

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Palms to Pines Scenic Byway becomes icon

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An impossibly long trailer negotiating hairpin mountain turns does not seem to be the stuff of successful movies, yet desert residents Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz had a big hit with the 1953 film, "The Long, Long Trailer" (the studio was wary of the film, thinking that people could stay home and watch the couple on TV for free. Arnaz reportedly made a \$25,000 bet that the movie would make more money than the highest-grossing comedy at the time, "Father of the Bride," starring Spencer Tracy and Elizabeth Taylor. Arnaz was right, the movie grossed an astonishing \$3.9 million as people were thrilled to see Lucy and Desi up to their antics in color).

The very long trailer used in the film was a 36-foot Redman New Moon model which could barely be turned around the sharp mountain curves featured in the movie. Many of the scenes were filmed in the Sierra Nevada mountains on Portal Road to Mt. Whitney, but some were shot on the Palms to Pines Scenic Byway, State Route 74, which climbs from Palm Desert to Mountain Center up a remarkably steep and tortuous grade.

Palms to Pines Road started from the Gillette Ranch on what was then called the Palm Springs-Indio road, on September 1929 and finished August 1933. A total of 37.1 miles requiring 747,600 cubic yards of excavation and was paid for by contributions from both Riverside County and the U.S. Forest Service. Before the road, the Palms to Pines Trail was used by horseback riders and intrepid outdoorsmen, having been originally scratched into the steep escarpment by M.S. Gordon around 1917 following ancient Cahuilla trails.

The San Bernardino County Sun described a lesser-known part of the story of this highway and those who brought it to fruition, in 1935, "What becomes of restless pioneers after a dream is wrought into permanence...by many Riverside county folks who were happy



COURTESY OF THE HISTORICAL PHOTO ARCHIVE AT THE SHADOW MOUNTAIN CLUB

to have the opportunity of boosting for the Palms-To-Pines highway from Idyllwild to the desert...Travelers will find, perched halfway between the Ramona Bowl and Palm Springs, a modest little way station--Ribbonwood.

"Wilson S. Howell became a familiar figure not only in Coachella valley and in the Riverside courthouse, but throughout the county in the years of crusading...he took a 10-cent school protractor and cutting the mountainside vegetation for an improvised surveyor's stand, he sighted a feasible way up the mountain side through shrubbery and wild vines...today the highway is an established route of travel, one of the most enchanting in the county, high-gear, Government-standard paved." In the 1930s paved roads were indeed something about which newspaper articles were written, a road where one could shift into high gear.

"It is appropriate that one of the first—and last—to preach and work for its building, should remain an active sentinel to its progress. Wilson S. Howell believes in San Jacinto mountain and in Coachella valley—and in their linking highway. Just to prove it, he acquired 2,000 acres 37 miles from Hemet, 30 from Indio and 32 from Palm Springs."

This is an interesting telling. Howell likely owned the land first and was a booster of the road in order to make his holdings more valuable by luring patrons up the mountain to his little Ribbonwood outpost. Either way, he certainly was the "patron spirit of the Palms-to-Pines highway."

Sid Burks wrote about the struggle to build the road for The Desert Sun, "For almost two years before construction began on the highway in 1929, several different factions clamored for routes that would benefit them. The lobbying that followed spawned heated arguments, newspaper editorials and endless meetings." Three routes were in contention. One was prohibitively expensive. Another was advocated by Palm Springs businessmen who wanted a route that would go directly through Palm Canyon. Others wanted a route that would go through Pinyon Flats. The pressure on the Board of Supervisors to decide the route was intense. "The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce even tried to influence the decision by hinting that they would not make a proposed financial contribution...if the highway did not go through Palm Canyon." The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians nixed the Palm Canyon route, and the road was

put through Pinyon Flats from Palm Desert.

Harry Quinn, past president of the Historical Society of Palm Desert, knows the road better than anybody, having driven it almost daily since 1941. His recollections have just been collated and printed in a special edition by The Riverside County Heritage Association, including a chapter on the highway. where many more details of its story can be found.

Quinn would doubtlessly agree with the newspaper in 1935, "The trip down the Palm to Pines highway should include at least two or three short—if they cannot be long—stops along the wayside to tramp a bit over the rocks."

Tramping over the rocks along this serpentine stretch of highway was a major scene in Stanley Kramer's 1963 peripatetic comedy, "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" where Jimmy Durante is seen careening off Highway 74 to his death, and where Edie Adams, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Buddy Hackett, Ethel Merman, Mickey Rooney and Jonathan Winters scramble all over the mountain-side intent on finding Durante's secret treasure, revealed to them just before he literally kicks the bucket, succumbing to the very treacherous stretch of road.

Today, the monument sign admonishes visitors to drive carefully, "This is a place of solitude and beauty, please take time to show respect for both the natural surroundings and those who share this highway. Maintain a grateful awareness of the time given you to share with your loved ones and remember those who innocently lost what you may take for granted."

And the newspaper article bids, "As you travel over the highway think of the hundreds who made it possible. But take time to make concrete your thanksgiving by a friendly word (for) the Ribbonwood pioneer..."

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