

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

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Exploring the North Coast



Timber trestles were built across each of the north coast stream valleys for the railroad and then the material from the cuts was used to dump over the trestles to create an embankment. This is a photo looking towards Davenport in 1906.

Driving north from Santa Cruz up Highway 1 is almost always an interesting experience for me, perhaps because I have this thing about the coast. There is often something new or unexpected, even though I've driven that road hundreds of times. The early Spanish explorers, however, didn't see the journey up the coast quite the same way. In fact it was the journey from hell by the accounts in their journals.

Today Highway 1 is two, sometimes three, very smooth, nearly level lanes, and you can easily drive 50 or 60 miles per hour, unless of course there is someone soaking in the scenery and driving very slowly in front of you. What you don't usually notice from your car is that each of the many stream valleys or canyons that emerge from the coastal hills is crossed by an embankment or fill that the highway passes over. There are a number of these stream valleys that you just zip

right across without giving them a second thought, Wilder Creek, Majors Creek, Laguna Creek, Yellow Bank Creek, San Vicente Creek, to name a just a few of the larger ones.

But 240 years ago, when Captain Gaspar de Portolá and his tired and scurvy-ridden traveling companions headed up the north coast on horseback from what was to later become Santa Cruz, the route across each of those steep, brush covered stream canyons was just about impassable. As they struggled along the route followed by Highway 1 today, they had to work their way down one side of each canyon, through poison oak, willows, and oak trees, across the valley floor, and then drag their horses and mules up the opposite side. They weren't happy campers and I'm sure that at least a few of them experienced the added discomfort of poison oak.

The Portolá expedition had been sent north from San Diego to find the glorious harbor named Monterey reported by Sebastian Vizcaíno from a ship nearly 70 years earlier. While Portolá and his men looked out over the bay from Mulligan Hill at the mouth of the Salinas River in 1769 they didn't see anything through the fog that looked remotely like a harbor. This is why they found themselves bushwhacking their way up the north coast, searching for an anchorage for Spanish galleons returning to Acapulco from Manila. These are some of the stories that Sandy Lydon brings to life for his local history classes, and through our local adventures together, some of this recent history has actually started to rub off on me.

In 1905, a bold, but ultimately unsuccessful effort was initiated to ease the trip north. The Ocean Shore Railroad was begun as a way to connect Santa Cruz to San Francisco along the coast. Excavation, filling and track-laying for a double set of tracks began at both ends, but was met with some overwhelming challenges.

For starters, there was a formidable task of building a rail line across Devil's Slide. Somewhat surprisingly, the engineers of the day managed to build across the slide, but the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake carried much of that portion of track into the ocean, which was a huge setback. Construction continued at the northern end, however, and by 1908 the railroad was running passengers, and freight, including artichokes, hay, horse beans, potatoes, dried peas and canned cabbage. Oil pumped out of the ground near Half Moon Bay was also shipped out in barrels on the Ocean Shore Railroad.

At the Santa Cruz end of the line, the firm of Shattuck and Desmond was contracted to build a line from Santa Cruz to Scott Creek, where the two lines were to connect. The completion of the double tracked, electrified Ocean Shore Railroad was to be announced in early 1907. The plans for crossing all of those stream valleys that the Portolá expedition struggled through in 1769 involved initially building wooden trestles. The trestles were used by the train as a way to transport rock and soil taken from the cuts to build a huge fill embankment across each stream valley, which would then carry the load of the rail line. In addition to Devil's slide at the north end, Waddell Bluffs plunged directly into the ocean a few miles north of Scott Creek and became an insurmountable obstacle for the ill-fated Ocean Shores Railroad.

The rest of the story will have to wait.