EARLY HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS

THE AUTOMOBILE IN KLAMATH COUNTY

The first automobile to make an appearance in Klamath County arrived in June 1906 when H. E. Peltz purchased a car in Portland, and had it shipped by rail from Portland to Ager, California, where he picked it up and drove it over the Topsy grade to Klamath Falls. Two years later, in 1908 there were still only four automobiles in the entire county, but all that was about to change. This new fad was growing by leaps and bounds.

The first rail car load of automobiles arrived in Klamath Falls over the newly completed railroad in 1909. Fourteen years later, in 1923 the Southern Pacific agent reported that during the first six months of the year, one hundred carloads of automobiles had arrived at the local station. That is a lot of autos when you stop to consider that each freight car was capable of carrying four automobiles.

Many people were skeptical, at first, passing the automobile off as a novelty for the rich and famous. They looked on in amusement whenever one of these machines got stuck in the mud, or its motor refused to start. Other people loved it, shouting “Get a horse” and others, such insults. Who would have dreamed that this noisy, bad smelling machine would change our way of life so drastically.
Map showing both old and new alignment of highway US 97 in 1948.
THE DALLES CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY

Construction on The Dalles California Highway, (U.S. Highway 97) got under way about 1920 and reached Klamath County five years later. The final hurdle to be overcome was the crossing of the 500 foot deep Crooked River Canyon north of Redmond. With the completion of this spectacular bridge in 1926, it became possible to drive, border to border, from Canada to Mexico without interruption. It has been an important artery from the very beginning and continues to be so today.

Over the years the road has undergone a number of major realignments, including several right here in the Klamath Basin and Northern California. Just over the state line in Siskiyou County a 15 mile section between Macdoel and Deer Mountain by way of Bray was replaced by a completely new highway, passing west of Mount Hebron, via Grass Lake.

To the north there were several smaller changes along Upper Klamath Lake between Klamath Falls and Modoc Point. The most noteworthy change in this section was at Algoma, where the old road climbed high up on the side of the mountain. There was a view point with a plenty of room to pull over and enjoy the view, protected by a beautiful arch stone wall. The old road was crooked and narrow at this point. It is interesting to note that when rebuilding the road between Barclay Springs (Hagelstein Park) and Modoc Point the state highway provided a car ferry to carry highway traffic around the construction area.
The longest stretch of realignment was a 42.5 mile section between Modoc Point and Diamond Lake Junction. (See map.) This section replaced the old road over Sun Mountain. The new road reduced curvature, and crossed the summit at an elevation 5,404 feet, nearly 1,000 feet lower than the old Sun Mountain road. The change to the new line was completed in 1948. New alignment, east of the former road, passing near Kirk, Spring Creek Hill and Collier State Park. The new road was 4.5 shorter, straighter and crossed the mountain at an elevation of 5,400 feet, nearly 1,000 feet lower than the old road by way of Sun Mountain.

The completion of the new highway was celebrated at a dedication ceremony at Collier State Park on August 1, 1948.

The overlook at Algoma, showing the Railroad tracks and company employee housing at lower left and the viewpoint on the right.
Six freight wagons backed up to loading dock at the Southern Pacific depot at Ager.

TOPSY GRADE

One of the earliest and most important roads leading into and out of the Klamath Basin was the Topsy Grade Road. This road ran for 60 miles from Klamath Falls to the Southern Pacific railroad station at Ager, California. For a time, before the coming of the railroad, this was the main link, connecting Klamath Falls with the outside world. Stage coaches plied their way over the road, carrying passengers, as did the large freight wagons hauling goods to and from Klamath Falls.

Topsy Road more or less paralleled the river down through the Klamath River Canyon at times rising to nearly 1,000 feet above the river. It was a narrow, winding road, not recommended for the faint of heart. Before the coming of the railroad this road was a busy thoroughfare for stage coaches and freight wagons on their way to and from the Klamath Basin. Ager was located on main line of the Southern Pacific Railroad, a few miles north of Montague, California. The railroad maintained a station at Ager with a large warehouse for the storage of freight.

There was a certain mystique attached to Topsy Road induced no doubt by the number robberies, both real and imagined, that took place in the area. At one location, known Robbers Roost it was possible to look down nearly a thousand
(Continued from previous page) feet to the river below, while on the other side the rocks went straight up. There was no practical way to get around it. There was nothing to do but grit your teeth and go for it. With the coming of the Klamath Lake Railroad to Pokegama in 1902 and the Southern Pacific's new line to Klamath Falls, seven years later, the Topsy Road fell into disuse. The road has not been maintained for several years and today it is unfit for travel.△

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THE GREEN SPRINGS MOUNTAIN ROAD

The Green Springs Mountain Road in the days before being paved.

Another road leading into and out of the Klamath Basin was the Green Springs Mountain Highway (Highway 66) which ran from Klamath Falls to Ashland. This Road closely paralleled the old Ashland-Klamath Falls wagon road. It was once a busy thoroughfare with many log trucks. It was the main road between Klamath Falls and the Rogue River Valley until the opening of the Lake of the Woods Highway (Highway 140) in the 1960s. It is still in use today, although its importance is greatly diminished.
OREGON'S HERITAGE TREE  
By Todd Kepple

Our connections to the past come in many forms, ranging from artifacts and archives to traditions and oral histories.

Residents of the Bly area have a living connection to one of the nation’s unique historic sites: a ponderosa pine tree that withstood the blast of a Japanese balloon bomb that killed one woman and five children on May 5, 1945.

The tree located just east of the Klamath-Lake county line was designated as an Oregon Heritage Tree in 2005, and residents of Klamath and Lake counties gathered at the bombsite earlier this year to dedicate a marker at the base of the tree.

Klamath County Historical Society members Cora and Norman Conner attended the dedication. Cora was a telephone operator in Bly when the bomb incident occurred, and has first-hand memories of the federal government’s effort to keep the news quiet for several days. She also remembers hearing how artifact hunters had hacked away at the pine tree in order to retrieve pieces of shrapnel.

“I was so upset that I didn’t know if I could ever look at this tree,” Cora said. “It was so traumatic for me, to think that people could do that.”

Cora was pleased with the recent effort of several local residents to protect the shrapnel tree. Leda Hunter, president of the Bly Community Action Team, and Orlando Gonzalez, a former ranger at the Forest Service’s Bly Ranger Station, spearheaded the effort to have the pine recognized as an Oregon Heritage Tree. The shrapnel pine joins at least 37 other trees around the state recognized for their historical significance.

Leda Hunter at the Heritage tree.

Oregon’s Heritage Tree program was instituted in 1995 by the Oregon Travel Information Council. The list of heritage trees includes the following:

- A Douglas-fir tree growing on the state capitol grounds that was sprouted from a seed carried to the moon and back on the Apollo 14 mission.
- A redwood tree planted near Brookings in 1992 at the site of the only spot on the mainland where a Japanese warplane dropped a bomb.
- A sequoia planted by Peter Britt in Jacksonville in 1862.
- A hickory tree in Shady Cove planted by a traveler over the Oregon Trail in 1865.∆
The effort to recognize and protect the shrapnel pine at the balloon bomb site near Bly included contributions from Steve Cornell, a recreation specialist for the Bly Ranger District, and Ken Hamlington, supervisor of the community corrections work crew from Lakeview that constructed the stone masonry base for the heritage tree marker.

The tree marker, installed on Oct. 5, 2006, stands just a few feet away from the Mitchell Monument, a large stone marker erected in 1950 by Weyerhaeuser Co., the timberland giant that owned the site at the time of the bomb incident. The entire site is now protected by a fence, and Weyerhaeuser Co. years ago donated the site and surrounding stand of timber to the Forest Service for preservation.

Local residents don’t know whether there’s any shrapnel left in the tree, or if it has all been removed by artifact collectors. Scars on the tree’s trunk show where the shrapnel hit and was later cut away.

Also found at the site are four small cherry trees planted by visitors from Japan as a symbol of peace between our two countries. The cherry trees are struggling to survive amongst the pines on the high-elevation site at the foot of Gearhart Mountain. But the combination of stone monuments and living trees is a fitting memorial to the woman and five children from Bly who were on a Sunday afternoon outing when they encountered the bomb.

Their names and ages: Elsie Mitchell, 26; Jay Gifford, 13; Edward Engen, 13; Dick Patzke, 14; Joan Patzke, 13; Sherman Shoemaker, 11.
Klamath County Historical Society

Meetings are held the 4th Thursday of the month — with some exceptions. See schedule or call 883-4208. We meet at the Klamath County Museum meeting room, 1451 Main St., Klamath Falls, Spring Street entrance. For further information call the museum.

2007 MEETINGS
JANUARY 25 - 2 PM
FEBRUARY 22 - 2 PM
MARCH 22 - 2 PM
APRIL 26 - 7 PM
MAY 24 - 7 PM
JUNE - TOUR
TO BE ANNOUNCED

Attention:
Echoes #9
Applegate Trail
& #10 Langell Valley-Bonanza
are now available at the Museum Gift Shop for $10 each

Membership information
Individual Member $10.00
Supporting Member $25.00
Life Member $100.00

Make your dues payable to:
KLAMATH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
and mail to or drop off at:
Klamath County Museum, 1451 Main Street,
Klamath Falls, OR 97601

Reminder:
Individual Membership increases to $10.00 per individual effective January 1, 2007.

Board Members
John Fortune, President
Vice President, vacant
Susan Rambo, Secretary
Avis Kielsmeier, Treasurer
Bob Baker, Carol Mattos,
Doris Peters
Great ways to help support the Klamath County Museum

1 Shop in the museum gift store.
Next time you need a gift for a holiday or birthday, check out our selection of art, photos and books.

2 Buy a pair of tickets to “New Year’s Eve at the Plaza — A Party Royale.”
This event sponsored by the Klamath County Museum Foundation raises money for and builds awareness of the museum endowment fund. Tickets available at the museum gift shop.

3 Take advantage of tax breaks offered by the Oregon Cultural Trust.
Donate to the Klamath County Museum, make a matching donation to the Oregon Cultural Trust, and then receive a tax credit on your state taxes. Go to www.culturaltrust.org for details.

Upcoming Museum Events

Valentine Banquet
Saturday, Feb. 10
Featuring live music by “Kickin’ the Brass.”