

Arrowhead Trail & Roundabouts

By Karen L. Monsen

This article is reprinted with permission from *View On Magazine* and was first published online at ViewOnMagazine.com and in print in *View On* magazine, November/December 2019 issue, Volume 12 Issue 6.

From animal paths, foot trails, and wagonways, to multi-lane highways, roads connect rural to urban, move merchandise, and propel us into the future if they don't drive us crazy in the process. Looking at Interstate-15 from California to Utah, we can trace a road's evolution from early Spanish trails through its not-so-well-known phase as the Arrowhead Trail and Highway 91 to reach St. George where roundabouts are increasingly popular. It's a story worth telling.

Trails become Roads

Today's Interstate-15 provides a direct route from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City over terrain previously traversed by Dominguez and Escalante in 1776 and later followed by wool merchants, Indian slave traders, 1849 fortune seekers, and Mormon settlers. The route incorporates sections of the Old Spanish Trail and places where Jedediah Smith trekked between 1826-1827, John C. Fremont traveled across Utah in 1844, and merchants traversed six states over 2,700 miles through mountains and deserts from Santa Fe to Los Angeles to reach California through the Cajon Pass.

The Arrowhead Trail, intertwining and overlaying Spanish trails, originated on California's western edge of San Bernardino County in Redlands where racecar driver Charles H. Bigelow lived in 1914 near an arrowhead-shaped land formation for which the trail was most likely named. It was the first all-weather road connecting Los Angeles to Salt Lake City and the major north-south artery through southwestern Utah.

In a 2019 newsletter for the Desert Explorers (a 4-wheel drive club affiliated with Mojave River Valley Museum Association in Barstow, California), Bob Jaussaud describes the Arrowhead Trails Highway that Bigelow drove at least three times to promote a faster autoroute between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City by going through Las Vegas.

In 1916, Bigelow organized an auto trip over the Arrowhead Trails Highway with members of his newly formed Auto Club of Southern California, the president of the Redlands Chamber of Commerce, a Los Angeles Times reporter, a railroad representative, and a Nevada State Senator. They took two days to cross the Mojave Desert and reach Las Vegas. They continued through the Valley of Fire, on to Saint Thomas (former Mormon settlement now under Lake Mead), crossed the Muddy and Virgin Rivers, passed through Bunkerville, and per Jaussaud, paralleled the Virgin River to Mesquite Flat, a Mormon community settled in 1880.

From Mesquite, Bigelow reached the Mormon outpost in Littlefield, Arizona at the mouth of the Virgin River Gorge. Jaussaud concludes, the early Arrowhead Trail joined the Old Spanish Trail and the Mormon Road in Beaver Dam and it continued over the Beaver Dam Mountains via Utah Hill following what was to become US Highway 466/91.

Southern Route

In his book, *The Arduous Road: Salt Lake to Los Angeles, The Most Difficult Wagon Road in American History*, historian Leo Lyman wrote, “The Southern Route through later southern Utah, across the northwestern corner of Arizona then southern Nevada into California Southland, served a far more significant historic role in the opening of the Far West than is usually recognized.” Lyman believes at least seven thousand emigrants and freighters crossed that trail.

Quoting traveler diaries, Lyman depicted the route as “being alternately rocky and sandy, with up to a dozen steep-banked river crossings,” and “wretched roads,” steep mountains covered with volcanic rocks, river crossings with quicksand, desert expanses without water or forage and hardships that would deter others.

In *The Overland Journey from Utah to California*, Lyman characterized “travel down the Santa Clara River and the pull over what was later called Utah Hill, officially the Beaver Dam Mountains” were among the most difficult stretches. Per Lyman, “The formidable Virgin Hill, unanimously rated the most difficult segment of the entire Southern Route, is six miles southwest of present-day Mesquite, Nevada and visible just north of I-15 prior to the highway climbing up the grade onto Mormon Mesa.”

Old Highway 91 Bypass

In 1926, the Arrowhead Trail was renamed US Highway 91 as part of the federal numbering system. In 1973, a bypass costing over \$1 million/mile cut off 12 miles from Littlefield to Santa Clara, Utah creating what is now Interstate-15 through the Virgin River Gorge. Motorists can still follow Old 91 from Littlefield to Santa Clara where roadbed remnants protrude a hillside near the Jacob Hamblin Home and they can continue on intermittent Hwy-91 sections north of St. George. Highway 91 originally entered St. George at Diagonal Street near where a roundabout currently stands.

Roundabouts

Historically, roads between destination points are improved by removing hazards and reducing travel time as I-15 illustrates. However, traffic flow, not speed, led to constructing 12 roundabouts in St. George since the year 2000. City traffic engineer Monty Thurber reports that St. George’s first traffic-circle-roundabout was constructed at Diagonal and Main Street and the most recent was added in 2014 at 400 East and Tabernacle. The City Parks Department maintains the landscape and sculptures along streets and roundabouts as part of their *Art Around the Corner* outdoor gallery.

Modern roundabouts are popular intersection alternatives in new subdivisions and commercial developments. The world's first roundabout was built in 1907 for horse-drawn wagons where 12 avenues converge around the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The earliest US roundabouts were built in Nevada in the 1990s and other places followed with their own controlled entry counterclockwise rotation circles that reduce intersection collisions, slow traffic, and limit impact points to glancing blows.

Interstate-15, like its predecessor the Arrowhead Trail, leads people to explore new places and return to familiar ones. By traveling old trails and highways, we can connect to history along the same roads that move us forward—assuming we don't get stuck in a roundabout.

*We can't return we can only look behind
From where we came,
And go round and round and round
In the circle game.*

~ Joni Mitchell lyrics The Circle Game