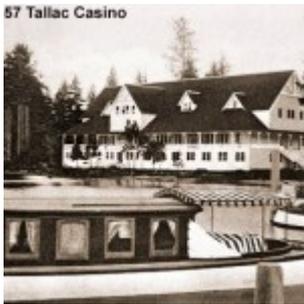


History: Building Nevada's highways in the basin

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Construction of Lake Tahoe highways in Nevada during the years from 1927 to 1935 was reviewed last week by William Howard Smith of Glenbrook when he addressed members of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.



Smith, a former division engineer for the United States Bureau of Public Roads, directed the construction of Nevada Forest Highway Route 1, which is now known as State Route 28 from Spooner Summit to the North Shore stateline, and Nevada Forest Highway Route 3, now better known as U.S. 50 from Spooner Summit to the South Shore stateline.

The speaker explained that the surveying and building of the roads, as with all highways constructed under federal regulations and with Congress appropriated funds during the 1920's and 1930's, was spearheaded by the USBPR. Working with the federal agency were the various state highway departments and the U.S. Forest Service.

While all the actual construction was done by USBPR crews, the Forest Service approved the highway programs and inspected the completed projects. The various state highway department obtained right-of-ways.

A survey party started mapping out the route for Highway 28 in 1928, starting from the stateline and working south. The survey was done during the summer months of 1928 and 1929 with crews working out of a camp in Tahoe Vista, California.

"In making the surveys, advantage was taken of portions of the narrow gauge lumbering railroads that were constructed during the early days," Smith recalled.

The railroad route came into use one-half mile from the lake shore on what is now Mill Creek near the junction of the old Mt. Rose highway and continued to Sand Harbor. Another two-mile section of the narrow gauge was used from five miles south of Spooner to three miles south of the summit.

Because of the mountainous terrain and the limited funds available for the project, the work was hard and the construction crews were forced to do all the day labor itself. That included clearing and burning as well as engineering, surveying and constructing the route.

During the summer of 1930, the first small grading contract was let out to the Isbell Construction Company. The terrain was difficult because of the steep sidehill extending above the lake with huge granite boulders and some solid granite outcroppings.

In the Crystal Bay area, the highway crew had to deal with Walter Hobart, Jr., owner of the property needed for the route.

"I will never forget him," Smith said. "Mr. Hobart was a true conservationist and our survey crew couldn't cut down even a little sapling in making the surveys."

He added that before Hobart was satisfied, three different locations were suggested on long radius curves. Hobart finally agreed to the third routing.

"All the grading and base course surfacing was completed in 1933 and we had a celebration to mark the milestone," the retired engineer told his audience.

Harry O. Comstock, owner of Brockway, acted as master of

ceremonies for the celebration and actress Carole Lombard reigned at ribbon-cutting activities.

Smith then talked about construction of Highway 50 from Spooner to the South Shore stateline, noting that because of the small amount of forest highway funds received during the period from 1927 to 1932 the route was split into six sections.

"An old existing one-way dirt road was in use between Spooners and the stateline in 1927. Portions of this road were built as a toll road in the early days. The first section covered the portion of the route between the summit and Glenbrook," Smith explained.

"The old road was on the north side of Glenbrook Canyon, but the property owners, The Bliss Company, would not permit the new highway to pass through the resort of Glenbrook," he added.

So, Smith said, the old dirt road was located closer to the lake and curved around Cave Rock on a wooden trestle bridge. The bridge was used until 1933 when the first tunnel through Cave Rock was completed and opened to traffic.

During the period from 1930 to 1932, the construction was hampered by numerous federal laws under the W.P.A., Smith contended.

In complying with the special provision of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act, the project had to issue contracts meeting wage, hour and other provisions of employment. These called for maximum use of manpower and sometimes involved using "antiquated equipment."

Various contractors had trouble in obtaining some of the outdated equipment required by the special provisions and some of the machinery was resurrected from second-hand shops and junk yards, Smith pointed out.

He recalled that when one old wooden wagon arrived, the wooden spokes in the wheels were so loose they had to let the wagon soak in Lake Tahoe until the spokes tightened up.

The construction year ranged from April 15th to December 15th during those years. An average of 15-20 engineers and 20-30 day laborers and maintenance workers were used. The route was finally completed on October 2, 1934, by the crew working out of an encampment on Marlette Creek.