

## Old Sunset Highway Heritage Corridor

**Location:** Snoqualmie Pass

**Length:** 12.8 miles

**Begins:** Alpentel Access Road

**Ends:** I-90

Corridor includes three discontinuous segments of old routes over Snoqualmie Pass, each segment accessible from I-90. From Summit Recreation Area (I-90 exit 53), head northwest on SR 906 toward Alpentel to:

- **Segment No. 1, Forest Road 58/Denny Creek Road**, bears left off Alpentel Access Road, parallels and runs under I-90, drops steeply through dense forest, crosses overpass over I-90 at mile 4.9 to join Segment No. 2.
- **Segment No. 2, Forest Road 55/Tinkham Road**, begins at exit 47, parallels south side of freeway, re-connects to I-90 on-ramp at mile 6.0.
- **Segment No. 3, SE Homestead Valley Road**, begins 3.0 miles further west off exit 38, re-merges onto I-90 onramp at mile 1.9.

### Road history in local context

The earliest push for a wagon road over Snoqualmie Pass originated locally, as the U.S. government was focused on promoting overland migration through the Columbia River Gorge. In 1855, Seattle surveyors, including prominent settlers Dexter Horton

and Charles Boren, first tried to locate a way through the mountains east of the village of Seattle. They explored two routes, one of which followed the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River up from Rattlesnake Prairie, dropping over the 3,022-ft. Snoqualmie Pass, and down to Lake Keechelus. In 1865, after the native-settler conflicts had subsided, another survey was completed and enough money raised locally to build 25 miles of road from Ranger's Prairie (the future site of North Bend) toward the Pass. This rough wagon road was completed from Seattle to Ellensburg in 1867.

The Snoqualmie Wagon Road altered the economy of the region by providing a direct route for trade and settlers to Puget Sound, putting Seattle on a competitive basis with Portland. Cattle drives from the rangelands of Washington and Oregon territories to Seattle began in 1869.

Although maintenance of the road was challenging, cattle-droivers and miners continued to rely upon it for east-west travel. In 1883, the road was taken over by the Seattle and Walla Walla Trail and Wagon Road Co., who made investments of money and labor in its improvement. This company operated it as a toll road, and it appears as such on an 1893 Ames & Adams map of King County.



*Snoqualmie Pass Wagon Road, ca. 1900. Courtesy of the Eastside Heritage Museum*



Showing old and new highways, near Denny Creek campground, ca., 1920s Photo Courtesy of Snoqualmie Historical Museum

In 1887, completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad's Cascades line to its terminus in Tacoma captured most of this overland freight. The wagon road fell into serious disrepair, and ultimately reverted to the jurisdiction of King County. In 1899, David Denny contracted with the county to make repairs. He laid corduroy road, built bridges, blasted rock, and improved alignments. Over the course of that summer he counted 1148 horses and 94 wagons and carriages carrying settlers crossing Snoqualmie Pass. Just six

years later, in 1905, the first automobiles would cross the Pass on the old wagon road, signaling the dawn of a new era.

Still, no major upgrades would take place for nearly another decade, because the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, completed over Snoqualmie Pass in 1909, effectively absorbed most commercial and passenger traffic. It was not until 1909, when the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition's transcontinental auto race over Snoqualmie Pass generated widespread publicity that focus shifted to improving this road for the motorcar.



Horses towing two Buicks along Sunset Highway, 1916. Photo Courtesy of Snoqualmie Historical Museum

In the push for improvements to Washington's highways, the Good Roads Association joined the efforts of local auto clubs in 1912. They proposed three trunk highways be built within the state. One would be named the "Sunset Highway," to run west from the Idaho line, over Snoqualmie Pass and down into Fall City. From there, it would continue south around Lake Washington and into Seattle. In March 1914, the State Highway Board accepted bids for clearing, grading, draining and bridging about 23.4 miles of the Sunset Highway between North Bend and Cle Elum. At its dedication in 1915, Governor Lister hailed the Sunset Highway as the "first passable route between east and west sides of the mountains."

The Sunset Highway replaced some of the old wagon road's most treacherous grades with

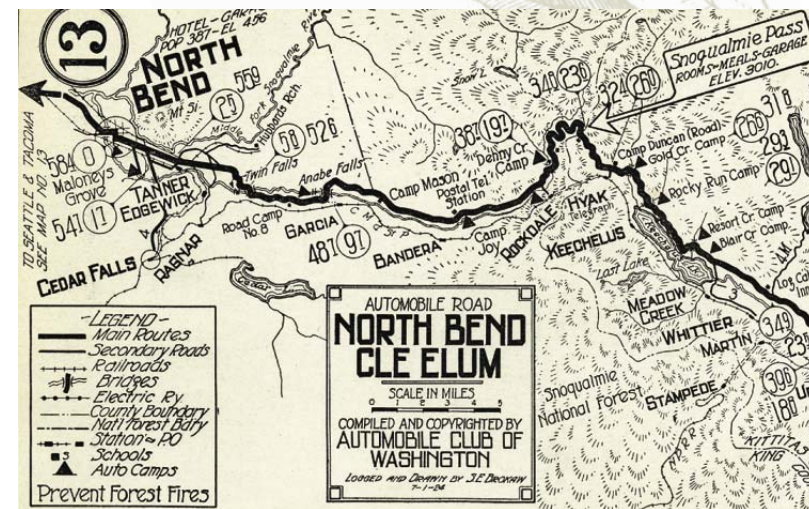


a series of switchbacks. Forest Road 58 with its hairpin turns is part of this original 1915 alignment (Segment No. 1); this abandoned stretch was then turned over to King County and finally to the Forest Service. The Sunset Highway ran north of the river, in the path of today's I-90 freeway, completely bypassing the old wagon road south of the river (Tinkham Road, Segment No. 2). The final stretch of the Sunset Highway just east of North Bend again crossed to the south bank of the river along the original wagon road alignment, past present-day Ollalie State Park (Segment No. 3). From there, it crossed back over the river, climbed northwest over Grouse Ridge, and dropped down into North Bend.

For about 13 years, the much-touted Sunset Highway remained a graded gravel road. Automobile enthusiasts popularized the route, despite the constant maintenance it required. Services and recreation opportunities are marked on maps of the era, including early-day strip maps of the Automobile Clubs of Seattle and Western Washington. As early as 1917, the Summit Inn at Snoqualmie Pass, and a camp known as Bide-A-Wee (and later Camp Mason) were open for business. In the mid-1920s, Denny Creek Campground, Snoqualmie Falls Lodge, and Maloney's Grove in North Bend, appear on these maps. The Sunset Highway was also included and marked as part of the nationally publicized Yellowstone Trail route from Chicago and Seattle to Yellowstone National Park.

Beginning in 1923 and continuing into the 1930s, major improvements to the Sunset Highway were accomplished with federal dollars made available under the Federal Highway Act of 1921. These improvements, initiated as Federal Aid Project #142, included hard-surface paving and some important new alignments. The upper switchbacks of 1914-15 were permanently bypassed at this time. The road remained open for the first time throughout the winter of 1931. By 1934, all sections of highway paving were complete from Seattle to the Pass. During this time frame, the Sunset Highway received official designations as State Road No. 2, Primary State Route No. 2, and U.S. Highway 10 – but the name persisted and is still alive in place names from Renton to Spokane.

Sources: King County records: Assessor's Property Record Cards, Historic Preservation Program HR database, *Index to Roads Records*, *Engineer's Road Establishment Atlas – 1913*, Roads' Map Vault database. Maps: AAA – 1917-1929; Ames & Adams – 1893; Metsker – 1926, 1936; Washington Map & Blueprint Co. – 1908. Prater, Yvonne, *Snoqualmie Pass: From Indian Trail to Interstate*. (The Mountaineers, 1981). NW Archeological Associates, *National Register of Historic Places Assessment of the South Fork Snoqualmie River Bridge*, 2002



AAA triptik showing road from Snoqualmie Pass to North Bend, 1924. Courtesy of AAA



### Corridor signature

- Key chapter in King County road history
- Authentic auto-tourism experience
- Forest and mountain immersion

The Old Sunset Highway Heritage Corridor uniquely illustrates the evolution of road development in King County, re-tracing extant portions of the 1915 automobile route over Snoqualmie Pass. Partially under the jurisdiction of Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, this corridor offers a taste of early 20th century motoring in a rugged mountain environment, and provides access to multiple recreational activities. Corridor lies within Mountain-to-Sound Greenway, a National Scenic Byway.

### Contributing features

The following **roadway features** contribute positively to overall corridor character:

- Historic alignments
- Sections of historic profile hugging lay of land
- Narrow vegetation cuts
- Stone wall, concrete radiator trough, painted Yellowstone Trail marker (segment No. 1)
- Concrete pour panels, bridge railings, vestigial alignments (segment No. 3)

The following **contextual features** contribute positively to overall corridor character:

- Deep forest environments at varying elevations
- Close-range views of mountain peaks to east
- Distant territorial views to west
- River proximity
- Springboard scars on old growth stumps show remnants of logging activity
- Access to adjacent Snoqualmie Wagon Road segments

### Non-contributing features

The following elements visually detract from overall corridor character:

- Built-up roadbed (segment No. 2)
- Chain link fence along Olallie Dam (segment No. 3)

