



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

# The Highway 50 Corridor: America's Gateway to the West

## Eldorado National Forest

### Welcome to the Historic Highway 50 Corridor!

Gold fever had hold of the country in the 1850s, and the demand for good roads into California was great. Highway 50 follows the general route of several historic wagon roads, many of which were built atop existing Indian trails, which led emigrants into Placerville at the heart of the California gold fields.

One person, complaining of high prices in 1860, characterized the route as having endless saloons, bar rooms and gambling tables. All of the roads were difficult to maintain due to mud, landslides, floods, ice, snow, avalanches and fire. Many of the sights of these early times are still visible along Highway 50, America's Gateway to the West. Follow along to discover highlights about this popular historic route.

### Emigrants and Indian Tribes

The huge influx of emigrants to California created immense hardship for the local Indian Tribes, particularly as food resources were destroyed by the thousands of emigrants and their livestock. By the mid-1860s, the impacts of disease, violence, environmental degradation and starvation had severely disrupted traditional lifeways. Today, descendants of these people live in the western Sierra foothills and the valleys adjacent to the east slope of the Sierras.

Forest Service  
Pacific Southwest  
Region



## TIPS FOR STAGECOACH TRAVELERS



**SPIT ON THE LEEWARD SIDE.  
DON'T GROWL AT THE FOOD RECEIVED  
AT THE STATION...STAGE COMPANIES  
GENERALLY PROVIDE THE BEST THEY  
CAN GET.**

**DON'T GREASE YOUR HAIR,  
BECAUSE TRAVEL IS DUSTY.**

**IF THE TEAM RUNS AWAY...SIT STILL  
AND TAKE YOUR CHANCES. IF YOU  
JUMP, NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN YOU  
WILL GET HURT.**

**THE BEST SEAT INSIDE A STAGE  
IS THE ONE NEXT TO THE DRIVER.**

**DON'T LEAN OR LOP OVER NEIGHBORS  
WHEN SLEEPING.**

**NEVER SHOOT ON THE ROAD, AS THE  
NOISE MIGHT FRIGHTEN THE HORSES.**

**DON'T DISCUSS POLITICS OR RELIGION.**

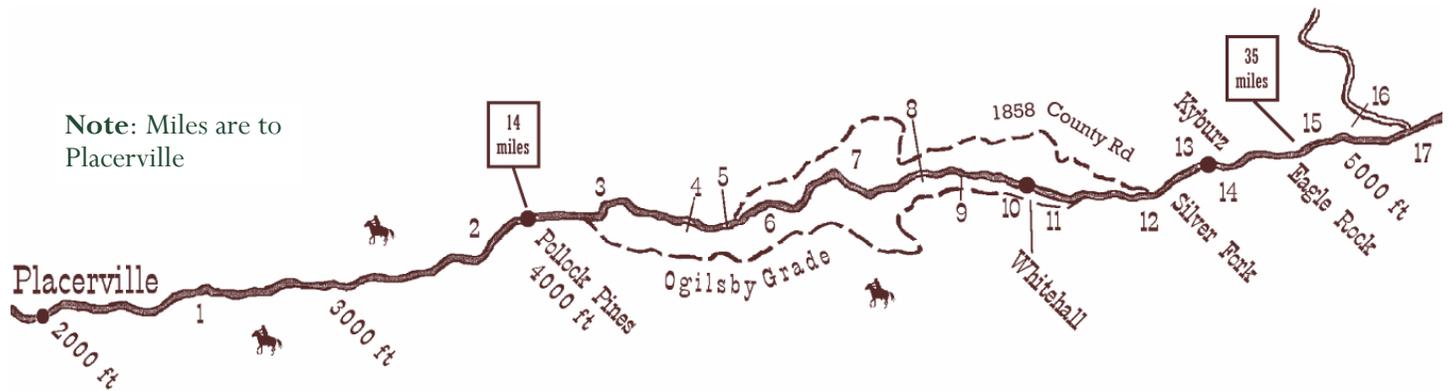
**EXPECT ANNOYANCES, DISCOMFORT,  
AND SOME HARDSHIPS.**

OMAHA HERALD 1877

April 2008

Eldorado National Forest website: [www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado](http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado)

1. **Rupley's.** This 1850s waystation was the first major overnight stage stop for travelers east of Placerville. The original station was down the hill from the modern bed and breakfast.
2. **Sportsman's Hall.** Sportsman's Hall has provided service to travelers since the Gold Rush as a stage stop, a Pony Express remount station, and a restaurant. During its heyday, seven stages stopped here daily and hundreds of horses stabled in its corrals. The dining room in the original building, which burnt in 1868, could sit 150 people. Today's restaurant is the old barn.
3. **Bullion Bend.** This prominent curve in the highway is the site of a stagecoach robbery on June 30, 1864. Bullion was taken from two Pioneer Stage Company coaches by as many as 14 men to fund Confederate recruitment efforts in California. One sheriff was killed in pursuit of the robbers, and several people were wounded. Nine men were eventually arrested for the crime.



4. **Fresh Pond.** A house and ranch were built here in 1861 where several wagon roads converged, including the popular Gold Rush-era Johnson's Cutoff route, which dropped from here into the canyon of the South Fork of the American River.
5. **Pacific House.** This toll house and stage stop was built in 1859. The Pony Express Trail passed in front of the house and dropped into the canyon east of here where it crossed the river.
6. **Bridal Veil Falls.** The Pony Express Trail crossed the river below this point at Brockliss bridge and toll house. On April 4, 1860, William (Sam) Hamilton carried the mail from Placerville on the first eastern run of the Pony Express, delivering it to 18-year-old Warren Upson at Sportsman's Hall. Upson continued east, crossing Echo Summit in a fierce snowstorm.
7. **Riverton.** Despite what the state monument here says, Moore's Station was not used by the Pony Express. The first bridge crossed the river here in 1864, when this spot was developed as a stop for the Pioneer Stage Company. By

1925, Riverton boasted a hotel, store, dance hall, garage, service station and summer cottages. St. Pauli's Inn, a mile upstream from Riverton, is near the location of Pauline's, another popular stop on the emigrant roads.

8. **Cleveland Fire.** The fire scar visible on both sides of the highway is the mark of the Cleveland Fire, which burned 22,500 acres of public and private lands in the fall of 1992.
9. **Recreation Residences.** There are 27 summer home tracts on Forest Service lands between this point and Echo Summit. These tracts date to the 1920s and were built under permit until the late 1940s. Initially, the recreation residences allowed the permittees' families to come up to the mountains to spend the summer months, although now they are often used for shorter periods of time throughout the year. A number of the homes were burned in the Cleveland Fire, leaving stone foundations and cellars dotting the canyon bottom within the fire area.

10. **Whitehall.** Constructed in 1910, this building is at the location of a Gold Rush-era waystation and saloon which later became a resort and store. The Ogilby Grade toll road (1861-1864) ran from Bullion Bend to a spot near here. Rock work supporting the old road can be seen at several places on the hillside south of the river where the fire has removed the vegetation.
11. **Landslides.** Several recent landslides can be seen in this portion of the canyon. Landslides have blocked the river for a time and closed Highway 50 for weeks while repairs were made. Road closures were also common in the past: in January and February of 1862, more than 50 feet of snow fell, closing all the roads in the canyon. Bridges, retaining walls, roadbeds and inns were destroyed in this tremendous storm. The river canyon has been formed in part by large landslides, leaving the canyon with a "hummocky" appearance and numerous midslope benches.
12. **Indian Springs.** In the 1920s and 30s, Inez Roth ran a resort hotel near here, and attempted to bottle the water from the mineral springs for medicinal purposes.



13. **Freds Fire & Sugarloaf House.** The recent fire scar on the north side of the highway is from the 2004 Freds Fire. Sugarloaf House, named for the large granite spire across from Silver Fork Store, was a popular stage stop by the late 1850s. This stop, also known as Websters, was used as a remount station for the Pony Express in 1860-61.
14. **Kyburz.** An inn and toll house were located here. The modern Union 76 garage is in a 1863 barn. The historic lodge features the distinctive stone work of Umberto Sibriglio, an Italian stonemason, who also worked on Strawberry Lodge and several buildings in Placerville. The use of native stone with molding defining each rock's outline was his signature style.
15. **Wrights Fire.** This fire, which ignited from a vehicular accident, scorched 3,000 acres in 1981.
16. **Fred's Place.** This roadhouse was built by Fred and Anna Spriggs and was a popular stop in the 1920s and 30s. Fred's Place was built next to the Champlain House, a Gold Rush era stop noted for its watering trough.
17. **Wrights Lake turnoff.** This road follows the course of the old Johnson's Cutoff and the Georgetown Junction Roads built in the 1850s. Near the turnoff, the Georgetown Junction House served the needs of travelers. A landslide in 1997 buried several portions of this road.

18. **Stone bridge.** The small rockwork bridge crossing a drainage just north of the highway was part of the Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway designated by automobile advocacy groups. Portions of the Lincoln Highway can be seen at several spots along Highway 50.
19. **Strawberry.** This valley contained a popular way station in the 1850s and 60s, and was used by the Pony Express. Early stonework in the present lodge, opened in 1940, is credited to Umberto Sibriglio, with later work by Gilbert Underwood, who also designed the Sun Valley Lodge in Idaho and the Ahwahnee in Yosemite. Food and lodging are still available here.
20. **Twin Bridges.** The wagon road passed beneath the large 1000-foot high rock face to the south of the highway, known as Lovers Leap. Slippery Ford House, an 1860s stage stop, sat at the base of Lovers Leap. Horsetail Falls can be seen further up the canyon, tumbling more than 600 feet over the rock face on the north side of the highway. Further east, Sayles Station, dating to the 1860s, was located near Camp Sacramento at the top of the switchbacks in the highway.
21. **Phillips Station.** Established in 1862 as a stage stop and waystation, Phillips was situated in the grassy meadow across from the turnoff to Sierra at Tahoe ski resort, and operated into the 1930s.
22. **Echo Summit.** The original historic wagon route crossed the Sierran Crest at Johnson's Summit, 1/2 mile north of here. Deep snows in the high country often forced stage riders into sleighs, then onto horses to cross the summit, then back into sleighs, and finally back into stage coaches to complete their journey. During severe weather, people would break track for the horses by repeatedly throwing their bodies full-length into the snow.
23. **Johnson's Cutoff.** The initial 1850s wagon route came straight up the canyon wall near the large gate on the downslope side of the highway. Teams were unhitched at this point, with one end of a long rope affixed to oxen, the rope's midpoint wrapped around an upslope tree, and the other end attached to carts or wagons. The oxen then walked downhill while pulling loaded wagons up the steep canyon slopes to the summit.
24. **Meyers.** The route from Echo Summit to Meyers follows a 1940 re-route of a steep wagon road built in 1860 by Kingsbury and McDonald. A Pony Express remount station, hotel, and stage stop (Yanks) was located here. George Meyers purchased the property in 1873.
25. **Pioneer Trail.** The original route of the wagon roads passing by Lake Tahoe.



## The Pony Express and Overland Stage Line



Prior to 1851, mail from the United States was delivered to Gold Rush communities by clipper ship, or by steamship through Panama, then by mule across the isthmus, and by steamer to San Francisco, a delivery lasting as much as 30 to 90 days. In 1851, mail began to be delivered on an improved monthly basis from Salt Lake City. The desire for even faster mail delivery led to the establishment of the Pony Express, which brought mail to California in a mere 10 days by individual riders on horseback. Each rider covered between 30 and 100 miles or more, changing mounts at least three times before turning the mail over to the next rider in the relay. Mail service by the Pony Express began in April of 1860 and terminated in October of 1861 when the Union Telegraph line was completed.

## California's First State Highway

California was admitted to the Union as the 31<sup>st</sup> state in September, 1850. California's first state highway was established in 1895 on wagon roads in the Highway 50 corridor. Granite markers were cut for the new State Road in Folsom to indicate the mileage to Placerville. The markers date to 1907 and are still visible in places along Highway 50. In 1928, the State Road through the river canyon was linked from coast-to-coast and designated as United States Highway 50. The road through the South Fork American River Canyon remained unpaved until 1939.

### Has The Traffic Been Bad Today?

Consider what it was like in 1860, when the roads were clogged with horse teams, stagecoaches, pack trains, wagons loaded with freight, persons traveling on foot, and loose stock, resulting in travel of less than a mile an hour. On heavy traffic days, if a team pulled off the road, it often took many hours before it was safe enough to pull back into traffic. In 1850, it frequently took three days to travel from Echo Summit to Placerville.

## The First Transcontinental Highway

Around 1908, the popularity of the Model T Ford saw the advent of auto clubs and automotive associations that encouraged the continued development of good highways. The Lincoln Highway Association was organized in 1913 to promote the first transcontinental highway for use by automobiles. The route from New York to San Francisco was designated atop existing wagon roads. In California, the route separated into two branches to cross the Sierras. The northern branch crossed the mountains at Donner Pass, and the southern branch crossed at Echo Summit. These two trans-Sierran routes are still popular today, and are traveled on what we know as U.S. Interstate 80 and U.S. Highway 50.

## The Eldorado National Forest and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit

The Forest Service began administering the public lands in the South Fork American River Canyon area shortly after the turn of the century. In 1910, the Eldorado National Forest was established from lands previously managed by the Tahoe and Stanislaus National Forests, in combination with newly acquired lands. The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit was created in 1973 from lands formerly managed by the Tahoe, Eldorado, and Toiyabe National Forests.



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