

### SILVER STATE 508, A RACE THROUGH TIME

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Perhaps it is fitting that an ultra-endurance event governed by the constraints of time would call Nevada its home, a place that's well acquainted with that particular master. Nearly 1.67 million years ago, ore deposits would form in veins across Nevada as the snow melted from white-glacier-capped mountains—from which she got her name—would create large, inland lakes.

These are the places the Silver State 508 riders will traverse: up and over mountain ranges and across valleys nearly ten miles long, spaces where those glaciers melted and formed miniature oceans.

The journey from Reno to Geiger Grade - or any landmarks along the 508 route - may not seem like a foray back in time, but it is. In the case of Geiger Grade's old Toll Road, an 8.75 mile climb out of Reno, riders will climb into a place which, due to the luck of the geologic draw, would inherit gold, silver and copper which would help to make Nevada a state in 1864.

Long before that happened, though, traces of time can be read in the hills in the language of Cordelian Tectonics, the language of a now-absent ocean, the silence of petroglyphs, the language of the gold rush, the pony express, and, later, the roar of fighter jets in the sky above.

#### STAGE 1: Reno to Silver Springs

It is hard to believe Nevada was once an ocean, especially when riders are confronted with the dry, arid air, the high elevation, and the type of vegetation only found in high desert steppe regions.

The air will be crisp and dry at the starting line of the Silver State 508 in Reno, Nevada. Named after Major General Jesse Reno, a Union officer killed in the Civil War. Reno is the Old West: images of cowboys, ranches, casinos, brothels - these are the images of Nevada to those who have cursory knowledge of her. But as riders trace their way through the streets of South Reno en route to Geiger Grade (a 8.75 mile climb) and Virginia City, there are traces of other histories, some more recent and others more distant.

In the 1850s, settlers would call the "Truckee Meadows" (the meadow which hosts Reno and Sparks) home and by the 1860s, several of the towns which dot the Silver State 508 route would be bustling mining towns as gold and silver veins were discovered by eager prospectors.

The climb up Geiger Grade at dawn is spectacular, encapsulating old and new, past and present, all at once. As riders climb up the Virginia Range to the summit at Geiger Summit, riders will arrive at Virginia City, origin of the Comstock Lode, and an example of the "bust and boom" nature which characterized the era and

still characterizes the mining industry today. At 6200' elevation, Virginia City is nearly the same elevation as Lake Tahoe which rests to its west up in the Sierra Nevada range.

Quickly, though, they will turn down Six Mile Canyon and this, too, will be beautiful... but chilly. Cottonwood trees which line the trickle of the creek will have likely changed into autumn hues and flicker like golden sequins in the morning light. The narrow two-lane road will take riders down from the Virginia Range into a large valley. This is Dayton, one of two towns which continues to argue to be Nevada's oldest.

As riders turn left onto old Highway 50, they might feel a reprieve in their legs. The landscape looks flat. But they will soon find that Nevada is, actually, the most mountainous state in the U.S. with 150 named mountain ranges. Over thirty of Nevada's mountain peaks exceed 11,000 feet and, in years of heavy snow, remain white-capped even in summer. Perhaps this is how "Nevada" got her name - in Spanish, the word means snow-covered.

The final miles of leg one suggest sage and wild horse are the most prevalent here. Homes are scattered and low-lying; horizons and sky are big.

It's hard to believe this was an ocean once, but as stage two begins, that is where evidence of that past begins.

#### STAGE 2: Silver Springs to Fallon



*Grimes Point, where people have left a mark on history for millennia.*

Between 200 million and 1.67 million years ago, most of the Silver State 508 route was beneath a gigantic inland sea, named Lake Lahontan. If riders look over their right shoulder, they will see what remains (in a sense) of this ancient ocean.

This is a "flat and fast" leg of the race and the only leg where a TT bike might be a wise choice.

As you ride, if you happen to glance up at the mountains which frame the sky, you'll notice the faint traces of a shoreline, evidence of ancient Lake Lahontan. Here is where the landscape begins to "spread out", (although, arguably, the biggest distances are yet to come) revealing that Nevada is, indeed, the United State's 7th largest state with 110,540 square miles.

It is impressive that riders will cross such a large expanse on the “loneliest highway” with only the help of their teammate(s) (if not a solo racer) and the help of their crew. What will they see out there, in those ancient horizon lines which were once shorelines, long ago?

Stage 2 riders will pass through Fallon, Nevada, which is known for many things— one of which, its melons. Maybe it’s the rich soil left over from its days as an ocean floor, but Fallon melons are renown for their unique sweetness and bouquet. Because they do not ship well, very few have tasted the clay-colored flesh of the Fallon cantaloupe melon aside from lucky Nevada residents.

“Blink once and you’ll miss it,” a friend once told me when describing the size of Nevada towns along Highway 50 and maybe that’s true. Rolling into Fallon - by far the largest town along the 508 route - riders will pass ramshackle bars, hardware stores, gas stations, fast-food restaurants, brick courthouses, and casinos from another era advertising renovated restrooms on their marquees. The blinking lights fade too quickly, and the desert - the past - returns.

Flat and wide: Harmon Junction, location of Time Station 2, appears at a curve in the highway as riders draw close to a shoreline where hunters, gatherers, and shaman carved images into rock— mysterious messages of a time that this landscape has nearly erased.

### STAGE 3: Fallon to Austin



*Middlegate has long been a waypoint for long-distance travelers.*

As riders pass into the third stage of the race, they might notice a shift in the landscape as they travel the loneliest highway deep into the heart of Nevada. There isn’t a line per se, but the sense of desolation becomes more present: the land empties of houses and even ranch and farm lands. There is a sense that one is alone in the middle of something vast and slightly unknowable.

This is the landscape of the Pony Express, where riders carried the mail across these expanses. The old trail nearly parallels

Highway 50 and is marked in several locations. An old windmill powers a water pump and cistern which still functions to this day that riders, long ago, would have used as a watering hole along their grueling trek.

The Pony Express riders had to contend with another part of Nevada’s past that is invisible today: wolves. Reportedly in 1860, Pony Express riders stationed at Cold Springs (a spot located along East Highway 50 just after riders turn onto Highway 722) were attacked by a tribe of Native Americans, killed and most of their remains eaten by wolves. There’s no need to pick up the pace as you pass by the Windmill or the old stone foundations where the Pony Express riders were slaughtered; wolves no longer reside in Nevada, however; as in many of the other “lower 48” states, they were hunted to (near) extinction.

Turning onto Highway 722, riders will notice an old ranch at the foot of the climb to Carroll Summit. This is one of the oldest ranches in the area, called “Eastgate,” one of three “gates” in Central Nevada. Eastgate (located beneath “Gibraltar Rock,”) the ranch sits in what was once a lush meadow, a green oasis of sorts. Riders will encounter the two remaining “gates” of Central Nevada on their trip back to Reno and the finish line.

Another detail that may catch a racer’s eye: the numerous signs pointing the way to Ione. You might even start to wonder if all roads lead to Ione... a small mining town which was founded in 1863 as a milling and trading outpost which serviced other nearby towns. In 1864 - when Nevada became a state - Ione was the Nye county seat until 1867 when another town took over the title.

What Ione is known for, however, is its local watering hole called the Ore House where “Buckaroo Bartender Fly” served cold beer to locals and those who happened through town. The “watering hole”: a true Nevada tradition if every there was one. A bar was never just a bar in the real “Old West” - it was a desert oasis, a community hall, a retirement home, a singles club, the “NPR” of local news, stories and gossip and the vibrant - if not vital - “hub” to everyone who dared call the Great Basin “home.”

### STAGE 4: Austin to Eureka

When racers cross into the Reese River Valley, they will see a glimmer of light on the hills before them. Perched on a hill, the town of Austin is unusual in that it is not a mining town which struck it rich for silver or gold; instead, Austin’s claim to fame - and its sustenance to this day - was found in turquoise.

Native Americans believed turquoise (the “fallen sky stone”) was produced by a mixture of their own tears of joy and rain mixed with earth.

Interestingly, this belief about turquoise’s origin isn’t far from the literal truth: copper, aluminum and iron deposits oxidize and combine to form turquoise in the veins of rocks. Turquoise in its natural state is not a solid stone, but often

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a veneer which must be removed and shaped by careful work with hammer and chisel.

Austin's economy is a boom-and-bust, fixed to the price of turquoise. Austin residents - or the ones I've met - all seem to have a claim somewhere near town and are proud and guarded of their turquoise holdings.

As racers climb out of Austin, they will descend into Monitor Valley and then, after a quick climb up Bob Scott Summit, into Antelope Valley. And here's another Silver State 508 fact: in nearly every Nevada valley, you can find a hot or cold spring.

If you were wondering, the reason why many of Nevada's small towns dot the edges of mountain ranges are the propensity for springs (either hot or cold) to form where the Earth's crust becomes thin. Spenser Hot Springs (a popular destination just East of Austin) are a prime example of this. Interestingly, some of the cooler pools are home to goldfish (the kind you have in a bowl at home) which have survived here for years.

Although most racers will traverse stage four in the dark, this is the country of the wildest Nevada: it is the land of antelope, of elk, of wild burro and of pictographs left in caves by the region's first inhabitants, long ago.

### STAGE 5: Eureka to Austin

On this stretch of the race, it's likely cyclists will only be able to judge their progress by the shifting position of lights in the distance - lights which illuminate the distant and solitary ranches.

Eureka, like Austin (and like Ione, in fact) was founded as a mining town. To counter the rough existence a miner must endure, Eureka built a solid town-center which featured an opera house. Built in 1880, the Eureka Opera house hosted balls, masquerades and, later, silent films for the residents of Eureka to enjoy.

After turning around in front of the Opera House in Eureka, racers again face the darkness. In some ways, the misconception of Nevada's particular landscape in the 19th century featured a similar "darkness." According to a Nevada "fable," in the mid-nineteenth century, the Reese River Navigation Company (formed by businessmen who had never seen the Reese River or the Reese River Valley) wanted to fill the Reese River with barges to carry the mineral wealth found in area mines to the railroad depot to Battle Mountain (a town to the North of the race route.)

According to several newspapers published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this company "fooled thousands of credulous souls" into purchasing stock in a venture that was, simply, not possible.

If it weren't dark in the fifth stage of the race, cyclists would recognize this: the Reese River, even at its fullest, is only a few inches deep. And, perhaps more importantly, the railroad depot did not exist in Battle Mountain until well after the mines in this area ceased production.

It's a nice image, though: the way you can't know a place until you're in it. And by this stage in the race, the participants certainly are.

### STAGE 6: Austin to Fallon



*The view of the 508 route from atop Sand Mountain.*

This might be the stage where riders begin to see dawn's light crest the mountains lining the landscape around them. Although they've traveled these parts before (in stage 3) the return trip somehow offers a different perspective. Maybe it's the fact that they are moving west (and isn't West associated with progress, Americana, the sunset, and a grand finale?)

One remnant of an older time waits for racers when they reach the foot of the climb up Carroll Summit. On the left, they may take note of an old, abandoned building fading into the shade of the canyon.

According to Nevada lore, racers may hear the voices of "Fred and Rosie," the former proprietors of Carroll Summit Station when it was still in operation. Known to be their "own best customers," the married couple were also known for their "knock-down-drag-out-brawls" which could be heard within and without the establishment.

Interestingly (or maybe it's only lore?) the landmark which sits at the end of Highway 722 was begotten in the midst of marital strife, too (but not a knock-down-brawl) in which a newly married bride threatened to walk away from her husband after they had argued. "If you do, you'll have to walk barefoot," he said, throwing her shoes high into the branches of the tree. They returned several years later with their first child to throw his shoes into the tree which sparked - as racers will see from the numerous shoes present - something of a tradition until vandals chopped the tree down in 2010. The new tree, however, has faced no difficulty in accumulating new shoes in its five years of life.

This is evidence, though, that the landscape in Nevada changes quickly: at times due to natural forces, and at others due to human manipulation, the Silver State 508 route is not what it once was, or will be. As the fourth most seismically active state in the U.S., Nevada's land literally changes shape.

Nowhere is this more visible than Earthquake Faults, Nevada which rests slightly South of Highway 50 before racers crest



Drumm Summit and descend into Dixie Valley. Early in the 20th century, Nevada experienced an earthquake large enough that its natural springs shifted positions (drying up extant ranches and offering springs were none had existed before.) Earthquake Faults (near Drumm Summit) still displays the extreme shift in the earth's crust by radical drops of twenty feet or more.

This is why Dixie Valley - and, really, the territory remaining in Stage 6 to Fallon - continues to be of interest to the military. Dixie Valley still contains a bombing range that racers will see on their left as they ride to Fallon. However, there is another (invisible) history here.

In 1963, "Project Shoals" was announced to residents of the racers' destination (Fallon) that the area east of the town had been surveyed for an "important scientific experiment": an underground nuclear exposition. According to newsreels, the military wanted to know the effect of a nuclear explosion on a seismically active area. The plan was to detonate a nuclear bomb far beneath the earth's surface - and a town filled of empty buildings then called "Shoals" - in order to see the results of such a violent explosion.

"Perhaps we were all a little concerned or shocked when the explosion took place," said a rancher who looked east from his ranch in Fallon when the detonation was set to occur. Yet, no one in Fallon felt the detonation or any negative after-effects of it, either (according to period sources.) This was only the third nuclear experiment ever conducted in the country outside the Nevada test site.

The military presence is still clear: as racers arrive in Fallon, maybe they'll spot a jet launched from Nellis Airforce Base where much of the film *Top Gun* was filmed. Or maybe they will only see a trace of its flight in the sky, a white line across the deep blue.

**STAGE 7: Fallon to Silver Springs**

This flat-and-fast stage quickly moves racers from Fallon to Silver Springs. Fallon, a small grid-lined town, is also known for it's hay. Although several valleys produce alfalfa in Nevada, the alfalfa produced in Fallon is world-renown due to its incredible nutritional value. Unlike other "hay" products from other regions of the state, Fallon alfalfa is often sold abroad and always sold to the highest bidder.

After leaving the small town-center of grid-lined streets, old courthouses, hotels and gas stations, Fallon's landscape opens to fields with the stray gas station, bar or homestead. Racers will probably notice (or, feel) that they are no longer in the land of "desolation" quite - and they will be right.

Although the miles which remain to the finish line have their own unique charm, they are hardly ever desolate or solitary; racers will, at the very least, have Nevada's population of wild horses to guide them home.



**STAGE 8: Silver Springs to Reno**

Have you seen a wild burro? Have you ridden over an exposed fault? A nuclear test site? A ancient burial site?

Have you ridden on part of the Pony Express Trail? Have you navigated by star or moonlight?

As you reach the mouth of Six Mile Canyon Road, it's very possible you have done all of these things while riding the Silver State 508.

Six Mile Canyon Road (if the name didn't give it away, it is a six-mile road down—or at this point, up—a winding narrow canyon) is where the first gold of the Comstock Lode was discovered. In 1896 a fire in the Yellow Jacket Mine (near Six Mile Canyon Road) would burn, uninterrupted and under the ground, for over a year.

Six Mile Canyon leads stage 8 racers to Virginia City. This is the town where a young writer named Samuel Clemens - later known as Mark Twain - would get this start as a reporter for the local paper.

At the height of the mining boom in the 1860s, the population of Virginia City was over 25,000. However, today the population hovers around 1,000. Sometimes (at the height of tourist season) Virginia City may attempt to approximate what it once was in terms of population, but even given the annoyances of bad drivers, Harleys, and the other extremes of highway traffic, this is not the Virginia City of the mid-1860s. It will (probably) not be that place ever again.

Stage 8 racers will climb to Geiger Summit from where contemporary Reno (home to over 200,000 people) is a lighted and welcome vista. Reno: once an ocean floor, is now home to several international corporations, a university, an arboretum, a bike coalition, a co-op, a vibrant cycling community, and - the latest addition to the expansive history of the state of Nevada - the finish line for the Silver State 508.

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