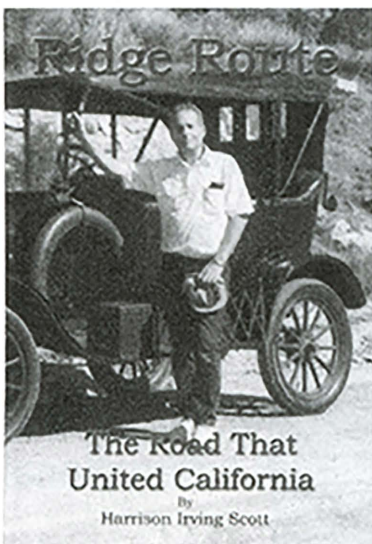


# RUNNING THE Ridge

A TRUCKER'S JOURNEY  
OVER CALIFORNIA'S  
INFAMOUS RIDGE ROUTE

Story and photos by  
HARRISON IRVING SCOTT



**Editor's note:** The following is a dramatized account of what a trip might have been like for a trucker in the early 1920s over the Ridge Route, California's first mountain highway. Author Harrison Scott used excerpts and photos from his book, "Ridge Route, The Road That United California," to tell this tale. Scott was one of the speakers at the 2004 ATHS National Convention and Antique Truck Show in Fontana, Calif., this past May. To order the book, contact the author at 310-320-3205,

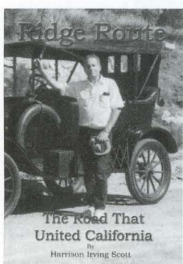


The steep grade and many switchbacks of the Grapevine made it one of the most treacherous spots on the Ridge Route for many truckers.

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It was a hot summer afternoon that August in 1921 as the old Teamster left the packing plant at Lindsey, Calif., with a heavy load of olives. He was heading south down the great San Joaquin Valley to Los Angeles. Checking his pocket watch, he hoped to get to Bakersfield and through town before the evening traffic. He could then continue on to Greenfield, about another 10 miles south where it was easier to park a rig and grab a bite to eat.

He thought to himself how only seven years ago he would have had to take the Midway Route due east from Bakersfield over to Mojave, then cut back south taking one of the canyon passes to gain entrance to Los Angeles and southern California. The Midway Route was like a giant "dog leg" that took you way out of your way from the direct route over the mountains that the Ridge Route now provided.

The best minds back then said it was impossible to conquer the Tehachapi and San Gabriel mountains with a road. The California Division of Highways decided to put the controversy to rest once and for all, and sent a group of engineers to Europe to see how England, France and other countries dealt with the building of mountain roads. The information they came home with indicated it was feasible to consider a route over the mountains.

After additional research, construction began in 1914, and a year later the new oil and gravel Ridge Route opened. The San Francisco Chronicle called it "one of the most remarkable engineering feats accomplished by the State Highway Commission."

When the road opened, it silenced efforts in the making to

divide California into two separate states. In 1919, the 20-foot-wide road was paved with concrete and was a showcase of what highway engineering was all about at a time when people were just concerned about “getting out of the mud.”

On the outskirts of Bakersfield, our Teamster noticed the neat row crops and orchards had given way to a forest of oil derricks. Entering town he followed a similar path and turned onto Union Avenue, the main north-south artery. Traffic started to thin out now, and he was making good time.

In the distance he could see the small community of Greenfield. Hay trucks, tankers and livestock rigs were parked along the highway in front of the Tropics Café. Drivers would be inside swapping stories over coffee, waiting for the sun to go down. Climbing the mountain grade with a heavy load on a hot summer day would almost guarantee your radiator would boil over and leave you stranded on the infamous incline. The Grapevine grade put the best trucks and drivers to the test of conquering elevation and the mountain barrier separating the state.

There were so many trucks lining the highway this day in Greenfield that the Teamster decided to keep going to the smaller town of Grapevine, located at the foot of the mountains and named after the very grade that begins in its back yard.

Up ahead, near the end of tree-lined Union Avenue, he approached 17-mile tangent, the straightest and longest section of cement highway in the state. It was so straight that it was almost boring, but that would soon change.

Waves of heat rose above the pavement, giving the illusion that you were about to hit water. The solid rubber tires of his Mack bulldog truck lumbered down the highway making a rhythmic



A Jeffrey quad truck stuck in the mud between Fairmont and Neenach after a heavy storm.

“thump, thump, thump” as they hit the seams separating the neat sections of pavement. The old Teamster started counting the bumps to while away the time.

In the distance, he finally saw Grapevine and the mountains looming above the small community of Richfield Oil workers. He wondered what he would have for dinner. Grapevine’s café was smaller than the Tropics back at Greenfield, and didn’t have a large menu.

A few trucks were parked near the café here too, but now that daylight was fading they were pulling back onto the highway to begin the torturous climb. He could hear the loud snap of the old chain-driven trucks as the transmissions engaged the links and began to torque the wheels forward. He decided to stop and eat before joining their parade.

Motorists were pulling into the small cabins at the far end of town. They would tackle the grade after a good night’s sleep and during daylight. Children were running about, happy their parents decided to stop for the evening.

With ample refills of coffee and a substantial dinner, the Teamster pulled back onto the highway in line with the other truckers.

Starting the ascent he noticed a sign which read, “Bowerbank Radiators: They Cool.” It was certainly an appropriate place to advertise their product, right at the beginning of the Ridge Route and Grapevine grade.

Although the road cut 58 miles from the old Midway Route, the down side was that you had 697 curves to navigate before reaching the small community of Castaic far to the south at the bottom of the mountains where the Ridge Route, with all of its curves and grades, ends — or begins, depending on which direction you’re going!

There were so many warning signs up here on the ridge to announce the many curves that folks complained that the signs outnumbered



McLarty, the first town on the Grapevine, was home to many Richfield Oil workers.

the trees in the mountains.

Maneuvering the switchbacks above Grapevine, he gained elevation. It was cooler now, and he really didn't worry too much about overheating as the Mack had a large radiator. Unfortunately, it was positioned in front of the firewall that separated the motor from the driver. An uphill climb during a hot day caused the radiator to really heat up. Sometimes the heat was so intense it forced him to steer the slow moving rig from the running board.

The mountains were beautiful as the last glimmer of daylight faded from the peaks above. Headlights began to identify the line of trucks coming down the grade in the opposite direction. He was glad he wasn't one of them because a fully loaded truck coming down this hill was a force to reckon with. You dare not make a mistake because it would be the last one you made.

Up ahead was Deadman's Curve, the most dangerous curve. The canyon below was called the "junkyard," testament to the many rigs that went over the side.

Truckers gaining too much speed coming down the grade often slowed their rigs by rubbing the hard rubber truck tires against the substantial cement curbing because mechanical brakes were worthless. This practice did little damage to the tires but inflicted severe damage to the curbs.

As he passed Fort Tejon, he recalled that it was here in 1857 that California experienced its worse earthquake. The quake caused extensive damage to the fort, and it was said that the jolt was so severe that fissures opened, swallowing unsuspecting



The Hotel Lebec (originally the Hotel Durant), located on the Ridge Route, was a popular destination for Hollywood's rich and famous in the 1920s and 30s. The hotel was razed in 1971.

cattle grazing on the sides of the hills. The San Andreas Fault created the very mountains the Ridge Route conquered.

Coming into view now was the opulent Hotel Durant (later renamed Hotel Lebec), built by Clifford Durant, son of William Crapo Durant, the founder of General Motors, and Thomas O'Brien of Bakersfield. It was an imposing structure, all lit up out in the middle of nowhere. This was the watering hole for the Hollywood elite. The old Teamster wondered what it would be like to bed down there for the night, and run into Buster Keaton or some other famous star.

He was still climbing, although Grapevine grade was pretty much behind him now. As the hotel faded from view, he realized that he had another 36 miles ahead of him. The speed limit on the



Deadman's Curve was the most notorious curve on the Ridge Route. The canyon below became known as the "junkyard" because of all the cars and trucks that missed the curve and went over the side of the mountain.



Sandberg's Summit Hotel catered to the "carriage trade" who traveled the Ridge Route. "Trucker drivers and dogs not allowed," said a sign out front.

ridge was 12 miles an hour for hard rubber-tired trucks. He pulled into the Standard Oil service station at Gorman to use the restroom and stretch his legs. Across the way a Greyhound bus was loading passengers from the Gorman Hotel, on its way to San Francisco.

Climbing back into the open cab, the warmth from the radiator felt good now, tempering the coolness of the mountain air. South of Gorman, he went by Holland's Summit Café, a small trucker's joint that had a gas station, café and a couple of sleeping cabins for weary truckers. Although it was at the top of a small ridge it wasn't the summit, which was yet ahead.

Passing Quail Lake, he started up another grade. Shortly, Sandberg's Summit Hotel came into view. It was a log structure that catered to the "carriage trade." A sign out front proclaimed: "Truck drivers and dogs not allowed." He saw a Packard and a Pierce Arrow parked out front.

A short distance up the road, at 4,233 feet, was the real summit, near Granite Gate. It seemed like everything up here had "summit" in its name. Now he was on top of the ridge, the road having been built right across the very spine of the mountains, hence its name.

In another 20 miles or so he would be at Castaic, another trucker's town at the foot of the grade on the southern end. Most automobile traffic had stopped for the night, and trucks dominated the highway now. He passed the Tumble Inn, a small rock structure with a few rooms, a café and a Richfield gas station, but there was only one light

on out front and he didn't see anyone as he drove by.

The old trucker knew every stop along the road. Next would be Kelly's Halfway House, being halfway between Bakersfield and Los Angeles. It was about a mile south of Kelly's where a tank truck had gone over the side of the mountain. Kelly's had a 24-hour café, gas station, tow truck and some cabins out back. He noticed a flag out front to signal the motor stage, as it normally only stopped at Sandberg's Hotel.

Shifting to a lower gear, he began a 2-mile climb to Reservoir Summit Café. The café hung out over the hill, with a commanding view of the canyon below. Here was another example of a business incorporating the word "summit" into its name, even though the real summit was back near Granite Gate.



The Tumble Inn was a small rock structure located along the Ridge Route.

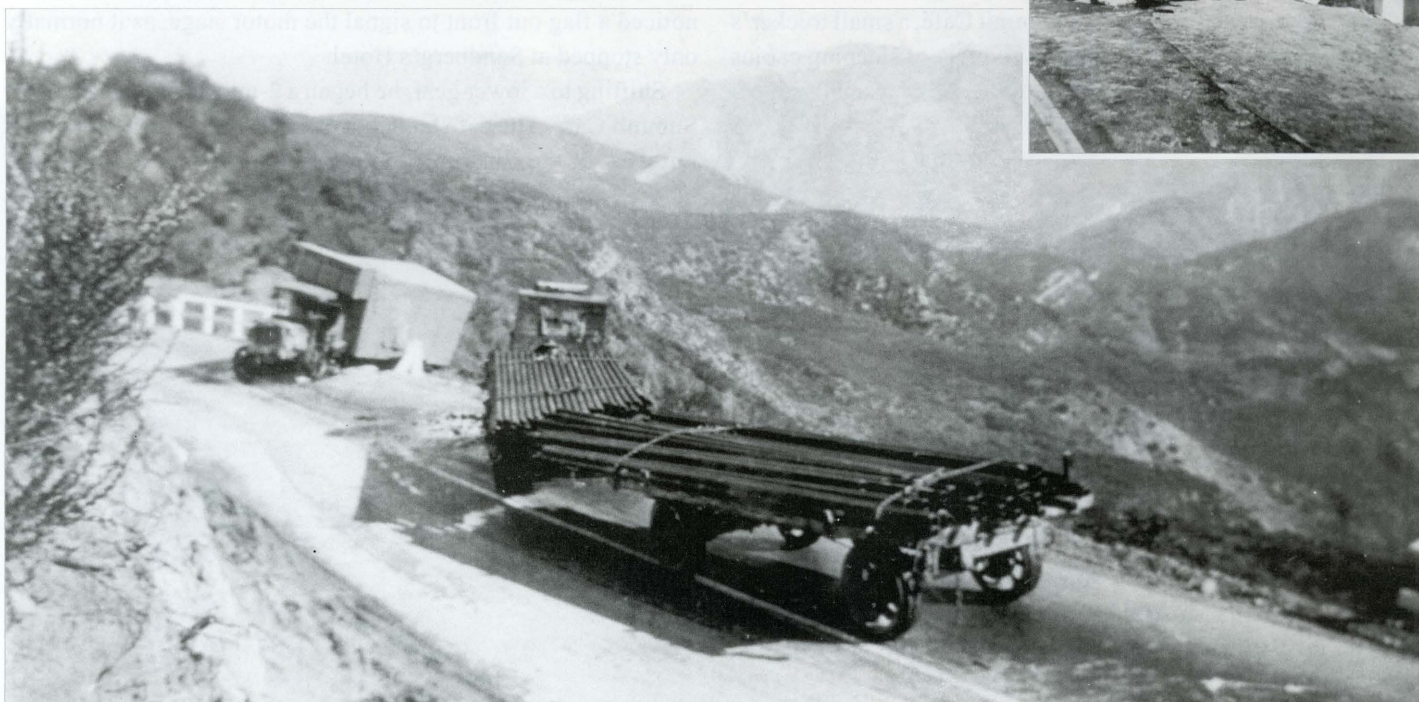


A view of the serpentine-like curves of "Swede's Cut" on the Ridge Route.

Reservoir Summit Café also offered tent cabins. The floor and bottom half of these units were made of wood, with the upper half of the wall and roof constructed of canvas. A small tin garage south of the café housed a tow truck. The reservoir was on a knoll above the café, and had been constructed for storing water for use when concrete was mixed to pave the road back in 1919.

Soon, he was going through Swede's Cut. The curve at the south end of the cut signaled the start of Serpentine Drive and a rapid descent. Not long ago, a truckload of Mexican farm hands missed the curve and met their maker. You had to be alert to the many curves and grades on the Ridge Route.

Shifting into a lower gear, he slowed his rig in advance of the crucial turn and descent. At the bottom he drove another two miles,



A stretch of dirt left by a maintenance crew on the highway between Martin's and the Ridge Road Garage turned into mud and disaster for a Mack loaded with oil-well casings and a Packard, loaded with eight tons of olives. The driver of the Packard (inset) can smile at his close call.

passing the National Forest Inn, a white clapboard structure that had a garage, gas station, café and nine sleeping cabins.

Mile after mile into the night, he would soon be over the ridge. He was now on a stretch of highway between Martin's Garage and the Ridge Road House, a couple of small establishments above Castaic. It was here, earlier in the year, that a maintenance crew working on the road left a stretch of dirt that had turned into mud. A fellow Teamster rounding a curve with a fully loaded Packard truck saw a Mack truck

and trailer load of oil-well casings. The Mack had slowed nearly to a stop when the driver saw the mud. The Packard hit the Mack, pushing it backwards, and the Packard nearly went over the side.

At Castaic, the old Teamster stopped to stretch his legs and get a cup of coffee. He was glad that he was down off the Ridge Route. He could now relax a bit for the rest of his trip into Los Angeles. ☑

