Our Ocean Backyard

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Waddell Bluffs Remains an Obstacle

For the next 175 years following the 1769 Portolá expedition, the steep coastal bluffs just north of Waddell Creek remained a challenge for anyone attempting to follow the coast north.

Despite the barrier formed by the bluffs, thirty square miles of the southern tip of present-day San Mateo County, extending as far north as Pescadero, were originally part of Santa Cruz County. Because the barrier at Waddell Bluffs 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.

An 1865 Santa Cruz County newspaper description of the road between Pescadero and Santa Cruz offered a clear description of the challenges for those early far north Santa Cruz County residents: “….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…”

Beginning in the early 1870s, however, a regularly scheduled stagecoach operated between Pescadero and Santa Cruz. The stage delivered everything from needles and spools of thread to sacks of flour and shovels. The Steele Dairy in San Mateo County even sent cheese and butter north to San Francisco on the stage.

Passengers and the stage often had to wait for hours at Waddell Bluffs, however, 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 down onto the beach.

There was no choice for the stage but to race along the beach at low tide and hope for the best. James Harvey was one of the stage drivers in the years between 1894 and 1918. On a stormy winter day in November 1895, James escaped a near disaster when a very large wave caught the stage and horses and almost carried them out to sea. The quick-thinking Harvey cut the traces, jumped on one of the horses, and led the entire team to safety. The stage, however, was totally destroyed by the surf.

The coast road, which was later to become State Highway 1, was originally built and maintained by Santa Cruz County. Vid Trumbo, the maternal grandfather of Big Creek Lumber Company owners Lud and Bud McCrary, worked as the road foreman. From the late 1800s into the early 1900s, Vid had the responsibility of keeping the road maintained and open from Santa Cruz to the San Mateo County line, which was no easy task.

In the spring of 1863, Jushua Grinnell, along with his wife and young stepson, Vid Trumbo, started a journey to California from Iowa on a wagon train across the plains. Grinnell knew the central coast of California from his time on whaling ships, and after a year and a half journey, settled with his family in Santa Cruz County. By 1869 he had mined enough gold along Majors Creek and its tributaries along the north coast to purchase a 147-acre piece of land and start a small farm along Big Creek in the area now know as Swanton. Seven generations later, the McCrarys, still call the area home.

The major challenge in Vid’s job was, not surprisingly, at Waddell Bluffs. There was no highway there but rather the steep bluffs falling off into the Pacific Ocean. And with the wind, waves, and salt air, rocks and debris were nearly constantly cascading downslope, making road maintenance a difficult, somewhat undesirable and not particularly safe job.

Vid and his crew, who were mostly farmers and woodsmen, kept the primitive road open by using blasting powder, picks and shovels. They were so exhausted at the end of a typical day’s work they would often camp on the nearby beach for days at a time. Vid’s diaries tell of his wife Annie sending letters to him by stage from their home in Swanton, just six miles away. Thanks to the McCrary family for some of the above information that was collected from the history of Big Creek Lumber Company.