

Highway

Highway 17 is the Mata Hari of freeways

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SCOOTS VALLEY — Highway 17 is one of the most beautiful highways in the state, but many drivers never notice.

They go through the tree-lined curves with eyes bugged, faces flushed and death-grips on the steering wheel, trying to avoid going over a 50-foot cliff, banging into the center divider or getting rammed by another car.

A lot of Santa Cruzans call Highway 17 the most dangerous highway in the state *until* there's talk of widening it, then they call it the most beautiful.

Local residents have complained almost since the highway was built more than 40 years ago that something should be done to make the 15-mile trip from Scotts Valley to Los Gatos more safe.

There have been a number of experiments.

Philanthropist Harvey West tried to get motorists to pay more attention to the road in the early 1960s by erecting signs showing the grim consequences of auto accidents.

West, a lumberman from Placerville whose philanthropic contributions to recreation earned him a park named in his honor — Harvey West Park — ran into snags from the county Board of Supervisors.

The billboard-style signs stirred up controversy because the signs were erected in violation of zoning ordinances.

The county was ready to make West take the signs down when vandals did it for him, ripping the signs from their bases.

July 4, 1964, residents of the summit area formed a picket patrol, flashing signs at the bumper-to-

bumper crop of weekend tourists.

Residents held signs warning of "Blood Alley," "Killer (Laurel) Curve" and "Coffin Corner" (Glenwood turnoff).

The residents also called on the Board of Supervisors to make safety improvements on the highway a priority.

Some residents wanted Highway 17 widened.

Some still do.

A SENTINEL editorial on July 9, 1964 urged the development of a new parallel route, using the present highway for one-way traffic to Santa Cruz and a new highway for one-way traffic to Los Gatos.

Twenty-three years later, some Band-Aid improvements have been made — primarily center barriers to halt head-on crashes — but Highway 17 remains essentially the same.

Motorists are now asked to turn their lights on for safety.

The debate about the future of the highway continues to grow along with the number of people who drive back and forth.

Caltrans has completed 70 separate construction projects since the 1960's.

What more can be done?

The county's transportation plan calls for a northbound truck lane at the summit. That proposal alone carries a \$12-million price tag.

Some say the only answer is a six-lane freeway through the redwoods and madrones.

Calls for even an inch of widening have irked non-commuters.

Many see Highway 17 as a means of natural growth control, a protective barrier for the Santa Cruz way of life.

Some 20,000 cars a day crawled into Santa Cruz on summer Saturdays and Sundays back in 1964. The



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When the 1982 storm crippled the area, a checkpoint was set up to turn back gawkers.

daily commute today is more than double that number.

LOCAL historian Margaret Koch says any highway into Santa Cruz is bound to be crowded. Always has.

A fourth-generation resident of Glenwood, Koch remembers bumper-to-bumper traffic on the old road. "It used to follow Scotts Valley Drive and Glenwood over the hill to Los Gatos," she explains.

"It was called the Military Highway because soldiers used to come from the Presidio in San Francisco to Monterey on maneuvers. Several hundred soldiers with all their equip-

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ment came over the road every year," she instructs.

The two-lane Military Highway was jammed with tourists on weekends. "It got so it was just impossible to go anywhere on weekends because the cars were lined up bumper-to-bumper, overheating," Koch remembers.

The bumper-to-bumper lines of overheated Packards and DeSotos have been replaced by bumper-to-bumper lines of overheated Toyotas and Camaros.

But some things don't change. Koch still prefers the solitude of her mountain home to motoring on weekends.



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Crashes aren't a rarity on Highway 17.