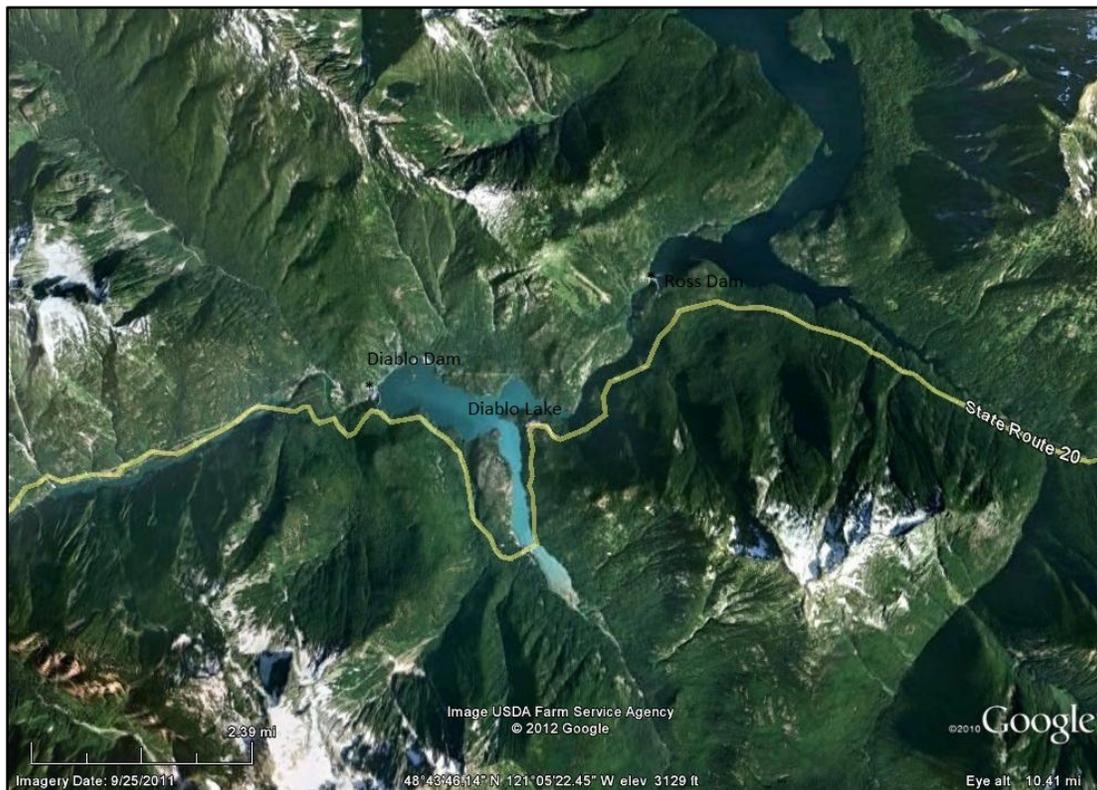


LIFE IN THE CAMPS: THE NORTH CROSS-STATE HIGHWAY, 1966 – PART II

A REMEMBRANCE BY PAUL ANDERSON, OCTOBER 2012

When the Bureau of Public Roads started surveying in remote areas for what is now the North Cascades Scenic Byway, crews worked out of tent camps that were erected along trails frequented by hikers. Two or three groups or individuals might pass through each week. It was not surprising that some even stayed the night; after all, the survey camp occupied the only flat ground for miles.



Just because the survey camp was located in remote territory didn't mean it didn't get any visitors. One night the family who owned a mine a few miles upstream stayed overnight at the camp. The man had studied the history of the area, and said that the Army Corps of Engineers had built a wagon road several miles to the east in the 1880s, roughly parallel to the North Cross State Highway.

That road led to the town of Chancellor which had a population of about 500 at its peak. The town had all the things a mining town would have, including a water-powered generator for electricity, a stamp mill, and a hotel. But the road was closed by snow six or seven months of the year, making transportation a problem. No one ever found any ore in profitable quantities, so the town soon died out. By the time of

the 1898 Klondike gold rush, most of the mining activity in the north Cascades was already over.

It was late August or early September when we finished the west end and were ready to move camp to the east side. While it was still summer in the valleys, it was early fall in the high country, and our next campsite was at about 4,200' elevation. Snow can hit the passes by mid-October, and with about six more weeks of work to do, we knew we might be cutting it close.

The packer told us that moving our camp and supplying us from the east side gave him a chance to do something he had wanted to do for years: make the full circle of the route by road and trail, by way of the North Cross-State Highway and Stevens Pass. By his best estimates, it was about twelve miles by trail

between our campsites, but by trail and road it was almost four hundred to complete the loop. Traveling today's routes, from Burlington to Winthrop, the Route 20 portion, is 132 miles. From Winthrop to Burlington via Wenatchee and Stevens pass is 262 miles, or a total of 394 miles.

Our move happened to correspond with our four-day weekend. We had given the packer a date to start moving our gear, so we had to have everything ready for him to load: about a half day's work to tear down and get everything organized. We had gotten done a little early the day before, so I decided to take a hike on the trail to the north. Big mistake.

The trail went up the point of a ridge and there were 64 (yes, sixty-four) switchbacks before the trail started leveling out some. But it was worth it; the scenery was spectacular. What looked like mountains from the creek – the future road level – were just foothills hiding the real mountains beyond. I thought it was a shame that the thousands of people who would eventually drive the road wouldn't be able to see the real scenery.

We all got together on a Monday evening at Twisp. Of the three college-student temporaries on the project, **Steve** and **Jim** didn't come back, having decided to get ready for school, **Bruce** wanted to get in a

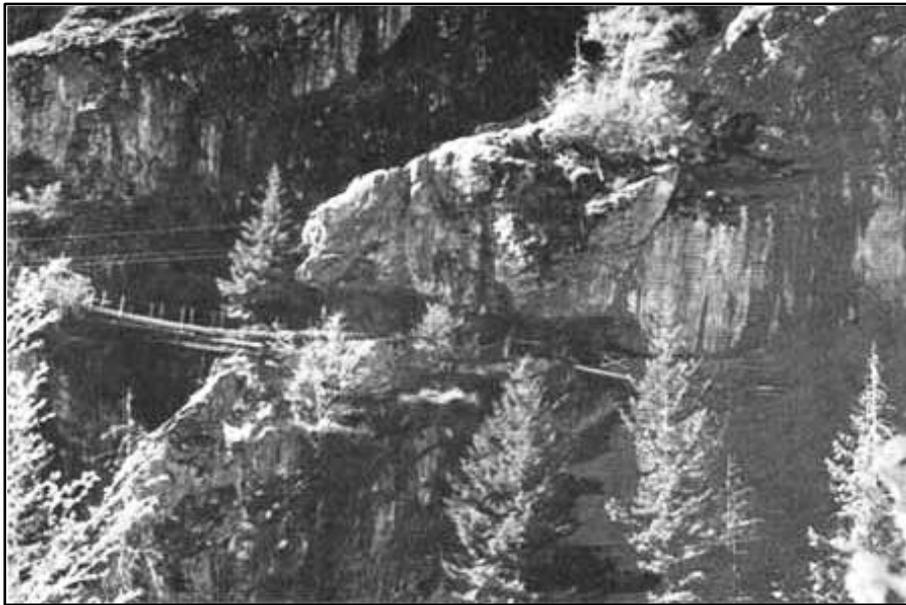
few more days and ride out on Sunday with the packer. **Chuck Borstad** joined us then.

On Tuesday we took the cars to a Forest Service guard station for storage. Then we loaded ourselves and our packs into the Crummy, which had been brought over from Newhalem, and drove several miles to the construction project. We left the Crummy with the night watchman for safekeeping, then shouldered our packs and hiked through the construction area: almost three miles – and uphill, of course.

The state crew had ferried a 4x4 Carry-All through the construction for us to use. There had been some advance clearing done, so we had a cat road that saved us several miles (and hours) of hiking. From the end of the cat road to our camp site was about three miles by trail.

Our campsite was at a place called Swamp Creek. It was about as dismal as it sounds, but it provided the needed water supply for the camp. There was a heavy growth of salal and ferns near the creek. Otherwise the underbrush was mostly huckleberries. That was an added treat – frozen huckleberries taste a lot like a fruit Popsicle.

The terrain on the east end was more favorable for us – no more cliffs or steep hillsides, fewer and smaller trees, less underbrush – so we were able to



As early as 1814, fur traders began developing a route over the North Cascades from the interior plateau. Gold miners were passing through the area by 1879, but it was not until the mid-1890's that they developed a satisfactory trail. The Devil's Corner (or Devil's Elbow) was a particularly difficult section where miners built short suspension bridges over the gorges of the Skagit River and carved half tunnels into the steep cliffs. Photo courtesy National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/noca/hbd/forms5.htm.

cover more ground in a day, and we made good progress on the work.

The short, cool evenings meant a lot of time sitting by the fire. Our wood gathering trips turned into a nightly event, and we sometimes made two or three trips. With the heavy snow pack at that elevation, there were plenty of downed trees, but they stay buried in snow five or six months, so never get much chance to dry out.

Luckily for us, the weather stayed nice late that year. We woke up to a light drizzle one morning, and it continued all day and into the next night. It eventually weighed down our dining fly and brought it crashing down about 2:30 in the morning. That caused a little excitement – especially for **Harvey**, our camp cook, who was sure it was a bear. No real harm was done. We went back to bed and fixed it in the morning.

It was a happy day when we finally reached the “Golden Spike” where our survey connected with the state’s survey at the top of Rainy Pass. The previous crew had planted a pole adorned with autographed survey stakes and yellow flagging. We had to add ours to it, of course. There was still a lot to do, but this gave us a kind of second wind. The end was in sight!

I think we all felt just a touch of regret when we started tearing down the camp for the last time. It had been a memorable summer: camping out in the woods for three months, being completely out of touch with the outside world for two weeks at a time, being a part of something that would probably never happen again. We took some pride in having a part in accomplishing a difficult job that would benefit a lot of people in the future.

Staking crews in the future would be able to access the work on a daily basis, but it would still be a difficult job.

John Bucholtz volunteered to drive the 4x4 back to Vancouver; I would ride with him part way. We had to wait at the top of Washington Pass, about 5,500' elevation, to drive through the construction area while the rest of the crew went ahead on foot. It was late afternoon on a sunny day, and a skim of ice was forming on a shaded pond. It was definitely time to leave.

With the heavy construction and lack of access, it would be several more years before the road would be completed, and several more before I had occasion to drive it. Even today, some forty years after completion, the North Cross-State Highway is considered an outstanding piece of engineering and construction.



A construction camp on the shore of Lake Chelan, 1927-28. Final Construction Report, Forest Highway Project Nos. 23A & 23A1, Chelan National Forest, Chelan County, Washington. WFLHD Archives.

Stories in this series are edited by Marili Reilly. Retirees who would like to share their own memories of early Federal Lands Highway projects may send them to marili.reilly@dot.gov.