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OUR OCEAN BACKYARD

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Waddell Bluffs Halts a Coastal Railroad

Waddell Bluffs remained a serious obstacle for anyone heading north along the coast for many years. In 1905, however, a bold, but ultimately unsuccessful effort was initiated in an effort 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 serious challenges in between.

For starters, there was a formidable task of building a rail line across Devil’s Slide. Many readers probably drove across that steep rollercoaster stretch of uncertain stability many times prior to the completion of the $439 million bypass tunnel a few years ago.

Over a century ago the Ocean Shore Railroad engineers managed to design a railroad across the slide that was constructed by Greek railroad gangs. And for a short period of time the train actually traversed the steep slope on its way down the coast, although most of the track was further down the cliff face than the old highway.

But on April 18,1906, the San Andreas Fault ripped loose, and in addition to destroying most of the city of San Francisco, the severe shaking carried much of the Devil’s Slide portion of railroad track into the ocean. This was a huge setback. The San Andreas Fault intersects the coast at nearly the same location as the Ocean Shore Railway did. Despite the damage and losses, the entrepreneurs rebuilt the railroad across the slide hoping to recoup their investment and connect the railroad to Santa Cruz.

Construction continued at the northern end and by 1908 the railroad was running passengers, and freight, including artichokes, hay, 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 tracks from Santa Cruz to Scott Creek, where the two lines were planned 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 first building wooden trestles across the canyons. The trestles were used by the train as a way to transport rock and soil taken from the cuts to build huge fill embankments across each stream valley, covering the trestles, which would then carry the load of the railroad.

In addition to Devil’s slide at the north end, Waddell Bluffs plunged directly into the ocean about 7 miles north of Davenport and became an insurmountable obstacle for the ill-fated Ocean Shores Railroad. Wagon roads had been built but never lasted for long between the waves battering them on one side and the bluff failures and rockfalls on the other.

In 1905, Ocean Shore Railway engineers 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.

Blasts were set off by the railroad crew at the bluffs in the hopes of creating a ledge for the planned tracks, but they only succeeded in burying the existing county road, and it fell to Vid Trumbo and his local crew to keep the existing roadway open.

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 a stage, which still had to navigate across the shoreline at low tide.

The railroad 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. This also turned out to be a formidable challenge and the railroad was stopped in its tracks at Swanton.

Early travelers, whether on horseback or stagecoach, had the same problem at Waddell Bluffs. They waited for low tide and then raced across the beach as fast as the horses would go. With the coming of the automobile, the stagecoach connecting Tunitas and Swanton was replaced by a Stanley Steamer bus, which had the same approach, wait until low tide and then go and hope for the best.