



US 99

CALIFORNIA'S UNIFYING LINK

BY LARRY S. STEVENS, SR/WA

It was a warm morning, the beginning of one of those Indian summer days we sometimes have deep into October, where the Southern California air goes stagnant, the oppressive haze is brown and thick against the San Gabriel Mountains, and the heat becomes stifling. It was the perfect day for our family to escape to the mountains for a respite from the heat and smog, and a golden opportunity to search for some early fall color nestled in the cool narrow valleys of the Tehachapis.

That day was over a half-century ago, but I still remember my parents packing a picnic lunch for the Saturday drive across the San Fernando Valley via San Fernando Road and Sierra Highway. At the time, Interstate 5 was still in the final planning stages. We passed Tip's Restaurant at Castaic Junction, the place where James Dean ate his final breakfast before his tragic crash on US 46. Then we crawled up the grueling five-mile grade on the newly reconstructed US 99 affectionately known as the Ridge Route.

My parents were children of the Great Depression, and in some ways they represented a real-life California rendering

of the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. When the stock market hit rock bottom in October 1929, with no high school diplomas, few skills and even fewer opportunities, my parents were forced to leave North Hollywood and move to the Central Valley, where my uncle offered food and shelter on his ranch in exchange for my father working his peach orchards. The days were long and the work arduous, but with the harvest of the peaches, the balky flatbed truck would be loaded high and my dad would share the driving duties in taking the ripe, juicy fruit to the wholesale market in downtown Los Angeles. But to reach that final destination, the tortuous challenge of the Ridge Route had to be overcome.

The original path—the one that would later become the Ridge Route—ran through the San Gabriel and Tehachapi mountains and was blazed by local Indian tribes. However, it was adventurer, explorer, land baron, California conqueror, politician, first Republican presidential candidate in 1856, and Civil War General John Charles Fremont, who claims the trail's namesake. As his trail grew in importance and broadened to an oxcart path, troop protection at Fort Tejon

and the Butterfield stage line followed. However, it wasn't until 1914 that the first true roadway was constructed.

Prompted by a real concern that the state might be severed at the Tehachapis, Southern California interests, including the Auto Club, worked tirelessly to make the road a reality and preserve the state as one. Using horse-drawn scrapers, workers braved the elements, as well as the terrain, carving a 20-foot wide roadway from ridgeline to ridgeline through the rugged mountains, opening the first road link between Los Angeles and Bakersfield in 1915. It was immediately hailed as a masterpiece of mountain highway engineering. Designed to minimize earth moving, it had 697 curves, which forced drivers to make the equivalent of 110 complete circles as they crossed the mountains. Five years later, realizing an all weather surface was needed, the highway was paved.

It was this treacherous, hairpin laden stretch of macadam that my father crept over with his precious and carefully piled load. Others have recounted stories of trucks creeping along so slowly that their owners, tired of sitting in the hot cab, would set the throttle, located on the steering post in those days, jump out of the truck and walk alongside. If this was done by my father, it was left out of his recitation of the adventure.

Even then, the Bakersfield side of the pass was known as the "Grapevine." Thought by many to be named for its serpentine resemblance to a grapevine wending its way to the summit at Tejon Pass, the name actually came from early wagon teamsters

who would hack their way through thick patches of Cimarron grapevines that inhabited "La Cañada de Las Uvas," the Canyon of the Grapes.

Within a little over a decade, this road would mercifully fade into history, replaced in 1933 with a three-lane Ridge Route Alternate Highway that was designated as California Highway 99. This new route removed some of the worst kinks and created a road that allowed sustainable speeds that could exceed 45 miles per hour. Surely this was greeted with a sigh of relief from my father who continued to ply the route until 1937. Like its predecessor, the alternate was lauded as an engineering marvel. Never mind that the middle lane, used as a passing lane for both uphill and downhill drivers, became known as the suicide lane.

Realizing the folly of a three-lane configuration with a burgeoning population, the Division of Highways began phasing it out in 1943, and by 1951, they had converted the entire length into a four-lane divided expressway.

It was on this four-lane expressway version of the Ridge Route that my parents drove on that autumn day so long ago. The one section that stands out and made that day so memorable was the Piru Creek stretch of road. It was here that the highway descended into a steep, narrow gorge with the Pyramid Rock standing as guardian to the canyon's entrance. The pyramid shape was the result of the highway department's blasting for additional road width in 1933. This is now where the Pyramid Dam is located.



With a burgeoning population, the highway at Pyramid Rock needed to be widened for safety.



The Division of Highways blasted the slope to make way for the four-lane highway.



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It was here in a gentle crook in the road where the highway department created a rest stop. Primitive by today's standards, the golden cottonwoods, the sounds of the creek gurgling over the rocks and a faucet for overheated radiators, along with a few picnic tables provided a shady and popular respite for road weary travelers, and it was our setting for lunch. Unfortunately, this narrow gorge was also the ideal spot for a reservoir, and about ten miles of this scenic canyon and US 99 was inundated in 1970 by the California Aqueduct Project. It is now buried several hundred feet beneath the shimmering blue surface of Pyramid Lake.

But whether the canyon remained or not, the need for a better transportation corridor was obvious. Southern California was hitting its stride in its love for the automobile, and the Ridge Route was feeling the growing crunch of cars and commerce.

The need for improvement was identified as early as 1947, but lacked funding. With the passage of the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, a funding mechanism was identified, and the state quickly acted on this critical corridor. Between 1960 and 1967, one of the great engineering marvels of the Interstate Highway system was constructed – an eight-lane superhighway that was built to federal standards across mountainous terrain. As a testament to this engineering triumph, more dirt was moved for its grade requirements than for the construction of the entire Aswan High Dam. It is also one of the few manmade objects to be clearly visible from space.

Known as “Main Street of America,” Route 99 was the north-south backbone for California’s commerce and personal travel. By means of Interstate 5, it still provides a vital link ensuring the economic health of the state. The

stake-bed farm trucks heading south for the wholesale markets in Los Angeles have largely disappeared, supplanted by high powered 18-wheeler rigs carrying everything from computer parts to travel trailers. The need for the route only grows with each passing day.

And what of the remnants of those earlier iterations of the current I-5? For those who are willing to spend a little time and energy, some signs of those earlier roadways can still be found. Just above Lake Castaic, one can still drive on the 1915 single slab wide concrete maintained for utility company access. Farther up at the ramp before Pyramid Lake,

the four-lane marvel of 1933 still takes one to Pyramid Rock and the face of Pyramid Dam. Gorman and Fort Tejon still exist, as do the Cimarron grapevines, but like the changing meander of a stream, the earliest remnants of the 1915 “Grapevine” are slowly being reclaimed by nature. Of the inns, gas stations and other tourist related structures, most have been destroyed by fire, vandals or just the wear and tear of time. The National Forest Inn, Tumble Inn, Camp Tejon and Sandberg’s Summit Hotel, all have passed into history.

When my parents took me on that jaunt, I had no thought that one day my life’s work would be linked so closely to the transportation system. But with the passage of time, and having worked with some of the old timers who worked on these projects, I have come to truly appreciate the professionalism and achievements of the era, and moreover its unheralded contribution to the growth and development of the Golden State.

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