

## Adventure on King's Canyon Road

by Norm Root

The historical interpretive plaque at the top of Spooner Summit says that Johnson's toll road crossed here. Hey, that means this was part of the Placerville Road. Businessmen in Placerville, California had been lamenting that business was slow. Hardly anyone comes to town spending money. The problem was, you couldn't get there from anywhere. Placerville had no road access. One John Calhoun "Cockeyed" Johnson, a local Placerville rancher, wished he could get someone to pass by his ranch and buy some of his products too. So Johnson decided to build a road so that immigrants would pass through Placerville. Since the Donner tragedy of 1846-47, overland immigrants quit using that pass and instead traveled further south to use Carson Pass. Johnson planned to intercept their trail at the Hall brother's Eagle Station (later to become Carson City) by building a road directly from there to Placerville. Johnson convinced the Hall brothers that a road would be good for business, so they helped grade the new road up the canyon. That was in 1852. That same year, Benjamin King settled at the mouth of this canyon west of Carson City. Eventually every feature around acquired King's name; King Street, King's Canyon, King's Creek, and King's Road. In fact, the 1862 Territorial Legislature granted King a 20 year franchise to repair, improve and operate Johnson's road as the Lake Bigler (later to become Lake Tahoe) Toll Road. King built a toll booth at the west end of King Street to collect tolls from those who wanted to use the road over the mountain. In 1882 the road reverted back to Ormsby County.

Long after King was gone, this route was selected for the Lincoln Highway. Now there was a competing toll road just a few miles to the south known as Kingsbury Grade, and the similarity in names often caused confusion. So the County fathers upon learning of the accidental death of Henry C. Ostermann, the Lincoln Highway Field Secretary, in 1920, voted to change the name of King's Canyon Road to Ostermann Grade, to honor Ostermann and to eliminate any name confusion. The Ostermann Grade name didn't stick and the road today is still known as King's Canyon Road.

Kings Canyon Road eventually became U.S. 50, and was maintained by the County until 1957. U.S. 50 was transferred over to Clear Creek Canyon when the State built a new road with Federal funds, in 1928-31. Today, King's Canyon Road is under the jurisdiction of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and is still passable by dirt bikes, short wheel based, fourwheel drive vehicles and on occasion by a lucky two-wheeled drive vehicle.

The Nevada Chapter of the Lincoln Highway Association offered to lead a tour over the King's Canyon segment of the Pioneer Branch, on July 10, 2005. Three Californian's, five, if we get to count Leon and Kathy Schegg, joined the tour. The combined knowledge of Leon Schegg, Jim Bonar, and Geno Oliver, contributed to a highly informative and enjoyable day.

The meeting place was Spooner Summit on U.S 50. Spooner Summit is the place where all four grades; King's Canyon, Walton's Clear Creek Toll Road, old U.S. 50 (1931-57), and the vehicles, so double up. Also we won't be able to cross the "wash out area", so we will have to back out and go around by Carson City to see the lower portion of the road.



King's Canyon Road



Photo Op

Kings Canyon Road Photo Op About a mile and a half down the road, the occupants of my car spied a wide spot next to the road and all agreed that that could have been Swift's. There were signs of recent spring water nearby, but the terrain must have changed in the last century and a half. A survey on the ground turned up absolutely nothing that would indicate any past occupation. I studied the topo map that had been furnished and noted that the contours just past Clear Creek indicate a possible wide spot. The tour leaders continued to argue that Swift's must be some distance away from the road, or that no, the road should go right through it. As we approached the switch back crossing of Clear Creek I espied through the trees across the canyon a place that resembled the photo of Swift's. I excitedly announced that Swift's was just up ahead.

At the Swift's site we discovered the stone foundations amongst the tall weeds that were in exactly the correct positions as the hotel and barn buildings in the photograph. I found the remains of a rusted away riveted shovel blade. We found broken manufactured bricks and wall plaster shards. A few small pieces of broken glass appeared to be of more modern vintage. And sure enough the road goes right through the middle of the site. We took pictures of our cars on the road in the exact position as the teamster's wagon in the photo.



Swift's Station in the 1860s Calif. Historical Society



Approaching Swift's, 2005



Swift's Hotel Foundation



Swift's Barn Foundation

Swift's Station in the 1860s Calif. Historical Society Approaching Swift's, 2005 Swift's Hotel Foundation Swift's Barn Foundation Just beyond Swift's, we came upon three hikers who warned that the road ahead is blocked by a stuck pickup truck. That didn't bother us none. After all, we have four-wheel drive vehicles.

At one spring crossing switchback, as the left front headlight of my Suburban was rubbing up against a moss covered rock sticking out of the cut bank on the left, the rear wheels tracking through the spring water began to slide off the road to the right. I gunned the engine and we made it through. Now I know why short wheel based vehicles are preferred.

Around a few more bends we came upon a considerable length of dry laid stone retaining walls supporting the road bed on the side of the mountain. We could see and hear cars whizzing below on U.S. 50.



Stone Work



Stone Work

Stone Work Stone Work Around each bend there was speculation that this must be the spot where the 1919 Signal Corps movies were made of the military convoy coming up King's Canyon.

At about mile six, we were stopped in order to examine the infamous wash out area. This is the place where Greg Franzwa lost his bumper. We were shown, with authority, by someone who wasn't even there, how the event unfolded and the exact outcropping that snagged Greg's bumper. A close examination revealed no rust stains, no flecks of chrome, and not even the bumper.

I bragged that, "This is no challenge, I have roads on my Northern California ranch that are worse than this." However I carefully held back until I watched the first vehicle attempt to make it through.



I observed how the frame twisted and distorted and the right side wheels, each in turn, floated out over space off of the road. My passengers all opted to get out and walk. I was cautioned to keep way to the left. I eased the vehicle slowly into the deep scallops with the left side wheels plowing a new trail through the overhanging brush. I made it through! It's a good thing we were going downhill. The hill is pretty steep and covered with loose sand. There are two huge scallops presumably gouged out by spinning wheels trying to go

up hill. I now have even more gallant stripes along the side of my car. It's a good thing I hadn't rubbed out the ones that I earned over in Ely yet, I'd be clear through the paint by now.

Once out of the overhanging brush and water, our leader knew about some nice pine shade trees just ahead where we enjoyed a delightful lunch in a very pleasant and scenic setting.



Lunch in the Shade



The Stuck Pickup Truck

Lunch in the Shade The Stuck Pickup Truck Shortly after lunch we came upon the stuck pickup. And sure enough, he was stuck, but good, totally blocking the road. He had tried to skirt around a large boulder that has fallen onto the road, and his long wheel based truck couldn't get around. The rear wheels slid off of the road. There he was, right side hard up against a huge boulder and the rear wheels dangling in the air out over the edge of the road. Not only that, he only has two-wheel drive. The driver said he had been there for 14 hours. He had had time to walk back to town and gather up some friends to help. But his drinking buddies were totally useless. All they did was laugh at such a hopeless situation. By hooking up two of our vehicles to his we were able to pull him back up onto the road. But by now, with all the wheel spinning and digging, the road wasn't wide enough for a car to get by the big rock. So we built up the embankment with stacked rocks and covered it all with dirt.

I'm back home now to tell the tale, so you know we got out alright. It took us 6 hours to cover the 10 mile route. The three hikers made better time than we did. This day has surely been shades of early motoring on the Lincoln.