 7 years, or approximately 40 visitors a month. The lodge currently stands across from the Donner Memorial Park museum and visitor center.

Portions of the Lincoln Highway were designated as the Victory Highway, a memorial to World War I. During war in 1919, Colonel McClure lead the first transcontinental army convoy, which left Washington D.C. on July 7th and arrived in San Francisco on September 1st. The convoy was two miles long, had 81 vehicles, 295 enlisted men and officers, and took 62 days, at an average of 53 miles per day. The event by the military was considered a "good trial" in moving equipment and the "government's contribution to the road movement."

In 1926, U.S. Highway 40 replaced the Lincoln Highway, connecting San Francisco to Atlantic City, New Jersey, and was much shorter, 2,286 miles, than its predecessor, plus very few resources exist that date to the Lincoln Highway. For those looking for an adventure, travelers can drive on the roadbeds accessible off Interstate 80 that weave through the towns of Soda Springs, Kingsvale, and Cisco Grove.

### **Sidebars:**

- To learn more on this topic, join us on July 20, 2019 for a historical talk on the progression from railroad to the Lincoln Highway, 5:30 pm (doors open at 5 pm), Visitor Center, Donner Memorial State Park, 12593 Donner Pass Road, Truckee.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

### **About the author**

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. For additional information, check out Donner Summit Historical Society *Heirloom* newsletters (November 2010, October 2010, November 2012, and October 2018) at [www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Newsletters](http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Newsletters)).