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Artist's note: The Ridge Road has been in my family for thirty-five years. Back in 1916, Aunt Lottie, who had a penchant for grandeur, ordered a big specially-built bus for her daughter's picnics, and Uncle Will drove it to Fresno over the Ridge Road. Uncle Will recalls he had to chop a tree down to get the bus around one corner. It was only natural that I should be assigned to paint the road.

GHOST ROAD TO BAKERSFIELD

by Harriet Crouse
paintings by Rollin Pickford, Jr.

IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, two highways keep company for a space—a living expressway and a ghost.

The living highway is U.S. 99. Up Violin Canyon,

over Seven Mile Hill, down to French Flat it races along, four divided lanes wide, with gentle grades and banked curves. Over it daily flow 21,000 passenger cars and 11,000 trucks, their drivers safe-

guarded from every hazard except falling asleep at superspeeds.

The ghost is U.S. 99 too, the old 99, the fearsome ancestor of the modern highway down in the canyon. It's been nearly twenty years since 99 last ran the hogback of the Tehachapi Mountains from Castaic to Gorman, but the old Ridge Route is still there, sunning itself like a lizard on top of the chaparral-covered slopes. Like a fat woman with a loose girdle it waddles around the hills, its decrepit pavement kept more or less intact by Los Angeles County, which maintains it as a fireroad.

But its memories are hardly that of a fat woman with a loose girdle. In its brief nineteen-year career it piled up a record of wrecks, steaming engines and superheated profanity that can hardly be excelled. Since the road is kept open after a fashion, the motorist with adventure in his soul may sample its thrills today—that is, if he doesn't mind crossing a dirt fill where the original road has disappeared over the side, or taking an hour and a half to go thirty-five miles. It will be an excursion into the past, an interlude with a rugged yet sinuous ghost.

Old Ridge was born in conflict. Before its day, the only road from the rich San Joaquin valley to the Los Angeles market lay via the Mojave desert—a roundabout trip. When the motorists of 1912 demanded a better highway, two factions developed. Both were headed by Los Angeles newspaper publishers, one with land in the Antelope Valley, who offered an easier route and a cheaper one; the other with land in the Tehachapis, who emphasized the savings in miles. The latter won. Two years and 3,500 curves later, the road was opened. It had an oiled surface at first, but the high pressure tires of the day soon tore the surface to pieces, leaving a mass of chuckholes. Next it was paved with concrete, and motorists who drove it during this period recall it with terror.

"In those days, you had to cure concrete," says Roy Compton of the Southern California Motor Truck Association. "They poured it in block forms six inches high, doused them in water, then spread dirt over the surface. Most of the time you were scraping past these forms, flirting with the cliff edge."

The concrete was exactly two cars wide, without aprons. As the road surged over the Old Ridge it was one unrelieved series of S curves. Most motorists, in addition to carrying plenty of tools, extra gas and water also carried a liberal portion of seasick remedy. Even after the road was somewhat straightened, thirty-two miles an hour was top speed.

Two things caused trouble for passenger cars. First, there was very little water on top of the mountain—Reservoir Summit, whose concrete tank is now cracked and dry, was one of the few places. Motorists not only had to carry their own water,

they had to stop every ten miles or so to let their engines cool down.

Second, there was the problem of four-cylinder engines versus ten percent grades. The actual grades up onto the ridge at either end caused no special trouble, but the road over the ridge itself continually went up short, sharp little rises that the cars of the time could scarcely surmount. Ice at the northern end and fog anywhere, anytime, constantly added to the hazard.

If pleasure cars had a rough time, truckers had it worse. It was a common sight to see a trucker head his rig up one of those pitches, get out and walk alongside to keep awake. "Some of those rigs, you had to drive a stake alongside and take a bearing to see if you were moving at all, then you had plenty of time to get out, pull your stake, and catch the truck," said one. Going up grades, the motors would get so hot the driver would burn his feet if he kept them on the floorboards; he would either open the door and hang them out or get out and walk alongside.

Uphill was bad enough, but downhill was worse. The heyday of the Old Ridge was the day of the mechanical brake; truck trailers had brakes on the two rear wheels operated by a rope running between a lever on the truck and the mechanism on the trailer. If the rope broke, or if the brakes went out altogether, the driver was out of luck.

Most of the accidents were credited to brake failure; actually shifting was primarily responsible. A driver would underestimate a pitch, try too late to shift down to a lower gear and not make it. The only thing to do was rev up the motor, get it in whatever gear possible, hang on and pray. Naturally, with such equipment the brakes went out faster than they do today. Some valiant souls managed to stop by banking, but the Old Ridge had too many stretches where there was nothing on either side but sheer space, and sooner or later the trucker met up with it.

Fortunately, neither trucking nor motoring then was as extensive as now, or hundreds more people would have been killed on a road that was



bloody enough. The traffic count for twenty-four hours in 1920 was 776. In 1933, at the end of the Old Ridge's career, it was 2,771—about the amount that the present road carries every two hours. Even so, old-timers claim that the man was lucky who drove it two or three times without banging up a fender or worse.

Modern brakes, transmissions and cooling systems make the Old Ridge an easy matter today. It is hard to realize, as you laze along, following the curves and dodging pebbles, that this tattered ghost carried all the traffic between Bakersfield and Los Angeles, or that the tumble-down buildings you pass were once busy commercial enterprises. You come to a wide place on a hogback where a dead locust tree still shelters a small square foundation. There is nothing else but a broken barrel and the rusted fender of an ancient car, yet you know the instant your eye takes in the magnificent scenery that reaches clear to the San Gabriel Mountains that here must have been View Service Station.

Still by the side of the road, held upright by two massive pillars of piled stone, its paint weathered but legible, is the Old Ridge's only remaining

billboard. At Reservoir Summit all that is left is a set of concrete steps, a knoll of planted pines, and a concrete tank.

A few miles north is what must have once been one of the Ridge's most pretentious establishments. You can count three fireplaces standing in a clutter of broken glass and torn roofing paper. A stone arch, still intact, curves over a stairway to an upper level. Halfway up, scratched into the concrete, is its name, "Tumble Inn." A long sidewalk leads away from the steps, and beside it, leaning slightly with time and too many games, is an iron horseshoe stake. On the way out you pick up a discarded license plate; its year of issue was 1927. Of all the places on the Ridge—Ridge Road Garage, Martin's, National Forest Inn, Halfway Inn—only one survives.

Even the old road signs, posted by the Automobile Club of Southern California, mostly are gone. Only three remain. One says "Winding Road." The other two say, "Caution—Speed Limit 15 Miles On Curves."

By the time you see one, you'll know they're not kidding.

Artist's note: At either end of the Ridge Road are signs reading ROAD CLOSED. Between them are loneliness, desolation and great space—favorite ingredients for an artist. One leaves the throbbing of busy U. S. 99 onto the old Ridge and meets the serenity of unfilled space and the subtle music of wind interwoven with silence. Here no one steps on your palette and asks, "Are you an artist?"



photograph by Ray Atkeson

* Colorama, U.S.A. *

Mt. Shuksan in Winter

MT. SHUKSAN is not the highest peak in the Pacific Northwest by a long shot. Yet it is situated in such a way as to appear more beautiful, rugged and majestic than many a mountain of greater height. Part of the effect is achieved by the fact that its north face is a nearly perpendicular headwall rising 7,000 feet above its immediate base. This results in a spectacular illusion that the mountain is much higher.

Shuksan, in northwestern Washington, is a great favorite with mountain climbers. It makes the special demands that devotees of this sport ask—the need for using special equipment, the opportunities of dangling over vast chasms, and the rewards of gazing triumphantly down from heights that would create bottomless wells of terror in the less courageous. Shuksan is also rife with avalanches which thunder thousands of feet downward in all seasons of the year.

This section of the Northwest also includes Mt. Baker, and between its 10,000-foot peak and

Shuksan there is a winter sports area as beautiful as any in the country. It offers skiers every possible sort of thrill and challenge on the downhill runs, but it also gives the cross-country skiers more than their money's worth because the scenery changes constantly and is never less than magnificent.

The scene of this picture is Heather Meadows, near Mt. Baker Lodge and Heather Inn. Both places are open all summer, but in winter the Mt. Baker Lodge accommodates guests only during Christmas and spring vacations, while Heather Inn stays open during all winter weekends. Last year 35,000 people went skiing during the six-months' winter of the area. Most of these were young college students from Seattle and Vancouver. During the winter the road ends at the lodge, which is in the heart of the Mt. Baker winter sports area.

The snow gets to be twenty-five feet deep in Heather Meadows but doesn't hide the tops of the silver firs and mountain hemlocks that are a characteristic part of the scenery.