



**SERGEANT BUZZ BANKS—  
CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL**

There was no Route 66 on November 21, 1913, but there was a new baby boy in Los Angeles, California, named Levellen Banks. Later nicknamed Buzz, he felt the Mojave Desert's call.

"You could call me a native Los Angeline, but at the same time, I hated L.A. with a purple passion as far as living in it is concerned," says Banks, whose way out of the big city was to join the California Highway Patrol (CHP) in 1941 at age 27—a decision which also gave him the "certain extent of excitement and adventure" he was looking for and a home in Route 66's desert town of Victorville. Excitement and adventure are certainly found in Banks' 1994 book *Policing the Old Mojave*.

Within months of Banks' joining the CHP, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and the United States was at war. German Field Marshall Rommel was raising Cain in northern Africa, and it would soon be up to U.S. General George Patton to help fight off Rommel's hordes of Panzer tanks with American tank soldiers trained in the Mojave Desert. It would be up to Banks to help escort the military troops through his territory safely.

"General Patton stopped off at the old sheriff's office on Seventh Street [66]," Banks remembers. "He pulled up on the wrong side of the street, which was all right because he was part of a military convoy. He strides up to the sheriff's office on the west side of the street and asked for directions. He was wearing his pearl-handled revolvers and his tall motorcycle-riding-type boots with his pants tucked in them. He talked in the sheriff's office for maybe two minutes, and he walks out—strides out, literally—hops into his Jeep, and away they go."

Banks remembers Patton's convoys taking rather long, strange routes through the desert, possibly due to fears of being spied upon, and there were precautions required of Banks as well.

"We had to be careful. We couldn't use the radios much. We had orders to operate with our headlights off. We even had to shield our red taillight lenses. You could fly over the desert for years after the war and see tank tracks all over the place."

When leaving 1940s Los Angeles for points east on Route 66, one would drive east through the intermittent countryside between L.A. and San Bernardino. Here 66 made a hard left turn north to begin the climb up the treacherous Cajon Pass over the San Bernardino

Mountains—a long, steep, winding road where big trucks routinely progressed at a literal walking pace. Once finally reaching the Cajon Summit at more than 4,000 feet, the Mojave Desert began, and it was a long, gentle slope all the way to Victorville 15 miles later and nearly 2,000 feet lower. Today, this drive takes less than two hours on Interstates 10 and 15. In the 1940s and 1950s, this could take all day on two-lane Route 66, which made Victorville a shining example of 66's road-side culture. It was alive with motels, eateries, garages, and gas stations needed by road-weary travelers and trucks. Victorville's Seventh Street and D Street were home to Route 66. U.S. Highways 66, 91, and 395 all merged in San Bernardino for the Cajon climb, and once over the summit and into the desert, 395 broke off and headed due north toward California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, and 91 broke off in Barstow and headed for Las Vegas, Nevada, and Salt Lake City, Utah.

World War II ended, and the Mojave Desert was quickly back to better-than-normal as postwar prosperity hit. Route 66 became busier and busier as Las Vegas-bound tourist traffic increased, and with this increase, 66 came to have, in Banks' words, "a load of undesirable people driving on it." The patrolmen called it "dude traffic," and it contained all the elements of old Las Vegas—sinners and mafiosi.

"We probably had more criminals running down Route 66 than any other highway in the United States," Banks says.

They ran, but Banks caught them. "We did have car pursuits off and on, but they became more common after the war. I'm not sure what to ascribe it to, but seemed like [criminals] had that notion they were God, and by golly, they were not going to let themselves be caught and prosecuted. Pursuits here on the north side of the Cajon Pass didn't generally last too long because we'd be able to knock them down by the time they got to Victorville. [The bad guys] just couldn't risk going through town maintaining that kind of speed."

"One of the toughest pursuits I ever had started out in Baker on old 91 westbound into Barstow where I picked it up, and then they headed out east toward Needles on 66," he tells. "It was two guys in a stolen car. [Banks believes it was a 1957 Dodge.] We had several officers join the chase, but some had to drop out for gasoline reasons. We chased them all the way out to Amboy [80 miles]. We set up a roadblock that probably would have killed them. I was the sergeant, and my duty was to

control this thing."

Buzz called ahead by radio and set up a scheme involving a semitrailer backing out onto the road to stop the bad guys.

"The [bad guy] got a hunch and whipped over to the side of the road and hit his brakes, and by that time, I was up really close to him, and I had to slam on my binders to keep from hitting him. I still bumped his bumper. Both of them jumped out and ran."

Banks laughs as he remembers these desperadoes jumping out and running away from the police in Amboy—the harshest desert on all of 66.

"They wouldn't have gotten far!"

Banks agrees that as cars got faster in the 1950s, people did dumber things to pass the trucks.

"[The 1950s marked] the transition from sensible driving to nonsensical driving. People got more power behind the wheel, and they weren't used to it, but they drove like they'd always had it."

Some groups gain bad reputations because of the reputation of a few members, and Banks says "9 out of 10" gas stations and garages along 66 through the Mojave were honest, but there was always that 10 percent.

"They would do petty things you wouldn't think a grown man would think of like setting his gasoline meter so it read one-tenth of a gallon more than what it was delivering. Some of them got a lot worse. They were cheating on fan belts and radiator hoses—stuff that could run into some money—by cutting them or jerking them loose."

Even at stations owned by honest people, some employees would sell parts unnecessarily to motorists and pocket the money unknown to the honest owners. The farther out in the desert, the worse it got.

Nature threw difficulties at all drivers who traveled 66 through the Mojave. The Cajon Pass snows in solidly in the winter, and Amboy can reach 120 degrees in the summer. When the Cajon Pass iced over in the winter, Banks says most of the garage owners who went to the pass to gouge motorists on snow chains weren't local.

"[Amboy's heat gave motorists a lot of trouble] because they didn't know how to drive to keep their cars cool," Banks says. "They'd turn on the air conditioning and poke along [and overheat in the middle of nowhere]. They needed to turn off the air conditioning and rev up the rpm of the engine by driving in second gear if they had to. It was a lack of knowledge on the part of people, by and large."

Route 66 had its dangers: the Cajon Pass and Amboy and the surprise of finding the narrow Oro

Grande Bridge over the Mojave River north of Victorville, the tight S-curve under the railroad tracks in the town of Oro Grande, and the curves through the hills halfway between Victorville and Barstow near the town of Helendale. But Buzz Banks helped keep it safe, and his book, *Policing the Old Mojave* has helped keep Route 66 in the minds of younger people.

"Once the newspaper reporters and television start humming away about 66, [younger people] start asking, 'Well, what was 66?' It has so many nostalgic memories—more so than any other highway coming into the West," he says. "Sixty-six nudges the older people, and the [younger people notice and wonder why]."



Buzz Banks, circa 1940.

# Route 66

LIVES ON THE ROAD

Jon Robinson

California Highway Patrolman Buzz Banks smiles at being in the presence of a 1955 Buick patrol car. Banks escorted General Patton's tank convoys down Route 66 through the Mojave Desert during World War II. Gary Goltz has restored this 1955 Buick into an accurate recreation of the patrol car driven by actor Broderick Crawford in the 1950s TV hit, "Highway Patrol." Goltz patrols his classic on Route 66 through his hometown of Upland, California.