



California Gold Country and Great Basin Road Trip (B22A)

I finally got around to checking out California's Gold Country, the mining towns in the Sierra foothills, including the Sutter's Mill site where an 1848 discovery of gold launched the 1849 California Gold Rush. I then continued north to the Oregon border, visiting California's part of the Great Basin before heading across northern Nevada to Elko before taking a scenic route south back to Las Vegas. Because of an unusual-for-September heat wave, the trip began with a few days of the hottest weather I've experienced all year. But I'm a Las Vegan, and we Las Vegans laugh at the heat. Tee-hee.

Less funny was when my car overheated on my last full day of sightseeing. I found out that my radiator had developed a coolant leak, and I couldn't get it repaired/replaced any time soon in the small town of Ely, Nevada. Armed with a spare jug of coolant, I drove straight home, skipping my last planned stops.

I started the trip by heading towards Bakersfield, heading west first on I-15 and then on California Route 58 through the Tehachapi Pass.



The ship ran aground on a pass in this uncharted western state
With Gilligan...
The Skipper too....



The Tehachapi Loop is a horizontal railroad track loop-de-loop, used to help trains gain elevation through a mountain pass at a reasonable grade. I've only seen one other of these, that one in Yoho National Park in British Columbia. The Yoho one even passes through a tunnel.



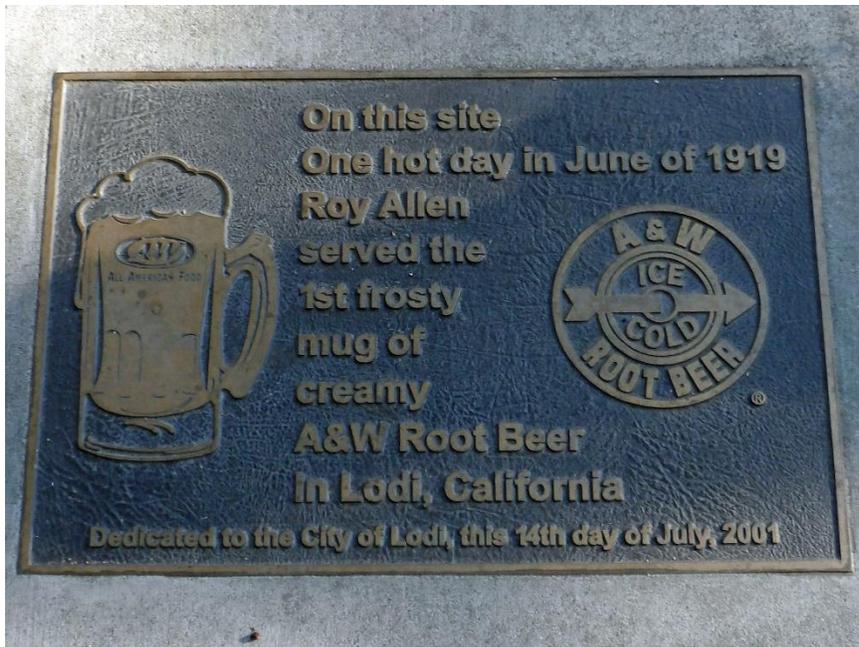
César E. Chávez National Monument was the home of César Chávez and headquarters of the United Farm Workers from the early 1970s until he died in 1993. Chávez was a controversial labor leader and civil rights activist who worked for improved pay and working conditions for farm workers. He was also one of the organizers of the Delano grape strike from 1965-1970. The visitor center features a museum on his work, and his office has been preserved. Chávez and his wife Helen were buried on the grounds of the site, established as a national monument in 2012.



I made my third trip to Carrizo Plain National Monument, east of Bakersfield. I've toured much of the park during my first two visits. Among other things, it features birding associated with an often dry lake bed, visible evidence of the San Andreas Fault, and a hike that crosses some stream beds whose courses have been altered as tectonic plates have shifted past each other along the fault. But I missed the Painted Rock hike on each of those visits, so I reserved a visitor slot so that I could finally make the hike.



Painted Rock is a sandstone outcropping on which a number of pictographs have been painted by Chumash, Salinan and Yokuts peoples, some dating back 3000-4000 years. Unfortunately, vandalism, gunshots and the effects of time and weathering have degraded a number of the surviving pictographs. But the site is still well worth visiting.



Because my family owned and operated an A&W restaurant for several years, I stopped in Lodi so that I could check out the site of the first ever A&W Root Beer Stand.



That root beer stand is long gone, but the nearby A&W restaurant features a lot of A&W-related memorabilia, including this complete A&W Burger Family collection.

Of course, I had dinner here – and gave myself some extra insulin to offset the frosty mug of creamy A&W Root Beer that I had with dinner (there's a pound of sugar in a gallon of root beer).

California Route 49 starts in Oakhurst, California, and takes a generally northerly route through the Sierra foothills and several historic mining communities that date back to the 1849 California Gold Rush era. That it is Route 49 is tied to the 49ers who came to California at that time in search of their fortunes.

I headed east from Lodi to connect with Route 49 at San Andreas. San Andreas was founded by Mexican gold miners in 1848; gold mined here helped support Union efforts during the Civil War. Notorious stagecoach robber Black Bart was tried and convicted here in the 1880s. My late uncle Glenn retired to San Andreas, where he sometimes portrayed Black Bart at community events and charity fundraisers.



Black Bart Inn is the most prominent business remaining on San Andreas' historic Main Street.



San Andreas is the county seat of Calaveras County, made famous in Mark Twain's short story *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. That probably explains why frogs get preferential parking along historic Main Street.



I left Route 49 for a bit when I found out about nearby Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park. A marbled limestone outcropping there features 1,185 morteros – mortar holes – that the Miwok people used to grind acorns and other seeds. This is the largest collection of bedrock morteros in North America. In addition, there are over 300 weathered and fading petroglyphs, many decorating some of the morteros. Except for one other small site, these are the only morteros known to be decorated with petroglyphs.



A petroglyph spoke pattern radiates out from this mortero.

Next stop, Coloma, where the 1849 California Gold Rush began.



In 1848, John Sutter, James Marshall and a team of mostly Mormon laborers were building a saw mill on the edge of the South Fork of the American River when Marshall discovered some gold flakes in the mill's tailrace. Word got out, and by 1849 people were flocking to California to try to strike it rich. A replica of the saw mill stands near where the original mill was built. The park also features a museum, an interpretive trail and a collection of historic Coloma buildings.



Archaeologists turned up the actual site of the mill in 1924, and found timbers, relics and the tailrace in 1947.

This is one of the original timbers from the 1848 Sutter's saw mill, on display in the park's museum. Unfortunately, due to the season's wildfire threat, some of the museum's key artifacts had been removed from the museum and safely stored.



Most of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park presents the history here very nicely. But here's the overgrown tailrace, the spot where gold was actually first discovered.



At just over a half mile long, California Route 153 in Coloma is the shortest state highway in California. Or not. There are four other numbered highways in the state that are shorter, but they only serve to connect other highways together. Route 153 connects Route 49 to the James Marshall Monument.

I spent the night in Auburn, California, and woke up the next morning to a smoky haze over the city – from the *Mosquito Fire*, which started the night before. As of this writing, it had grown to become the state's biggest wildfire of 2022.

At the town of Grass Valley, I left Route 49 for a bit to check out the village of Rough and Ready. Established as a mining town in 1849, it declared its secession from the United States in April 1850 in order to avoid mining taxes, although the people voted to rejoin the country later that year on July 4.



The Great Republic of Rough and Ready



The Oregon Creek Covered Bridge



Site of Jouberts Diggins, along Route 49. The Joubert family used a hydraulic mining process here for 74 years. Basically, blast a hillside with water, and then run the resulting muddy gravel through sluice boxes to capture the gold.



The Sierra City Country Store. The village of Sierra City supported a number of hard-rock gold mines that had been developed along the North Yuba River Canyon.



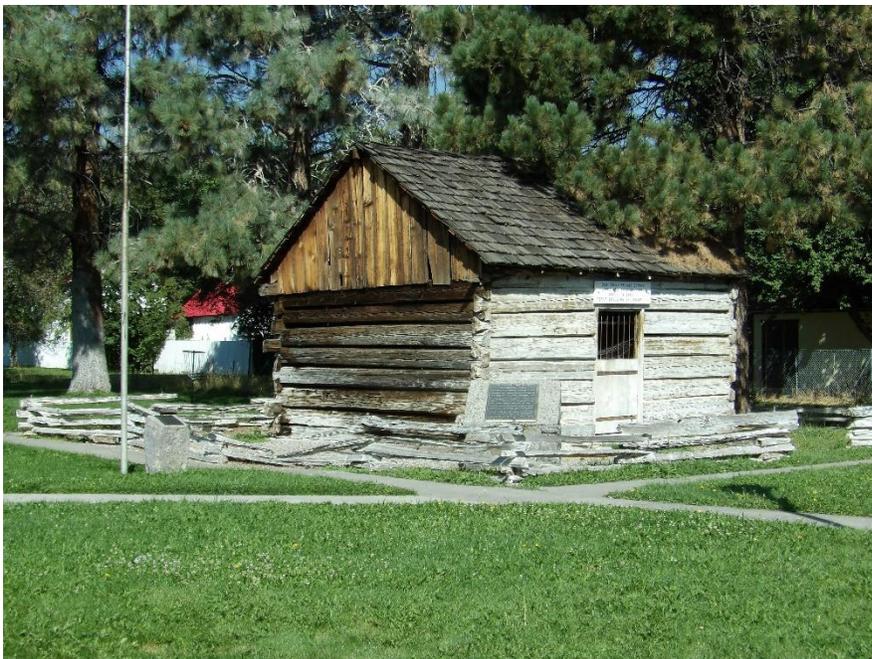
After finishing up Route 49, I hit US 385, which heads north in California not far from its border with Nevada all the way to the Oregon border. Here the Nobles Emigrant Trail crosses the highway. The Nobles Emigrant Trail was established in 1851 as one branch of the California Trail.



The town of Likely, California



For my last morning in California, I had planned to take county roads across the Warner Mountains en route to northwestern Nevada. But the *Barnes Fire* broke out along my planned route the night before, and that area was being evacuated. Here, a helicopter had just scooped up some water and was returning to dump it on the fire. I took a different route to Cedarville, California and on into Nevada.



The Cressler and Bonner Trading Post in Cedarville, California was built in 1865 and served thousands of emigrants to California. It was the first building constructed in Cedarville.

I chose Cedarville, California as my entry point back into Nevada, as I wanted to see more of the remote, townless Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area. Not that I expected to see anything more than beautiful Great Basin scenery, as my 100-mile route was mostly a gravel road with no towns or services along the way.



The scenery was prettier than this road view suggests, that is, if you like mountains and high desert scenery like I do (left). First sign of civilization – well, sort of – after more than 50 miles (right).



Along the way, I stopped at the George W. Lund Memorial Petrified Forest. For some reason, a couple of the petrified logs were enclosed in chain-link fence cages (left). But there were a number of free range petrified logs on the adjacent hillside (right).

Remnants of more than 250 mappable examples of petrified wood at the site are preserved, thanks to Lund's efforts after he witnessed uranium prospectors and collectors blast or make off with tons of petrified wood from the site.

The trees here were similar to Giant Sequoias, with some as much as 15 feet in diameter. They were buried by volcanic tuff (ash flow) an estimated 16 million years ago.



After reaching pavement and then passing through the town of Gerlach (site of the annual *Burning Man* gatherings), the road continues on through the eastern area of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Indian Reservation. During the Ice Ages, this marked a shoreline of Glacial Lake Lahontan that filled many of the valleys of northwestern Nevada. Archaeologists have found evidence of early Native Americans at various places along the ancient lakeshore. That includes this area, where the earliest known North American petroglyphs have been found on rock outcroppings like these that the highway passes. However, the rock art site is not marked, non-tribal members are generally banned off the highway in this part of the reservation, and no tours to the site are available. Analysis of adjacent mineral deposits suggest that the petroglyphs are from 10,500 to 14,800 years old.



I was hoping to learn more about these at the tribe's visitor center/museum, but it only displayed one photo of rock art found on the reservation.



The Thunder Mountain Monument was built by Frank Van Zant after he retired to Imlay, Nevada in 1969. There were originally seven buildings, including a hostel often used by hippies before it burned down. Three surviving buildings and more than 200 sculptures survive, many depicting the beliefs and hardships of Native Americans. Van Zant was named Nevada's Artist of the Year in 1983. He died in 1989, and the site was declared a Nevada State Historic Site in 1992. It is currently undergoing restoration.



I finally was able to visit the California Trail Interpretive Center west of Elko – it's always been closed for the day by the time I got there on past trips. The California Trail generally followed the Oregon Trail route until it turned southwest at Fort Hall, Idaho. Trappers, fur traders and eventually emigrants to California used the trail well before the 1849 California Gold Rush brought in a flood of gold seekers.

The center provides a nice overview of trail history and the daily life of emigrants as they made their way along the trail. A section of the original trail is preserved near the entrance to the site.



A display of Shoshone baskets at the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko. I was a bit disappointed by the museum. It featured a reasonable collection of artifacts for a small-town museum, but their haphazard display didn't really tell much of a story.



A display of Nevada wildli... Wait. We don't have gazelles in Nevada.

The museum's exhibit hall of taxidermy animals was about the same size as the historical artifacts exhibit hall. I'm guessing that they inherited someone's collection, but for the most part it just seemed out of place.



A 12-mile scenic drive leads up to Angel Lake, a glacial tarn found in the northern part of the East Humboldt Mountain Range. It is located at the base of a steep cirque that leads up to Greys Peak. (Only one glacier survives in Nevada; it is located at Wheeler Peak in Great Basin National Park.)



After gold and silver were discovered in the area in the 1860s, mining town Cherry Creek was established in 1872. Today, it is a near ghost town. The old schoolhouse, pictured, is now a by-appointment-only museum.

Las Vegas is a Democratic stronghold, but the rest of Nevada is solidly Republican. So, it shouldn't be surprising that I'd encounter Trump supporters when I traveled across northern Nevada.



A trio of Trump supporters



I like it that they included free medicated powder with one of them. After all, some people can get a little rash when Trump supporters rub them the wrong way.

The McGill Drugstore Museum used to serve as the drugstore for McGill, a mining town near Ely, Nevada. Established in 1908, Gerald (a pharmacist) and Elsa Culbert owned the drugstore by the mid-1950s. Not long after Gerald died in 1979, Elsa closed the store with its inventory of products, prescription records that date back before 1920, and the Culbert's complete business records all left in place. The museum now serves as a time capsule, a well-preserved example of 1970s small retail, complete with products in their 1970s and earlier packaging, some brands no longer made.

Like Trump Supporters. Johnson & Johnson was making those at least as far back as the 1930s.



Duncan Yo-Yo Wax and Replacement String kits. I suppose that there's a yo-yo app that today's young people can download onto their phones, making yo-yo wax and replacement strings obsolete.



Ayds Reducing Plan Candy was a popular appetite suppressant in the 1970s and 1980s. Then, HIV and AIDS appeared on the scene, with AIDS getting a lot of attention, and Ayds sales dropped. In early 1986, an executive with the manufacturer famously said, "The product has been around for 45 years. Let the disease change its name." That didn't happen, and the product disappeared from store shelves in the 1990s.

Except from McGill Drugstore shelves.



The pharmacy counter at the back of the McGill Drugstore



Many of the old prescription records are stored in cigar boxes in the storeroom. The records can be analyzed for the history of prescription practices over several decades. They also provide evidence that people lived in McGill. This was important as McGill was downwind of above-ground nuclear tests conducted in Nevada. Downwinders – people exposed to radiation as a result – are eligible for government compensation for health problems as long as they can prove they are Downwinders.

During Prohibition, doctors could prescribe alcohol to their patients – typically whiskey and brandy – for medicinal purposes, of course. Such prescriptions can be found in these records, and were especially common as Christmas approached.



The Big Four Ranch in Ely, Nevada was established in the 1880s, making it Nevada's oldest brothel.



The Nevada Northern Railway Museum focuses on preserving the history of the Nevada Northern Railway, which connected the copper mines near Ely and McGill to the national rail network that passed through Wells and Elko more than 100 miles to the north.

While staying in Ely, I returned to an area 90 miles west of Ely that I visited last year that includes an old nuclear test site, a petroglyphs site and volcanic area. After that visit, I found out about some old toll stations in the area that I decided to see. Moore's Station and Pritchard's Station were toll-collecting stations along a toll road that connected Eureka, Tybo and Belmont.



I visited a different area of the Lunar Crater Volcanic Field, this the Black Rock Lava Flow. Lava filled some old cinder cones whose cone walls were not strong enough to hold it, allowing the lava to flow across the landscape. It is the youngest of the lava flows in the field and covers about 1,900 acres.



Cattle call. With open range cattle grazing in areas where surface water is scarce, large water tubs are positioned at various locations around this remote area and kept filled by water trucks.



Yeah, I visited Petroglyph Butte when I was out here last year, too, but it's such a good rock art site that I couldn't resist a return visit.



There wasn't much to see at Moore's Station as the actual station buildings are on private property, hidden by trees and fenced off.



Here's the Pritchard's Station toll house at about 25 miles from today's modern highway. It dates back to the mid-1870s. No fences here – you could even go inside the house.



This was the old toll road. Worth \$2 for a wagon and one horse, or \$2.50 for a wagon with two horses, don't you think?



On the drive back to Ely, my engine started to overheat. As I got closer to Ely, it got to the point where I could only drive 2-3 miles and then I had to let the engine cool off for a while. There's not a lot to Ely, but luckily there is a Chrysler Jeep dealership, so I took my Jeep Cherokee there first thing the next morning.

Turns out that my radiator was slowly leaking coolant. It would have taken a week or two to get a replacement in Ely, so they filled my coolant reservoir, I ran the car through a heat up and cool down cycle to ensure that coolant got into the radiator and then added some more to the reservoir, and then I made the 250-mile drive back to Las Vegas without incident, canceling three planned sightseeing stops along the way. A rather underwhelming end to an otherwise good trip.