

A sepia-toned photograph of a winding road through a forest towards snow-capped mountains. The road is paved and has white dashed lines. It curves to the right in the distance. The forest is dense with evergreen trees. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains with significant snow cover. The sky is cloudy. The overall tone is nostalgic and scenic.

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An Engineer's Story of Highway Building, Adventure, and Camp Life



By Bianca Benson

HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION in Washington has relied on many inspired minds and thousands of strong backs. The North Cascades Highway (State Route 20) is no exception. With the longest history of any cross-state highway in Washington, spanning 79 years from inception to completion, the highway has had as many names as it had planned routes. SR 20 is rich with industrial lore and remarkable personalities. One such person is Dick Carroll, former District 2 engineer.

For 11 of his 35 years with the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Carroll supervised 200 miles of the highway leading out of Okanogan County toward the Cascade Range. In 1975 the *Wenatchee World* published an article titled "King of the Road," in which he recalled what it was like to live and work on the highway. A career highwayman, Carroll went on to plan and supervise thousands of miles of highway construction in eastern Washington, Seattle, and southwestern Washington. But before Carroll joined the SR 20 team, many others came before him.

In 1893 the Washington State Legislature allocated \$20,000 for construction of a "Cascade Wagon Road" connecting the ports of Skagit County to the mineral deposits of the Cascades as well as the resources of the Inland Empire. Much of the route through the Cascades would traverse peaks above 8,000 feet and cross expanses of solid rock. The mineral deposits of gold, silver, and copper were greatly over-estimated, but the mere possibility of these riches aided in procuring funds for the project.

During the summer of 1895 crews blasted rock and made way for a preliminary footpath for men and livestock. Still, after the completion of this would-be route, much of the North Cascades lay out of reach, including the perceived mineral-rich mountains to the north.

Throughout the next 37 years the highway suffered starts and stops in funding. Interest waned until a new vein of gold or copper was discovered. When allocations finally were

made available, avalanches, mud slides, or other natural disasters inhibited efforts to continue.

In 1932 the project reached a major milestone. A more northerly route was surveyed. Rather than running west from Twisp to Stehekin and Cascade Pass, the new plan was to head north through Winthrop and Mazama, then west over Washington and Rainy passes. Ike Munson, location engineer for District 2, headed the effort. Munson became a huge proponent of the highway's completion, making it his mission to see that sufficient funds were made available to finish the project.

The men in Munson's crew had many natural challenges to deal with as they made their summer camp at the edge of Early Winters Creek just west of Mazama. Mosquitoes plagued them so badly that they worked a good deal of the time with shirts and hats covering their heads. The warm summer of 1933 also brought massive amounts of water down the mountains, turning Early Winters Creek into a rampaging river. This undoubtedly made surveying along the creek by horseback treacherous and unnerving.

Just as it seemed that the highway would finally connect the farmers and ranchers east of the Cascades with the seaports on the coast, progress halted. All resources, including the road-builders themselves, were reassigned to the military. When World War II began, highway construction ceased. The pass through Snoqualmie had already been completed, so with limited money and manpower, it seemed the North Cascades Highway would never be finished.

After the Allied victory, though, Munson was again ordered back to Washington and Rainy Pass, and this time he led a reconnaissance mission of a different nature. Nearing a decision for the final route, the Washington State Highway Commission itself wanted to experience the North Cascades. Munson asked George Zahn, an orchardist from the Methow Valley, to accompany the commissioners and crew. Although Zahn would not become a member of the highway commission for several years (eventually serving as chairman), his passion for the highway was born during that reconnaissance mission of 1956. Zahn dedicated his life to the completion of SR 20, rallying support and funds from various public sources. Due in large measure to Zahn's campaigning, excitement built on both sides of the Cascades, and planning for the highway went into full swing.

FACING PAGE: State Route 20, better known as the North Cascades Highway, heading east toward Mazama, with Liberty Bell peak looming ahead. The road that eventually became SR 20 received its first allocation of state funds in 1893 and finally opened for traffic in September 1972.

In 1959 construction of a paved highway began at Diablo Dam, east to Thunder Lake. On the east side of the mountains, in Highway District 2, a different kind of road building had been going on. The last of Washington's pioneer roads was being surveyed and built.

EENTER DICK CARROLL, construction engineer for District 2. After serving overseas with the Army Corps of Engineers during World War II, Carroll settled in Washington in 1946 and went to work for the highway department. A young husband and father, Carroll began a 21-year career surveying, designing, and constructing bridges and roads in central Washington, and was often away from home. While staying in Winthrop, working on a Methow River bridge, Dick received word of the arrival of his firstborn son Eugene at a Wenatchee hospital. His work on location throughout each winter, often six days a week, was followed by the summer construction season.

Carroll lived out of abandoned schoolhouses, maintenance sheds, tents, and construction camps—wherever the projects were under way. Finding housing and meals for the field crews fell to the party chief. Carroll worked as the negotiator and often arranged with farmers' wives in remote areas to provide breakfast, lunch makings, and dinner for his crew, sometimes paying as much as two dollars a day per crew member.

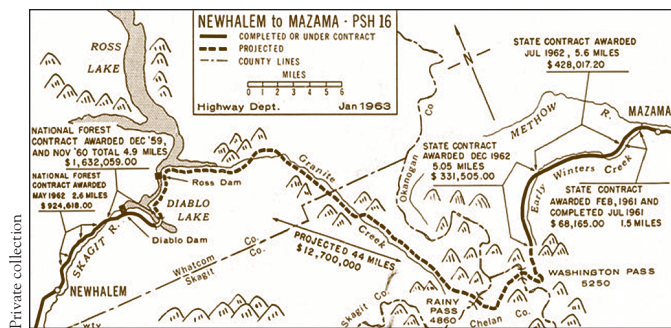
Following the 1956 reconnaissance mission, Carroll joined his boss, Munson, on an extended trip to Bridge Creek and Rainy Pass to evaluate the survey work being done by project engineer Fred Walters and crew. Walters was engaged in the ongoing assignment of following the best route over the pass, since that had still not been determined. The survey crew used aneroid barometers to measure elevations. They considered areas for tunnel construction as well as locations likely to experience avalanche.

The crews on Rainy Pass faced some challenges during the summer of 1956. One great difficulty was finding sufficient horse feed in an area made up almost entirely of exposed rock. Also, there were times on the trail, recalled Carroll, when the men encountered hornet and yellow-jacket nests about every quarter mile.

Following completion of the surveying, the location and design work could finally commence. The pioneer road would be a 14-foot-wide path that carved its way through the passes so that drill rigs could determine bridge foundation conditions. Where they encountered rivers and gullies, the men erected timber bridges in this stage of the road, allowing necessary equipment through for the eventual highway construction.

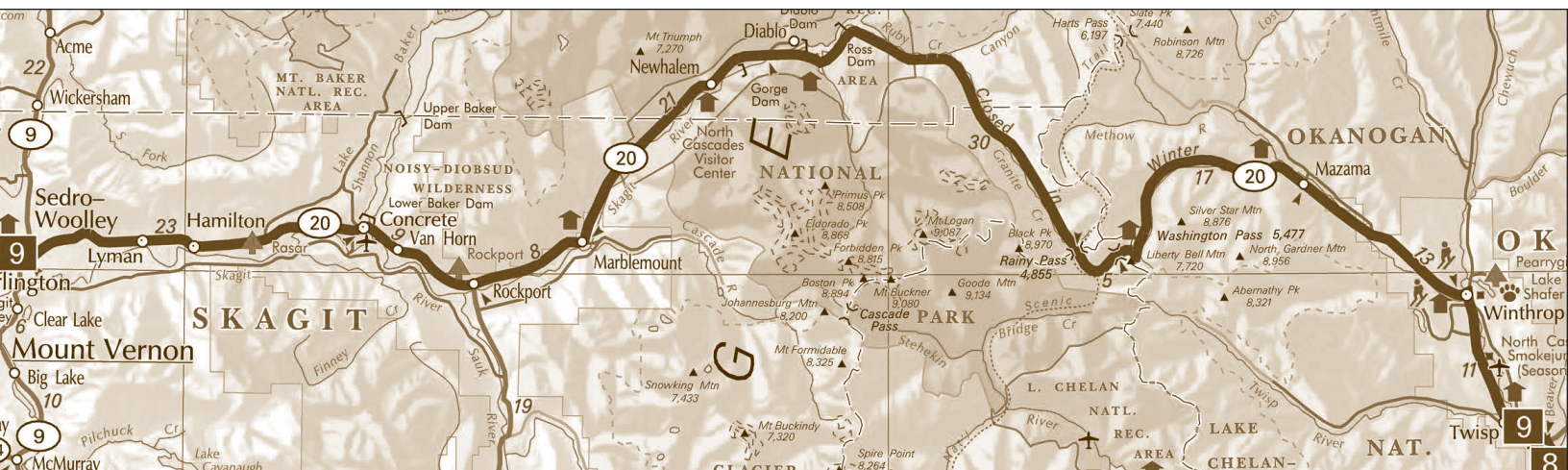
The location/design work began on the east and west sides of the mountains simultaneously. One contract was awarded from Diablo Dam to Thunder Arm, while District 2 began work on the pioneer road beginning at Early Winters Creek and eventually ending at Washington Pass, where their role in the project ended. Each summer season went the same way: crew members followed the snow out in June and worked until snow returned, usually in September. The road construction went on from 1956 to 1967, with 10 east side sections contracted out of District 2.

The first stretch awarded on the east side was a four-mile piece beginning at Early Winters Creek that provided the first access to the area other than on foot or horseback. Following weeks of rising transportation time and cost for the crews to commute by horseback from Winthrop to Mazama each day, the highway department built a labor camp near the start of the pioneer road. Indian Creek, just west of Early Winters Creek became a suitable first camp for the project. Progress on the road was steady as the men accustomed themselves to camp life, working and living with their team for ten days and returning home for a four-day stretch. Carroll, with a young family at home, lived in Wenatchee and worked out of the District 2 headquarters. He spent time in camp with the men each summer but also moved ahead, doing further reconnaissance on horseback and conducting tours with press and government officials. He sometimes brought his



LEFT: The dotted line in this map shows the last and most difficult section of Highway 20 to be built.

BELOW: The state transportation department has designated the North Cascades Highway as Scenic Byway No. 9. Indeed, it boasts some of the most breathtaking views of any state route.





ABOVE: The 1933 survey party, led by Ike Munson (far right) charted a course through the mountainous terrain of Washington and Rainy passes. Munson's two children (on horseback) and his wife accompanied him on the survey.

RIGHT: For purposes of inspection and public relations, it occasionally fell to construction engineer Dick Carroll (left) to lead groups of visitors along the route through the mountains.

son Eugene on pack trips, providing the ultimate summer camp experience for the youngster.

When it became impractical to work out of Indian Creek, camp was moved west to Cutthroat Creek as the pioneer road made its way to Washington Pass. "The Cutthroat camp was probably one of the most comfortable of the early camps," Carroll noted. One resourceful crew member, Tom (Sonny) Martin, a former army demolition expert and paratrooper, earned high status in camp when he produced an old GI immersion heater that provided hot water. When Martin installed plastic hoses upstream, the fresh water supply in camp became plentiful. He also created a shower using a 55-gallon drum and made camp furniture with skillful use of a chain saw.

EACH TIME THE MEN went home for their four days off, the highway department employed camp watchers to look after the equipment and livestock and ward off any curious or hungry bears. After one such break, the men returned to find the camp completely devastated, but rather than finding evidence of marauding bears, they found the kitchen, tents, and Coleman lantern riddled with bullet holes. The watchers claimed that they had been attacked by elephants and wild turkeys. "The Project Engineer suspected that this may not have been factual since he found the garbage pit about half full of empty booze bottles," Carroll commented in 1972.

Mazama rancher Jack Wilson acted as wrangler, providing the pack animals and horses each time the equipment and men needed to be moved. Wilson had established a working ranch at the confluence of Early Winters Creek and the Methow River after arriving from San Francisco with his wife Elsie in the late 1940s. Together the Wilsons built six cabins, a stock barn, a garden, and a small lake. The property the Wilsons developed became a popular destination—however difficult to reach—for



Private collection

fishing, hunting, and back-country tours, and still serves visitors the world over. The ranch's hospitality had become renowned by the 1960s. It is said that what is now the small fishing lake on the property was once the highway department's gravel pit during road construction.

By 1963, contracts on the pioneer road had been completed, but the exact placement of the road over Rainy and Washington passes was still uncertain. The engineers would often trade their pack animals and long treks into the mountains for efficient helicopter missions, either transporting men and equipment or conducting location and design work. Just before Ike Munson's retirement, construction engineer Dick Carroll and pilot Al Platt made a day trip to locate avalanche sites. They took off from Wenatchee, making a stop along the way to pick up Munson from a golf course near his home in East Wenatchee. Once back in the air Carroll suggested to his companions that it might be wise to return to Munson's home and collect three pairs of snowshoes for the mission. After doing so, the men made the flight to Washington Pass in clear and sunny conditions, landing on Kangaroo Ridge.

Once the men identified avalanche sites and observed the route from the ridge, they set off for another spot on the pass. Just after lifting from the ground and having gained only 600–700 feet in elevation, the helicopter lost engine power and crash-landed into the ridge. Fortunately, men and machine were intact but the crew now faced the task of getting down the mountain. Carroll knew their location and, after setting out markers that would tell the rescue crews they were "OK," the trio made a late start through the snow, down the mountain



Hairpin curve approaching Washington Pass from the east on the North Cascades Highway. A wayside overlook allows this view of the Liberty Bell group of peaks.

toward Cutthroat Creek. “We had a standing agreement [in the highway department] that we would not start search and rescue until 24 hours had passed,” Carroll noted.

As darkness approached, a weather disturbance moved in and temperatures dropped below freezing. The men thought they had best find a place to spend the night, keeping in mind the 24-hour policy. None of them was a smoker and so none carried matches; they had no water either. They were comforted, though, by the fact that there were several pilots on the highway crew who could potentially make the rescue—an upside of the post-war era. The Civil Air Patrol, the State Patrol, and the Chelan County Sheriff’s Department were alerted. Carroll’s wife Betty, when contacted by the *Wenatchee World*, said, “You should see my eyes. No sleep last night. This is one of those things where you think everything is all right but you’re not sure.”

AFTER A LONG, cold night under a fir tree, dressed only in light clothing, the men continued their descent, hoping they would soon be spotted. They owed their rescue to the piloting skills of the department’s Don Horey, who located the sign they had left at the crash site and followed their snowshoe tracks down the mountain. Horey’s crew dropped a food bundle down to the men, and as the trio enjoyed their ham and cheese sandwiches, rescue crews set off on foot to retrieve the unfortunate campers. Aside from the exposure the men had suffered, all were well. “I didn’t get upset until I saw the body bags on the rescue sleds,”

Carroll recalled. Later that year, when he returned to conduct further location work, Carroll found his sunglasses under the tree where they had spent that long, cold night.

Following Munson’s retirement, Buzz Mattoon took over as district engineer with just as much passion for the project as his predecessor. The construction went on, as did the press junkets and safaris for government officials. Carroll recalled one such trip made with the governor, highway commissioners, and their entourage in 1966. He shepherded Governor Dan Evans and about 20 others, plus 30 horses and 20 pack mules, from Silver Star Camp to Ross Lake while acting as camp cook, packer, wrangler, and jack-of-all-trades. Several journalists made trips with Carroll over the years in an effort to pique public interest. These included Hugh Blonk and Wilfred Woods of *Wenatchee* and Bruce Wilson of *Omak* (who later became a state senator).

While the construction phase of the highway had been under way for several years, in 1968 the first automobile crossing was made by Governor Dan Evans, who led a Jeep caravan along the impressive route. Asphalt followed, with construction finalized four years later to allow for the grand opening on September 2, 1972. Again, Evans led the way as 15,000 people crossed the state that day on Highway 20. Evans was not actually the very first person to cross the newly opened highway. The now-infamous Ted Bundy, then employed by Evans’s reelection campaign, was the first to cross the Cascades on Highway 20 as the governor’s limousine driver. 🏔️

Bianca Benson is the daughter of Eugene Carroll and granddaughter of Dick Carroll. A photographer by trade, she has lived on both “sides” of Washington and marvels at the state’s natural beauty. This article is dedicated to the memory of Betty Carroll, who passed away in 2011.

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COVER: William Owen Bush (1832–1907), firstborn son of mixed-race pioneer George Washington Bush, poses for a formal portrait. Owen dedicated his life to promoting the agricultural interests of Washington. He served in the state legislature, helped establish the Western Washington Industrial Association (WWIA), and represented Washington wheat growers at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and the Chicago World's Fair in 1892. See related story beginning on page 10. (Washington State Historical Society, #C1964.1.35)