

A Short History of the Stehekin Valley Road

Derived from NPS Archives and other sources, compiled by J. Kennedy, Cultural Resource Specialist, October, 2010

For over 9,000 years the Stehekin Valley has served as the entrance to an east-west travel corridor through the Cascade Mountains linking a network of trails used by indigenous people and, more recently, by adventurers, trappers, and miners (Mierendorf, Foit, and Nill, 2006).

As early as 1875 prospectors traversed the trails in search of minerals in the vicinity of Doubtful Lake, Horseshoe Basin, and Bridge Creek. The primary mining activity occurred in the mid 1880's when ore was discovered on the shores of Doubtful Lake, followed by discoveries in 1891 in Horseshoe Basin (Thompson, 1970). The apparent success of these early prospectors led to a small gold rush of settlers into the area.

In order to succeed, the mines had to have a way to efficiently carry ore to their markets and the existing trails could not meet the needs. In 1891 Donald Ferguson planned the construction of a wagon road from the Horseshoe Basin mines to the head of Lake Chelan. The same year the Lake Chelan Railroad and Navigation Company initiated planning for a short railroad that would "undoubtedly" be completed by 1892 (Chelan Falls Leader, September 10, 1891 and January 14, 1892). There is no evidence that either of these entrepreneurial ideas were ever implemented.

When Chelan county was created in 1892 one of its first priorities, as petitioned by M. M. Kingman, owner of the Blue Devil and Black Warrior mines and other miners, was the construction of a wagon road extending from the head of Lake Chelan "to the summit of the Cascade Mountains".

The original route had been surveyed in the fall of 1891 (Byrd, 1972). The route went from the head of Lake Chelan, along the south side of the Stehekin River up to an area near the end of present day Company Creek Road where it crossed the river to the North side. The south side route was chosen because of the location of the original docks on the south side of the head of Lake Chelan, the number of creeks and streams that would have to be crossed, the number of boulders that would have to be removed, and the extensive rockslides (Byrd, 1992). An additional reason might have been that the land north of the south bank of the Stehekin River was part of the Columbia (Moses) Reservation from 1880 until withdrawn in 1886.

The wagon road on the south side of the Stehekin river was declared a public Highway February 6, 1892 and designated the Stehekin River County Road (County Road #21) (Thompson, 1970; Byrd, 1992).

In 1899 the State Legislature appropriated money for a road from Stehekin to Bridge Creek (approximately 16 miles). For years, though, the road only extended to High Bridge, 11 miles up valley. The road was extended 5 miles to Bridge Creek in 1926.

After this initial road was roughed out it was used for a few years, but fell into disuse following the building of a new dock on the north side of the Stehekin River.

DeWitt Britt of the Chelan Leader editorialized that a better road was needed to improve “the trail (1892’s Stehekin River County Road) from the head of the lake to connect with the state trail (Cascade Wagon Road) at Bridge Creek” (Chelan Leader, August 13 and 20, 1897) because “lots of mining trade is going to Twisp because the trail is better than that to the head of Lake Chelan” (Chelan Leader, August 13 and 20, 1897 reported in Thompson, 1970). The state legislature was petitioned to give \$7,000 for a wagon road from Stehekin to bridge Creek, and in 1899 the state appropriated \$5,500. In August, 1899, State road Commissioner O.A. Hoag inspected the progress and reported that the road extended eight miles from the docks at the head of Lake Chelan, and in September of the same year he indicated that the road had reached within 3 miles of Bridge Creek (Thompson, 1970). Construction on a wagon road started in 1891. The wagon road was extended from High Bridge to Bridge Creek in the 1920’s.

The highways of Washington State were identified, numbered, and classified in an evolving system frequently resulting in the name or number of the same section of road changing by action of the state legislature. The numbered system of state roads, established in 1907 and extended in 1909 was changed in 1913 so that the Cascade Wagon Road became State Road 13. It is unclear if the Bridge Creek to Stehekin section of this road was included as it was in subsequent legislative action. In Chapter 110 of the Washington State Laws of 1919, the Cascade Wagon Road (Bridge Creek to Stehekin Section) was identified as one of Washington State’s eight secondary highways. A complete revision and renumbering accompanying the passage of Chapter 185, Laws of 1923, included the “Cascade Wagon Road: Twisp – Marblemount – Bridge Creek – Stehekin as one of five secondary highways. Chapter 190 of the Washington State Laws of 1935 identifies the “Primary State Highway” (P.S.H.) system and identifies the Cascade Wagon Road as “P.S.H. No. 17, - Twisp – Marblemount; Stehekin – NW to P.S.H. 17.” (Washington Department of Highways, 1945). It could be suggested that there were few, if any, site inspections. At best the “Cascade Wagon Road” was composed of many sections of trail, some wide enough for a pack horse, others restricted to foot travel. Perhaps the most improved section of the Cascade Wagon Road was the section from Bridge Creek to the head of Lake Chelan which did allow the passage of wagons.

It was not until 1943 when public interest in a mine-to-market road was renewed and a “passable” road was punched through from Bridge Creek to Horseshoe Basin, about two miles east of Cascade Pass. In 1947 mining interests punched a rough road all the way to Black Warrior Mine. The major 1948 flood washed out the road but road repairs and re-routes allowed them to re-establish the road. In 1949 it became obvious to the mining interests that it was not economically feasible to maintain a road that would support the mining operation and the mine and road was abandoned.

The Stehekin Valley Road was originally a Chelan County road. In 1969, during the first year of the operation of the park, Stehekin residents, “...complained that the road maintenance was poor and that it has always been poor. The community was unanimously in favor of a transfer to the National Park Service...” (Contor, 1970). In April of 1970 the ownership of the road was transferred from the county to the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation which in turn transferred the road to the National Park Service. Pleased being relieved of the high costs of maintaining the 23 mile road, the Chelan County engineer Don West breathed a sigh of relief and

said, “It’s one of the most expensive roads to maintain that we have.” (Chelan Valley Mirror, 1970).

Reacting to complaints from Stehekin residents not about the condition of the road, but about restrictions on private individual’s ability to conduct commercial activities on the road, in 1991, Chelan County tried to rescind the transfer of ownership and regain jurisdiction over the Stehekin Valley Road (Wenatchee World, 1991). In 1993 the issue of ownership was resolved when Judge Alan A. McDonald ruled, “...that the federal government, not Chelan county, owns the road.” (Wenatchee World, 1993)

Constructed through a steep walled, narrow and winding valley that is constantly being sculpted by the Stehekin River, the Stehekin Valley road, from its first construction in the 1890s, has been impacted by floods, erosion, washouts, avalanches and landslides. The section of the Upper Stehekin Valley road that was constructed as a mine-to-market road in the 1940’s could be considered to be the most “engineered” road was washed out in the catastrophic floods of 1948 and abandoned in the early 1950’s. The pattern of reconstruction and deconstruction of the road by the forces of nature continued through the major floods that have occurred with increasing frequency and intensity, seen most dramatically in the floods of 2003 and 2005.

When the North Cascades National Park Service Complex was created in 1968, the Upper Stehekin Valley road had been inaccessible because of the county closure of the Bridge Creek Bridge. One of the first actions of the new park was to replace the bridge at Bridge Creek and reopen the road to Cottonwood Camp for the first time in years.

The park replaced the two other primary bridges on the Upper Stehekin Valley road: Tumwater in 1973 and High Bridge in 1975 and, “also expended considerable sums of money to maintain the entire road, but especially the upper section that was prone to heavy snows, avalanches, and washouts. Nature wanted to reclaim the road, but the Park Service resisted.” (Louter, 1998)

Floods in 1995 forced the park service to abandon the two and a half miles of road below Cottonwood Camp. An October, 2003 flood forced the closure of an additional eight miles of the Upper Stehekin Valley Road. The potential costs of repair from just the October, 2003 floods totaled \$1,140,400 for the Stehekin Valley road, of which \$445,000 was needed for the Upper Stehekin Valley Road alone. (North Cascades National Park Service Complex (2003).

Faced with the constant recurring economic and engineering challenges of keeping the Upper Valley Road open to motor vehicle traffic, in 2006 the Park permanently closed the upper Stehekin Valley road. (Wenatchee World, 2006)

Concerned with the National Park Service’s decision to permanently close the road and its impacts on visitation and the Stehekin Valley economy, some residents petitioned for help from congress to allow the road to be relocated and rebuilt. The relocation would place the new road into what is now Wilderness, an action that would require congressional approval (Wenatchee World, 2009)

Representative Hastings introduced a bill, HB 2806 that would allow give allow the National Park Service to adjust the wilderness boundary for the sole purpose of rebuilding the closed 2.5 mile section road away from the Stehekin River, provided there is, "...no net loss of wilderness acreage." The relocation would cross into wilderness. The legislation passed the U. S. House of Representatives on Monday, October 26th and moves forward for Senate consideration. (Lake Chelan Mirror, 2009)

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