

A Trip in Time

Harry Quinn recounts the early days of the long, winding and breathtaking Highway 74.

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by Ann Japenga

AS OFTEN AS WE DRIVE HIGHWAY 74—THE PALMS TO PINES HIGHWAY—most of us don't really know the famous road. The serpentine route from the low desert into the Santa Rosa Mountains and beyond has inspired countless fashion shoots, car ads and cinematic chase scenes, including those from the classic 1963 road movie "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World".

The turns are so tight, the drop-offs so perilous, that's there's no time for motorists to contemplate the brave road builders or movie makers who came before. I wanted to get to know Highway 74 better and that's why I found myself on a recent morning jolting along in Harry Quinn's old Bronco, bracing my neck against every bump, while rivers of slobber (courtesy of Harry's dog, Milo) drenched my shoulder.

When it comes to Highway 74, you could call Harry the King of the Road. A respected geologist, paleontologist and archaeologist, he knows this landscape through professional eyes. But he's also been traveling the highway since he was two years old. He lived in a tent on the mountain with his grandparents beginning in 1941, and later moved with his parents into a Pinyon Pines cabin.

While he left the mountains at times to work as a geologist in Alaska and Nevada, he has lived in Pinyon for much of his life. The road and its residents have taught him most of what he knows. Paradoxically the road also cost him his wife, Terry, when her car plunged off Highway 74 in a fatal 2005 accident.

As we drive along Harry points out fault lines, fracture zones and old tungsten and asbestos mines. He points to a mountain called Sugarloaf and casually mentions that up on top are the Big Harry and Little Harry mines—named for himself and his grandfather. He tells stories about the half-frozen dolomite miners who once stumbled into the old Nightingale's Café (15 miles up 74 from 111, where the Sugarloaf café is today), and about watching local cowboys known as "The Brush Poppers" perform wild riding stunts across the pinyon country.

On his earliest trips up Highway 74, Harry says his family would stop at Beaumont for a 25 lb. bag of ice and open the windows for air-conditioning while the ice dripped through holes drilled in the floorboard of his grandfather's '39 Chevy. The ice was gone and the engine over-heating by the time they reached the Seven Level grade (the switch-backs) on Highway 74. Fortunately, at a popular stop on the road just below modern day Vista Point, spring water was piped up the canyon and someone had installed a faucet for thirsty boys and boiling radiators.

Just eight years before Harry came to the hill, there was no road at all. Prior to the opening of Highway 74 in 1932, only a deeply-worn ladder-like trail led up Dead Indian Canyon, near where the road is today. In the era before air conditioning, desert dwellers looked to the mountains for relief from the heat, but there was no easy way to get there.

"At that time to reach the area by automobile was a roundabout all-day drive through the Pass, over to Hemet, and up the steep, narrow and crooked Idyllwild road on the far side of the San Jacintos," wrote Nina Paul Shumway in "Your Desert and Mine". To go on to Pinyon, where Shumway built a house called "The Tors", motorists had to open and close seven cattle gates, straddle several miles of Omstott Creek and dodge downed trees and boulders.

A quicker road to the mountains was the brainchild of two men—J. Win Wilson, editor of the Date Palm newspaper in Indio, and Harry Quinn's old friend, Wilson Howell. Howell operated a date garden in Indio, but he increasingly longed to escape to his plot of land in the Santa Rosas.

At the same time as Howell and Wilson began lobbying for a road, boosters in Palm Springs had the same idea—except their road would take off from Palm Canyon. A tug-o-war erupted. "There was a big fight with Palm Springs about the route," wrote Charlotte Anderson Stocks in a letter to the Palm Desert Historical Society. "There being no Palm Desert at the time it seemed a very lopsided battle."

Wilson Howell led groups of supporters into the mountains to pull weeds and rake stones, laying out a path for the contested highway. "Just about everybody from Indian Wells, Indio and the entire lower valley got into the act," wrote Valley pioneer George Ames. "Groups and clubs began organizing trips up the mountain on foot or by auto the long way around."

One of the folks Howell guided into the mountains was County surveyor A.C. Fulmor. Fulmor eventually settled the dispute between cities by selecting the Pinyon Pines route as less costly than Palm Canyon. In 1929, County Road Camp prisoners began hacking out the roadway using picks, shovels, dynamite, wheelbarrows and horse-drawn scrapers.

As I bounce along in Harry's Bronco (the four-wheel drive is out so we have to hit the ruts hard), I get to hear a lot about Wilson Howell, a mentor to young Harry. As a kid, Harry was a white-haired Tom Sawyer-type with a crooked smile; today his hair is a white crew cut.

He had a knack of making himself useful to adults and he also had the unusual ability and desire to remember everything his elders told him. By age eight, he was writing down stories recited by local Indians.

Howell, an early bohemian, built a health resort on the highway, and named it Ribbonwood. The location was about 3 miles past the Sugarloaf Café where today you see an abandoned gas station south of the road. He planted 65 fruit trees and grew 15 types of vegetables, using kitchen compost and worms—no commercial fertilizers. Howell put young Harry to work carrying a surveyor's staff and tying flags on bushes.

Another pal of Harry's was Pinyon pioneer, Arthur Nightingale, who founded the Pinyon Pines subdivision and ran the Nightingale Store. On Nightingale's first trip to the mountains with his wife Mae, there was no road so they hiked up through a snowstorm with heavy packs, at times pulling themselves through knee-deep snow bush by bush.

Later, Nightingale set up tent camps—and even a school—for the workers who built the highway. Crews worked their way down from Ribbonwood to meet the crews coming up from the desert. They connected at Black Hill, a prominent landmark at about the 3,000 foot level.

Harry takes a turn onto a rutted dirt road up Santa Rosa Mountain. After much jostling we come to a dry creek bed below the remains of the old Garnet Queen Mine. The boulders in the creek used to be orange with ladybugs, he says, when he and Wilson Howell would come here to scrape bugs into a gunnysack for Howell's garden.

“Unlike the kids of today I was able to do what I wanted and had plenty of room to do it in,” he says. “I could go in any direction from our cabin and in ten minutes not see anybody.”

Life in the mountains remained primitive long after civilization came to the desert below. The Quinns hunted for quail and rabbit; their pancakes were sweetened with jelly made from cactus or manzanita berries. Electricity didn't arrive in the Pinyon area until around 1957—before that evenings revolved around a kerosene lamp and a game of cards or checkers. “I learned the game of dominoes at Steve's “Betwixt and Between” cabin on a double-nine set of hand-carved ivory dominos,” Harry once wrote. “Steve” is Desert Steve Ragsdale, a legendary mountain character who wrote poems on the trees and had a cabin on Santa Rosa peak called Eighth Heaven.

On the Santa Rosa mountain road at about the 4,000 foot level we come to an overgrown doorway in the bushes. I'd never have known it was there if not for my guide. Harry leads me down a brushy path into a garden of huge boulders, with expansive views to the valley. Highway 74 drew its share of dreamers and this was the site of one such dream. The Mountain Home Community was to be a back-to-nature retreat for some 20 Valley date-ranching families. Then came the Depression, futile attempts at prospecting and a devastating 1944 fire. All that's left today is a ghost utopia.

Heading back down the hill we cross Omstott Creek, a brook where Quinn's family got water when he was a child. It's now dry, as are almost all the springs the family once depended on. Even the pinyon pines have crept farther up the hillsides, retreating for lack of water. “We could always travel spring to spring and we never carried a canteen till the mid-'50s,” Harry remembers.

When we get back to Harry's house two doors down from his grandparents' original cabin (which he still owns) my pens, notebook and the contents of my pack are littered all over the floor of the Bronco, drizzled with dog spit and stamped with paw prints.

After the Road Movie I've just been in, it seems anticlimactic to mention that other road movie made up here on the hill. But I know there are millions of fanatical “Mad World” fans so I'll close by noting that: Yes, there will be a sequel to the most famous Highway 74 flick of all time, “It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World”. Producer Edward Bass is working with Stanley Kramer's widow on a sequel. In a telephone call Bass told me: “We plan to revisit as many of the original locations as possible.”

And for those of you who replay over and over again Jimmy Durante's famous kick-the-bucket scene on the lip of a hairy Highway 74 turn, Bass has this good news: "Of course, somebody will kick the bucket."