

**Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.**

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Forty miles of bad road**



*One of the original Ocean Shore Railway locomotives.*

The North Coast article two weeks ago generated a lot of comments and questions, and there is a lot more stories; asphaltic sandstones and oil, stage coaches and Stanley Steamers, railways and highways, to mention a few.

It wasn't until 1947 when Highway 1 was built across the base of Waddell Bluffs that Santa Cruz was first permanently connected to San Mateo County to the north. Thirty square miles of the southern tip of present-day San Mateo County, including Año Nuevo Point, Pigeon Point and Pescadero, were originally part of Santa Cruz County. Because the barrier at Waddell often prevented access to the county seat in Santa Cruz for those northerly homeowners, this area was annexed by San Mateo County in 1868, although not without a fight. At that time you couldn't always get here from there.

Sandy Lydon sent me a description of the road between Santa Cruz and Pescadero from an 1865 Santa Cruz County newspaper: "...it is a great hardship and injustice to the people living in Pescadero and its vicinity in compelling them to go

to Santa Cruz upon all county business, a distance of 40 miles over one of the most abominable roads this side of Kamchatka- a road, in fact, that is totally impassable at times, either on foot or on horseback, as a portion of the distance must be traveled along the beach, which is encompassed by a high bluff upon one side and the foaming billows upon the other, and which is completely covered by surf in every southern gale”

The first regular stage coach connection to the north began in the early 1870s, and for years made the trip daily, usually pulled by two horses, sometimes four. The stage went north from Santa Cruz to Pescadero, and then headed inland through the mountains to San Mateo and Redwood City. It carried everything from shovels and sacks of flour to needles and thread for coastal housewives, and even small batches of cheese and butter from the old Steele Dairy north of the county line destined for markets in San Francisco.

Passengers and the stage often had to wait for hours at Waddell Bluffs for the tide to drop. Even then, during large waves, the water would wash up around the horse’s hooves. Adding to the excitement of early travel along the coast were the rocks that constantly fell and rolled off the bluffs and onto the beach.

The road along the coast was just a dirt wagon track in those days and was a long dusty ordeal in the summer months and a muddy trek in the winter. Although the Ocean Shore Railway was planned to shorten the trip and transport more visitors, the sections built at both ends were never connected. Waddell Bluffs remained a formidable barrier and the tracks heading south ended at Tunitas Creek. Passengers coming from San Francisco were loaded onto the stage, which still had to navigate across the shoreline at low tide.

The tracks heading north from Santa Cruz extended 15 miles to Swanton where the railroad curved inland in an abortive attempt to avoid what was then called Gianone Hill. With the coming of the automobile, the stagecoach connecting Tunitas and Swanton was replaced by a Stanley Steamer bus.

In 1905, engineers with the Ocean Shore Railway experimented with some rock filled timber cribbing at the base of the Waddell Bluffs to see if they could find a way to resist wave action, but this also proved unsuccessful. There was so much rock constantly coming off the bluffs that it was one huge talus pile from just beyond Waddell Creek to the county line. Wagon roads were built but never lasted for long between the waves battering them on one side and the bluff failures on the other.

It was 178 years from the time the Portola expedition clawed their way up the coast in 1769 until the California Department of Highways was able to build a permanent road across the base of the bluffs. About a million cubic yards of loose rock (or about 100,000 dump truck loads) were removed from the base of the bluff and 600 feet of riprap was placed to protect the area most exposed to wave attack. Much of that rock survived until the 1983 El Niño winter. Large storm waves combined with elevated sea levels and high tides removed the loose rock and fill protecting about 2000 feet of highway at the south end of the bluffs. Cal-Trans brought in twenty-four thousand tons of rock to save Highway 1 that year.