

# 7: It's much more *Highways* than just a highway

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## SANTA CRUZ

**I**T'S THE highway we love to hate, but have to use.

Highway 17 is the vital link that ties Santa Cruz County to the outside world — a 26-mile road which takes workers to their jobs, delivers tourists to the beach, and moves mountains of sand and gravel to markets elsewhere.

It's a picturesque mountain road that's a blast to drive in a little sports car with the top down, the sun shining and an empty road before you; and it's also a hot, choking commuter's nightmare of overheated radiators and long hours of slow-and-go driving — punctuated by narrow escapes and remembered in picturesque views of the gravel truck in front of you and the sand truck in your rear-view mirror.

From the opening of its last link across the mountain in 1940, Highway 17 has always been much, much more than merely a way to get from here to there and back.

And from the beginning, Santa

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### MONDAY

■ **The future:** Toll roads, rail lines, overpasses and detectors in the pavement — it's all a part of Highway 17's improved future.

### TUESDAY

■ **Paved in politics:** Why nothing much will happen to change the basic nature of the road.



In the 1930s, construction crews carve out what will be a portion of Highway 17 just south of Los Gatos.





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## More than a highway

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Cruz citizens have been profoundly ambiguous about the road that opens us to the world.

Ranging from the flower-encrusted welcoming signs of the 1930s to the "Valley Go Home" graffiti scrawled at popular surf spots in the 1980s, we haven't been shy about saying it, either.

In his 1991 book, "Highway 17: the road to Santa Cruz," author Richard Beal explores the road's mystique, along with the controversies, the lore and dozens of bits of historic trivia.

Sentinel files also reveal our fascination with the road that, at bottom, no one is indifferent to.

Highlights include:

- **What to call it.** Highly controversial. At first, in the 1930s, it was called Highway 5. Then state highway engineers on a consistency kick decided that the highway between Oakland and Santa Cruz should be Highway 13. The Santa Cruz chamber of commerce complained so bitterly, however, that state officials relented.

Highway 17 was born.

In 1978, a Los Gatos historian proposed naming it after the Catholic priest, Father Fermin Francisco De Lausen, known for opening the route in 1791 between Mission Santa Cruz and Mission Santa Clara. This time, it was the chairman of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors who protested.

The traffic started as soon as the road opened at the end of August 1940. Postcards showed bucolic views and empty roads. But 9,000 vehicles a day used Highway 17 right off the bat.

Even though 13.82 miles of the road are in Santa Clara County, and 12.55 miles are in Santa Cruz County, then-Chairman Ed Borovatz said it was "presumptuous" of San Jose to name our highway. The idea died.

In the end, money won out. The northern part of 17 — from the 280 interchange in San Jose north to Oakland — was renamed U.S. Highway 880 in 1985 to pull in \$100 million in federal highway funds. The \$380,000 worth of new signs proclaim the road as 880.

But to Santa Cruz residents, it's still Highway 17.

- **Traffic and mudslides.** Nothing new, according to the history files.

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The first mudslides soon followed. For almost the entire second year of its operation, heavy winter rains reduced the four-lane road to two lanes just south of the Summit.

- **Slow down.** The effort to get drivers to slow down has also been with us since the beginning.

A 1921 Sentinel editorial notes that, "If the speed limit of 20 mph is held to, no road could be safer or more enjoyable." At those speeds, the editorial said, "The run from San Francisco to Santa Cruz now need occupy but about three hours."

By 1985, only the numbers had changed.

Officer Steve Ellis of the California Highway Patrol urged commuters that year to drive it at 50 mph, not 70.

Driving the curvy stretch of 17 at 50 would add less than three minutes to the drive, Ellis said, citing 10.79 minutes at 50 mph and 7.89 minutes at 70 mph.

Then came the fake cop cars.

These were the work of philanthropist Harvest West, the benefactor of the Santa Cruz park that today bears his name. In 1964, West launched a safety campaign that included three lifesize plywood replicas of California Highway Patrol cars, set near the Highway 1/17 fishhook interchange.

It was the three billboards that accompanied the cars that infuriated the local citizenry, though. Featuring skeletons and coffins, the signs warned against reckless driving and drunkenness and urged motorists to slow down.

The signs and cars were part of West's five-county campaign. Then-governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown liked the campaign, and so did William Randolph Hearst, then-head of the state's Safety Council.

The Santa Cruz County Planning Director didn't. Bert Muhly, who later became mayor of Santa Cruz, said the signs violated the county's zoning ordinances. Muhly demanded that the District Attorney file charges. Then-D.A. Richard Pease refused to do so.

The signs disappeared mysteriously one night. But the Highway 17 stories continue.