

Old Ridge Route and Sandberg

Sandberg's Summit Hotel

RIDGE ROUTE

Hotel History from SCVHistory.com (service of SCVTV)



Sandberg's Summit Hotel, which once stood along the old Ridge Route between Castaic and Lebec. Postcard, 1920s.

According to Ridge Route historian Harrison Scott, Norwegian-born Harald Sandberg erected a one-story hotel in 1914 in anticipation of the 1915 opening of the Ridge Route highway. In 1918 he was appointed postmaster and the area was officially named Sandberg. Harald (b. 9-4-1867, d. 7-9-1939) expanded the hotel sometime after 1921, turning it into a high-class, three-story log hostelry using timber he cut down on the property. The ground floor featured the post office, lobby, dining room, ladies' lounge and men's lounge. The family lived on the second floor; guest rooms were on the third floor. Several cabins were added behind the hotel, along with a garage that had upstairs guest rooms.

Sandberg's Summit Hotel made news in September 1929 when Ulysses S. Grant Jr., the 77-year-old son of the former president and an avid motoring enthusiast, was found dead in bed there, presumably from a heart attack. The hotel changed hands a few times around the time of Harald Sandberg's death 10 years later. Its vaunted reputation shattered under the ownership of J.H. Cox, who reputedly brought in "booze, slot machines and ladies of the night," according to Scott, who carefully notes that Harald Sandberg had repeatedly rebuffed pressures from "various syndicates" to allow gambling during his lifetime.

"We will probably never know for sure if Mr. Cox profited from any alleged shady activities at the hotel," Scott writes, "but we do know that he was doing pretty well selling apples from the old Sandberg orchard" — an unusual crop for the region.

Cox ultimately sold to a German woman, Lillian Grojean, an ex-con who manufactured ceramic tableware sold in department stores and who, according to local legend, transmitted secrets to the German government during World War II. The allegation has never been proved, and what secrets a potter in the boonies might know has never been explained.

Around 1950, Grojean sold the hotel to a fellow ceramics maker from Burbank, "Lucky" Walter Stevens, who was in the process of rehabilitating the property as a camp for underprivileged children when sparks from the fireplace in the lobby ignited the wood-shingled roof. Stevens had been burning trash. The date was April 29, 1961.

Two cabins survived the fire. The Forest Service canceled the lease on the property in 1963. One cabin was moved to a nearby ranch and the fate of the other is unknown.

For more information, read "Lost Hotels on California's Historic Ridge Route" by Harrison Irving Scott (2008).

Ridge Route history by Jerry Reynolds:

Ever since the days of Phineas Banning, General Beale and the Butterfield Overland stage, vehicles made their way out of Los Angeles, through San Francisquito Canyon, down the Grapevine Pass, and then into Bakersfield. The California Highway Commission was formed in 1911, and one of its first priorities was to build a simpler, more direct road through the La Liebre Mountains. That task fell to the man with the unlikely name of W. Lewis Clark.

Frustrated in several attempts to locate an easy way across the stony barrier, Clark, at last, blazed a trail right over the top from the mouth of Castaic Canyon to Gorman. It was called the Ridge Route.

After a year of toil, during which four-horse Fresno scrapers graded hilltops alongside chugging Caterpillar tractors to the tune of a staggering half-million dollars, the Tejon Route, as it was originally dubbed, opened to the motoring public late in November 1915. The Auto Club did a little calculating, finding that in the 36 miles between Castaic and Gorman, there were 642 curves that added up to 97 complete circles. It did cut 60 miles off the road, however.

Even before construction started in 1914, an enterprising businessman by the name of Sam Parsons purchased an acre of land from W.H. Cook fronting the stake line, then threw up a general store that catered to the needs of the workers. Afterwards, "Sam's Place" became a mecca for truckers and the beginning of a new town called Castaic.

While the Ridge Route did not bring permanent residents (to the Santa Clarita Valley), for the most part it did cut down on travel time to the great markets of Los Angeles. One could journey to town and back in a single day — amazing! Then there was the increasing horde of gentlemen clad in long linen dusters with goggles, piloting their chugging, spitting vehicles with names such as Marmon "41," Winton "Six," or Packard ("Ask the man who owns one"). They, their womenfolk, and children might get hungry along the way or need gasoline or automobile repairs. So began a series of what might be called "tourist traps."

The next stop (after Newhall-Saugus) along the Ridge Route would have been Castaic, (and then) there was the Ridge Road Garage, The Tumble Inn, Reservoir Summit, and that splendid establishment in the wilderness known as Sandberg. Local rancher Herman Sandberg provided excellent, guaranteed-fresh steaks at his hotel. Slot machines could also be found there and, in a long, low building out back (known as "The Crib,") feminine companionship was available for weary truckers and lonely salesmen.

In 1933 Highway 99 was carved up the canyons, bypassing the 18-year-old Ridge Route, which was already antiquated.