

Historical Overview of the Carmel to San Simeon Highway

Excerpt From:

Historic Resource Evaluation Report on the Rock Retaining Walls, Parapets, Culvert Headwalls and Drinking Fountains along the Carmel to San Simeon Highway.

Prepared by Robert C. Pavlik, Associate Environmental Planner/Historian, Caltrans
November 1996

The history of the Big Sur region and Highway 1 begins long before the area was settled by Euroamericans. The steep and rugged nature of the topography severely limited the available land base which could support a human population, despite the richness of the region's natural resources. The first inhabitants of the area now known as Big Sur were the Esselen. They occupied an area of roughly 580 square miles, extending from Point Sur to Big Creek, northeastward to the Carmel Valley, and east to the Salinas Valley. They probably numbered no more than 750 to 1300 people, most of whom were absorbed into the missions at Carmel and Soledad.¹ To the north of the Esselen were the Ohlone, whose territory extended from Point Sur north to the San Francisco Bay area. Along the Big Sur coastline the Ohlone Rumsen subgroup numbered about 800 people. To the south, from Big Creek to San Carpoforo Creek lived the Salinan. San Carpoforo Creek marked the northern boundary between the Salinan and the Obispeno Chumash.² The coastal people, also known as "Playanos," lived on the flats and in the canyons high above the rocky beaches of the Big Sur coast.³ Because of the deep stream cut canyons and high ridges, long ranging north and south travel was probably eschewed by the Native Californians in favor of east-west crossings that would yield access to both the coast and the inland resources. Those people who did journey north and south probably followed the ridges at the crest of the range, or stayed to the interior valleys, where travel was easier than at the mouths of the numerous creeks emptying into the ocean.

The first European to traverse California's coastal waters was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo in 1542. In his diary, he described the Santa Lucias as "mountains which seem to reach the heavens, and the sea beats on them; sailing along close to land, it appears as though they would fall on the ships."⁴

¹ Thomas Roy Hester, "Esselen," in Robert F. Heizer, vol. ed., Handbook of North American Indians. Volume 8: California (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 496-499.

² Roberta S. Greenwood, "Obispeno and Purisimeno Chumash," in Robert F. Heizer, vol. ed. Handbook of North American Indians. Volume 8: California (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 520-523.

³ Paul Henson and Donald J. Usner, The Natural History of Big Sur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 264-271.

⁴ Ibid., 272.

In the 1590s Spain acquired the Philippines as its newest colony, and their interest in locating a port along the California coast increased in conjunction with their shipping trade. In 1602 Sebastian Vizcaino mapped the California coast and extolled the virtues of Monterey and Carmel bays. Spain did not take any action to colonize the rugged and remote region for another 167 years, when they sent Captain Gaspar de Portola on an overland expedition to establish a settlement at Vizcaino's Monterey Bay, thereby establishing Spain's claim to the region in the presence of Russian fur hunters along the northern California coast. Portola and his men stayed close to the coast on their northward journey, until they encountered the wall of the Santa Lucias looming over San Carpofero Creek, plunging into the Pacific Ocean. Turning eastward, they struggled over the Santa Lucias and followed the Nacimiento River to its confluence with the Salinas, which they mistook for the Carmel River. They followed the Salinas northward, and, not recognizing Vizcaino's description of an "excellent harbor" at Monterey, continued northward and inadvertently discovered San Francisco Bay. The Portola expedition turned southward, and returned to San Diego. A second journey resulted in the rediscovery of Monterey Bay, and it was there that a mission and presidio were established in 1770. Indians from the surrounding area, including the mountainous region to the south of the mission, were drawn to this new settlement. The rugged and seemingly impenetrable mountains became known as "that big (rough) country to the south," or "El Pais Grande del Sur."

Following the secularization of the mission system in 1833 there were only two land grants in the Big Sur country: Rancho el Sur, granted to Juan B. Alvarado, and Rancho San Jose y Sur Chiquito to Teodoro Gonzales. Both were located at the upper end of the Big Sur range, from the Big Sur river mouth north to Carmel. Neither gentleman lived on their land, but employed "caretakers" to raise cattle and otherwise establish their presence on this wild and lonely coast. Their only link with the Monterey peninsula was a tenuous trail that wound along the sea cliffs and deep into the redwood canyons before daylighting on the grassy ridges high above the coastal plains. The trail probably went only so far as the Big Sur river valley. What few residents there may have been south of there probably followed ancient trails along the ridges and over the mountains to the Salinas Valley.

Following the Mexican-American War of 1846-47 and the discovery of gold in 1848, thousands of treasure seekers flocked to California to find their fortunes. When the harsh reality of life in the diggings settled in, many of the discouraged and displaced settlers returned to their former occupations in mercantile, farming, or ranching. Much of the best land in the state had already been claimed, and so these newcomers were forced to push farther into the wilderness, searching for suitable land for a homestead. Many of the pioneer families of the Big Sur coast arrived in the period from the 1860s to the 1890s. As Henson and Usner observe in their book, The Natural History of Big Sur (1993), "Big Sur as a whole was separated from the rest of Monterey County by a lack of roads and safe harbors. The coast road from Monterey, a primitive wagon trail, reached only as far as the present-day Ventana Inn. Winter storms caused frequent washouts and slides, and wooden bridges crossing the many creeks were swept away during storms. Travelers

farther south had to follow the narrow horse trail that connected the various homesteads. It was a long and sometimes dangerous trip."⁵

Coastal transportation could be hazardous as well. A lighthouse at Piedras Blancas Point was built in 1874-75 after the ship *Harlech Castle* wrecked nearby. The Point Sur lighthouse was erected in 1887 on the oceanside of a huge rock rising from a peninsula of land that juts into the Pacific. It was there that the *S.S. Los Angeles* ran aground on April 21, 1894. Ironically, it was this event that prompted a local physician to lobby for an improved road along the Big Sur coast.

Dr. John L.D. Roberts was a medical doctor living on the Monterey Peninsula whose territory included the northern Big Sur coast. It was Roberts who raced to the scene of the tragic shipwreck in 1894, reportedly negotiating the winding and rugged road in his horse drawn wagon in three and one-half hours. As he performed his ministrations to the injured and dying, he was convinced of the importance of an improved road into that rugged country. He later made a trip on foot from Monterey to San Simeon in 1897, and estimated the cost of constructing such a road to be \$50,000.⁶

The importance of tourist travel along this scenic and pristine coastline was not lost on Roberts, who was a land speculator and entrepreneur responsible for platting the town of Seaside, a hoped-for rival to nearby Pacific Grove. In the early 1900s Big Sur was increasingly becoming a place of respite and retreat for big city dwellers, and a touchstone for poets and artists who settled on the Monterey Peninsula and made periodic forays into the rough land to the south.

Roberts was able to gain a powerful ally for his proposal in the form of State Senator Elmer S. Rigdon of Cambria. As a member of the senate committee on roads and highways, Rigdon shared Roberts' enthusiasm for a coastal route, and even arranged for Roberts' appearance before a joint session of the legislature. A \$1.5 million bond issue to build the highway was approved for placement on the ballot, but the intervention of World War I delayed the public's approval of the bond until 1919. Construction began in 1922, the same year that Elmer Rigdon died.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 275.

⁶ John Woolfenden, Big Sur: A Battle for the Wilderness 1869-1981... (Pacific Grove: Boxwood Press, 1981), 99-107.

⁷ Ibid.; "Elmer Scott Rigdon," in Facts and Faces of the Governing Bodies of California, n.p., 1919; "Death of Senator Elmer S. Rigdon is Mourned in County," San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram, December 14, 1922, 1. Early travelers to San Simeon described the trip as an arduous one. Architect Julia Morgan, on her way to William Randolph Hearst's ranch in January, 1920, reported that it took five and one-half hours to travel between San Luis Obispo and San Simeon, and five hours for the return trip. She later characterized the county road as a "bog" and the Los Osos road as a "continuous skid." In a 1922 letter to

Work crews were located near Piedras Blancas lighthouse and on the Big Sur River. The first sections completed were a twelve mile stretch of road that ran from San Simeon north to Salmon Creek, and a thirteen mile section from the village of Big Sur south to Anderson Canyon.⁸ Both laborers and engineers quickly discovered how difficult and expensive the project would prove to be. Work ground to a halt in 1924, and was not resumed until March of 1928, when convict labor crews were employed on the road building job. The use of convict labor for state highway construction projects was authorized by the passage of a bill authored by State Assemblyman B.B. Meek and enacted into law on August 8, 1915. Convict labor was seen as a solution to the pressing problems of overcrowding in the state's two prisons, and as a method of rehabilitation for first time offenders. This ready pool of unskilled labor also filled a need on the part of the Division of Highways and private contractors, who had a difficult time in attracting labor to work in remote regions of the state. One provision of the utilization of convict labor on highway construction was that the prisoners were limited to tasks requiring unskilled labor. Free men performed all of the skilled labor, served as the convicts' supervisors, and operated all of the motorized equipment.⁹

Convict labor camps were established at Salmon Creek and the South Fork of the Little Sur River. Later, construction camps were established at Point Gorda, Kirk Creek, and Anderson Canyon as the work progressed.

Life in the construction camps was not without its drama. According to the WPA guide to California (1939), "One of the many stories about the convicts tells how, one winter night when slides had blocked the road, the word spread that the wife of a man in the freeman's camp, about to give birth to a child, needed a doctor; of their own free will, men from both camps poured out to work in pouring rain and pitch darkness, blasting open with dynamite a road to the Community Hospital."¹⁰

The section from Anderson Canyon to Big Sur was almost completely rebuilt on a new alignment, and the stretch of road running north from Big Sur to Carmel was also rebuilt,

Hearst, she described the road conditions as being nearly impassable, but that "a mile of new highway shows how delightful the trip will someday be." Julia Morgan Collection, courtesy Department of Special Collections, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

⁸ L.H. Gibson, "Difficult Big Sur Contract Completed," California Highways vol. 1 no. 11 (November, 1924), 10-11; Mikesell, op.cit.

⁹ G.A. Tilton, "Convict Labor," California Highways and Public Works, March-April 1949, 4-6, 55-57.

¹⁰ California: A Guide to the Golden State (New York: Hastings House, 1939), 345.

with a spectacular bridge over Bixby Creek that substantially shortened and straightened the highway.¹¹

On June 27, 1937, a gala celebration was held at Pfeiffer Redwoods State Park to commemorate the opening of the highway. Governor Frank Merriam, Dr. John Roberts, Department of Public Works officials, and others were in attendance. With the help of a stick of dynamite and a bulldozer, Governor Merriam and Public Works Director Earl Lee Kelly symbolically pushed a large boulder out of the highway's path, thereby opening the road to the traveling public.¹²

Previously, the governor dedicated the new section of highway in San Luis Obispo County and presided at a ceremony honoring the late Elmer S. Rigdon at a roadside park and water fountain that still bears his name.

The Carmel-San Simeon Highway, also known as the Roosevelt Highway in honor of President Theodore Roosevelt, provided access to previously unknown territory to thousands of depression weary tourists. The highway was a seasonal route for many years, used primarily during the summer and fall months, frequently closing for extended periods during the winter. The war years saw a dramatic decrease in travel along the coast, due in part to the rationing of gasoline and rubber, and the blackouts that occurred nightly as a precaution against enemy attack.

In 1940 "the largest installation of guard rail ever placed on a California state highway under one contract" was made when 12 miles of tuthill (steel) guard rail and 3,649 guide posts were installed along 46.6 miles of State Route 01. The total mileage of guard rail and guide posts was 30.2 miles. According to District Engineer Lester H. Gibson,

Because of the nature of the terrain which on this portion of the Roosevelt Highway is very precipitous, a car leaving the road at some places may fall hundreds of feet. Consequently, the necessity for guard rail is very evident and further consideration was given to the selection of a type of rail which would give the greatest protection possible. A beam type of metal rail was finally selected as best adapted to the conditions....In addition to the protection afforded

¹¹ For a more complete discussion of the road's construction, including the many bridges along the route, see Mikesell, op.cit.; G.A. Tilton, "Spectacular Bixby Creek Bridge Dedicated with Ceremony and Fete," California Highways and Public Works, December, 1932, 6-7, 21; Lester H. Gibson, "A Dream Comes True," California Highways and Public Works, July, 1937; "State Builds 29 Bridges on Carmel-San Simeon Highway," California Highways and Public Works, December, 1937, 4-5.

¹² Gibson, "A Dream Comes True," California Highways and Public Works, July, 1937, 1-5, 14.

by the guard rail, guide posts 3 by 8 inches by 5 feet 4 inches long were placed in areas which were considered less hazardous but where, on account of occasional fog conditions, marking of the roadside edge was quite essential. These guide posts...were spaced approximately 50 feet apart measured along the centerline of the highway.¹³

Tourism along the Big Sur coast increased immensely in the period following World War II. Repairs and improvements to the route continued to be made during this time, just as they are today. As retired Willow Springs foreman Don Harlan has written, "His [Caltrans foreman] work is so unstandard that he never uses a work standard on his production report because nothing they do up there is standard!"¹⁴

The opening of Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument in 1958 resulted in a tidal wave of tourists that overwhelmed the tiny town of Cambria. A bypass was constructed in 1963-64, relieving the downtown of the congestion caused by the through traffic. Additional road alignments and widening occurred throughout the decade, enabling an ever increasing number of travelers to safely ply the highway, and enjoy the sights of the central coast.

In 1960 a movement was begun to recognize some of the state's most scenic byways and identify them as a part of an overall "scenic highway" program. In June, 1965 State Route 01 from the Carmel River to the San Luis Obispo County Line was designated as the state's first official scenic highway. The following year Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson came to California for the official designation ceremony, held at Bixby Bridge. She traveled the length of the route, spending one night in Big Sur as a guest of Nathaniel and Margaret Owings, and the following evening at Hearst Castle.¹⁵

¹³ L.H. Gibson, "Steel Guard Rail Installed Along 46 Miles of Monterey Coast Road," California Highways and Public Works, November, 1940, 12-13, 28.

¹⁴ Don Harlan, "The Personality One," typescript, n.d.

¹⁵ Woolfenden, op.cit., 116-117.