

The Agony and the Ecstasy: Ruminations on Highway 17

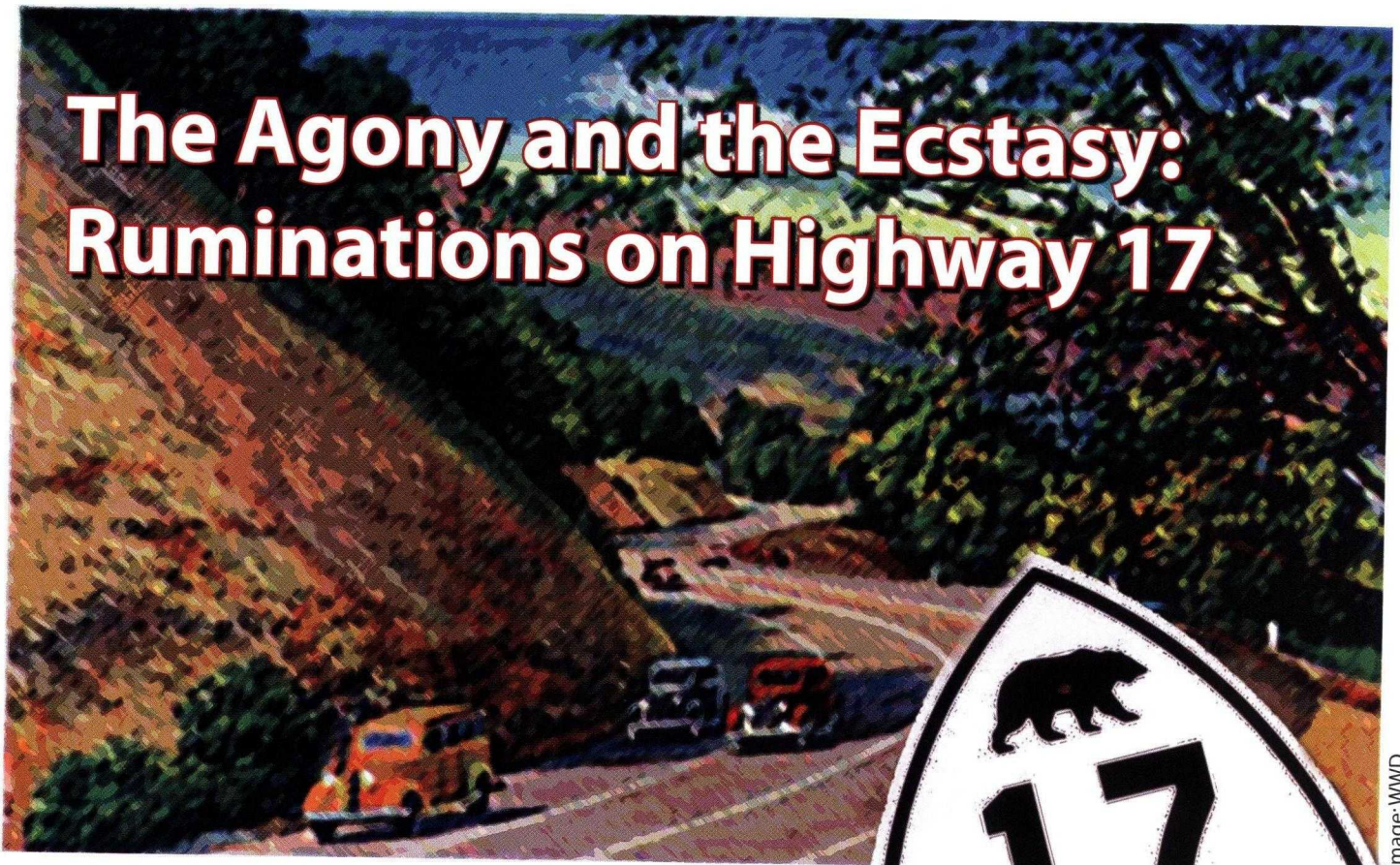


Image: WWD

From footpath to freeway, the evolution of Santa Cruz's link to the outside

By Geoffrey Dunn

If one lives in our community long enough—and I have lived here most of my life—one develops a deep and intimate relationship with California State Route 17, as it is formally known, the serpentine, often tortuous route through the Santa Cruz Mountains that links the southern rim of the Santa Clara Valley to the City of Santa Cruz.

When I was young I was more than a bit terrified by the thought of traversing "17." Several family friends in my youth had been killed on the dangerous stretch of highway. In 1967, alone, there were 36 fatal accidents on the highway, with grim markers on the side of the road noting where fatal crashes had occurred. The series of twists and turns up and down the narrow canyons often made my stomach turn. I did not like the crossing, and those youthful apprehensions still flash in my memory whenever I drive "over the hill" today.



(Above) Charles "Mountain Charlie" McKiernan began his toll road through the mountains in 1851.

(Top) The finished Santa Cruz Mountain highway quickly became popular as displayed by the art on a vintage postcard.

Back then, what was called Highway 17 extended all the way to Oakland, and then across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, to Marin County, totaling more than 90 miles. Today, it begins at the north end of Ocean Street in Santa Cruz and ends suddenly, without fanfare, at the juncture of Interstate 280, where it morphs into the Nimitz Freeway (or Interstate 880) and continues on to the East Bay. According to Caltrans, Highway 17 is precisely 26.49 miles in length—less than a third of its original distance.

I recall most vividly my first time driving 17 as a teenager. My father, with an irritable Irish temper, had demanded that I pick him



(Above) Father William E. Riker's Holy City, now all but forgotten, was a welcome respite for travelers on the original highway in need of food, water, or gasoline.

up at the San Jose Airport. I was 16 and had just received my drivers license. My own car—a beat-up 1960 Ford Falcon with an oil-spewing crankcase—was not suitable for the commute, so he made me drive his hard-to-handle four-wheel drive truck on the journey. I inched my way over, but on the way back, he forced me to keep up with the traffic and pass crawlers like me in the slow lane. Let us say it was a decidedly unpleasant experience.

Not that driving 17 is ever entirely pleasant. Even today, with all of its engineering upgrades and the presence of a median divider that separates north and southbound traffic from head-on collisions, there is a certain degree of difficulty to the drive that requires a focus and prolonged attention that straighter and flatter stretches do not. Last year, collisions rose a record 34 percent, to a staggering total of 983 wrecks, and there is no end in sight. Getting from one side to the other remains an adrenaline rush—a real-world amusement park ride without much amusement.



(Above) The 1933 ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of a small portion of the new Santa Cruz-Los Gatos Highway was celebrated by a diverse collection of political dignitaries, highway engineers, and local citizens.

When most people think of Highway 17, they generally have a fixed entity in mind. But probably the most central fact associated with the thoroughfare—aside from its endless parade of dips and turns—is the fact that it is always changing. And those dips and turns change, too. Constantly. Construction of retaining walls and engineering upgrades seem endless.

Archeological reports indicate that the region's earliest inhabitants, conducting economic trade, forged their way back and forth over the mountains for millennia. The arrival of Spanish colonists in the 18th century and their imposition of missions along the California coast posed a formidable dilemma for those wanting to get from Mission Santa Clara (and the pueblo of San Jose) to Mission Santa Cruz (and the adjoining pueblo of Branciforte). According to original Spanish documents, the first crossing of the mountains by a European contingent was led by Father Fermín Lasuén in the summer of 1791 (he described the passage as "a long and rough way"), when he founded La Mision la Exaltación de la Santa Cruz on the western edge of the San Lorenzo River. He almost certainly followed longstanding Native American trails on his journey.

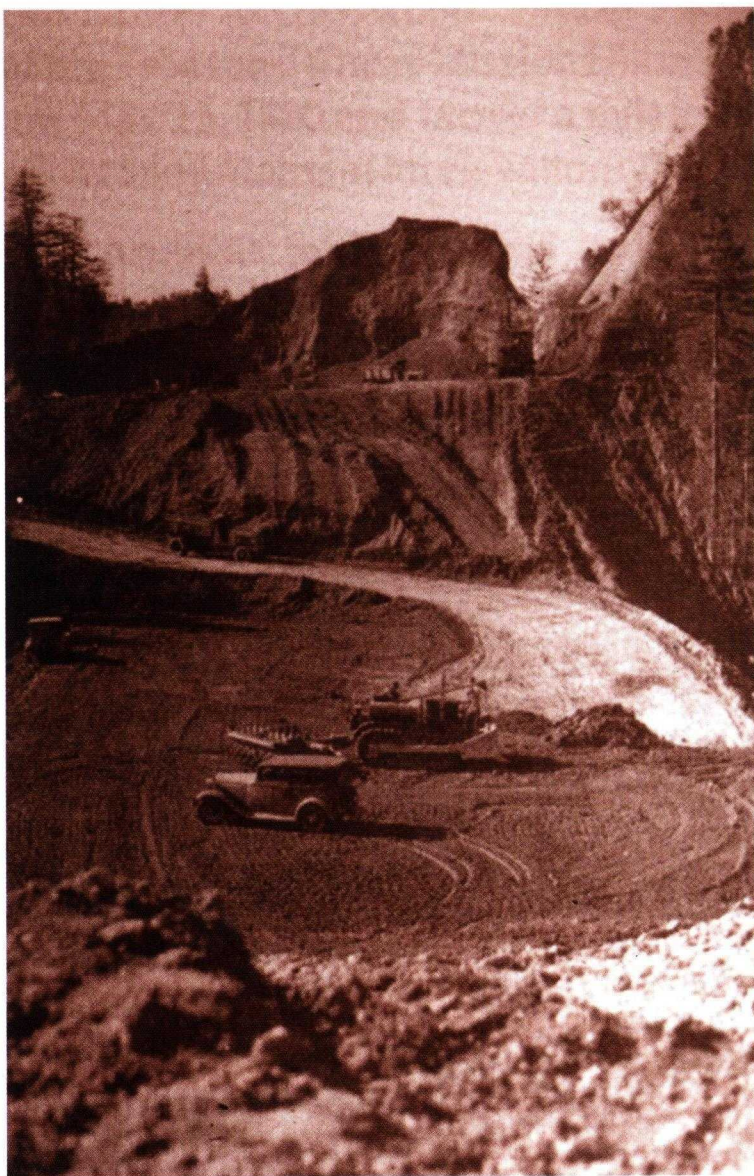
From that point on, getting to and over the mountains posed a constant challenge for those residing in communities on either side of the divide. The first crossings were by foot and horseback, but by the aftermath of the Gold Rush, the first stagecoaches and horse-and-buggy transports began to traverse the grade over a series of patchwork roads. The legendary Charles Henry McKiernan arrived in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1851 and, a few years later, began building a turnpike from Scotts Valley to the summit known as the McKiernan Toll Road (and which still exists today in bits and pieces as Mountain Charlie Road).

Indeed, the post-colonial history of the passage is as colorful as any in California. Unfortunately, the second growth redwoods and the mostly non-native curtain of trees that now line each side of the highway presently hide much of that history. The small and forgotten communities of Alma, Lexington (now lost under the reservoir of the same name), Holy City (where the crazy Father William E. Riker reigned over dozens of acolytes), Glenwood, Patchen, Laurel and a host of other forgotten locales once dotted the highway (or variant segments) and gave the passage a human personality that it no longer retains.

The current iteration of the highway was formally dedicated in August of 1940, marking the completion of a modernization

project that began in 1931. Until then, it was commonly known as the Santa Cruz-Los Gatos Highway, or simply the Los Gatos Highway. "Highway 17" actually didn't become common in popular usage until after World War II.

During my youth, the southern run of 17 was still colorful, featuring Santa's Village (where a housing development is now underway), Axel Erlandson legendary Tree Circus, and the life-sized dinosaurs in Lost World (all located in Scotts Valley), while at the bottom of the northern run were the two majestic feline figures marking the entrance to the ornate home of writers C.E.S. Wood and Sara Bard Field (the eight-foot tall statues remain there to this day).



(Above) The 1930s were known for major public works projects and the new highway was no exception. Massive abouts of earth were moved carving a path through the mountains.

Photo: Special Collections, University Library, University of California Santa Cruz

In the 21st century, Highway 17 is a critical economic artery for what has become a series of bedroom communities in Santa Cruz County linked to the economic juggernaut of Silicon Valley. When there is an accident or a natural disaster on 17 during peak commute hours—and they are all too frequent—the flow of traffic can grind to a standstill, turning what has become a half-hour drive into a slow multi-hour crawl. Even on the best of days, "Big Moody Curve" (just below Redwood Estates) and "The Valley Surprise" (the sharp descent just north of the Summit), no matter how much engineering, remain treacherous and potentially fatal. It has become part of the price we pay for the lucre of the Information Age.

Photos: © Geoffrey Dunn Collection



(Above) A line of 1930 automobiles streams over the Santa Cruz-Los Gatos Highway prior to the opening of the new road.

Photos: © Santa Cruz Museum Art and History



(Above) After centuries of primitive travel through the Santa Cruz Mountains, opening day marking the completion of the new Santa Cruz-Los Gatos Highway was a significant event for residents of both Santa Cruz and Los Gatos.

As fate would have it, I've driven Highway 17 several times in recent weeks, and, on at least once occasion, I got caught up in a horrible snag that resulted in snarled traffic for hours. As recently as October, there was a tragic accident that left one commuter dead and several more seriously injured.

Highway 17 remains a formidable femme

fatale. The road is still dangerous, but it also has its charms. Gone are the days of Holy City, but there's now a business sporting a green cross near the summit and a nearby Korean barbecue restaurant. Who could have ever imagined? On the other side of the highway, there's the newly reincarnated Summit House Beer Garden & Grill that

sports some innovative fare, craft beers, and live music at the midway point over the climb. The sunsets over the western horizon are absolutely spectacular from the back deck.

Indeed, there's another vista that one gets while driving down the south side of 17—between the summit and the Glenwood Cutoff—where one catches a quick glimpse of Monterey Bay and Mt. Toro to the south. The spot used to be known as Inspiration Point. Many have mistaken the view in the distance as Monterey—it's actually to the east, overlooking Salinas—but the image, even at 50 miles per hour, is a reminder that the bay is not that far away and that at the bottom of this long climb and descent, Santa Cruz awaits.

Perhaps that's the best part of Highway 17, that portion of the drive where the road suddenly flattens out again on the northern ridge of Scotts Valley. You're getting closer to home home. It's always a relief to know you've made your way through the gauntlet. The grip on the wheel can relax and you can breathe a little easier knowing that you just survived Highway 17—both its beauties and its demons—once again. 🍷