

Kings Canyon Road: Maintaining Cultural Connectivity in Peripheral Western Nevada

Greg Haynes and Terry Birk, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest

I. Introduction

Frontier populations that live in regions far removed from the centers of their culture maintain connectedness in a variety of ways. Roadways are one of the more tangible representations of cultural connectivity because they physically connect a frontier population to larger, more important cultural capitals. The prehistoric roadways associated with Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest or the cobblestone Ways of the Roman Empire are striking examples of how roads serve this function. During the late nineteenth century, a number of roads in western Nevada—the Bonanza system of toll roads—served to connect this peripheral frontier zone with larger, more important Euro-American cultural capitals of Sacramento, San Francisco, and ultimately beyond. This research concerns Kings Canyon Road, running from Kings Canyon near Carson City to the Placerville Toll Road on the southeastern side of Lake Tahoe, the last and finest link in the Bonanza system (Map 1).

II. From Emigrant Trail to Transportation Thoroughfare (1852-1875)

The emigrant trails that crossed northern Nevada were not formally constructed roads. They were emplaced through repeated use within a large swathe and their primary function was to allow quick transit through a region. Kings Canyon Road is quite different from other emigrant trails in that its route was specific, purposefully conceived, and formally constructed by the first settlers of then Eagle Valley:

In 1852, the Halls and partners ran the Eagle Station, mined a little, and became to a limited extent, packers of goods from California, traders with overland emigrants, and helped to grade a road up Kings Cañon, with a view of inducing the overland travel to pass that way. During that year, a number of emigrants went that way, but it was a bad road, and was soon abandoned, except by pack-trains (Angel 1958 [1881]:34).

So, from the very beginning the purpose of Kings Canyon Road was not only to enable transit across the eastern Sierra, but also to get Western goods from California, to trade or sell these items to beleaguered emigrants, and to induce traffic both east and west.

It was not until 1863, however, that Kings Canyon Road became an important regional transportation route, fully integrated into the Bonanza Road system. Local demand for lumber, driven by the Comstock mining boom, served as one impetus for its construction. Because a road up Kings Canyon would allow access to unexploited timberlands, the Nevada Territorial Legislature authorized its construction and gave the builders, led by Alfred Helm and Butler Ives, ownership for 20 years provided they begin work 90 days from the Act's passage and complete it in the time span of one year (Nevada Legislature, 2nd Session, 1862:20-22).

Completed in November of 1863, the Kings Canyon Toll Road became the “last and finest link” (Goodwin 1971:76) of what was known as the Bonanza system of Toll Roads, which included three major routes—Luther Pass, the Dagget-Kingsbury Grade, and Kings Canyon (Map 1). Between 1864 and 1875, this roadway became the favored route of travel and freight transport into and out of the Comstock region of Western Nevada. The official route, called the Lake Tahoe Wagon Road or Lake Bigler Toll Road, went from Friday's Station (a ‘waystation’) at the base of Kingsbury Grade, northward along the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe to Spooner's Station (a ‘waystation’). US-50 from Kingsbury Grade to Spooner Summit follows closely the original route. From there, the road switch-backed northeast along the face of the Carson Range down into lower Kings Canyon to Carson City—the official Kings Canyon Road segment (Map 1); this portion of the larger Lake Tahoe Wagon Road was built by constructing extensive sections of heavy rockwork held in place by dry-wall masonry embankments (Photos 1-2). Total distance from Carson City to Friday's Station was about 25 miles. Galloway (1947:34) describes the Kings Canyon segment as “a well-built highway with grades generally limited to 8%, although there were some pitches of 15%, which is much less than grades used in roads in the region”. When the road opened to through traffic, the *Gold Hill Daily News* (11/11/1863) reported: “The grade on this road is much easier... and it also considerably shortens the distance. The Pioneer stages... make two hours better time than heretofore”. Where once the Pioneer Stage Lines and heavy freight wagons had used the Luther Pass and Kingsbury Grade routes, Kings Canyon was now preferred.

While local economics was one reason for its construction, the road's value as a cultural conduit was just as important, if not more so. There was ever-increasing demand to

“Improve the [Placerville-Bonanza] road! Build stations on the route! Shorten the miles to the mines! Speed up the flow of materials!” (Scott 1957:364). This need is well illustrated by the fact that on one day in August of 1860, 353 wagons were counted on the road (Scott 1957:366). Moreover, so many people were beginning to flood into the region that the *Sacramento Union* (4/02/1860) stated that in Carson City,

Provisions and other articles of prime necessity have almost reached starvation prices. Flour, none in quantity for sale, 60c a pound; sugar, \$1 a pound; liquors, \$10 to \$12 a gallon. Hay sold today for \$350 a ton; barley, corn, wheat, 30c a pound, and prices will not be materially reduced for a month.

There are few accounts that illustrate the importance of Kings Canyon Road, what it was like to ride on it and stay at its waystations (see inserts). Understanding its importance is probably best reflected through Nevada’s statehood, which occurred on October 31, 1864, after more than a decade of embarrassing squatter governments and attempts at territorial organization. Kings Canyon Road—the “last and finest link” (Goodwin 1971:76) in the Bonanza system of toll roads—connected the capital of the new state, with all its wealth in silver and gold, to the Union and the rest of the civilized world. No doubt official personages, both political and corporate, traversed this route, including national figures like Ulysses S. Grant and Samuel Clemens, regional figures like Territorial Governors Roop and Nye, Governor Blasdel, lumbering moguls D.L. Bliss and Henry Yerington, as well as renowned locals like stagecoach driver Hank Monk. And over that same road moved the endless mass of government paperwork that connected the new state to the Union, that connected investors in far off places to the booming Comstock mines, and that connected individuals living in western Nevada to families and friends elsewhere.

The Kings Canyon Road segment of the Lake Tahoe Wagon Road would remain the primary transportation route from Spooner Summit to Carson City until 1875. After 1875, the Clear Creek roadway was constructed and it became the favored route of travel (Map 1). The portion of the Lake Tahoe Wagon Road that continued in use after 1875 was from Spooner Summit to Kingsbury Grade. This particular alignment (Clear Creek to Kingsbury Grade) would remain—with one notable exception—as the primary route from Nevada’s Capital to the Placerville Road until the construction of US Highway 50 in 1928.

III. Automobile Tourism and the Lincoln Highway (1913-1928)

Before the twentieth century, most people lived in a three-mile-an-hour world. The development and widespread use of the automobile would change all that and the ability for average American citizens to maintain connectivity would become much easier. There is no better example of this connectivity than the Lincoln Highway, the nation's first transcontinental automobile road, which consisted of regionally maintained road segments stretching from Times Square in New York City to Lincoln Park in San Francisco. From its inception, the highway's primary purpose was to allow for automobile tourism (Patrice Press 1993 [1924]): the Lincoln Highway allowed every American citizen the ability to personally experience places where much of the nation's history had been made. This included the famous Comstock mining region, and the Lake Tahoe Wagon Road from Kings Canyon to South Lake Tahoe was an official route from the highway's beginning in 1913.

Just as local economics proved important for constructing Kings Canyon Road in the 1860s, Carson City residents quickly realized the boom a national auto route would have on its economy. The effect was, apparently, almost immediate:

Automobiles on the State road above Placerville averaged fifty a day from July 1 to November 1... July was the banner month of the year with a record of 2,000 machines... This year the travel over the road is expected to double the record of last year. The increase will practically come from the influx of eastern tourists traveling the Lincoln Highway (*Carson City News*, 4/08/1915).

Articles in the local *Carson City News* consistently comment on the effects that tourism had on the local economy:

The merchants of this city have realized during the past several months what this outside travel amounts to. Every merchant in Carson states that it has been a big thing during what was considered the dull season. The garage men are only one factor in the business, as thousands of dollars have been left here with the business houses (*Carson City News*, 8/05/1919).

And the little capital of Carson City did everything it could to attract people. A local group, called the 'Good Roads Club', was organized to maintain the Kings Canyon segment of the highway. The club built and emplaced official Lincoln Highway road signs (6 in x 6 in x 10 ft redwood posts) at one-mile intervals along the route (*Carson City News*, 6/17/1914). At times, private citizens would work on the road, shoveling snow and sanding the grade (*Carson City News*, 4/17/1915). The city even installed a free campground for tourists, including electric lights for "late arrivals" (*Carson City News*, 8/05/1919).

While the boom to Carson City's economy was important, there were other benefits as well. The Lincoln Highway gave national recognition to the small state capital. Road guides published by the Lincoln Highway Association describe Kings Canyon as "one of the most scenic drives in the country" (Patrice Press 1993 [1924]:486) and during 1919 *Carson City News* (8/05/1919) claimed that it was the most traveled road in Nevada. Kings Canyon Road was also, undoubtedly, a source of intense community pride. When the army sent a convoy of 63 trucks over the Lincoln Highway to test the practicability of long distance commercial transport, Carson City went all out.

The ladies of this city, who put up with the delay, served hot meals until well past midnight, and the people held on until the last of the caravan was landed here.

It all proved to be a real day, and the best part of a night. The band boys were out, dancing was indulged in giving the people a chance to at least enjoy themselves (*Carson City News* 8/31/1919).

Kings Canyon proved to be an important segment on the convoy's trip because it proved the worthiness of the Highway, even in the most rugged of mountain stretches, "Every officer and man interviewed... pronounced Kings Canyon road a wonderful piece of engineering and perfectly safe for any kind of travel" (*Carson City News* 9/03/1919). When reading these old articles in the Carson City newspaper, one is struck with how much pride the community took in this stretch of road. Again, quoting from convoy personnel, the *Carson City News* (9/03/1919) wrote "They stated that on no other grade within their knowledge were the watering places so frequent, and that they knew of none that surpassed it from a scenic standpoint".

IV. The Future of Kings Canyon Road

Kings Canyon Road—that segment of the old Lake Tahoe Wagon Road running from Spooner Summit to lower Kings Canyon—has been in disrepair since 1928 (Map 1). However, local residents still know of the road and often discuss it amongst 'insiders'. While it no longer serves as a spatial conduit with the rest of the world, many Carson City residents perceive it as a way to maintain connectivity with the Capital's historic past.

The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest's Carson Ranger District, with help from Carson City, is in the process of developing a long-term management plan. Much of Kings Canyon Road remains in excellent condition (Palmer 1994; Photos 3-4). Not only is there a

relatively large body of historic documentation about it, there is also a rich material culture still associated with the road. And many of historically known homesteads, as well as one hotel waystation, Swift's Station, have been located and recorded by archaeologists (Birk 1997; Palmer 1994). Future management plans intend to incorporate different elements of the road's history for recreational and interpretive purposes, but the level of use and maintenance will be determined through public review. The following points highlight future plans for this roadway as an historic recreational travel route:

1. Stabilization/maintenance/reconstruction for safe off-highway activities;
2. Picnic/rest stations;
3. Lincoln Highway mileage markers/information signs at original locations;
4. Interpretive signs for historic context (topics include road chronology, purposes, construction features, associated historic sites, waystations, Lincoln Highway, etc.);
5. Interpretive biking/hiking tours;
6. Passport-in-Time projects;
7. Public involvement/stewardship/partnerships;
8. Long-term research collaborations.

Another important feature about Kings Canyon Road is that it is easily integrated into regional tourist and recreational attractions. For instance, at the road's eastern terminus is the Nevada State capital, with its state government and museum complex, and at its western terminus is Lake Tahoe's Rim Trail.

V. Epilogue

The role Kings Canyon Road played in the history of western Nevada is complex. Much of the initial development, as well as later use of the roadway was due to local economic considerations. Documents that highlight economic considerations dominate the historic record. But the road's ability to act as a cultural conduit, connecting people that lived in the western Nevada periphery to the centers of Euro-American culture, should not be trivialized. This "last and finest link" (Goodwin 1971:76) in the Bonanza system of toll roads was built at exactly the same time that Nevada became a state, signifying the important

connection of Nevada's new capital city with Sacramento, San Francisco and beyond. Moreover, the importance of the roadway as a regional transportation route, rather than a local haul route, is well illustrated by the sheer numbers of people that traveled on the Placerville-Lake Tahoe Wagon Roads and the development of Spooner's and Swift's Stations.

Kings Canyon Road still lives in the collective memory of long-time Carson City residents. This once grand roadway maintained cultural connectivity with spatially distant Euro-American centers. Now, it is a road that connects modern western Nevada residents to a temporally distant heritage.

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