

Tahoe's roads – from dirt to modern construction



Dave Borges talks about transportation in the American River Canyon. Photo/Denise Haerr

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – Roads in and around the Lake Tahoe Basin seem to be in a perpetual evolution.

Local historian Dave Borges took a group on a ride through transportation lore at a presentation this month at Camp Richardson Resort. The Lake Tahoe Historical Society talk went from the 1800s to today.

“We’ve progressed from deer tracks,” Borges said. Wagon trains followed those paths, then pavement covered the dirt.

Mostly Borges focused on the trek between South Lake Tahoe and Placerville. What now takes about an hour to drive used to take days to travel.

“El Dorado County couldn’t afford to build roads so they had franchises,” Borges said.

The Osgood Tollhouse was built in 1859. (It is now located at the Lake Tahoe Museum in South Lake Tahoe.)

According to Borges, the first year of the toll road \$1.6 million was collected.

People would have to pay a toll at various locations through the American River Canyon. Traffic was steady in this era because of the Gold Rush on the West Slope and the Silver Rush in Virginia City.

Trading locations dotted the route; places where people could refresh their horses and stock up on supplies.

Borges said it was in 1877 that the county purchased the toll roads because by that time there was so little traffic. The transcontinental railroad in 1869 drastically changed how people traveled and did business.

By 1895 Caltrans took over. The problem was the roads weren’t constructed well. Workers slapped on some oil over the dirt, then some asphalt.

The Mormon Emigrant Trail came into being in 1848, Johnson Pass in 1852, Luther Pass in 1854, and Hawley Grade to Echo Summit in 1858.

Remnants of an old state bridge can be seen near Pioneer Trail and Golden Bear. Other sections along what is now Highway 50 also have historical markers.

At mile post 55.19 just past Strawberry is a rock masonry culvert from days gone by. It’s possible to still see three of the four posts from the 1901 Riverton Bridge.

At first roads were built higher on the hillsides. As they started to be constructed closer to the American River bridges

had to be built as well.

Old Meyers Grade was the primary route of the basin to Echo Summit until 1946.