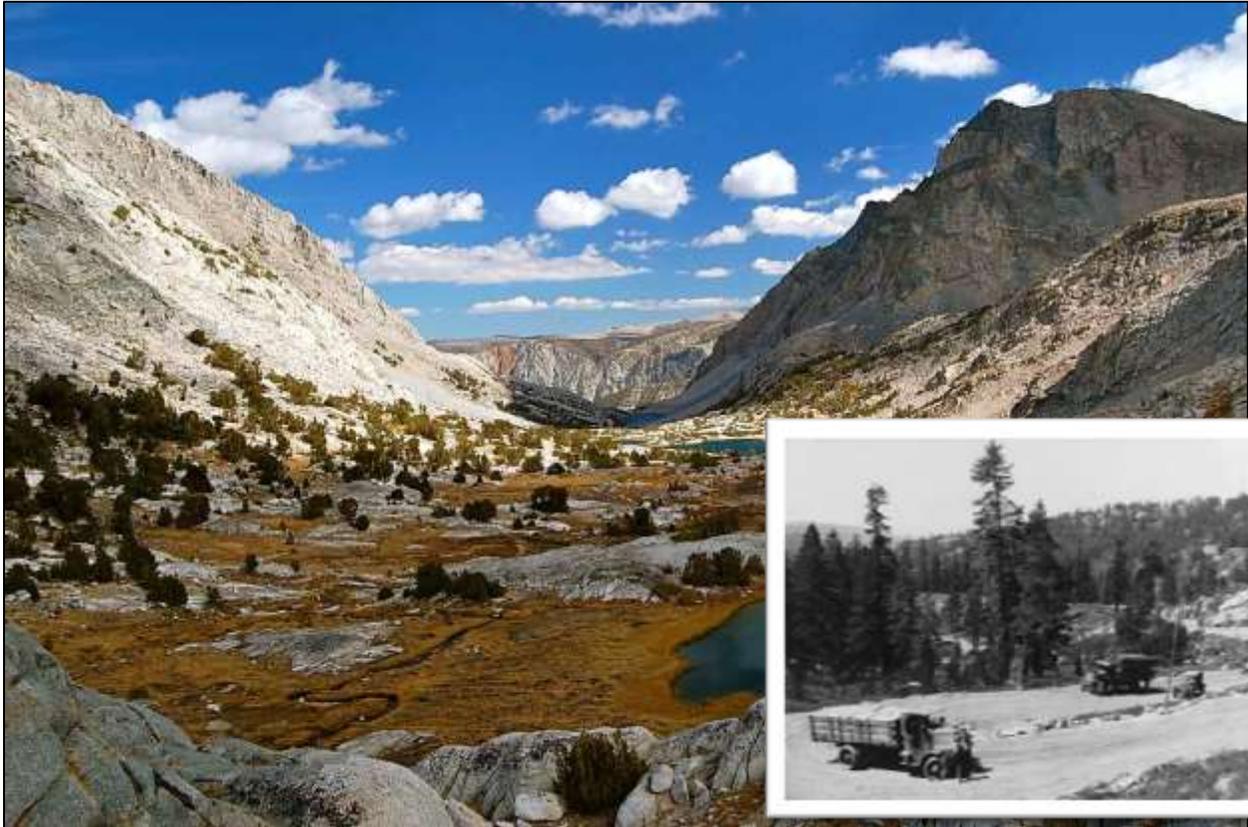


THE HIGH SIERRA PIUTE HIGHWAY

From Fresno, CA to Bishop, CA
Sierra National Forest



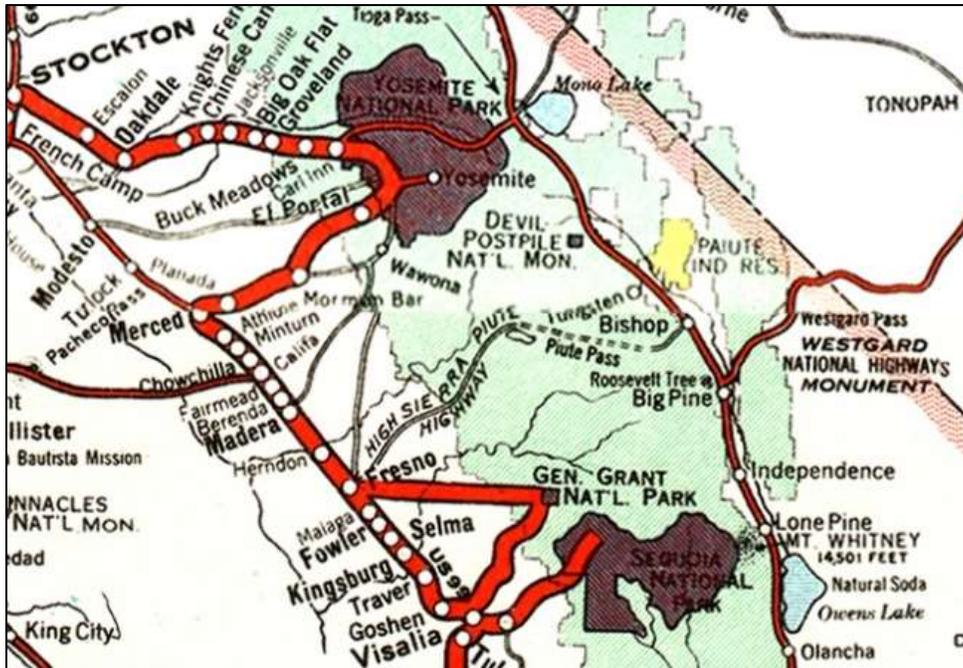
Piute Pass, John Muir Wilderness, looking east into Bishop Basin.¹
Inset Photo: Vehicles on Kaiser Pass Road en route to Florence Lake, August 24, 1923.²



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2015

THE HIGH SIERRA PIUTE HIGHWAY

From Fresno, CA to Bishop, CA
Sierra National Forest



The High Sierra Piute Highway, between Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks
Excerpt: 1927 National Park to Park Highway Map³

State Highway 168 leaves the Fresno/Clovis metropolitan area as a well-maintained, all-weather, mostly two-lane rural highway as it wends through the Sierra foothills and into the mountains. It passes Shaver Lake and ends at Huntington Lake, where an offshoot, Kaiser Pass Road, continues up the mountain. About four miles up, Kaiser Pass Road turns into a rough, potholed, slightly-bigger-than-one-lane mountain road, that the traveler can follow all the way to Florence Lake, at the edge of the John Muir Wilderness.

But once upon a time, there were dreams that the road would not end there. Early California motor enthusiasts and business interests had plans to continue the road, up the South Fork of the San Joaquin River, along Piute Creek, and over 11,423' Piute Pass to the east slope of the Sierras and to the town of Bishop. This would be the **High Sierra Piute Highway**, a trans-Sierran road that would allow travelers to easily cross the Sierras, experience some country that was compared to the Swiss Alps, and boost the economies of Fresno and Inyo Counties. The highway was an idea that flourished briefly, and then withered, leaving the Sierran wilderness between Yosemite and Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks unmarred by concrete, asphalt, and motorized vehicles.



Excerpt: United States Touring Map, 1929.^A

Piute Pass has served for millennia as a gateway across the forbidding Sierras.

Archaeological research and accounts by Native Americans describe the back-and-forth movement of people and goods on the foot trails between the west and east sides. Not until the automobile came within the economic reach of most Americans in the early 20th century that visions were born to convert those foot trails to auto roads.

Henry Ford’s Model T debuted in 1908 priced for the average consumer. Sales rocketed and Americans were soon on the move.⁴ The practicality of auto travel was initially limited because of the lack of suitable roads, but the need to transport rural goods to urban markets and to accommodate new heavier vehicles in World War I led to vast improvements in the American road system. Roads were improved and assembled into highways. The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 and the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1921 provided for federal funding for road building, and by the early 1920s, there were 30,000 miles of paved roads in the country.⁵

The end of the war in 1918 meant that domestic production of cars would increase and gasoline rationing ended. The concept of motoring for pleasure took off. A 1919 article expounded on the possibilities of transcontinental travel and the scenic wonders to be found, where the movement had brought about the building “of good roads through heretofore untravelable mountain passes.”⁶

Two of these roads were the Lincoln Highway and the Roosevelt Highway. Conceived in 1912 and formally dedicated in 1913, the Lincoln Highway ran coast-to-coast from Times Square in New York City to Lincoln Park in San Francisco, originally through 13 states, crossing the Sierras near Lake Tahoe.⁷ The Roosevelt National Highway also transected the country, entering eastern California at Westgard Pass and then branching north and south. The intention was to eventually cross the Sierras at Piute Pass and transverse Sequoia National Park into the San Joaquin Valley before diverging.⁸

Competition was fierce in California for the anticipated flood of travelers. It appeared that the motorists would end up in San Francisco or Los Angeles on the main highway routes, passing up businesses in the eastern Sierra, Owens Valley, and the San Joaquin Valley of central California. The Tioga Road through Yosemite opened in 1915 to autos, but gained popularity in the 1920s, touted by businesses looking to capitalize on the burgeoning motor travel market.⁹ The idea of trans-Sierra routes were seen as key to development of economic growth in central valley cities like Fresno. Visionaries began looking to breach the granite wall of the Sierras.¹⁰

One such visionary was Wisner Gillette Scott, who devoted most of his life to improvement and development of highways in the west. A 1919 article in *Western Highways Builder* magazine told of Scott's vision for a Piute Pass highway:

Scott's New Fresno-Bishop Project Arouses Enthusiasm. A project the importance of which to that great section of California lying east of the Sierra Nevada range, and to the vast section of San Joaquin valley of which Fresno, a city of 70,000 people is the commercial center, is inestimable, has been propounded by Wisner Gillette Scott, of Bishop, Cal., the man mainly responsible for opening the road over Tioga pass, connecting Inyo and Mono counties, east of the range, with Stockton, in Central California on the west, and giving thousands access to Yosemite who could not go there before.

His newest plan is for a 40-mile link over Piute pass, at the crest of the range at the northern end of greater Sequoia Park, which no doubt will be re-named Roosevelt National Park. The road through Piute pass would be the highest on the Coast, 11,409 feet above sea level. Tioga is 9941 feet. The highest in the Alps, Stelvio, is 9042. The new road would become part of the Roosevelt National Highway. The 40-mile link in the approximately 150 miles between Fresno and Bishop needs only about 13 miles of actual construction, of rocky material right on the ground. It would open to the world what Mr. Scott declares is the most majestically scenic region in California; with proper advertising, a strong competitor for the alleged \$400,000,000 a year for which Americans now spend in Switzerland.

Mr. Scott is vice-president of the Pacific States Defense League for California, and probably the most constant worker for a series of three heavy-duty highways, possibly for military, but chiefly for commercial purposes, through the Coast states between Canada and Mexico. He is chairman of the Division on National Parks, in the Council of National Advisors, National Highway Association, on which President Hill, of the Northern Pacific Railway, and other prominent men also serve. He is also executive secretary of the Inyo County Good Roads Club, now merged with the defense league.

The Fresno-Bishop project, which means much more than is apparent, is receiving enthusiastic co-operation of the Fresno County Chamber of Commerce, and is fully expected to receive aid from national forest reserve funds, which are being used to develop scenic assets of the country.¹¹

In September 1919, Congressman John Raker of California introduced a bill authorizing the examination, survey and report by the War Department for the improvement, construction and maintenance of a national system of military highways in the western states, as well as to support the state highway systems for conventional use. One section of the legislation included examination of lateral highways extending eastward from important harbors and the important passes in the mountains, stating "and that included in the latter shall be a road from Fresno by way of Huntington Lake over Piute Pass to Bishop, California."¹² The Piute Pass road was in the national conscience.

On the Sierra National Forest, the road system was in its infancy in the early twentieth-century. Early on, most of what could be called roads had been built by the lumber or power companies or the stockmen; most were barely passable for light carriages or wagons. Forest Supervisor Maurice Benedict (service 1916-1944) wrote, "things changed pretty fast with Henry Ford and his Model-T and Dodge with his very low gear invading the mountains and with them came an increasing demand for better roads." Firefighting and lumbering also needed better roads for access to the mountains. Benedict began planning a road system and crews went to work.^B

The Fresno Chamber of Commerce was enthusiastically on board with the idea. In 1922, members took a pack trip expedition over the route "to obtain all necessary information, which will be used in a drive to build a road from Florence lake to Piute pass which would then open to tourists one of the great high mountain scenic highways in the world."¹³ They reported that the concept was feasible and that the road could be kept open for three months a year under normal conditions.¹⁴ The road possibility was also promoted by valley business interests to rival the Tioga Pass road.¹⁵ Plans by Southern California Edison Company to extend the Kaiser Pass Road from Huntington Lake to Florence Lake coincided with:

“plans underway whereby a combination of state, county and federal funds, the highway may be built from some eleven or twelve miles farther, right through Piute pass, and down on the Inyo side to meet a highway that has already been constructed up the eastern slope of the Sierras. If that plan proves feasible and is carried out, we shall have one of the most remarkable scenic drives in the world, crossing the Sierras at an elevation of 12,000 feet and making possible view of scores of famous peaks from Mt. Whitney north. This road will surpass the famous Tioga pass road in interest and would be open a longer period during summer months.”¹⁶

Proponents hoped that Fresno County would achieve a prominent place in the state, by “recognizing new and wonderful opportunities” like the Piute Pass Road.¹⁷ A committee was soon formed to lobby for the road, led by H. E. Patterson of the Fresno County Chamber of Commerce.¹⁸ They wasted no time getting the message out, promoting the tourism potential and the need for legislative action.¹⁹ The State Highway Commission was urged by the boosters to complete a survey and cost estimate for construction.²⁰

The lobbying began to produce fruit. In January 1923, a bill was introduced into the California state legislature for proposed highways in which San Joaquin Valley businesses had interest, including the funding of \$15,000 for the survey of Piute Pass road.²¹ Assemblyman Herbert McDowell of Fresno, a highway enthusiast, was a supporter as it would further a road system of ‘Sierra-to-the-sea’, undoubtedly improving business in Fresno County.²²

1924 was a pivotal year for the proposed Piute Pass road, as the promoters expanded their vision, as explained in an article in the Oakland Tribune:

Drive Begun for Piute Pass Road. The campaign for the construction of the Piute Pass road over the high Sierra will be carried on in the future as a statewide movement by a strong organization representing interests of all parts of California, according to an announcement at the headquarters of the Fresno county Chamber of Commerce.

The organization will be known as the “High Sierra Piute Pass Association” and the objective will be the securing of legislation appropriating sufficient funds for a survey of the route by the California State Highway Commission, an undertaking estimated to cost about \$15,000. Invitations were recently sent out from here to civic leaders all over the state asking them to affiliate with the proposed road organization, and acceptances have already been received. It was announced from A. B. C. Dohrmann of San Francisco, representing the Yosemite National Park Company; R. R. Hale of San Francisco, vice-president of the California Development Association; W. G. Scott, president of the Inyo Good Roads Club; Harry Chandler, newspaper publisher of Los Angeles, and L. A. Nares of Fresno. The first move of the new association, according to Secretary Guy E. Leonard of the local Chamber of Commerce, will be an

The precursor to modern State Highway 168 was the road from Fresno to Huntington Lake, which was in place by 1920. It was built for Southern California Edison’s Big Creek Hydroelectric Project on the Sierra National Forest, which created high mountain recreation opportunities with the new reservoir. As the hydroelectric project expanded, SCE surveyed Florence Lake for a dam site in 1917 to provide water to Huntington Lake via a tunnel, and planned a road from Huntington to Florence for construction equipment. The Kaiser Pass Road to Florence Lake, started in 1920, was completed in 1922. Now autos could penetrate quite deep into the Sierras in Fresno County.^c



First Car to Drive Over Kaiser Pass, Sept. 8, 1920.^d

inspection trip over the route by members of the association and the California State Highway Commission as soon as weather conditions will permit—probably the latter part of May or the first of June.

The Piute Pass road has assumed the proportions of a state-wide improvement, according to local leaders because it would connect with the Roosevelt-Midland trail and would open a new gateway to Central California.

That road as now considered would extend from Florence Lake, the present terminus of the Southern California Edison Company's road from Huntington lake to Florence, to East lake, the terminus of a road from Bishop to East lake. The air line distance of the route is nineteen miles, while the road construction would involve about thirty-two miles.

J. B. Woodson and F. G. Somner, division engineers of the State Highway Commission, surveyed the proposed route in the summer of 1924 to make a topographical report and cost estimate.²³ They were accompanied by a representative of the Automobile Club of Southern California.²⁴ Woodson and Somner estimated the cost at over \$1,000,000 for thirty-two miles of construction. North Lake to Piute Pass, six miles, would cost \$70,000 per mile; Piute Pass to the mouth of Piute Creek, fifteen miles, would cost \$50,000 per mile; Mouth of Piute Creek to Blayney Meadows, seven miles, would cost \$20,000 per mile; and Blayney Meadows to the west end of Florence Lake, four miles, would cost \$40,000 per mile.²⁵

Although the State Highway Commission completed a survey in 1924, Assemblymen Heisinger and Browne introduced a bill in the California State assembly in January 1925 to appropriate \$25,000 for a survey and cost estimate of the Piute Pass Road.²⁶ This bill was approved by the Assembly in April 1925.²⁷ That summer officials of the California Highway Commission, Fresno County Chamber of Commerce and others making a party of twenty-five, toured the proposed route by pack train.²⁸

Inyo County was also exploring options for trans-Sierra travel. Perhaps a little tremor of fear was felt in Fresno about the competition, as a Fresno newspaper editorial noted:

A generation ago it was reasonable to argue in favor of the crest of the Sierras as a 'natural' boundary of the state, with the territory of Inyo and Mono as a part of Nevada. The eastern slope of the mountain range had little interest in California. Now the mountains have become, instead of a barrier, a bond of interest. It is the Sierra which binds Inyo and Mono to us, rather than separating them from us. And every year will increase the strength of this bond. The Piute pass and similar enterprises will make these territories glad that they were compelled to stay in California.²⁹

A more southern route from Porterville to Lone Pine at Mulkey Pass was considered by Inyo County proponents. Another Fresno newspaper editorial noted, "while Fresnans naturally have a greater interest in the Piute pass proposal, encouragement should be offered to all feasible proposals to connect the people on the two sides of the Sierras. The more we cross the mountains, the more practical use we are going to make of them and the more advantage we will be to each other as Californians."³⁰

The lobbying continued. The High Sierra Piute Highway Association even invited President Coolidge to spend his 1927 vacation in the mountains to see the best Central California could offer.³¹

In 1927, Assemblymen Heisinger and Williams introduced a bill in the State Assembly to "locate a Piute Pass highway from Florence Lake to Bishop Creek, through the Sierra." It directed the highway commission to survey and estimate cost of construction.³² Assembly Bill (AB) 539 was submitted to the

Assembly Commission on Roads and Highways, but did not leave the committee with a recommendation to the full Assembly.³³

Assemblyman Heisinger tried again in 1929, submitting AB 126, directing the Department of Public Works to locate and survey the route and report to the legislature.³⁴ However, it seemed the momentum had been lost by the end of the 1920s. The United States had entered into the Great Depression, and economic recovery was more pressing than the Piute Pass highway. In 1933, bills were introduced in the State legislature to include two trans-Sierran roads, including the Piute Pass road. Foreshadowing the end of the Piute Pass idea, another proposed bill included a road option that would connect Yosemite Valley on the west and Mammoth Lakes on the east side, across Mammoth Pass.³⁵

By the early 1930s, however, the Piute Pass Highway concept died away. Other forces were at work. The Forest Service was seeking to demonstrate a commitment to protection of the wild lands of the Sierras. Chief Forester William Greeley had all forests prepare proposals for “a system of wilderness areas,” free from roads and other developments, where there would be no necessity for future road building. The 1929 regulations formalized the protection offered to these areas. In California, the Sierra Club was invited to participate in planning the wilderness areas. The Sierra Club was founded in 1892, close upon the heels of the Forest Reserve system (1891), and proved to be an influential voice in wild land management. In the Sierra National Forest, the designated Mount Dana-Minarets Wild Area and the High Sierra Primitive Area (later renamed the John Muir Wilderness) covered much of the high country (including the Piute Pass Highway route).³⁶ Kings Canyon National Park was created in 1940, also creating an administrative barrier to road building.

In 1937, the Sierra Club endorsed a Bass Lake to Mammoth Pass route across the Sierras, in lieu of other routes, along the lines of the 1933 proposal. This route did not invade the designated wilderness or primitive areas, was less rugged, and was desirable for recreation. A Sierra Club letter to the Regional Forester read, “the construction of a Bass Lake – Mammoth Highway should remove *for all time any valid demand for any other road crossing the Sierra south of Tioga Pass.*”³⁷

The High Sierra Piute Highway vision fell victim to better options for the high Sierras. Improvement of State Highway 168, which underwent major alignment changes between 1955 and 1974, including the “four-lane” segment just east of Auberry, and the connection to the east end of Huntington Lake, provided the access to the Sierras, and the resulting economic benefit of increased recreation, that Fresno County desired in the Piute Highway. The Mammoth Pass route became the more viable option once the wilderness areas were designated.

Piute Pass is now accessible by foot and by horse from where the roads end at Florence Lake on the west side, and North Lake out of Bishop on the east side. The amazing scenery of the Sierra crest, once touted as a draw for motorists, remains unspoiled and wild.

New rumblings for a trans-Sierra road re-emerged in the 1950s again with the Mammoth Pass or Minaret Summit highway that would wend between the Minarets and John Muir Wilderness areas formalized by the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Madera County Board of Supervisors and the California State Chamber of Commerce extolled the benefits of this proposed Sierra road. In 1972, California Governor Reagan persuaded the administration of President Nixon to halt construction. Congress later joined the Minarets (renamed Ansel Adams) and John Muir Wildernesses, leaving an unbroken barrier of unroaded wild lands across the Sierra National Forest.³⁸

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