

The Plank Road

Warning: Avoid the plank road. A public warning was issued yesterday by the El Centro branch of the auto club of southern California that travel to Yuma via the plank road is dangerous. . . Parties attempting to travel suffer from thirst and hunger and are sometimes in danger of death as there is little chance of succor arriving unless a call for aid reaches Holtville or Yuma.

--Imperial Valley Press, April 29, 1919.

Today's car drive on Interstate 8 across the Imperial Valley to Yuma is a quick, beeline trip across the desert. Some drivers might find the modern road a little boring. But in the early 1900s, the route was an exciting adventure, featuring a risky stretch on a one-lane wooden road through six-miles of sand hills.

The Imperial Sand Dunes run north to south for nearly fifty miles between valley towns and the Colorado River. The stark, spectacular region of towering dunes resembles the Sahara desert and has been used by Hollywood producers for movies ranging from Rudolph Valentino's "The Sheik" to the Star Wars "Return of the Jedi."

But for early auto pioneers the sand dunes formed a nearly impenetrable barrier. No roads crossed the sand, forcing travelers to go around the hills in north, adding nearly fifty miles to the route between San Diego and Yuma. Clearly, a direct route through the sand was desirable.

Imperial County supervisor Edwin Boyd had an idea that sounded feasible. He proposed a roadway of wooden planks laid across the most treacherous miles of soft sand. Boyd partnered with San Diego developer and road enthusiast Ed Fletcher, who raised money for lumber. The county supervisors agreed to pay for the labor force that would built the desert's first plank road.

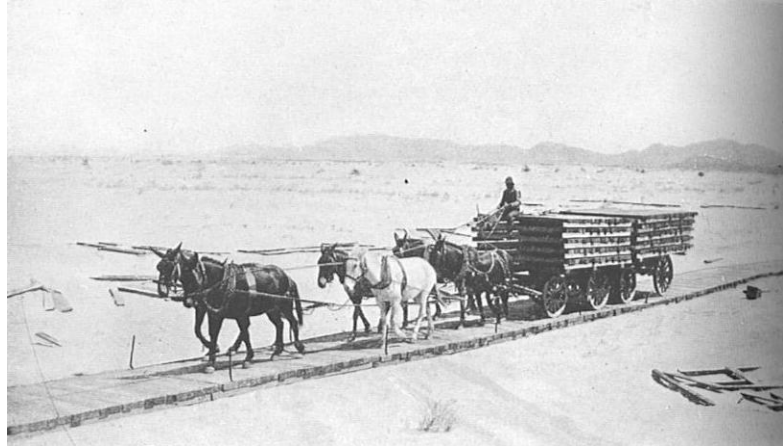
In early 1915, workers completed a crude road with two parallel tracks, each 24 inches wide made from 3 x 8 inch wooden planks. The roadway resembled railroad tracks for cars. Turnouts built every mile were added so cars could pass each other on the one-lane road.



The track needed constant attention. Maintenance crews repaired splintered planks and cleared windblown sand with mule-drawn scrapers. After only a year of use the road was a wreck.

But Fletcher and Boyd believed they had proven that a road through the sand hills was practicable. Some experts disagreed. Joseph Lippincott, a well-known civil engineer and consultant to the Auto Club of Southern California, ridiculed the plank road as “the most asinine thing he had ever heard of.”

Ignoring the skeptics, Fletcher partnered once again with the Imperial County supervisors to provide funds for an improved road. Fletcher raised about \$25,000, enough to fill thirty-seven railcars with lumber. The planks were shipped to a rail station at Ogilby, a few miles north of the planned road.



At an Ogilby workshop workers assembled the road surface in 8-foot wide, 12-foot long sections. Weighing 1,500 pounds each, the sections were loaded on mule-drawn wagons and taken to the work site. With crude cranes workers lowered the sections onto the leveled road bed and bolted them into position.

When finished the new road stretched seven miles. The California Highway Commission adopted the route as Highway 80 in 1917 and took responsibility for road maintenance.

Travel on the new path was an adventure, particularly when cars met on the one-lane strip. The pullouts were found about every quarter mile but often an auto had to back up to find them--marked by wooden posts decorated with discarded tires “dangling as sentinels.”

The roadway surface was a major trial. The posted speed limit was 15 miles per hour—a rate of speed few drivers ever achieved. “You just bumped across it, and it was bumpy,” a driver from Holtville recalled. “I always said that going across the Plank Road was as good as having a chiropractic adjustment.”

Driving off the roadway could be disaster. The soft sand swallowed wheels. A traveler from 1926 remembered: “If a car falls off there is no hope of retrieving it. We passed many cars dug into the sand mutely waiting to slowly disintegrate.”

Careful drivers packed emergency supplies: shovels, extra boards, auto jacks, and food and water for two days. One plank road veteran recommended a set of boxing gloves for the occasional fistfight with stressed drivers.

But other drivers remembered the trip as a happy adventure. A popular winter outing was a picnic at Gray’s Well at the head of the road, followed by a bouncing drive to Yuma. College students, church groups, and families all found the plank road as a party site.

Maintaining the road was a nightmare for the crews from the state Highway Commission. Drifting sand often obliterated the road completely. Using scrapers pulled by draft animals, the crews cleared the path as best they could but sections were impassible much of the time.

Road enthusiasts suggested fighting the drifts with “sand sheds” similar to railroad snow sheds of the Sierras. Others recommended an elevated causeway or even a tunnel burrowed beneath the sand hills. The Highway Commission ignored the suggestions and their crews kept on scraping, “enabling travel to pursue its sandy way.”



As auto travel increased in the 1920s traffic jams on the plank road became common. At times control schedules were imposed; eastbound traffic would use the road for two hours followed by westbound cars.

With the heavy use, the condition of the plank road deteriorated rapidly. After rejecting construction of a two-way redwood plank road, the Highway Commission decided to risk permanent pavement across the

sand. On a raised grade, the engineers laid a twenty foot-wide, asphaltic concrete surface through the sand hills. To tame the unruly dunes, the engineers poured massive quantities of oil on the sand bordering the new roadway to “cake” the sand and prevent wind drift.

The new two-lane highway opened to traffic on August 11, 1926. At the official dedication in October, Imperial Valley officials praised the “black ribbon through the dunes” that defied the “concerted attack of wind and sand.”

Fragments of the old Plank Road can still be seen at the west end of Gray’s Well Road, 47 miles east of El Centro, along Interstate 8. A monument and interpretive exhibit at the site commemorate the historical landmark.

Photographs are from Ben Blow, *California Highways* (San Francisco: 1920).

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