

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Altamont Pass: Today and Yesterday

The old two-lane road over the Altamont Pass, earlier called the Livermore Pass, has an elevation of 749 feet; modern Interstate 580 climbs to 1,004 feet. Since the days when bands of Native Americans traversed it, the windy pass curving between high bare hills has been a major route between the Livermore Valley and the San Joaquin Valley. About eight miles northeast of Livermore, the small community of Summit—now bypassed by I-580—grew at the summit of the old road, which was first part of the original stagecoach route to Stockton, later the Lincoln Highway, and eventually designated State Highway 50.

The Central Pacific, which soon became the Southern Pacific, Railroad rechristened the settlement “Altamont” when its depot was built in 1870, and the old stagecoach road became the Altamont Pass Road. The two-story depot included living space for the station agent and his family. Munro-Fraser’s *History of Alameda County* describes Altamont as a hamlet with about a dozen houses in 1883. Western Pacific also put a line through the area in 1910. Most of the original residents came to work on the railroads and settled nearby. Two to four engines were needed to pull the freight trains up the Altamont grade from the town of Niles, now part of Fremont; the

extra engines were turned on a hydraulic turntable at Altamont and returned to Niles.

Train passenger service was discontinued in 1941; the depot was torn down in the 1950s. A palm tree and a large metal barn mark the site of the hamlet today; the houses and the school are gone. The only surviving, though not functioning, commercial building in the tiny windswept settlement is Armstrong’s Garage. Early land uses in the Altamont area were predominantly sheepherding and hay production. Now the two main industries on the surrounding hills are cattle raising and wind farming. The Southern Pacific abandoned its tracks in 1986; current freight trains and the ACE trains use the old Western Pacific rails.

On 4 August 1938 a bypass of the Altamont Pass Road opened. Governor Frank F. Merriam pressed a white-hot branding iron against a stretched-out rawhide riata held by Lois Mulqueeny and another cowgirl across the road, symbolically burning through the barrier to the new

highway. Merriam said that he dedicated it “to the public that built it, to those who participated in its construction and to all who will travel over it—may they move speedily and safely, with the greatest happiness and satisfaction.” Now travelers could enjoy the new section of Highway 50, four lanes wide, which eliminated the narrow, twisting, dangerous sections. The number of curves was reduced from 60 to fifteen. Construction of the 8.2-mile bypass between Greenville and Mountain House cost \$1,207,000, a phenomenal amount in 1938. One of my favorite cartoons published in the *Herald* before the bypass showed a truck slowly climbing the grade, and cars as far as you could see behind it with angry drivers waving their hands. An estimated 9,000 cars used the old route daily in 1936; estimates of the travel that would be handled on the new four-lane were as high as 48,000 per day. Today, the rate is 170,000 vehicles.

A writer for the Newman, CA *West Side Index* newspaper

published an article in April 1940 about a drive he had made several days before from Newman over the two-lane Old Altamont Road into Livermore: “Some day, if you feel a desire for a peaceful drive over a smooth and winding road through rolling hills; a yen to meander or speed on your way unhindered by traffic; a yearning to see sheep grazing on hillsides, where no glaring billboards spoil the beauty of nature; to see a deserted village in all of its lovely, calm contentment; to loiter by the side of the road untroubled by dust or hurrying motorists; to cut corners in a spirit of bravado with no fear of a traffic officer—as we said, if someday you want to do this little thing, we know the spot.

“Such places don’t exist anymore, you say, except way, way back in the rugged wilderness and then not even there. Don’t say it, for this stretch of heavenly road is but fifty miles away; the way is paved and plenty wide; and if lack of excitement palls, you can be back in the bustle and hurry of modernity quickly. Want to go?

“If you do, just head north to Tracy, west to Mountain House, but don’t swing to the left into the Livermore bypass. Stay on the old road through Altamont, if for no other reason than old time’s sake. Remember how you used to cuss the slow-moving trucks, fume over the couple that was just out for a drive, berate the highway department for not straightening curves, and soundly condemn the pioneers who put the road in the location in the first place? Remember?”

“We hope you do, just for the shock you’ll get from the contrast ... Gone are the billboards telling of a myriad of ‘new’ hotels in San Francisco, distracting bathing beauties inhaling entrancing cigarettes, even advice to take the train next time. Gone are the dodging cut-in drivers, the fifty apoplectic motorists stalled behind the huge semi. The only persons we saw on our trip on the entire stretch were a couple of sentimental old fools like ourselves, taking the drive for Auld Lang Syne.”

You can still enjoy this drive on the old road, but I would advise you to take it only on the weekends. During the week it is not so romantic—jammed with commuters hoping to avoid the traffic on Interstate 580 and with trucks headed for the dump site.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)