

CAVE ROCK: A SHORT HISTORY  
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Although Lake Tahoe has been the subject of considerable historical investigation over the years, there is much history remaining to be written. Cave Rock, to take but one example, is so much a part of the life of Tahoe commuters that most give little thought to the twin-bore tunnels and the background of that serrated up thrust of rock on the eastern shore of the lake.

Various writers about Lake Tahoe have recounted legends that the Washoes and the Paiutes once fought pitched battles at this natural fortress for control of the lake, its fishing resources and the surrounding hunting grounds: One myth tells of the conquering of the Washoes by another warlike tribe. The gods took offense at the cruelty of the latter warriors, fashioned a large cave in the rock and imprisoned them there as the waters of the lake rose. To this day, it is claimed, their wailings and pent up moaning can be heard around Cave Rock.

On to more recent history, on December 17, 1862, the Nevada Territorial Legislature passed an act authorizing Alfred "Boone" Helm, H.E. Rice and Thomas E. Haydon to construct and operate a toll road from Carson City to the lake - Lake Bigler, as Tahoe was known at that time - and south to the California line. Twenty—one and one—half miles in length, the road connected with the Placerville Road into California. At Cave Rock, a one—hundred foot trestle bridge set upon hand—hewn granite buttresses took traffic out around the western edge. There was also a steep wagon road running through the hills behind the rock which was used when the bridge was being repaired.

This communications link served the needs of the lumber industry and the traveling public for some twenty—five years, but the mining depression which settled upon the American West in the 1880s ended the profitable timber operations at the south end of the lake within ten years and the toll road fell into disuse. Steamers had taken much of the traffic around the lake by that time, and travelers from California took the train to Tahoe City.

In 1895, the California Legislature created the Lake Tahoe State Wagon Road across Echo Summit — the former Johnson Pass — and the route was greatly improved. Shortly after the turn of the century, early automobilists began to take this route into Nevada, but the bridge at Cave Rock required frequent and costly repairs. The toll road had reverted to Ormsby and Douglas County by that time and had become a public thoroughfare. In May 1913, the members of the Douglas County Commission discussed the abandonment of the bridge in favor of building a road up behind the rock, but the grade was too steep.

Both California and Nevada became heavily involved in road construction in the twenties and the first loop encircling the Lake Tahoe basin was completed in August 1925. A road from Reno to the lake by way of Mt. Rose Summit had opened to traffic on August 13, 1921, and the Clear Creek Road which replaced the Kings Canyon Grade was dedicated on August 17, 1928. By that time, officials of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and the U.S. Forest Service were involved in a

plan to run a tunnel through Cave Rock and eliminate the sharp curve at that point. Forest Service surveyor's laid out three routes — an upper, a tunnel and a lower road — in October 1928. Tests determined that the rock was stable enough for tunneling, and the Nevada Construction Company of Fallon got the contract. Their bid called for a bore twenty—six feet wide, eighteen feet six inches high and 164 feet long. The contract also envisioned a retaining wall on the north approach to the old bridge which would permit the parking of cars at that picturesque spot. Work on the tunnel and the scenic viewpoint was completed in late August 1931. On Saturday September 19, the first automobile traffic passed through on the new route.

The two—lane tunnel through Cave Rock served commuters for the next quarter—century, but had become something of a bottleneck by the mid—1950s. Federal aid for highway projects was once again available State officials suggested three a new highway up Clear Creek Grade, the widening and improvement of the highway around the lake and the construction of a second tunnel at Cave rock.

Grading on the approaches to the new tunnel was completed in July 1956, and the contract for the tunnel was let to Gibbons & Reed of Ogden, Utah. Highway crews from the Silver State Construction Company of Fallon were meanwhile at work on the Clear Creek project. On October 5, 1957, the wife of Nevada's Governor, Marjorie Russell, cut the ribbon which opened the new Clear Creek Highway. Reinforced concrete finishing work on the new northbound tunnel at Cave Rock was being completed at that time and the new thoroughfare was opened on October 16. Constructed at a cost of \$45,179.30, the 410-foot tunnel did much to ease traffic congestion on the east shore of the lake.

Since there was no room for public parking near Cave Rock, state highway officials arranged to have the waste rock from the tunnel excavation dumped into the lake near the south end to create a landfill for parking, picnicking and the launching of boats. The quarried granite blocks which once supported the old bridge can still be seen from this lower parking lot.