

The Building of Highway 1 Through Big Sur and How it Affected Morro Bay

The idea for Highway 1 began with Dr. John L. D. Roberts, founder of Monterey settlement Seaside, who began early speculations for the construction of a road that would connect San Simeon and Carmel.¹ He advocated that the road be built not only for the scenic beauty with which it winds itself through, but also for increases in lucrative tourist travel.

The San Simeon-Carmel Road was quite the engineering feat for its time. Engineers had to circumvent cliffs, while laborers faced dangerous conditions on steep mountain inclines (see Fig. 1). Most laborers were prisoners from San Quentin Prison who were put in three camps along the road: Little Sur Creek, Anderson Creek and Kirk Creek². In exchange for their efforts they were given small wages and lighter sentences. The work was grueling and on top of it, expensive equipment was constantly being broken due to landslides.



Fig 1. depicts the steep and dangerous cliffs that laborers built the road on. Image courtesy of Cambria Historical Society.
www.cambriahistoricalsociety.com/history_highway1.html

Despite all the obstacles they faced, the workers continued to push through the 100 mile stretch of land that spanned the gap between San Simeon and Carmel. Thousands of pounds of dynamite were used to blast away granite and marble to clear the way for the road. Thirty-Three bridges in total were built to span various sized creeks. June 27, 1937 marks the official opening of the Roosevelt Highway, named in honor of the current president at the time. Eventually the road would be incorporated into the state highway system as a section of California Highway 1 in 1939.³ With the completion of the road came increases in tourists traveling to see the scenic beauty. This stemmed to towns such as Morro Bay, Cambria and others having booms in population and economy.

Although the initial construction of Highway 1 was considered a feat of its own, California's constantly evolving coastline proves to be an ongoing engineering challenge. Landslides caused by heavy rainfall and storms can heavily affect people's ability to freely travel across the Big Sur region to popular destinations like Morro Bay and San Luis Obispo.

¹ Saunder, Scott. "The Building of Highway One." *Cambria Historical Society*, www.cambriahistoricalsociety.com/history_highway1.html.

² Longfellow, Rickie. "Highway History." U.S. Department of Transportation/Federal Highway Administration, 27 June 2017, www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/back0403.cfm.

³ Saunder.

On May 20 2017, The Big Sur coastline was hit with its most damaging landslide in history taking out a quarter mile of roadway with more than 6 million cubic yards of material.⁴ The slide was located in the Mudd Creek section of Highway 1, an area notorious for its frequent closures, nearly halfway between Monterey and Morro Bay. Directly to the right, you can see officials constructing a rock seawall that rises 36 feet above sea level (see Fig. 2). John Duffy, a geologist engineer who worked on the proposal to fix the Mudd Creek slide says, "it's an emerging coastline geologically speaking, and it's in a constant state of trying to come to some stability."⁵ New advancements in engineering and routine monitoring of the landscape is helping to mitigate the damage of disasters. After 18 months, the roadway opened back up to motorists. Keeping roads safe and maintaining Big Sur is a key component of keeping Morro Bay a center for tourism.



Fig. 2. Crews work to finish up the massive seawall, 10 Mar. 2018.
<https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/article215063895.html>

After the highway was completed, the economy and population of Morro Bay and its neighboring town were influenced by two factors: the development of tourist-oriented facilities and the construction of permanent and summer homes.

Completion of the Carmel-San Simeon Highway set in motion a transformation of the character as well as the size of the local population. Firstly, the older families began to cease their cattle, mining, and lumbering operations almost immediately. Many did so by selling their land to the state or to private parties interested in developing the land for tourist uses. Secondly, as noted, tourist facilities began to be built almost immediately. Finally, the area began to be settled on a more permanent basis, either by people who moved to the area for year-round residency or by wealthy individuals who bought second homes there.⁶

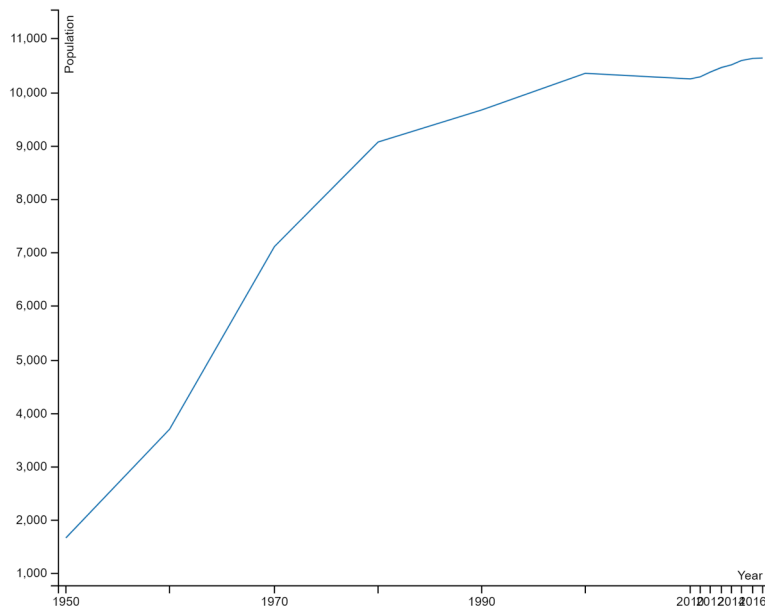
⁴ Cruz, Susana Z. "Iconic Big Sur Route Reclaimed ." *California Department of Transportation*, 2018, www.dot.ca.gov/milemarker/docs/articles/2018/Q2/MM-2018-Q2-Big-Sur-slide.pdf.

⁵ Held, Amy. "'Lifeline' Stretch Of California's Highway 1 Reopens 14 Months After Massive Mudslide." *NPR*, NPR, 18 July 2018, www.npr.org/2018/07/18/630070035/lifeline-stretch-of-californias-highway-1-reopens-after-massive-mudslide.

⁶ "History of Road Closures" http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist05/projects/bigsur/inventory_reports/history_road_closures.pdf

Tourist-oriented facilities were constructed along the Carmel-San Simeon Highway even before the highway had been completed. The earliest of these resorts suffered enormously during World War II, when auto-based tourism disappeared with gasoline rationing. The pace of development picked up briskly after 1945 and was well established by the mid-1950s. Newer tourist facilities were constructed during the 1960s and again in recent years. Today, Morro Bay has approximately 900 hotel-motel rooms and an additional 250 Vacation Rental Units. Morro

Bay generates approximately 800,000 visitors who spend approximately \$161 million dollars.



Highway One has played a key role in the development of Morro Bay. Constructed to provide access to Big Sur, Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) emerges from the hills in Morro Bay and takes motorists along the scenic coast. Lobbyists for the new roadway only gained traction with the State senate in 1919, as coastal

Fig. 3. Population of Morro Bay⁸

defense improvement.⁷ However the Highway One's largest appeal has been tourism since 1945. Prior to this, PCH frequented military traffic on their way to Camp San Luis Obispo and the Aquatic Training Base that was once located in Morro Bay. After WWII however, tourism picked back up and over the second half of the century, Highway One and Big Sur helped Morro bay grow by a factor of ten.⁸

⁷ Saunder.

⁸ "Morro Bay, California Population 2019." *Morro Bay, California Population 2019* (Demographics, Maps, Graphs), 2018, worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/morro-bay-ca-population/.



Fig. 4. California Dream Drive finished in Morro Bay following is 18-month closure.
<https://drifttravel.com/highway-1-the-iconic-road-through-californias-central-coast/>

Following its recent 18-month closure that resulted from a landslide, many central coast communities suffered from the lack of tourism. According to the Wall Street Journal “merchants in and around Big Sur... revenues have plunged as much as 90% following the closures.”⁹ For Morro Bay and small pacific communities, Highway One is a lifeline for small tourism-based economies. To celebrate the reopening of Highway One more than 80 modern and classic cars traveled from Monterey to Morro Bay in Dream Drive event. The Visit California President at the time, Caroline Beteta, emphasized “that Highway 1 is open and better than ever, and that the Central Coast is ready to welcome travelers.”¹⁰ The event highlighted major tourist attractions attraction the

Highway such as Big Sur and Hearst castle while finally ending at Morro Rock pictured on the left (see Fig 4).

⁹ Carlton, Jim. “As Big Sur Roadway Reopens, Businesses Eagerly Await Surge in Visitors.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 18 July 2018, www.wsj.com/articles/as-big-sur-roadway-reopens-businesses-eagerly-await-surge-in-visitors-1531920071?ns=prod%2Faccounts-wsj.

¹⁰ “Highway 1 'Dream Drive' Celebrates Grand Reopening of Iconic Road Through California's Central Coast.” *Drift Travel Magazine*, 10 Aug. 2018, drifttravel.com/highway-1-the-iconic-road-through-californias-central-coast/.

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