

# THE OLD BLACK CANYON HIGHWAY

BY MARSHALL TRIMBLE, OFFICIAL ARIZONA STATE HISTORIAN

*The first time I traveled the old Black Canyon Highway was in October, 1947 and I was 8 years old. My father had recently given up ranching and had sold his cows. He hired out as a fireman for the Santa Fe Railroad, and the only place where he had enough seniority to work steadily was at the railroad junction town of Ash Fork along storied Route 66. Phoenix was linked*

*to northern Arizona at Ash Fork by U.S. Highway 89 and the Santa Fe, Prescott and Phoenix Railroad. The highway took a long, circuitous path through Wickenburg and the rugged Weaver and Bradshaw Mountains. Because of its switchbacks, twists, and more kinks than a cheap lariat, the railroad became known as the Peavine.*

We packed up the 1936 Ford, hitched up our two-room trailer house, and headed north up Mission Drive (today's 27th Avenue) along what would one day become Interstate-17. The only paved road from Phoenix to Ash Fork in those days was U.S. 89 by way of Wickenburg and Prescott. There was only one major obstacle—Yarnell Hill, north of Wickenburg—and it was so steep that mountain goats had to shut their eyes and walk sideways. There was no way that old Ford could climb it pulling a trailer house. Our only choice was to travel the old stagecoach road that's now called Black Canyon Highway. It began at 27th Avenue and Thomas Road and headed north toward New River where the pavement ended.

We stopped at Rock Springs for water and gas and then headed north across the Agua Fria and up the steep grade north of the river on that narrow road that is still visible today from I-17 on the way to Sunset Point. About halfway up the grade, the clutch blew out and we had to be towed into Bumble Bee by a highway department truck. All there was to Bumble Bee in those days were some small cabins, a

school, and the general store, which included a gas station, café, bar, groceries, and hardware. It was also the area's social gathering place—on Saturday nights, they pushed back the tables and had a dance.

My dad flagged down a southbound car and gave a parts list to the driver to drop off at

hills looking for gold.

After making repairs, we loaded up and headed north from Bumble Bee, only to break down again on the steep hill in Crazy Basin, scene of several stagecoach robberies during the late 1800s. Once again, a highway department truck towed us in to Cordes.

Henry Cordes had a gas station and general store similar to the one at Bumble Bee, and he became our cordial host for a few more days while more parts arrived from Hilding's Garage. Soon, we were on our way again.

The journey on to Mayer, Humboldt, Dewey, and Prescott was uneventful, as there were no more steep hills to climb. We turned on U.S. 89 north of Prescott and made our way the final 53 miles to Ash Fork. It would be our home for the next eight years.

During that eight-day journey

from Phoenix to Prescott, my brothers and I had a great time skipping school and roaming the hills and canyons along the old Black Canyon Highway. I was too young to appreciate the history as we traveled along that old stagecoach road, but the memory is still clear after more than sixty years. 



The travelin' Trimbles in Ash Fork, 1948. Marshall, age 9; brother Danny, age 7; mother Juanita, age 29; father Ira "Happy", age 39; and brother Charlie, age 12.

Hilding's Garage on 27th Avenue between Indian School and Thomas. Mr. Hilding filled the order and gave it to another car heading north. The next day, the parts arrived, and Dad went about rebuilding the clutch. My brothers and I passed the days exploring along the creek and the nearby