



ONION VALLEY

EVERY EASTERN SIERRA DESERT TOWN HAS AT LEAST ONE SUMMER ESCAPE ROUTE TO THE HIGH COUNTRY. FROM INDEPENDENCE YOU CAN TAKE THE ONION VALLEY ROAD AND IN LESS THAN AN HOUR BE AMONG MOUNTAIN MEADOWS SHADED BY TALL PINES AND QUAKING ASPENS, ECHOING WITH BIRDSONG AND COOLED BY THE SPRAY OF WATERFALLS.

Getting there: In Independence the route begins at the traffic light in the center of town. Turn west onto Market Street, also marked as Onion Valley Road.

Length: 13 miles.

Driving time: 45 minutes, one way.

Along the route: While you enjoy the charming little back streets of Independence, at 0.2 miles look for Grant Street and a low, green “Museum” sign. A right turn takes you to the Eastern California Museum where you can immerse yourself in the excellent collection of photographs and artifacts or ask the knowledgeable curators about anything that has piqued your curiosity along these routes. The Paiute basketry is not to be missed. The Paiute culture was largely nomadic, with long distances traveled on foot to reach widely-spread resources, and great artistry was applied to making lightweight, practical baskets that would delight the eye while carrying all kinds of supplies—even water! The Owens Valley was so resource-rich as to allow year-round living and some basic pottery was made but the tightly woven, perfectly symmetrical, intricately patterned baskets are especially beautiful works of functional art.

Returning to Onion Valley Road, at 0.4 miles you’ll pass the Independence Creek campground where the first non-native fish were planted in the Owens Valley in 1873. Trout and bass have since made the valley a haven for sport fishermen but unfortunately contributed to

the near-extinction of the smaller native fish, once so numerous that Paiutes scooped them out of the water by the basketful. Independence Creek lies to your right as you climb its broad alluvial fan. The tall evergreens along the stream are ponderosa pines—the southernmost in the Owens Valley. Ponderosas are prevalent at higher elevations that get more snowfall, and follow the streams partway down toward the hot, dry valley floor.

Two tall peaks lie ahead: Independence Peak, and to its right, triangular Kearsarge Peak with exposed road cuts switchbacking up its base. The Kearsarge mining district was organized during the Civil War and named by Northern sympathizers after the battleship that sank the *Alabama*—namesake of the hills to the south. The mining camp clung

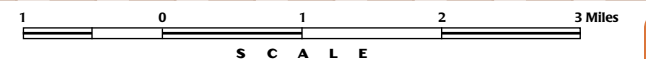
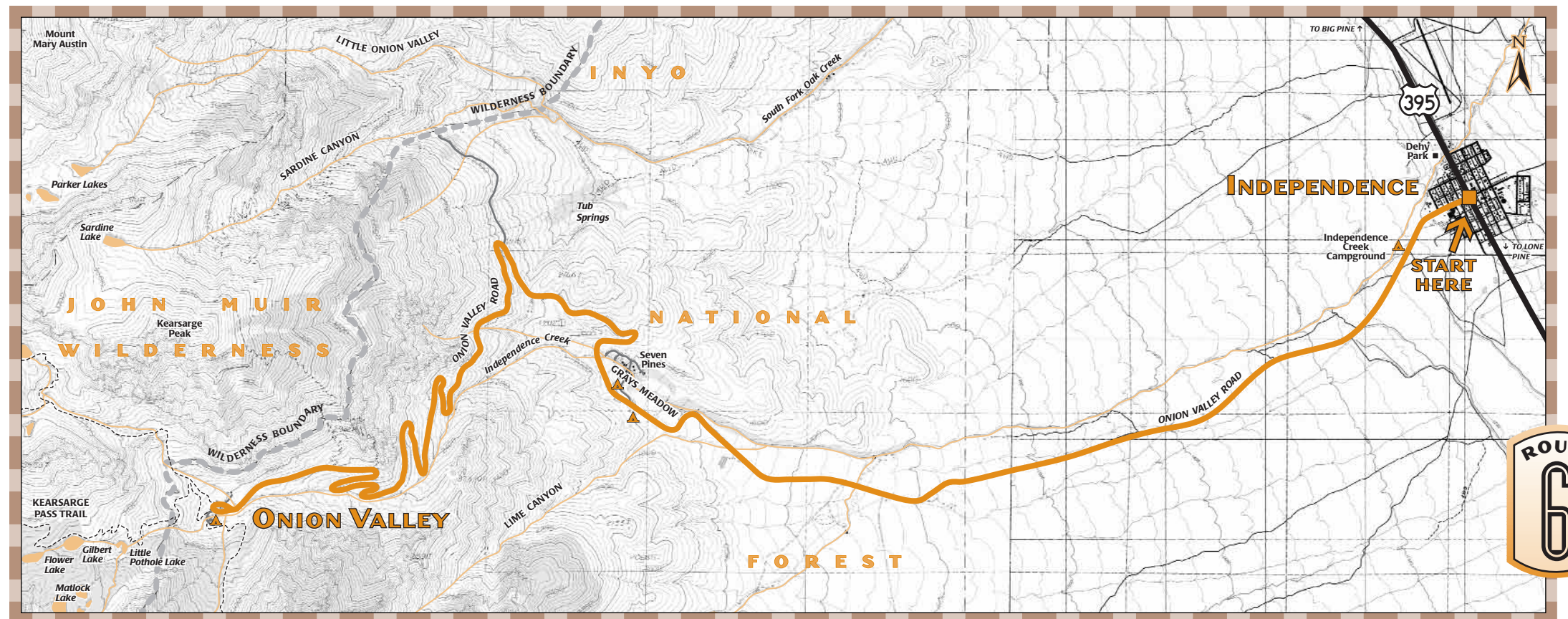
to the back of the peak at two miles above sea level and was devastated by an avalanche in the winter of 1866-7, but continued to send out gold ore for several more years. After 5 miles you’ll pass two Forest Service campgrounds, Lower and Upper Gray’s Meadow, followed by Seven Pines, a small private housing tract. Then the big climb begins.

At 13 miles and 9,200 feet elevation you will reach Onion Valley. This is a gateway to the John Muir wilderness and trailhead for the Robinson Lake and Kearsarge Pass trails. The Bighorn Sheep Zoological Area encompasses steep granite slopes above the valley. Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep once occupied at least 20 canyons of the Sierra but hunting and diseases of domestic livestock took a heavy toll. By the turn of the century ten of the 20 herds were gone and by 1979 only two remained—comprising 250 surviving bighorns. During the 1980s wildlife biologists strove to reintroduce



Pack train on Kearsarge Pass, 1930s
COURTESY EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM

Sierra bighorns to three more canyons but the small, scattered herds have been vulnerable to mountain lions. Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep were found to be genetically distinct from their desert cousins, were added to the federal endangered species list in 1999, and continue to cling precariously to their mountaineering life.



Onion Valley, 1972
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