PICTURED: Highway 50 in Nevada/Shutterstock
Who said the road would be lonely and that there are no points of interest along the way? LIFE Magazine did in their July 1986 issue.

It’s totally empty, says an AAA counselor. There are no points of interest. We don’t recommend it. The 287-mile stretch of U.S. 50, running from Ely to Fernly (sic), Nev., passes nine towns, two abandoned mining camps, a few gas pumps and an occasional coyote. We warn all motorists not to drive there, says the AAA rep, unless they’re confident of their survival skills.

With the mark of a pen and the published word, the road less traveled, would become just that, an odyssey of discovery for the brave few. Stark and spectacular, this vast terrain beckons the adventurer, as it did over a century and a half ago, when young men set out to deliver the mail Pony Express-style from St Joseph, Missouri to San Francisco, California. Crossing the thirteen mountain passes and dipping into the spacious valleys below, the Pony Express rider was indeed alone. With not a drop of water in sight, and a distance spanning out in front of the brave soul, Nevada’s breathtaking purple mountain majesty left an impression upon a young lad delivering the mail cross country, for there is a spirit here that exists in this great expanse of open road, it was apparent then, and has endured now.

So, pack your survival gear and let’s head out on a descriptive adventure across the heart of Nevada.
Heading east from the State Capital of Carson City on Highway 50, the traveler will go through the bedroom community of Dayton. Dayton and Genoa share a common rivalry between the two, each protest that their location was the first settled in Nevada. Gold Canon (Dayton) became a stop-over point for prospectors seeking their fortune in the Gold Rush to the west. By searching out an opportunity where it presented itself, a handful of prospectors camped along the river edge and laid claim to the heavily sought after mineral, silver. This discovery would have a direct influence on the foundation of the Comstock Lode in 1849; an economic impact that would drive the financial future of the Utah Territory and the development of statehood for Nevada. Dayton, today, still maintains its old town character.

Continuing along Highway 50 the traveler breezes by the communities of Stagecoach and Silver Springs, developed within the last sixty years and promoted as a desert living experience. Stagecoach and Silver Springs attracted a group of homeowners who wanted to enjoy the solitude of country living, while maintaining the convenience of being within a short distance of an urban area.

As one ventures further, a body of water appears, the Lahontan State Recreation Area and the manmade Lahontan Reservoir; built to supply water to the neighboring Lahontan Valley through a sophisticated system of irrigation canals. In abundant wet seasons not hampered by drought, the snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada feeds this reservoir by way of the Truckee River turning the arid landscape into an agricultural paradise.

The next town on the route requires a slight detour off the beaten track. Fernley, a town located between Interstate 80 and Highway 50 was originally a railroad stop, and now is considered a bedroom community of Reno/Sparks. It wasn’t always that way. Land that was considered unfit for agriculture soon became fertile with the development of a flood irrigation system in the early 1900s (Newlands Irrigation Project). Fernley has become a major draw to the community because of its convenient proximity to a major transportation corridor and the growth of industry.

Traveling through a sea of rabbit brush and tumbleweeds, Highway 50 enters into the Oasis of Nevada and the city of Fallon, a settlement located along the 40 Mile Desert, a western migration trail where hearty souls made the trek across the hostile desert, for a life of promise in California. In 1902, the Reclamation Act changed the desert dynamic by reclaiming the arid land and turning it into small farms of 160 acres each. The Reclamation Project drew prospective farmers and businessman from around the United States who sought to prove up on their acreage, and with flood irrigation land was transformed into a thriving garden oasis. Specialized crops such as the Hearts-O-Gold Cantaloupe brought national attention to the valley’s agricultural industry.

The town of Fallon continued to prosper and in 1944 it became home of the Fallon Naval Auxiliary Air Station, an arrangement with the U.S. Military in 1959 that catapulted the Lahontan Valley and the City of Fallon, from an agricultural base to a military focus. Year round, Fallon can boast that it is a hub of activity with many of the local events driving tourism along the Pony Express route.

Taking heed, I hope the traveler picked up provisions, while filling their gas tank in Fallon, because this is where the Highway 50 experience begins. One hundred and twenty-five miles of open two-lane road before one reaches the town of Austin. Austin is a mining town with character and its charm is in the well-preserved historical Main Street. The town itself is perched on a hillside at an elevation of 6,600 feet and this picturesque hamlet with its quacking Aspens and dramatic views still has a sense of connection to its mining past. In 1862, a rich silver ledge was discovered and the boom commenced with prospectors and miners searching for prosperity flocking to the region and Austin saw its numbers swell to 7,500 residents. These were individuals who moved to the heart of central Nevada to set up stakes, mine, and make a mark on history. Today, the town’s population has dwindled to 300 and the saloons and taverns that dotted the Main Street landscape have long since shut down. What remains
is a quaint center and a community that welcomes its visitors with open arms and tourism has replaced the trappings of yesteryear. As you leave the town of Austin, you travel deeper into the Toiyabe Mountain Range. Climbing the summit and driving down the backside into Smokey Valley gives the traveler a sense of a place untouched by progress as the panoramic view is both pristine and undeveloped.

The drive continues seventy-seven miles to Eureka. Rich in history, Eureka has survived the boom and bust nature of mining. It too, like Austin, has had to reinvent itself time and time again. In its heyday, the population swelled to 9,000. Lead and silver were mined and processed here with some dire consequences: Eureka was known as the Pittsburgh of the West. Air thick with black smoke hung in the canyon causing upper respiratory diseases in the children who lived here. Cemeteries lay record to this haunting past. Today, without the smelters, the air is crystal clear and Eureka has maintained a consistent base of 600 residents who are drawn to this region of Nevada not because of necessity but choice and familiarity. Highway 50 travels through the heart of town and Main Street stands as a tribute to an earlier life when lead and silver were discovered here. The carefully restored Eureka Opera House received a National Preservation Honor Award upon the renovation and grand opening in 1994. Since then, the Opera House has been recognized as a historical treasure on Highway 50. The Courthouse located across the street continues to stand as a reminder to the town’s elegant past and both buildings are open to the public.

From Eureka the highway travels east toward the town of Ely, a distance of seventy-seven miles. As you enter the outskirts of Ely, a large imposing mound of earth reaches for the cobalt blue sky, the Ruth Pit. Copper is king is this region and with its first discovery in 1872 the town of Ely has shared a long relationship with the exploration and mining of this metal. In 1906 the Nevada Northern Railway was established and today the station and tracks have become a world-renowned railroad museum and are listed as a National Historical Landmark. Beckoning train enthusiasts from around the world, they are able to ride the short-line railway on one of the steam or diesel engines. Ely’s downtown is reminiscent of an earlier time when Main Street held a position of prominence in the psyche of mid-America. Ely’s Main Street still has the wooden sidewalks and storefronts but with an added flair. The buildings are painted with creative murals depicting an era and a feel of what life is now and what it was like back then.

Our final stop along the route is Great Basin Heritage Area, a geographical region that encompasses the Basin and Range. Unique, this terrain offers an escape to an incredible quiet beauty. And according to the Pony Express Nevada website, “National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress in recognition of the contributions they make in making up the unique fabric of our country.”

The Nevada Commission on Tourism played upon the negative press of 1986 and three decades later Highway 50 has become, for many, a purposeful pilgrimage across central Nevada and the Pony Express Territory.

Isn’t this what it is all about, experiencing the road less traveled?