

H 23 El Camino Sierra Oct 9, 1980

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Captions--El Camino Sierra

1. The first auto travel up the east side of Sonora Pass in 1916.  
A Stearns and a Dodge car. Ben Noxon Collection
2. North to LeeVining by way of sandy washes that had to be bridged  
with logs to cross. Ben Noxon collection
3. The Dusey sign, posted on 1395, read; "22 miles to Dusey's store  
for men, Bishop. Everything for men except wives and whiskey."  
Laws Museum. Adele Reed photo.
4. The Fish signs once pointed the way to a fishing paradise.  
Laws Museum Adele Reed photo
5. Sidney Doty and Josephine Breen in a covered wagon during the  
"Wedding of the waters" at Lone Pine in 1937.  
Adele Reed photo
6. Holding the gourd of water were two descendants of the Jayhawkers,  
Josephine Breen and Sidney Doty. Adele Reed photo



# The history of 'El Camino Sierra'

by ADELE REED

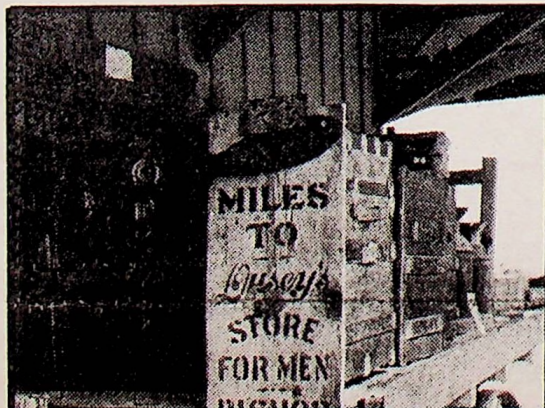
As an introduction, to El Camino Sierra we quote from author Peter B. Kyne after his second visit to Bishop in 1911. Used with permission from "The Story of District IX."

INYO—MONO—"I was conceited enough to imagine that I knew my California thoroughly. I did not know that in one day's travel it was possible for one to traverse desert, mountains, meadow, valleys and lakeshore, scattered in such delightful chaos. From a scenic standpoint one is first appalled at the aching desolation and the next a miracle is wrought and he is enchanted with a landscape to be found no where else on earth. Let us become acquainted with the wonders of the land we live in."

The present U.S. 395—once called the Royal Road to Romance—runs from Mexico to Canada and includes the scenic, colorful route through the Inyo-Mono country. A beginning was made, locally, in 1910, to plan for a much-needed through road for the remote desert and mountain terrain. The Good Road Club was formed, sponsored the planning with the aid of interested citizens and the name El Camino Sierra was chosen, meaning "mountain highway."

After much delay, many meetings, visitations of officials and arranging for financing, the decision to proceed came in 1915. At that time there were two original routes north. One by way of Benton and Mono Mills; the other was the formidable Sherwin Hill route. The latter was chosen and it was a historical day when the work first began over the former J.L.C. Sherwin Toll Road of the 1870s.

George Wood, Bishop native, was named foreman of construction. After a great amount of hard labor, the road was completed northerly over the hill into Rock Creek Canyon and to Whiskey Canyon, ready for the dedication on Sept. 4, 1916. A colorful celebration was followed by a barbecue. There were about 300 licensed autos in Inyo that year and a good selection of all kinds of autos—that now would be titled antique—gathered in a circle on the meadow along Rock Creek. That became an eventful day in the history of roads.



The route was in use until 1954 when Hwy. 395 was located higher on Sherwin Hill to eliminate the old Sherwin Grade-Rock Creek bottleneck and other steep pitches and curves. It also called for a dedication that was attended by several of the ones who were prominent at the 1916 event Mrs. Dorothy (Doyle) Cook, daughter of Drs. Guy and Nellie Doyle, Mrs. Frances McIver, Art Hess and Mrs. Alma (Yaney) Crosby.

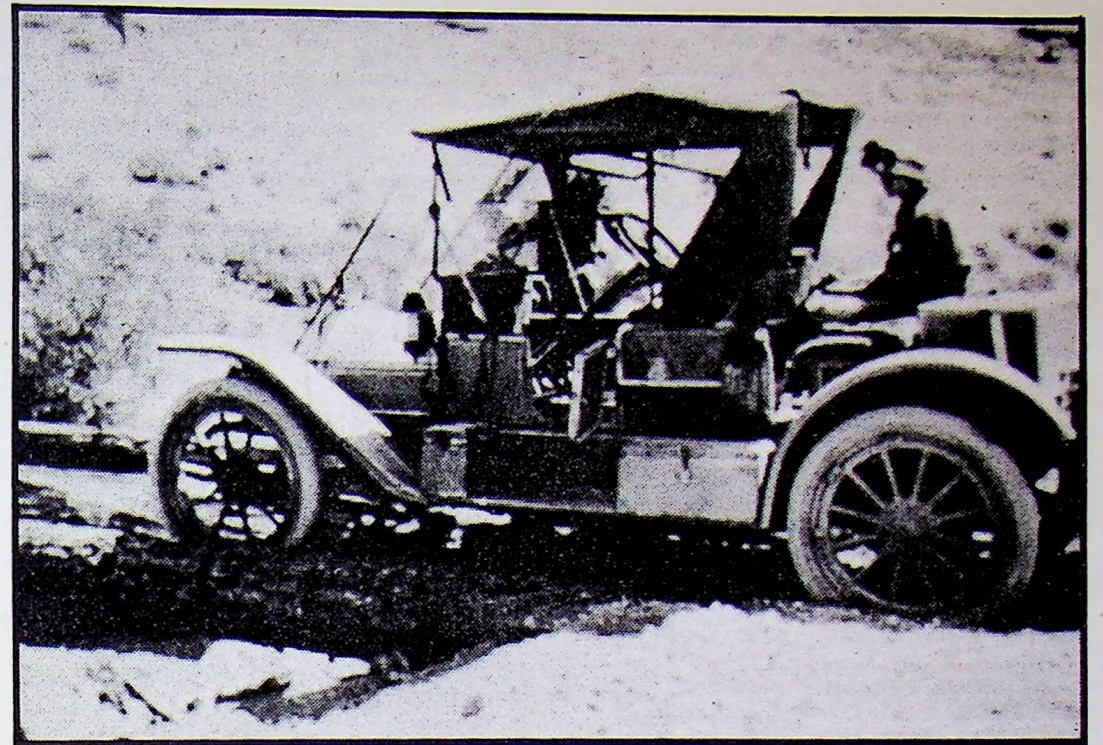
As finances became available, the road work continued to the north and to the south, a section at a time. In due time many branch roads were built. In 1917 a work crew constructed road from Division Creek northerly past Aberdeen, skirted the Black Hills, Charley's Butte and Poverty Hills to a point near the old Fish Springs school house. It was completed in 1920 to connect with the road north.

Another Bishop man, Ellsworth Taylor, began with a small work force building the road from Hammil and Benton to connect with the new route over Mount Montgomery. It was but a rough dirt road in 1927 over the pass called "Summit." The new road was completed in 1935 including the Nevada portion that connected with Tonopah, making a much faster route than the Westgard Pass.

Progress northerly to Lee Vining brought the decision to build Hwy. 395 directly from that town to and over Conway Summit in 1921. The older road had lead easterly and or westerly around Mono Lake to reach Dogtown, the early mining camp south of Bridgeport, thus avoiding the steep Conway summit. It is difficult nowadays, when traveling the Sonora Pass, to picture the way it once was. As noted in the "Story of District IX" the first roadway had rock steps of 12 inches or more on the steepest grades. These had been backfilled with gravel which moved downhill when an auto tried to climb over the steps. One wonders with what conditions the early stage line from Bodie to Sacramento had to contend. Caltrans District IX was formed in 1923 with headquarters at Bishop and included highways in Mono, Inyo and the desert portion of Kern County. It began in a small building and has grown through the years into a large complex south of Bishop.

In the 1920s two Bishop businessmen, G.H. Dusenberry and L.A. Hazard, made an effort to mark the roads. They drove an auto towing a trailer and both were loaded with signs to be placed one mile apart from Mojave to Bishop. One could read the slowly diminishing miles when traveling the sandy road north. It was likened to a two-track cowtrail where meeting another auto was an experience! One or the other took to the sagebrush in order to pass, wondering if they could get back into the tracks. Either Hazard's big red fish sign ticked off the miles to shade and water and services, or a tall board listed the distance to Dusey's store in Bishop where "there is everything for men but wives and whiskey."

U.G. Smith of the popular Smith Auto Garage in Bishop, placed his "Back to Bridgeport" sign.



LOG BRIDGE—North to Lee Vining by way of sandy washes that had to be bridged by logs.

Ben Naxon collection

Father John J. Crowley, the originator of the event, was aided by the following: George Savage, W.A. Reid, T.R. Goodwin, Dane Coolidge, W.A. Chalfant, Alex Krater, E.T. Albright, Ralph Merritt, Joe Riley, H.P. Gower, John Beebe, Roy Boothe, James Irvine, Isaac Bays, Chester Best and W.A. "Bob" Crosby. These men succeeded in capturing...for a few hours...the romance, hazards and rough riding over a 100-mile expanse of desert and mountains. The memorable "wedding of the waters" lured many people from the "outside." Old-time prospectors from the desert outposts, no matter how remote, were seen on the streets of Lone Pine. The plan was to join waters from the highest lake in America to the lowest sink in Death Valley in pageant style.

An Indian runner brought water in a gourd from Lake Tulainyo, 12,865 feet high, to Whitney Portal where a Pony Express rider, Bert Johnson, carried it to Lone Pine the first day. Then Sam Bell, an early prospector, and his burro carried the water to a covered wagon that had brought pioneers to Lone Pine in 1849. It was driven by Sidney Dory, descendent of a survivor of the Jayhawker party, accompanied by Josephine Breen, a descendent of the Donner party.

A mule skinner of Death Valley days, Johnny O'Keefe, and his swamper, Bill Bonham, drove the lumbering Borax wagons drawn by 20-mule teams carrying the gourd of water to Ollie Dearborn. Ollie, 79, had once been driver of the Mt. Whitney-Death Valley stage. The water was carried a short distance by stagecoach, then transferred to the rail-

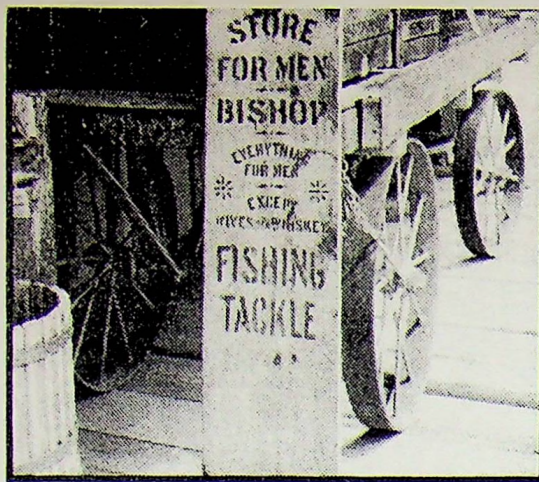
road car. The Slim Princess, the charge of J.M. Henry, engineer on the narrow guage line from Mina, Nev., to Keeler, Cal., ended that day's procession at the Keeler Station.

The third day an auto and airplane completed the trip into Death Valley and to Badwater where the waters were wedded. This effort was a colorful and extensive undertaking and the dropping of the water was flashed by telegraph connection through special arrangement. That evening the beacon on Dante's View blazed up, Telescope Peak showed a red star, Cerro Gordo Peak flamed as did Mt. Whitney, in the charge of the famous mountain climber, Norman Clyde. It was the ending of a pageantry of great proportions, very historical in the legends of Inyo.

We, as residents of Lone Pine, enjoyed the celebration from beginning to end. We resided north of town directly across the highway from the big Simmons barn where the road to Owenyo leads east. The 20-mule team was housed at the barn and it was especially interesting to see the handling and the hitching of the mules. Then they lined out and hauled the huge freight wagons into town each day. Probably we witnessed a bit of history not seen but once or twice since.

Forty years after El Camino Sierra was named it lost the colorful Spanish name, becoming just Hwy. 395 in District IX, the transcontinental route. The many highways built in Inyo and Mono bring into prominence numerous names to conjure with and all are shared by the world, a great accomplishment.





THE DUSEY SIGN, posted for travelers of the early Hwy. 395, reads "22 miles to Dusey's store for men, Bishop. Everything for men except wives and whiskey." Sign was photographed at Laws Museum.

Photo by Adele Reed

to Dusey's store in Bishop where "there is everything for men but wives and whiskey."

U.G. Smith of the popular Smith Auto Garage in Bishop placed his signs northerly to Bridgeport. In front of his garage a huge glass tank filled with sleek, darting Rainbows lured tourists to the ol' fishing hole and made it the busiest place in town, come tourist season.

In 1937 a branch road, Hwy. 203, was completed northerly from Hwy. 395 with a more gradual ascent to the beautiful Mammoth Lakes in Mono. The new road by-passed the old road by the mining camps and also the little settlement named Old Mammoth. This meant a move for the business people from their superb meadowland and scenery to a new location on the highway.

Every completion of roadway over a summit or other area in the early days called for a dedication and celebration. A most novel use of all types of transportation was seen in the historic celebration held in Lone Pine in 1937 upon completion of the relocation of Hwy. 190. The new road by-passed Darwin and the Zinc Hill road through Darwin Wash, connecting with the Townes Pass road into Death Valley.

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WAGONS HO—Sidney Doty and Josephine Breen in a covered wagon during the "wedding of the waters" at Lone

Pine in 1937.

Photo by Adele Reed



THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD—A Stearns and a Dodge automobile negotiate rough terrain as they were among

the first autos to travel up the east side of Sonora Pass in 1916.

Ben Noxon collection