Red Rocks and Race Cars:

Charles H. Bigelow and Tourism Development along the Arrowhead Highway

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Let’s take a Road Trip!

When Bigelow drove his 1907 Reo roadster across the rugged sandstone slopes of southern Utah he became one of the first automobile tourists to fall in love with the red rock country. He wouldn’t be the last!

The Arrowhead Highway from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City followed the route of today’s Interstate 15 but, in the early 1900s, it was little more than a wagon trail. This is the story of one of the most successful Utah road promoters - Charles H. Bigelow - and the way he and the Arrowhead Highway changed the face of our state.*

*Special thanks to Leo Lyman

Near St. George, 1921
The idea for the Arrowhead Highway (or Trail) was hatched by Charles Bigelow and some Las Vegas and Southern California businessmen during 1916. They were improving the “Old Mormon Trail” route between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City in order to encourage more people to buy automobiles and see sites such as “St. George...a green gem in a setting of brilliantly-colored sandstone cliffs and basalt-covered hills.”

*August 3, 1924 Los Angeles Examiner*
Who was Charles H. Bigelow?

-- Born August 26, 1872 in Kilbourne, Illinois, he moved to Southern California with his wife in early 1900s to become a race car driver

-- Competed in car races such as the 1908 LA to Phoenix overland race, the 1909 Corona, the 1911 Panama Pacific, and even drove in the first Indy 500 in 1911 at the famed brickyard!

-- Drove alone 21 days from New York to Los Angeles overland, including part of the Santa Fe Trail, in May, 1910 over a route which no car had driven before.

-- Became fascinated with the desert southwest during his efforts to set land speed records in primitive autos across nearly impassable roads

-- Wrote and published more than 100 articles in national newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and San Francisco Examiner touting Utah scenery.

-- Died June 8, 1958, buried in St. George, Utah, his scrapbook of newspaper articles was donated to Dixie College (now Dixie State University)
One of Bigelow’s first big race wins came in the 1911 Oakland Portola Road Race: “in his handsome red car he came jauntily up to the tape and was ready to flash away...calm and collected he made a pretty getaway...” He raced 9 laps around a course in San Leandro - totaling 98 miles in a record time of 1:42:54! He drover a Mercer Raceabout.

February 22, 1911, Oakland Enquirer
“C.H. Bigelow - The desert rat, the dark horse of the Los Angeles-Phoenix road race.” He raced the 300-mile overland race at least 5 times from 1908-1912.

Bigelow, bottom left, shown as one of the racers in the inaugural Indy 500, May, 1911. He completed 194 of 200 laps and was in 15th place when he was flagged.
Early car races helped popularize the automobile... In 1910 there were only 873 cars in Utah and many adults had not yet seen a car on the streets of their own town.

Tourism - which was not practical in wagons nor very effective in trains - became immediately possible once you sat behind the wheel of your own vehicle.

You were free to set your own course, see things of your own choosing, and travel at your own pace.

But you needed good roads to do it!

In 1916 Utah had only 36.59 miles of concrete pavement in the whole state, none of it south of Provo.
In 1916, Bigelow’s first bold promotion effort was the Cactus Kate escapade where he helped drive a Packard Twin Six from LA to SLC to prove the Arrowhead Highway was viable for tourists:

“Cactus Kate II, her checkerboard paint besmeared with mud, arrived in Salt Lake last night after pushing her way across mountain and desert over the Old Mormon trail from Los The purpose of the trip has been to blaze and log the Old Mormon trail - an all winter route to the coast - later to be renamed...the total distance covered by Cactus Kate was 313 miles, to be reduced about seventy miles by proposed cutoffs. “The feature of this highway,” said Mr. Woods, “is its scenic wonders. There is no scenery on any tri-state highway to equal what we have seen in the past nine days. Little Zion canyon, near St. George in Utah, outshadows even California’s wonderful scenery. All along the route we were given rousing welcomes.”

May 21, 1916, Salt Lake Telegram
Bigelow was featured in a December 24, 1916 article in the Los Angeles Sunday Tribune entitled “Arrowhead Trail - Trail Rich in Scenic Beauty, Claim”:

“...a route mapped out by Charlie Bigelow as a straight line automobile highway between the intermountain empire and southern California...Utah has today constructed one of the best highways in the entire west. In fact this Utah highway...forms the initial work to which the remainder of the Arrowhead trail is linked.”
Bigelow organized a “Good Roads Day” in many Utah communities during 1916-1917 where citizens would turn out with their own horses, plows, and scrapers to build the Arrowhead Highway themselves.

At one Good Roads Day on February 10, 1917 there were more than 400 men and 80 teams of horses and wagons working on the route between St. George and Santa Clara. The ladies of both towns provided food:

“Wagon covers were spread on the ground on which snow white tablecloths were spread upon which the food was laid...There were chickens, ham, roast beef, cheese, potato salad, baked beans, sweet pickles, etc, etc, and cake in great abundance and variety.”

Bigelow arranged for a motion picture crew to film the work and show the film to motivate other communities.
In 1917, Bigelow broke a record for overland travel, driving an Oldsmobile Eight from Los Angeles to Salt Lake in 36 hours and 14 minutes!

“I do not believe that we could have even approached the record that we made on any other route except the Arrowhead trail, which I am sure offers the tourist the very best road conditions...The conditions of the Arrowhead trail speaks volumes for the hard work that has been done by the Salt Lake Route, the Oldsmobile company of California, and the B.F. Goodrich Tire company.”

- C.H. Bigelow, June 3, 1917, Salt Lake Tribune

The trip was done at the height of WW1 when the military hired Bigelow to identify routes that troops could use if the railroads were unusable.
Utah was seeking tourists - even as early as 1913!

• “Then take the tourist business. With a good automobile road through Washington County, hundreds of thousands of tourists from Northern Utah and adjoining states will visit this wonderful section, which is acknowledged to be the peer of any country on the globe.”
  
  November 11, 1913, Washington County News

• 1920 Zion National Park renamed/dedicated
• 1928 Bryce Canyon opens

Hall’s Cabins, Washington, Utah

Photo: Lynne Clark Collection
Bigelow took advantage of Utah’s road construction boom…*

**Pioneer Era**

- 1854 Road project “improve the southern roads as much as possible”
- 1876 Governor Emery - “The roads are insufferable in summer from dust and impassable during winter” Urged money to “macadamize” a certain number of miles of the principal trunk roads.
- 1880 1st comprehensive road act funded by poll tax requiring donated labor
- 1893 1st road paved - SL Main Street
- 6,341 miles paved in U.S. but few in the west, none in Utah

**After Statehood**

- 1904 - Utah had 7,090 miles of roads, with 597 miles of gravel, 11 miles of stone, all others were dirt
- Jan 14 1909 First Good Roads Convention held in Utah, 400 delegates, Utah Road Commission was formed by Legislature
- 1909-1919 Designation of Utah roads begins per County maps “on tracing linen” “in India ink”
- 1911-1913 Prisoners worked on road crews
- 1916 1st Federal Highway Aid Act - 50/50 cost-sharing with states
- 1919 Poll tax repealed

**Early 20th Century**

- 1919-1921 202 miles hard surface, 82 miles macadam in Utah = $5m!
- 1921 2nd Federal Highway Act emphasizing interconnected national highway system
- 1927 “low cost oil surface” treatment now widely used in Utah
- 1931 Arrowhead Highway is now paved through most of state
- 1931 Utah has 3,426 miles of which 275 miles are hard surfaced
- 1933 Utah has 4,120 miles of which 365 miles are hard surfaced
- 1939 Utah has 5,163 miles of which 536 are hard surface, 1,844 are oil, 1,923 are gravel

*with thanks to Ezra Knowlton!
The Charles Bigelow Scrapbook

1908-1932

Newspaper articles from Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Examiner, Oakland Tribune, Salt Lake Tribune and many others around the west.

Bigelow wrote most of the articles and pasted the clippings into a 68-page scrapbook. The book is in a wooden box, about 2 feet by 3 feet, 4 inches deep. The pages are deteriorating but there are some black and white copies. It was donated to Dixie State University Library Special Collections after his death in 1958.
Bigelow’s publicity campaign

- A flood of Bigelow articles hit the newspapers in California and Arizona promoting Utah as a beautiful destination starting in 1916 and lasting into the 1930s.

- “Charles Bigelow, who is credited with being the originator of the Arrowhead Trail...and who, without a doubt has given more time and money to the enterprise than any other individual...Mr. Bigelow has played almost a lone hand and has carried the burden so long that he feels that he has about reached his limitation in the matter...”

1918, Los Angeles Herald
“So much has been written of Cedar Brakes [sic], Bryce Canyon and Zion National park that mere mention of these scenic marvels is sufficient to introduce and make clear to the motoring public the value...”

- C.H. Bigelow, December 18, 1921, Los Angeles Evening Express
“The Oldsmobile Four scouting party under the leadership of Charles H. Bigelow, secretary treasurer of the Arrowhead Trail Association and well known road and mining engineer, made a complete survey of this entire section of southwestern Utah and brought back a wealth of data on the possibilities of the district from the tourist and development standpoints.”

December 20, 1922, Los Angeles Express
“Zion canyon and the closely associated scenic marvels Bryce Canyon and the Cedar Breaks by virtue of a comprehensive scheme of road development have been made easily accessible to the motoring public during the past six years...We Californians are so proud of the beauties of our own state we are prone to lose sight of the charm and wonder of the ‘just beyond’...Utah is becoming mecca to thousands.”

- C.H. Bigelow, August 3, 1924, Los Angeles Examiner
“It has taken a whole lot of work on C.H. Bigelow’s part to bring about an awakening to the possibilities of this short line highway between the Pacific and the Rockies and the final organization of the Arrowhead Trails Association in Redlands on July 11 was the first of the real moves to bring the new roadway into reality.”

August, 1924, Southern California Traffic Journal
“A scouting party in a Studebaker President eight visited the scene and gathered information relative to the road and wonderful scenic sections of Utah for the Pennzoil Company...found good roads throughout California, Nevada, and into Utah by way of the Arrowhead Trail...Ages of erosion have worn the peaks and cliffs into fantastic forms. The various strata contrast sharply in color yet blend into a symposium of color and form unmatched anywhere.”

August 7, 1929, Hollywood Daily Citizen
Arrowhead Highway spawns an industry -1920s

St. George street signs read “Free Campground” and “Welcome Tourists - Gas - Oil”, 1920s

The Warren Cox family built the Arrowhead Hotel in St. George in 1917.
“Tourist traffic over the Arrowhead trail is growing every week...With the opening of good weather the problem of finding accommodations for the automobilists will be the most serious difficulty for business men of that section. More hotel accommodations are seriously needed...and the construction of two or three hotels along the Arrowhead trail this year will be one important phase of the development of southern Utah.”

Utah State Legislator Joseph Snow, February 5, 1920, Washington County News

Main Route through St. George, 1920s, looking east. The Arrowhead Highway from LA to SLC was renamed U.S. 91 in 1927; it wasn’t fully oiled until 1931.
In the early 1930s, with the booming tourist traffic, St. George families started building lodging to appeal to the traveler who wanted to park next to his front door.
“Ten years ago, St. George and the intervening hamlets were just places where people lived. Today you find paved streets, handsomely appointed hotels and well-kept stores...now they are forward-looking - taking pride in self and ownership. Thanks to highways and automobiles.”

- C.H. Bigelow, May 21, 1931, Los Angeles Evening Express
“[Zion Park] was a land of high flung peaks, deeply graven canyons, timbered mesas and desert valleys, all bathed in gold or red or purple lights, made easy of access and serves today as a vacation land where jaded spirits find rest…”

- C.H. Bigelow, June 2, 1929, Los Angeles Express

“Describe a 300-mile circle with Zion Park as the center and therein is a territory in which a dozen lifetimes might be spent in geological, botanical, and archaeological research… sandstone hills sculptured by the winds and rains, grassy leas walled by colored ledges - visions that amaze and delight…”

- C.H. Bigelow, September 2, 1928, Los Angeles Examiner
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Source: www.irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSREPORTS
The Legacy of Charles H. Bigelow

“Did you ever meet Charley Bigelow?…We have known Charley for the past ten or twelve years…We met him again Saturday night in the Arrowhead Hotel in St. George, and say, some of the lies we told each other would hardly do to print here. Charley is down there, boosting as usual; boosting is his business, and always road boosting at that…It is safe to say he has pioneered more roads - desert roads - than any other man…”
(The Beaver Press)

“At his own expense and all alone would leave SL in his old Ford or Chevrolet with cans of gasoline - canteens - tire patching - fan belts - oil - springs - and everything to bounce over the rocks and thru sand and mud holes. He would contact anybody along the way whom he thought would help him make a bridge across a wash…”
(Howard Pulsipher)
It is tempting to define Bigelow’s legacy in terms of numbers, such as road miles completed, or population growth along his beloved Arrowhead Highway, or tourism figures which grew to include millions of annual visitors. But there is also the profound value of Bigelow helping to discover a unique, hidden landscape and bringing others to experience that with him. The roads he explored and built outlasted him, as did the effects of tourism on the country. Tourism opened up the west, for good or bad.

In that sense, Charles Bigelow’s influence is magnified by every visitor and road tripper who comes after him. We are still following his tail lights over the next red sandstone hill.
Thank you to these sources providing inspiration and insight!

Edward Leo Lyman, “The Arrowhead Trails Highway: The Beginnings of Utah’s Other Route to the Pacific Coast,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 1999 and many other Lyman publications


Utah Digital Newspapers

Lynne Clark Photo Collection

[Las Vegas Age](http://Las Vegas Age) database

Dixie State University, Special Collections, St. George, Utah

Washington County Utah Historical Society website [www.wchsutah.org](http://www.wchsutah.org)

Utah State Historical Society