

Mystery of the High Sierra Piute Highway

By Frank Groffie, October 2012

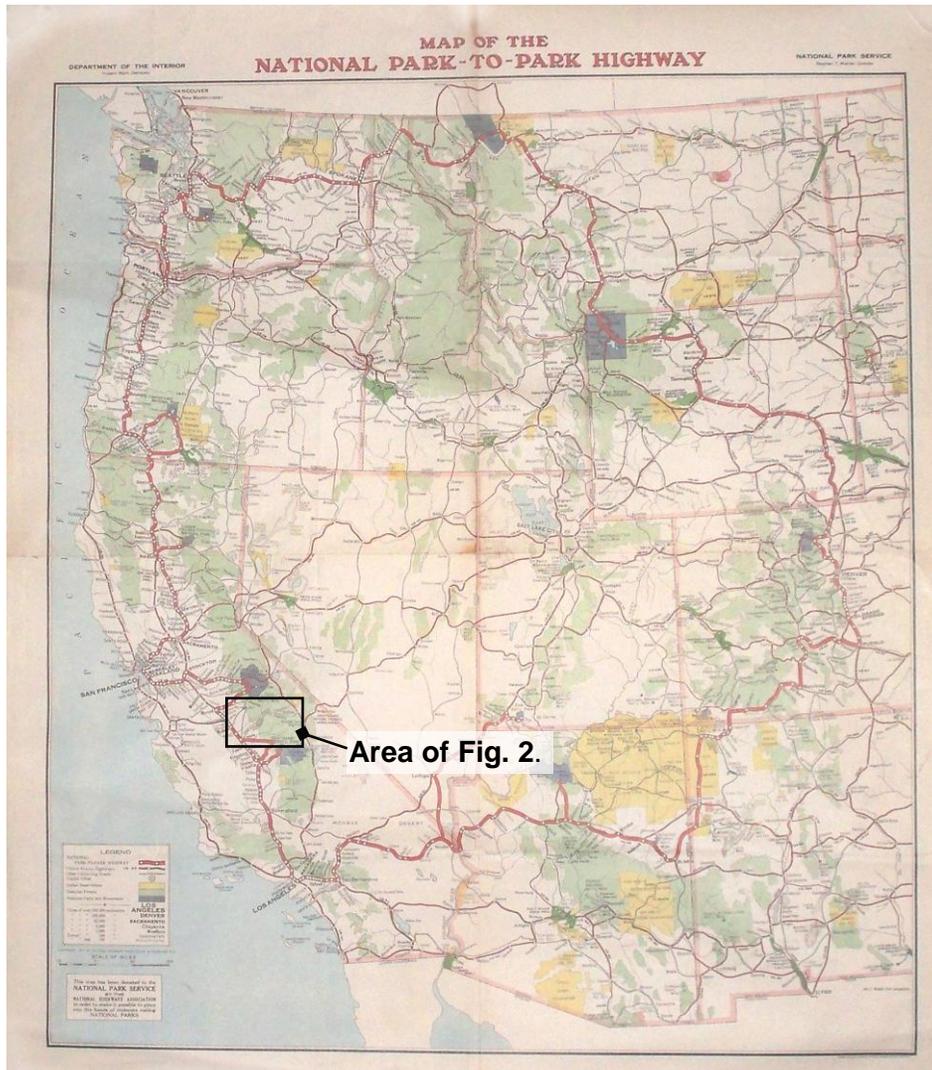


Figure 1. *Map of the National Park-to-Park Highway*, dated 1927, as described in the text.

Around 2000 I obtained a 1927 roadway map from an antique shop in Pacifica, California. Called *Map of the National Park-to-Park Highway*, it shows nine western states and parts of five other adjoining states (Figure 1). Created by the National Highways Association, this quirky map was donated to and published by the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior. Its purpose evidently was to guide the motoring public of the 1920s to the national parks of the west in succession, perhaps as several destinations in a loop route.

Starting, say, at Glacier National Park in Montana, vacationers in their Tin Lizzies (Ford Model Ts) could travel clockwise around the west and hit Yellowstone, Rocky Mountain, Mesa Verde, Grand Canyon, Zion, Sequoia, Yosemite, Lassen Volcanic, Crater Lake, and Mount Rainier National Parks.

What caught my eye and induced me to buy the map was a so-called High Sierra Piute Highway connecting Fresno and Bishop, California (Figure 2). This route crosses the Sierra Nevada where the range is its highest, widest, and most rugged and undeveloped. Mt. Whitney (14,501 ft) lies just 50 miles to the southeast.

So, what was this so-called High Sierra Piute Highway? It's certainly not there today.

Most of the route is shown as a double solid line, which, says the map legend, is "other connecting highway." However the central 30 miles of the route, where the highest, most-rugged terrain is crossed, specifically through "Piute Pass," is shown as a double dashed line, not explained in the legend.

Herein lies the mystery: Did a road really traverse Piute Pass and

did Model Ts make it through in any significant numbers? Or was this Piute Pass roadway just a mapmaker's fantasy, and were travelers of the 1920s expected to leave their cars and travel by mule or horseback? Was this an old route traveled by the 19th-century pioneers in their prairie schooners? Did miners and loggers traverse the route by oxen-pulled wagon? Can discarded wagon wheels and axles and parts from Model Ts be found along the route? Do two parallel wheel ruts show there today, or just a single trail? Did highway planners come anywhere close to including this route in plans for high-speed trans-Sierra travel?

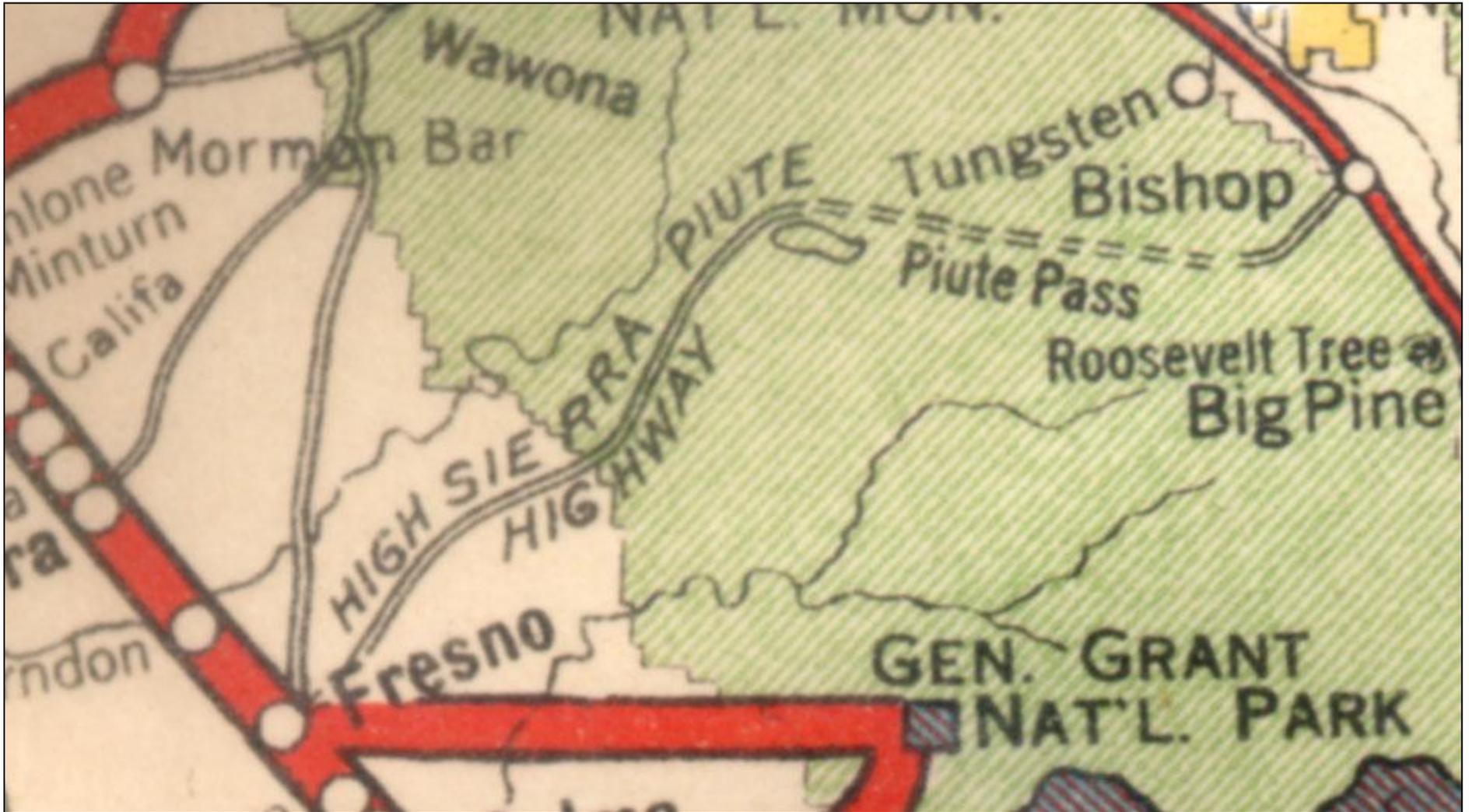


Figure 2. Portion of 1927 map showing High Sierra Piute Highway.

California State Highway 168

One clue is California Route 168. When superimposing the 1927 map on current maps, the solid-line portions of the High Sierra Piute Highway roughly follow the present alignment of Route 168 (Figure 3). Of course, the 1927 route and current route don't perfectly coincide, mostly owing to

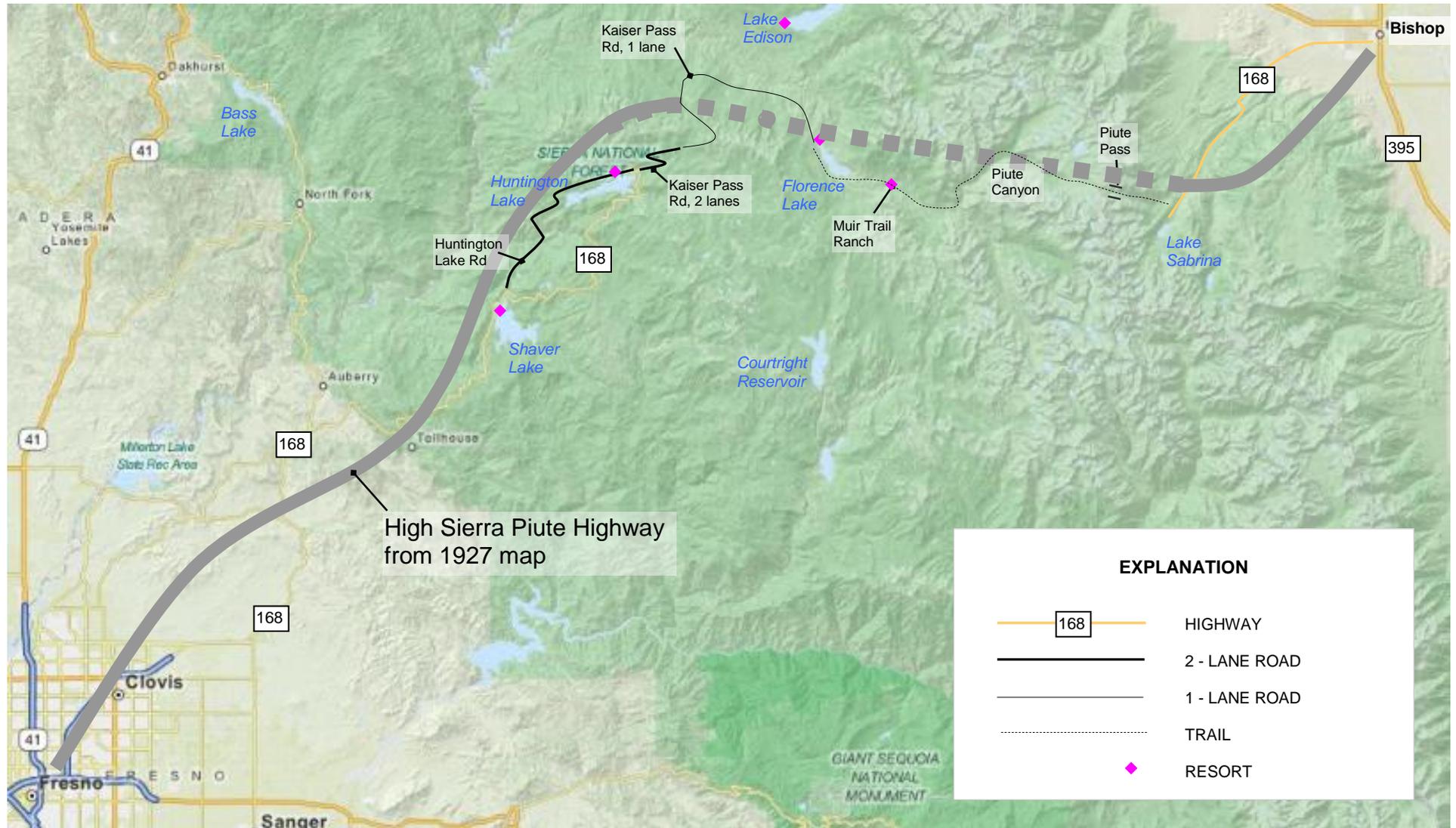


Figure 3. Current geography. High Sierra Piute Highway route from 1927 map is superimposed: forgive its crudeness, which derives from the 1927 mapping, as in Figure 2.

the crudeness of the 1927 map. Note how the 1927 route hugs the north shore of Huntington Lake, following Huntington Lake Road, which evidently was in present in 1927; this lightly travelled road is still well maintained currently. The current (newer) Route 168 alignment approaches Huntington Lake from the south and meets the lake at its east end.

Route 168 is quirky: it consists of several disjointed segments. The western segment connects the city of Fresno, in the Central Valley, with Huntington Lake, at Elevation 6,950 ft. Then there's a gap in the high Sierra. The eastern segment of Route 168 runs from the city of Bishop, in the Owens Valley, to Lake Sabrina, at Elevation 9,128 ft on the eastern slope of the Sierras. The Fresno-Huntington and Bishop segments of Route 168 roughly "point" to each other through the "gap." Evidently, state highway planners planned a connection through the gap and a trans-Sierra route through this area, or else they wouldn't have used the same route number, 168, on the two segments.¹ These plans may have been hatched yet lay dormant through the 1920s through early 1960s.

When the U.S. Congress enacted the Wilderness Act in 1964, one of its first actions was to create the John Muir Wilderness, effectively blocking any bridging of the gap in Route 168. Then, with the creation of the Ansel Adams Wilderness in 1972, the possibility of *any* trans-Sierra roadway in the area between Yosemite and Kings Canyon-Sequoia National Parks was sealed off for good.

Still, the gap in Route 168 remains, and California's department of transportation hasn't seen a need to renumber either of the segments.

Kaiser Pass Road

The configuration of Kaiser Pass Road is another clue. The Fresno-Huntington segment of Route 168 officially ends at the eastern end of Huntington Lake. From here, one can travel easterly on a well-engineered, well-maintained, paved two-lane mountain road for a distance of about 7 miles toward Kaiser Pass, beyond which lies Florence Lake. This roadway segment is part of Kaiser Pass Road. One can drive up to 60 mph on much of this roadway segment, and it feels like the "high-speed" segment of Route 168 between Shaver Lake and Huntington Lake.

This "high-speed" segment of Kaiser Pass Road ends abruptly just beyond Badger Flat Campground. It's as if funding and planning abruptly stopped there. One then "turns" onto a thinly paved, poorly maintained (potholed, bumpy), steep, one-lane road. Both the good and poor sections of road go by the same name, Kaiser Pass Road, but the poor section is of a whole different breed.

One can sense, though, that highway planners at one time intended for this all to be part of Route 168 and for the "high-speed" segment to continue higher and deeper into the Sierra Nevada, undoubtedly along a slightly different alignment from the current poor one-lane road. In fact, remnants of an extension of the two-lane roadway extend northward for about 1/4 mile beyond the turnoff onto the one-lane road. One can see this abandoned stretch of two-lane road if you travel slowly at the turnoff or if you scan the area on Google Earth.

***Oakland Tribune* archives**

Archives of the *Oakland Tribune* are available online. The *Oakland Tribune* of January 20, 1927, page 2, contained this line:

¹ There's even a third, easternmost segment of Route 168: through the White-Inyo Mountains. Here there is no gap, with U.S. Route 395 providing a normal roadway connection between the Lake Sabrina-Bishop segment and White-Inyo segment.

To c[re]ate a Piute Pass highway from Florence Lake to Bishop through the ... [the rest is garbled]

I could glean no further details from this archived report. But the implication is obvious: there were plans in the 1920s to do just what the report said. Interestingly, the report indicates the highway route would go through Piute Pass. And the presumably new portion would begin at Florence Lake. Evidently Florence Lake was in existence by 1927, and undoubtedly a roadway, the same one present today, extended from Huntington Lake to Florence Lake to allow for construction of the dam that creates Florence Lake.



Figure 4. Page 2 of January 20, 1927, edition of *Oakland Tribune*.

The area's artificial reservoirs

Four large artificial reservoirs exist in this area: Shaver Lake, Huntington Lake, Lake Edison, and Florence Lake (Fig 3).

The 1927 map shows only Huntington Lake. Although the lake is drawn in crudely, it is indeed Huntington Lake, as shown by superimposing the 1927 map over current maps. A little online research reveals this:

Huntington Lake was constructed in 1912 as a part of the enormous Big Creek Hydroelectric Project. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huntington Lake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huntington_Lake))

So, Huntington Lake had been present for some 15 years when then 1927 map was prepared, thus accounting for its depiction on the map.

As for Shaver Lake, "The lake was formed with the construction of Shaver Lake Dam, which was built by Southern California Edison and completed in 1927." ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaver Lake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaver_Lake))

Florence Lake construction was begun in 1920 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of dams and reservoirs in California](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dams_and_reservoirs_in_California)). And evidently this lake was present at the time of the 1927 report in the *Oakland Tribune*.

However, it appears Shaver and Florence Lakes were too new for inclusion on the 1927 map. Perhaps the 1927 map was based on maps a few years older that predated, and thus did not depict, these two new lakes.

Still, to repeat an earlier finding, a usable roadway apparently ran from Fresno to Huntington and Florence Lakes in 1927.

Muir Trail Ranch

Muir Trail Ranch is a small resort located about 4 miles east of the upstream (southeast) end of Florence Lake (see Fig. 3). It caters to backpackers and horseback riders on the John Muir Trail and Pacific Crest Trail, which pass nearby. One can access it with help from a ferry ride from the Florence Lake dam to the upstream end of the lake. Their website (<http://www.muirtrailranch.com/history.html>) says this:

Our guest ranch is unique – a family-owned piece of land in the middle of the wilderness. It has been in private hands since 1885; the current owners have operated it since 1953.

The ranch was first opened for use by the vacationing public in 1940. At that time, it was called the Diamond D Guest Ranch. Prior to that it was used every summer by cattlemen and shepherds who drove their herds into the high-country meadows clear into what is now Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park. Even earlier, American Indians from the east side of the Sierra came over Piute Pass on their way to trade with the tribes in the foothills near Auberry. One of their major summer-use campsites was in what is now called Blayne Meadow on the western-most part of the ranch.

Later still, the area became a mecca for people traveling on foot or horseback. In 1947 the [John] Muir Trail was completed and became one of the most popular trails in the United States.

Clues from *Sierra Trails*

A short article called *Sierra Trails*, by Walter A. Starr, Jr. (1903-1933), posted on the web (http://www.owensvalleyhistory.com/stories1/sierra_trails.pdf), has this to say about foot travel across the Sierra Nevada:

The trail routes into and across the Sierra Nevada found by early American pioneers were those which had long been used by Indians. The mountains had not been explored or entered by the Californians living near the coast during the earlier period of Spanish and Mexican occupation. These Indian trails evidently afforded means for crossing the mountains for the purpose of trading between tribes living east and west of the range, and perhaps for the less peaceful purpose of raids by the more warlike Indians of the eastern side. ...

Owens Valley was the home of Piute Indians. They used (southern) Mono Pass, ***Piute Pass*** [emphasis added] and Kearsarge Pass to cross the range on the routes of the present trails. While the early mining prospectors used and improved these trails, and built a few others, it was the sheep and cattle men who were responsible for much of the trail system of the Sierra Nevada, especially on its western slope. Excepting parts of the John Muir Trail, the High Sierra Trail, and some laterals which have been improved or relocated, most of the Sierra trails just happened — in moving livestock to and from summer ranges in high mountain meadows.

Web Discussion Postings

Others have posted messages on this topic at <http://www.highsierratopix.com/community/viewtopic.php?f=27&p=52016>. One, going by the alias Troutdog 59, posted this message on January 31, 2012:

One map I saw long ago, but don't have a copy [of], showed a route proposed to join the eastern portion of Hwy 168 (North Lake out of Bishop) with the western section at Florence Lake. It would have gone up the So Fk of the San Joaquin, turned left (north) at Piute Creek, continued up canyon to Hutchinson Meadow, then over Piute Pass to North Lake. Humphreys Basin was almost a roadside destination.

A reply came from someone, alias Gdurkee, dated April 19, 2012:

I had heard (but don't know for sure...) that Reagan canceled the trans-Sierra highway from Florence over Piute because it was too expensive. Makes more sense since he was not a known nature lover ('seen one tree, seen 'em all').

Interesting. However, it's unlikely that Ronald Reagan cancelled any trans-Sierra highway through Piute Canyon and Piute Pass, since this route was legally blocked by the John Muir Wilderness by 1964. Reagan's two terms as California governor from 1967 to 1975 were a few years too late to pass judgment on a Piute Pass highway. His service as U.S. president from 1981 to 1989 certainly came way to late to weigh in on the issue.

It does make sense, though, that as governor of California, Reagan may have decided against another, nearby (a few miles to the north) trans-Sierra highway route, between Bass Lake (on the west) and Mammoth (on the east). That particular potential route was eventually fully sealed off when Congress established the Ansel Adams Wilderness between Bass Lake and Mammoth in 1972.

Present Trail through Piute Canyon

The section of route in Figure 5 climbs a slope that's 200 ft tall over a horizontal distance of 280 ft. That's a 1½H:1V slope (horizontal:vertical), or an angular gradient of 33°. And there's no local alternative: you're pretty much restricted to going up that particular portion of slope. There are a few switchbacks, so the gradient of the trail itself may be reduced to some 3H:1V. Hikers, mules, and horses can handle trail gradients like this. But conventional 4-wheel vehicles, in other words wagons pulled by animals, cannot. If someone had created a dirt road through this spot sometime between the 1840s and 1930s, they would have added — with great difficulty — numerous switchbacks to create a barely passable 5H:1V or 10H:1V roadbed gradient.

The particular section of route east of Piute Pass shown in Figure 6 is more suggestive of a foot trail than a roadbed.

Indeed, if one views the 20 or 25 miles of winding, narrow trail through Piute Pass using Google Earth, one sees that much of it could never have been more than a footpath.

Tioga Pass Road

Tioga Pass provides an east-west route across the Sierra Nevada. It happens to be in Yosemite National Park. In the mid 1880s roadbuilders succeeded in building the first road in this area that could be used by horse-drawn wagons (http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/tioga_road/great_sierra_wagon_road.html.) Its purpose was to serve miners hauling in supplies and hauling out ore (mainly silver). Before that time, miners moved through the area along trails by way of horse and mule.

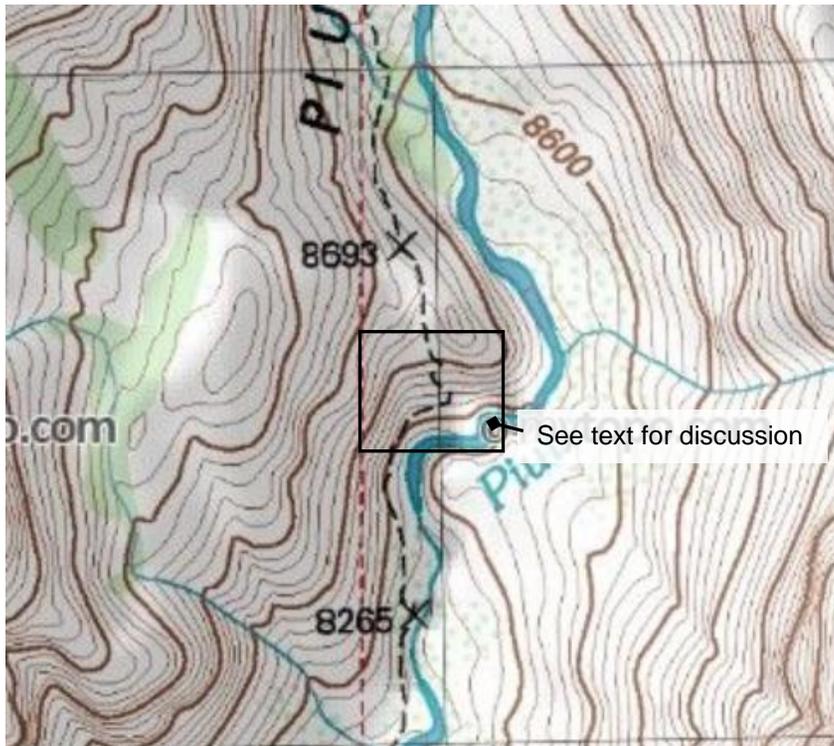


Figure 5. Trail through portion of Piute Canyon.

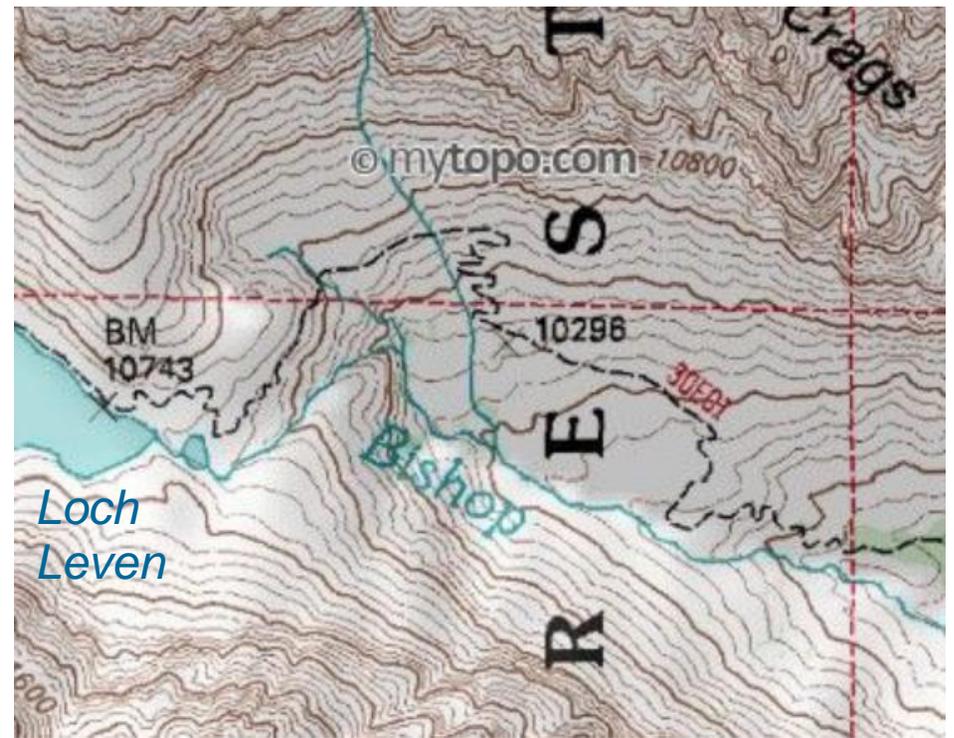


Figure 6. Part of trail west of Piute Pass and alongside Bishop Creek.

Building of the Tioga Pass Road (see Figures 7 and 8) is well documented. It was a herculean effort. Tioga Pass is at Elevation 9,950 ft. Piute Pass is at 11,450 ft. If someone between, say, 1870 and 1930 had constructed a similar Piute Pass roadway, then it's reasonable to assume such an effort would have been documented also. Yet the historical record is silent on such a matter.

What Else?

What else can we glean from mapgazing and online research? Apparently, we can only find negative evidence of any well-developed historic roadway route through Piute Pass.

There are no reports of 49ers, emigrants, or other pioneers traveling a trans-Sierra route in this vicinity into central California. Apparently they favored the routes in the vicinity of present-day Routes 80, 50, 8, and 4 (to the north) and Walker Pass (to the south). This makes sense, since the mountain passes in those areas are several thousand feet lower in elevation than Piute Pass. Piute Pass is at Elevation 11,450 ft and is likely snowbound 8 months of the year, from November to July, and was passable without snowshoes or skis only in August, September, and October.

There are no records that can be found online of efforts after 1927 to extend Route 168 all the way over the Sierra Nevada. Physical evidence for partial efforts is there: the 7-mile, good, 2-lane segment of Kaiser Pass Road northeast of Huntington Lake. If a last push for a trans-Sierra roadway here was contemplated in the 1950s to early 1960s, it came to a halt with designation of the John Muir Wilderness in 1964.

Conclusions

Evidently, the trans-Sierra route through Piute Canyon and Piute Pass never bore more than foot travel. There is no historical or physical evidence that it was ever traveled by four-wheeled vehicles, like wagons or Model Ts.

Much of the route from Florence Lake to Lake Sabrina would have been amenable to establishing a road, but certain short stretches would have been too rugged or too snowbound almost year-round for pioneers, miners, or loggers to roll their wagons over. Like a chain that depends on its weakest link, no continuous roadway, no matter how rough and steep, ever developed along this route.

Native Americans, prospectors, sheepherders, and cattle herders undoubtedly travelled the Piute Pass trail on foot, but Model Ts, no.

Reagan probably never passed judgment on a roadway over this route. The terrain, the John Muir Wilderness, and lack of a strong need did that instead. Constructing a Piute Pass version of Tioga Pass road, over an 11,450 ft. pass, would have been quite an undertaking. Fresno and Bishop were not important destinations to link together with a highway. Anyway, a roadbed over this route would be useable only 4 months per year, from mid July to mid November.

The so-called High Sierra Piute Highway was only an audacious dream of planners, a trans-Sierra roadway route that almost, but never, was. ***It would have been glorious.*** Or, depending on one's viewpoint, it was stopped, thankfully, to preserve the natural, untrammled beauty of the wilderness for many miles around.

Figures 7, 8. Hints of what might have been. These photos document auto travel over Tioga Pass Road in the 1920s. From Trexler, K.A., http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/tioga_road/.

