

Heading 'Over the Hill,' pre-rush hour

✓ **AUTHORS**
**Hwy. 17 lends
ex-commuter
literary thrills**

By Paul Rogers
Mercury News Staff Writer

In 1854, "One-Eyed Charlie" Parkhurst charged \$2.50 for an all-day stagecoach ride from San Jose over treacherous dirt trails to Santa Cruz. Today, the fare is 50 cents cheaper, on a commuter bus that glides over smooth asphalt.

That's progress.

From its long-gone grizzly bears to religious encampments, ghost towns to commuter nightmares, Highway 17 is as historically fascinating as it is nerve-racking to drive, according to a Santa Cruz

man who has just finished a book that chronicles the famous route "Over the Hill."

For 16 years, computer consultant Richard Beal commuted on Highway 17 to Apple Computer, Inc. He made 4,200 round trips, racking up more than 200,000 miles negotiating Highway 17's winding mountain curves and redwood-lined straightaways.

"There are 26 miles full of interesting communities and history out there," Beal said recently. "One day I realized I didn't know what any of those were. So I went to the library to see if I could find out."

The \$12.95 result, "Highway 17: The Road to Santa Cruz," is due in area bookstores Monday.

The self-published book is as much a primer of hard-to-find Santa Cruz Mountains history as it is a story about a transportation landmark. It contains 126 old photos and sheds light on such places as the Cats, Lexington Reservoir, Mountain Charlie Road and Holy City.

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A view of Highway 17 construction south of Los Gatos in 1938. Time has widened the road, but not taken away its curves.

For commuter-turned-author Hwy. 17 mixes beauty, peril

■ HWY. 17

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Where Lexington Reservoir now sits, for example, was once the prosperous 19th-century lumber town of Lexington (pop. 200). When a dam was built across Los Gatos Creek in 1956, the few remaining buildings were covered with enough water to supply 25,000 families for a year.

Similarly, Holy City, three miles south, was once a garish 1920s tourist trap and religious encampment. At its peak, 300 people lived there with Father William Riker, a popular palm-reading radio preacher and white supremacist whose appeal declined during World War II, when he was arrested by the FBI for writing letters of support to Adolf Hitler.

The book also includes modern-day advice for the 75,000 people a day who drive Highway 17: radio station information, explanations of how to use call boxes, what to do in accidents and detailed maps.

Highway 17 opened in 1940, after nine years of construction and \$9 million in expenses. It replaced 100 years of dirt trails, rail lines and primitive routes. It soon became the favorite route of Santa Clara Valley beachgoers, and later, Silicon Valley commuters.

Efforts to widen the four lanes began in the mid-'60s. Most were motivated by economics and safety, as the road had by then acquired the nickname "Blood Alley"

for its frequent and gory accidents.

In 1964, philanthropist Harvey West even erected billboards with coffins and skeletons to scare motorists into driving slower.

For the past two decades, slow-growth politicians in Santa Cruz have resisted efforts to widen the freeway, worrying that their coastal magnificence could deteriorate into urban sprawl if getting over Highway 17 no longer became a chore.

In the future, predicted Beal, prohibitive costs and unforgiving topography will keep the road at four lanes. Beal predicted that in 20 years or so, however, there will be some sort of rail service, similar to the old "Suntan Special," restarted along existing tracks between Santa Cruz and Los Gatos. The line probably would carry people as well as freight, he anticipates.

Like most people who drive Highway 17, Beal has plenty of war stories.

He's seen hundreds of accidents. Been rear-ended twice. Spun 360 degrees avoiding a pileup on Big Moody Curve. His father's aunt was killed when the Doret touring car in which she was riding careened off a cliff near the summit.

According to California Highway Patrol statistics, there is an average of one accident a day on Highway 17. There are 15 injuries a month and four people killed every year on average. Last year, eight people died.

"It's like the road has two per-

sonalities," Beal said. "If you drive on some off hour, it's a beautiful, relaxing, easy ride. But drive on a Wednesday morning at 8 a.m. and it's very different."