

Walking the Lincoln Highway in EDH

by Mike Roberts, Village Life staff writer

(01.03.07) Workers poured concrete 12 feet wide and a nation long when they built the Lincoln Highway. They did a good job of it—America's first coast-to-coast highway ushered in the named-roadway era of the 1920s.

While most of the highway was jack-hammered or overlaid with ubiquitous asphalt later in the century to make way for wider, more modern roadways, traces of the old Lincoln Highway still exist, winding through El Dorado Hills and eastward through the Sierras.

The concrete roadbed ran through El Dorado Hills from Folsom along White Rock Road through the historic ghost town of Clarksville, and east to Placerville. Traces of "Lincoln concrete" can be found at several spots on the original route in and around EDH.

Some are easily viewable, but most, including Clarksville, are on private property. A tour of Clarksville, including the private sections of the Lincoln Highway, will be held on Jan. 6.

In El Dorado Hills, the Lincoln Highway route closely follows the freight route established in the late 1850s to carry supplies to the gold fields from Sacramento. That road had many names, including "Placerville Road." A short stretch of the old route between White Rock Road and East Bidwell Street still bears the name, and contains a patch of exposed circa-1916 Lincoln concrete.

Look outside the curve where Old Placerville Road bends to intersect with East Bidwell.

There, in the shadow of Costco and Highway 50, you can park and walk on the original Lincoln Highway.

The Lincoln Highway follows the old wagon road along Old Placerville Road to White Rock Road, and east across Latrobe Road. It passes south of Town Center into the ghost town of Clarksville. The original concrete road is still intact through the middle of the historic town site, in stark contrast to the quietly decaying abandoned buildings on either side of the old road.

As traffic increased in the 1930s and '40s, the roadway through Clarksville was widened and patched with asphalt. In 1949 the new Highway 50 alignment bypassed Clarksville, sealing its fate as a ghost town.

Leaving Clarksville, the old road turns left at the picturesque Tong Barn, visible from the freeway. It follows the contour of the land, crossing the current freeway alignment and wrapping around the knoll north of the freeway.

Lincoln Highway Association officials believe that the northern section contains the longest stretch of intact Lincoln concrete in California. The road is in surprisingly good condition. Much of it was never widened beyond the original 12 feet, and unlike most surviving stretches of concrete, has very little asphalt patching.

Motorists on Highway 50 can catch a quick glimpse of the old road from either side of the knoll north of Highway 50 between EDH Boulevard and Bass Lake Road.

Noah Briel, who lives on the knoll with a couple of cooperative neighbors, has cleared the road and agreed to open it to the public as part of the Jan. 6 Clarksville tour.

East of the knoll, the Lincoln Highway route crosses the freeway a quarter mile west of Bass Lake Road, emerging south of Highway 50 and crossing Marble Mountain Road near the freeway interchange.

Concrete is visible behind a loose barbed wire fence between Marble Mountain Road and the freeway. Across the road, it continues under a sprawling oak tree behind a white rail fence before looping back toward the highway, where it ends abruptly behind a billboard.

Between Marble Valley Road and the highway the old roadway is clearly visible, canopied by mature oaks. Portions are blanketed in a thick, spongy moss.

The Lincoln Highway route continues east along Country Club Drive into Cameron Park, where it crosses the freeway alignment again, emerging on Rodeo Road, adjacent to the Red Bud Caf/.

The route wraps behind Burke's Junction and the Safeway store in Cameron Park, and emerges on Durock Road behind a self-serve car wash. Walk to the back of the car wash and look for Lincoln concrete at the bottom of holes in the thick broken asphalt.

The route continues along Durock Road, Mother Lode Drive and Pleasant Valley Road east to the town of El Dorado, and Poor Red's. As a welcome respite for weary travelers, the old, world-class roadhouse evokes the Lincoln Highway era.

From El Dorado, the route follows Forni Road into Placerville, crossing Weber Creek on a spectacular, arch-ribbed concrete bridge, dated 1914.

Clarksville is pay dirt for highway historians, who delight in finding highway markers and hunting down original "Lincoln concrete."

Bob Dietrich is president of the California Chapter of the Lincoln Highway Association. He and fellow LHA members Norm Root and Lloyd Johnson have been instrumental in raising awareness of the Lincoln Highway in EDH, and are sponsoring the Jan. 6 Clarksville tour.

The Lincoln Highway Association, originally formed in 1913 to promote the highway, was reactivated in 1992 to identify, preserve, interpret and improve access to the road once called "America's Main Street."

When they learned that Clarksville had been purchased by developers, they were concerned about the potential loss of a historically rich portion of the original highway.

However, Ken Wilkinson and Jim Brunello, the new owners of the sprawling, largely forgotten property, have turned out to be friendly to their cause.

Brunello, a Placerville attorney whose family has been in El Dorado County for several generations, made a startling discovery when he first walked the portion of Lincoln Highway he'd purchased with Wilkinson. There, in the center of a narrow bridge over Carson Creek, he found a plaque dated 1918 containing a familiar name: His great grandfather, Arthur S. Lyon, built the bridge.

The plaque bears the name of the contractor (Lyon), the engineer, and the four county supervisors, one of which was a distant cousin. "That's probably how my great grandfather got the job," quipped Brunello during the first Clarksville tour.

The discovery kindled Brunello's interest in preserving the highway and the bridge. Both partners in the Clarksville development have become active members in the Clarksville Region Historic Society, and have said publicly that they would like the eventual development of Clarksville to preserve the historic stretch of Lincoln Highway.

LHA California State Director Norm Root has suggested that Clarksville would make an ideal national headquarters for the association.

With the Clarksville development still several years out, Brunello and Wilkinson aren't making firm commitments yet. But local historians are encouraged by the developers' interest and involvement in unraveling the prehistory of EDH and the Lincoln Highway.

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LONG STRETCH OF 1916 CONCRETE - This portion of the Lincoln Highway has been called the longest stretch of original Lincoln concrete in California. It wraps around the knoll between Highway 50 and Serrano near Bass Lake Road. Most of the Lincoln Highway in EDH is on private property. The road will be opened during the Jan. 6 Clarksville tour conducted by the Lincoln Highway Association. *Village Life photo by Mike Roberts*