

The First Motorized Crossing of the Sierras and the U.S.

Author: Bill Oudegeest, Donner Summit Historical Society

In 1902 George Wyman, a champion bicyclist, attended the Reno motorcycle races by traveling over the Sierra on his motor bicycle. Wyman must have enjoyed the ride because he set his sights on a bigger challenge; a ride all the way across the country.

On May, 16 1903 Wyman left San Francisco for New York on his 90cc 1.25 hp motor bicycle. The machine weighted between seventy and eighty pounds, was belt-driven and could only go 25 mph. The throttle was controlled by spark timing. There was no float to control gas entering the carburetor so periodically a valve had to be opened so the carburetor would have gas. For the trip Wyman only carried a set of warm clothes, a gun, a camera, money, a water bottle, and spare oil and gas.

Roads, where they existed, were terrible so about half Wyman's journey was on the transcontinental railroad bed, bumping from tie to tie. He ran into flocks of sheep and was cussed at by shepherders. Sometimes the grades were too steep for his little engine and "the help of the pedals was necessary". The engine overheated and as he got close to the summit he met the "vilest road that mortal ever dignified by the term."

Like most people he had no idea there would still be snow on Donner Summit in May. It had been an about average winter with a bit more than thirty feet of snowfall. It takes a long time to melt. Wyman worked his way up the Sierra but when he got close to the Summit he ran into the snow. He found that the snowsheds were an alternative and ended up walking eighteen miles through the snowsheds for seven hours pushing his machine. Going through the sheds he came to stations and section houses all "built in the dripping and gloomy, but friendly, shelter of these sheds, where daylight penetrates only at the short breaks where the railway tracks span a deep gulch or ravine."

Wyman stayed at the Summit Hotel and visualized that the next day it would be all downhill to Truckee. Then he found he'd lost his oil can. He had to walk back through the sheds a mile and a half to find the can.

Finding the oil, without which his machine would not work, Wyman then walked through that "dark, damp, dismal" 1700 foot long Tunnel 6 with his bike and then decided to get out of the sheds. The day had started badly and "The magnificent view that the tip top the mountains afforded lost its charms. I had eyes not even for Donner Lake, the 'gem of the Sierras,' nestling like a great, lost diamond in its setting of fleecy snow and tall, gaunt pines."

He emerged from the tunnel and "I tried to walk. Where the road should have been was a wide expanse of snow - deep snow. As there was nothing else to do, I plunged into it and floundered, waded, walked, slipped, and slid to the head of Donner Lake. "

In Truckee he discovered that the locals' knowledge of local geography was not accurate. He

followed the directions of “the intelligent citizens, several of [whom] agreed on the route.” After two hours and riding 21 miles, he’d only progressed six miles from Truckee. “After that experience I asked no further information, but sought the crossties...” (meaning he rode on the railroad bed) which “shook me up not a little, I made fair time to Verdi.”

He got to New York almost fifty days after his start on July 6, pedaling the last 150 miles. He’d covered 3,800 miles. His was the first motorized crossing of the country (excluding railroads). Automobiles would do it later in the year but on different routes and after George Wyman.

Sidebar/drop quotes

“The crossties of the roadbed proper are not laid with punctilious exactitude, nor are the intervaling spaces leveled or smoothed. They make uncomfortable and wearying walking: they make bicycle riding of any sort dangerous when it is not absolutely impossible. On the trestles themselves the ties are laid sufficiently close together to make them ride-able – rather ‘choppy’ riding, it is true, but much faster and less tiresome than trundling.”

(George Wyman on going over summit with first motorized vehicle, 1903)

- Join us on May 20, 2019 for a plaque dedication and commemorative motorcycle ride celebrating the first motorized crossing over the Sierras. Time TBD.
- 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:

Bill Oudegeest has had a house on Donner Summit for more than forty years. He is a retired public school teacher and administrator and one of the founders of the Donner Summit Historical Society. He writes and edits the Donner Summit Heirloom, has published two books on local history, written a variety of pamphlets and exhibits, leads hikes, etc.