



Local News

Once-rugged Old Spanish Trail celebrates 90th year

BY PAM M. SMITH, SUN STAFF WRITER

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Today is the 90th birthday of the Old Spanish Trail, a route that opened the way for cross-country vehicular traffic — with some help from Yuma's Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge.

The Old Spanish Trail started in Mobile, Ala., Dec. 10, 1915, as the shortest vehicle route between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, said John W. Murphey, a historian with the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs Historic Preservation Division, in a telephone interview with The Sun.

"Its route wound through several states, a path for the old Highway 80 — today's Interstates 8 and 10," Murphey said.

The Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge, crossing from Arizona into California, was the last bridge on the southern Old Spanish Trail route. It was dedicated in 1915, a few months prior to the beginning of the trail itself.

The 20th century automobile route was actually the second of two Old Spanish Trails. The first, dating back to the early 1800s, started in Santa Fe, N.M., and went north into Colorado, west through Utah, then southwest in Nevada, through the Mojave desert and into Los Angeles. The original Old Spanish Trail had been used by Native Americans and various explorers and traders before the modern highway route was opened.

That highway route — the one celebrating its birthday today — was envisioned as a means for tourists to see Florida towns, go through Mobile and continue on their way west. During a convention in Mobile, 419 delegates from Alabama, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona created the future highway.

"The (Old Spanish Trail) spanned the impassable swamps of the Deep South and the vast deserts of the Southwest. The idea back then of an automobile highway on the route seemed impossible," Murphey said.

In Arizona, the route followed the Gila River through the Salt River Valley, and continued from north of Gila Bend west toward Yuma, following the old Highway 80 route. The river went through the Mohawk Valley-Wellton area, the Dome and Gila valleys and into Yuma, where the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge carried it into California.

Murphey provided The Sun with a 1925 edition of The New York Times, which carried the headline: "Indians join motorists in highway celebration." The subhead read: "Unique ceremony at Yuma, Arizona, to commemorate completion of improved road on the Old

Spanish Trail into California."

The article stated, "On the southerly border of Arizona and California at the town of Yuma, in the state of Arizona, on the Colorado River, an unusual celebration took place on the last day of February to commemorate the opening of the new highway from that town to Holtville, California." The article mentioned the sand hills west of Yuma that previously had been traveled only over a plank road.

The trail highway took years to complete because of the terrain it followed. The Old Spanish Trail Association is recognized for supporting the first southernmost transcontinental highway.

The Old Spanish Trail ended at Horton Plaza in San Diego, Murphey said.

The Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge was in use from 1915 until it was closed to vehicles in 1988. It was restored and rededicated in 2002 by the Quechan Tribe and the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area and is again open to vehicle traffic from both directions on an alternating basis.

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