

HIGHWAYS

U.S. ROUTE 40

U.S. Route 40 has a long and memorable history. It served as one of the early wagon train routes; in fact, its summit is now named after the ill-fated Donner party — a wagon train which reached the eastern faces of the Sierra in the late fall of 1846 and was trapped by early snow. Following the discovery of gold in 1848, the route received even heavier traffic. It was this same route and mountain pass that was later chosen by Judah for the Central Pacific.

The first known survey of this route was made in 1860 by S.G. Elliott and in March, 1861, the Lake Pass Turnpike Company was organized. However it was not until officials of the Central Pacific Railroad saw the advantages of building a toll road ahead of their track, that significant progress was made. The

Central Pacific then formed the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Wagon Road Company, which by the fall of 1862, had already completed a few miles of road. In June of 1863, work was resumed, but road work was interrupted in November by heavy snow. Finally, in June, 1864, the road was opened to traffic and on July 16, the California Stage Company began operating stages over it. But in July, 1869, the summit tunnel was completed and the Central Pacific Railroad became the easiest and fastest way of crossing over the Sierra.

Freight wagon at Halfway House near Cisco on the Dutch Flat-Donner Lake Wagon Road.



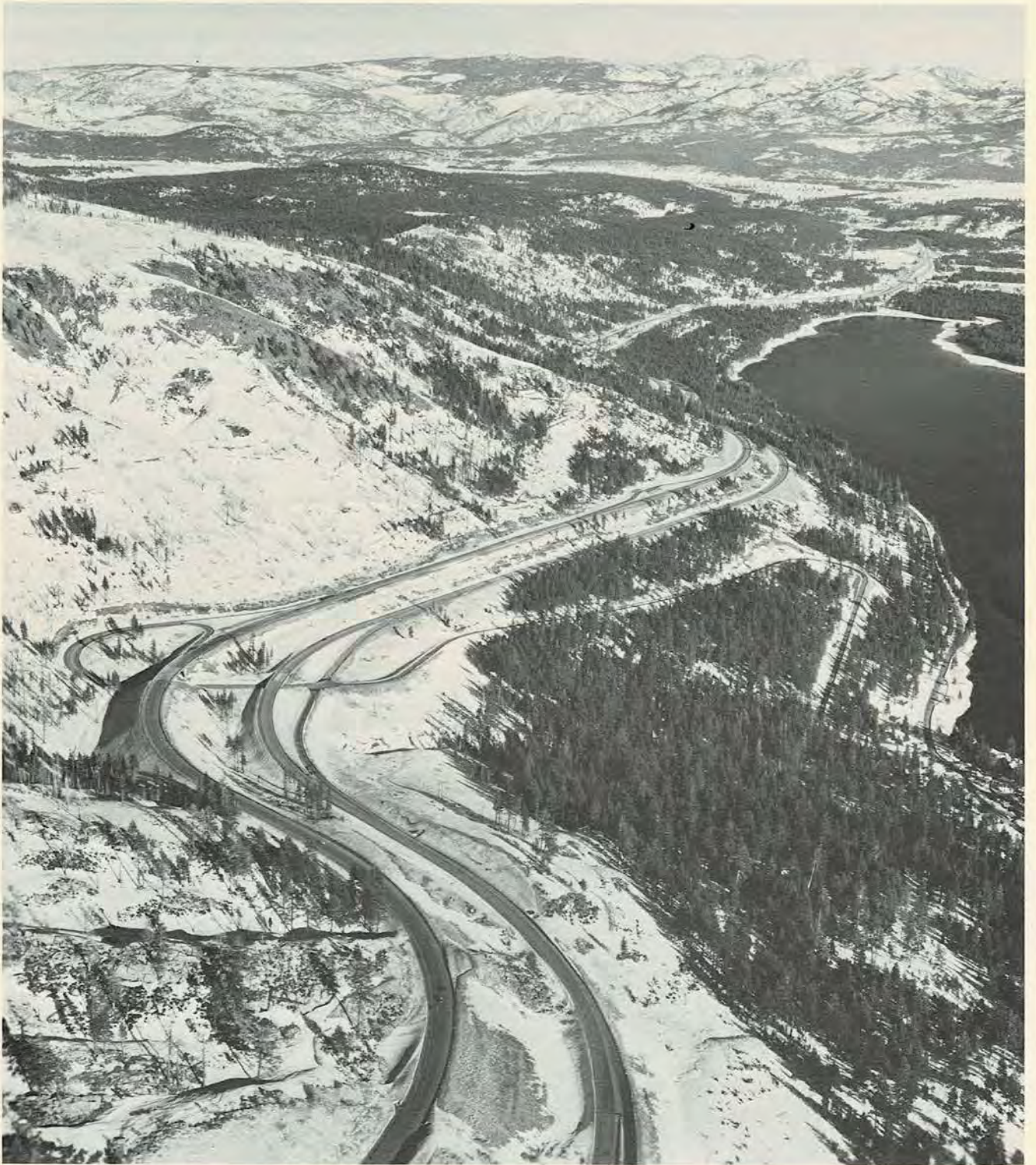
In March, 1909, the legislature finally saw fit to appropriate funds for the location survey and construction of a state highway from Emigrant Gap through the Truckee Pass (Donner Summit) to the west end of Donner Lake. The Highway Engineers found the existing road in exceedingly poor condition, and did as much as possible with the money allocated for improvements. Finally, a law was passed placing a tax on gasoline which boosted highway construction.

Due to the construction of Interstate 80, U.S. Route 40 became a thing of the past. However, many short

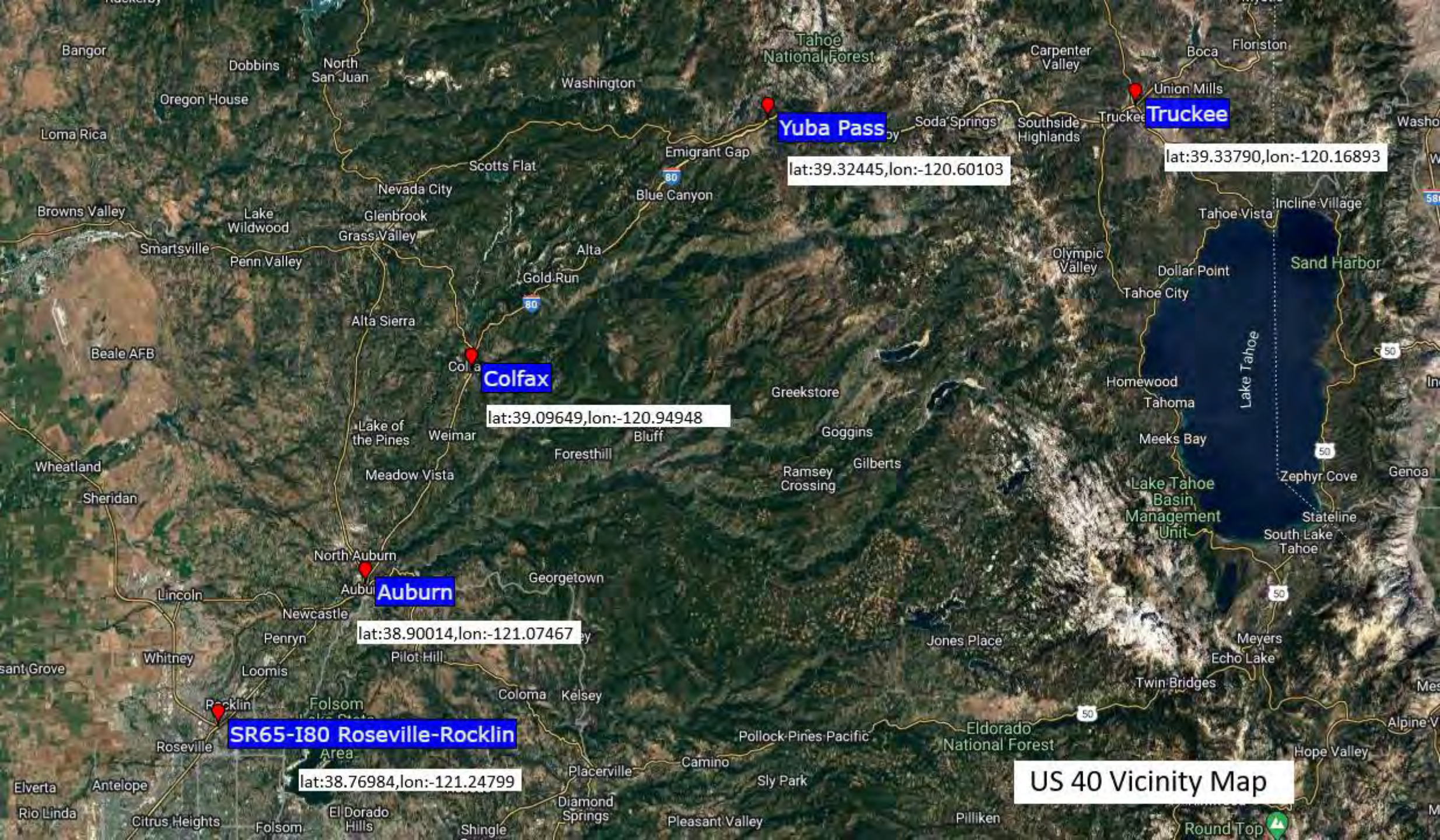
remnants still parallel Interstate 80, some of which are shown on highway maps. This includes the particularly picturesque stretch from Norden, over the summit and down to Truckee, which is open in the summer after the snow melts. Much recognition should be given to the California State Highway System and its engineers who "over seemingly insurmountable obstacles of nature" performed amazing engineering feats to accomplish this task of great magnitude.

A 1933 view of Route 40 overlooking Donner Lake.





The modern Interstate 80 passing Donner Lake 33 years later.



Yuba Pass

lat:39.32445,lon:-120.60103

Truckee

lat:39.33790,lon:-120.16893

Colfax

lat:39.09649,lon:-120.94948

Auburn

lat:38.90014,lon:-121.07467

SR65-180 Roseville-Rocklin

lat:38.76984,lon:-121.24799

US 40 Vicinity Map

References

[California U.S. Highway 40](#)

[US Highway 40 - The Lincoln Highway](#)

[AA Roads - Historic U.S. 40](#)

[The Highway 40 Scenic Bypass](#)

[The Earliest Roads over Donner Summit](#)

[Hwy Scenic Bypass - The Snowsheds](#)

[Donner Summit Historical Society](#)

[20 Mile Museum](#)