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From Footpaths to the Grapevine: A Brief History of Southern California's Ridge Route

By Nathan Masters

November 1, 2012

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1920 view of the Ridge Route ascending Grapevine Canyon. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive. Used under a Creative Commons license.

Today, motorists traveling on Interstate 5 between Southern California and points north seemingly glide over the rugged San Gabriel and Tehachapi mountains. Navigating the gentle curves and easy grades along today's eight-lane highway -- once called the Ridge Route and today popularly known as the Grapevine -- gives little indication of the difficulty early travelers experienced in their journey between Southern California and the Central Valley.

Motorists on the highway's first iteration, which opened to traffic in 1915, faced a daunting, 12-hour drive between Los Angeles and Bakersfield on a one-way, unpaved road. To save money by minimizing road cuts and bridges, a 36-mile stretch of the route traveled atop the mountain ridges between Castaic and Gorman. Slowed by a strictly enforced speed limit, drivers crawled around 697 curves at 15 miles per hour.

Today, most drivers would avoid such a road. But in a time when many took to the roads as a recreational pursuit, the Ridge Route -- a name that later came to be applied to the entire stretch between the Central Valley and San Fernando -- earned many admirers. A 1921 travel guide, "On Sunset Highways," raved:

No description or picture can give any idea of the stupendous grandeur of the

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road.

Still, the highway was dangerous -- one precarious section in Grapevine Canyon became known as Dead Man's Curve -- and the views may have pleased tourists but hardly compensated for the time spent on the road by truck drivers and other regular users. The road also tested the mettle of the automobiles of the era; overheated engines and blown-out tires were a common occurrence.

Motorists got an alternative in 1933, when the state opened a new, three-lane highway that avoided the ridge top in favor of the canyon and gorges of Piru Creek. At the time considered the largest highway project in state history, the Ridge Route Alternate, later designated US-99, shaved 9 miles and 45 minutes off the original Ridge Route. Curves featured a minimum radius of 1000 feet, and the new road's lower elevation reduced the chance of snowfall.

The route of US-99 later became the basis for today's modern superhighway, which opened in 1970. Some portions of the original Ridge Route and its 1933 successor are still open to traffic today. Other parts are accessible only to hikers, who may struggle to find the concrete beneath the overgrown chaparral.



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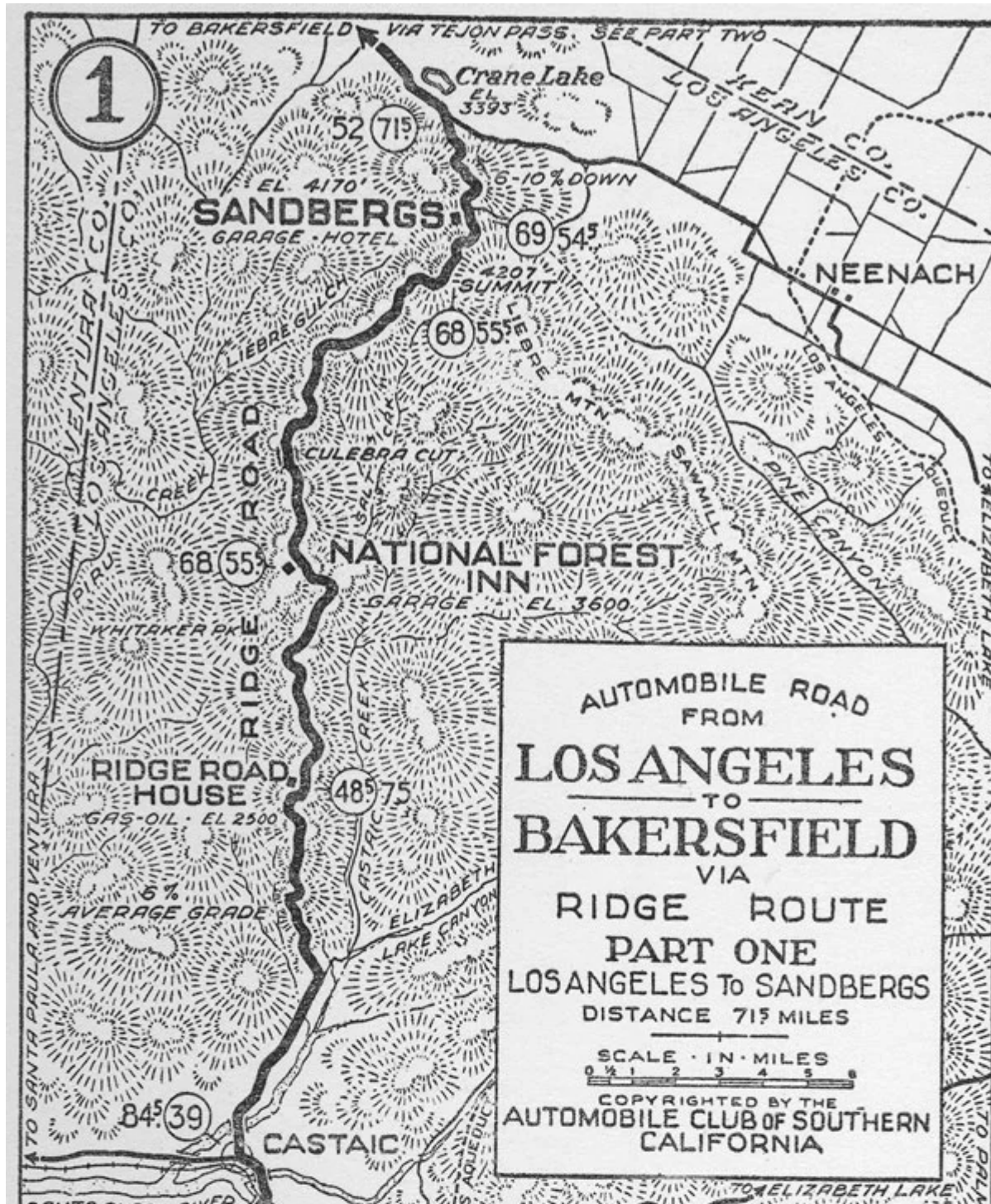
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Ridge Route, circa 1920. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce Collection, USC Libraries.



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An automobile on the Ridge Route, circa 1925. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce Collection, USC Libraries.




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Famous
Grapevine
Grade
and
straightaway
approaching
the
Scenic
Ridge
Route
U. S. Hwy. 99

KERN
COUNTY
CALIFORNIA

F6726

Courtesy of the Frasher Foto Postcard Collection, Pomona Public Library.




A
Scenic
Spot
Along
The
Famous
Ridge Route
U. S. Hwy. 99
The
Inland
Route
Thru
California


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Aerial view of the Ridge Route Alternate, signed as US-99, in 1957. Courtesy of the Kelly-Holiday Collection of Negatives and Photographs, Los Angeles Public Library.

Historical Precursors

Notably, the section of the original Ridge Route from Castaic to Gorman followed a novel route; unlike most mountain highways, which follow the paths of Indian foot trails, wagon roads, and railways, the winding Ridge Route was invented by state highway commissioner N.D. Darlington and engineer W. Lewis Clark.

But other segments of the freeway's 45-mile route between Kern County and the San Fernando Valley owe their alignment to historical forerunners.

At its northern end, Grapevine Canyon has long provided a vital line of communication

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When Captain Fages did finally arrive in 1772, hot in pursuit of deserters from the Spanish army, he noted in his diary the canyon's abundance of wild grapes. Three decades later, a Spanish missionary named Jose Zalvidea also noticed the grapes and gave it the name La Canada de las Uvas (the Canyon of the Grapes), which later became Grapevine Canyon.

The canyon grew in importance as a transportation route under U.S. rule. In 1854, the U.S. Army founded Fort Tejon near the Tejon Pass as the headquarters of its First

Dragoons. Four years later, the Butterfield Overland Mail route brought stagecoaches through the canyon.

The southern end of the freeway, where it rises from the San Fernando Valley, also traces historical routes. Intrepid Indian traders blazed a trail through this area to connect cismontane Southern California with the Antelope Valley. The trail crossed over a summit known today as Newhall Pass but which historically has been named Fremont Pass and San Fernando Pass, located near the present-day interchange of Golden State (I-5) and Antelope Valley (CA-14) freeways.

That ancient footpath eventually became a wagon road and in 1858 was incorporated into the Butterfield line, which extended north to San Francisco and east to St. Louis. Seeking to improve this important line of communication, the city of Los Angeles contracted with a rancher and former Indian Affairs superintendent named Edward F. Beale to improve the road. Between 1859 and 1865, Beale's army of Chinese laborers used picks, shovels, and dynamite to cut a 50-foot trench in the earth at the Newhall Pass. Though bypassed by modern-day roads, Beale's Cut long served as an important link between the San Fernando and Santa Clarita Valleys.



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Circa 1880 view of Beale's Cut at Newhall Pass. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust / C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

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