

## On the Donner Pass, the Lincoln Highway once forced motorists through an active train tunnel

[Daniel Strohl](#) on Jan 2nd, 2018



*CPRR tunnels number 6 (foreground), 7, and 8, with the 1914 re-routing of the Lincoln Highway to their left. Photos by [Trey Pitsenberger](#), except where noted.*

While the threat of having your fellow traveler cannibalize you had more or less passed for motorists crossing the Donner Pass in California, they had another, far more ominous challenge to face on the route: a long, unlit, and utterly unpredictable trip through a railroad tunnel.

“Imagine driving through that dark, cold tunnel, all the while hoping your car doesn’t break down on the tracks, with a train coming,” Trey Pitsenberger wrote after recently tracking down abandoned sections of the Lincoln Highway in California.

The infamous wagon train that lent its name to the Donner Pass crossed it in 1846-1847, but established wagon trails didn’t appear there until nearly 20 years later, built to support the Central Pacific Railroad as it crossed the Sierra Nevadas. The first automobile – driven by Alexander Winton – reportedly crossed those wagon trails in 1901, and California designated the wagon trail over the Donner Pass a state highway in 1909, so when Carl Fisher and his group pieced together the Lincoln Highway four years later, they simply used the same route for the northern branch between Fallon, Nevada, and Sacramento.



*Photo courtesy [Donner Summit Historical Society](#).*

Great, except the wagon trail (when headed up to the summit from Donner Lake) entered the CPRR tunnel that bore underneath the pass itself, continued through a snow shed and another railroad tunnel, and only then diverged from the railroad to continue the climb up over the

summit. According to the Donner Summit Historical Society, there was a sort of protocol to navigating that section:

Drivers approached the snowsheds and stopped, turning off the auto engine so they could hear better. They got out of their vehicles and opened one of the sliding doors on the side of the shed. They listened for approaching trains. Hearing none they went back to their cars and restarted the engines and drove across the tracks and then alongside the tracks to the sliding door on the other side.

It was far from foolproof, however, and the system [resulted in a number of accidents](#) – enough to warrant the construction of the country’s first auto road underpass beneath a railroad just a year later. The concrete underpass went in roughly where automobiles exited the snow shed near CPRR tunnel No. 8 and forced a minor re-routing of the Lincoln Highway.



*The former CPRR roadbed above the 1914 re-routing of the Lincoln Highway.*

The underpass remains, as do the railroad tunnels and the nearby roadbeds for the Lincoln Highway and the CPRR. The railroad abandoned that section of line in 1993; the purpose-built U.S. Route 40, now known as the Donner Pass Road, replaced the Lincoln Highway in 1926 and was itself replaced by Interstate 80 in the 1960s.

These days, the [Old Donner Summit Road](#) remains [open as a hiking trail](#).

Source: [https://www.hemmings.com/blog/2018/01/02/on-the-donner-pass-the-lincoln-highway-once-forced-motorists-through-an-active-train-tunnel/?fbclid=IwAR3kkZdng40w7iqGolanyLpHyqgl7M8hIL9KfVftCyahUKSiO\\_20f6XKnRE](https://www.hemmings.com/blog/2018/01/02/on-the-donner-pass-the-lincoln-highway-once-forced-motorists-through-an-active-train-tunnel/?fbclid=IwAR3kkZdng40w7iqGolanyLpHyqgl7M8hIL9KfVftCyahUKSiO_20f6XKnRE)