

The Tale of the Blasting at Cape Horn



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Elton Troth, editor of "Tanspo News", monthly publication of the Washington State Department of Transportation, writes in the December issue of the November 1927 blast which was needed to complete construction at the Washington State Highway 14 segment at Cape Horn, a few miles west of Beacon Rock and about 25 miles east of I-5 at Vancouver.

A total of 74,000 pounds (37 tons) of dynamite was used, yet no one had predicted that something might go wrong as a result of the gigantic



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explosion. Unfortunately, the subcontractor had miscalculated the power of the powder set off by the firing sequences of delayed action fuses. A roadbed section to-be came tumbling and hurtling down — leaving a deep chasm that later had to be bridged for nearly 500 feet to complete the highway.

When the explosion occurred, engineers and other observers exclaimed, “It seems like half the mountain is disappearing.” Far below, the speeding disintegrated basalt chips and debris buried a 600-foot-long section of the SP&S railroad tracks up to 15 feet deep near the railroad tunnel. The avalanche smashed barns and dwellings on one farm property, buried a year-around spring and road that served another and reportedly killed six hogs on one of the farms.

No human lives were lost. However, a near tragedy was averted when an unknown man was warned to leave his “observation post” in a culvert moments before the blast was set to go off. He took the advice just in time and watched the culvert buried under 30 feet of rock.



View of Cape Horn and its wood covering from the farm below, 1950.

An engineer's report had emphasized that the "sloping operations in connection with the cliff section presented an extraordinarily difficult and hazardous problem" to all concerned. The subcontractor on the cliff section constructed a trail about four to five feet wide around the face of the cliff, which permitted his men to work the section ahead for grading and loading.

To prepare for the big blast, holes were drilled 100 feet apart at right angles into the cliff from the planned center of the new roadway. Experience "powder monkeys" filled the holes with dynamite. As the well-publicized moment neared, hundreds of spectators gathered at various vantage points to get the best view possible of the event.

Weather was favorable. The sun was shining in a normally moisture-laden November. There was no wind. A hush seemed to prevail over the entire Columbia River Gorge. The river far below was moving silently. Then a second whistle was heard. "Here comes the blast," an observer shouted.

The gigantic vertical columns of basalt appeared to buckle. Then suddenly they were shattered as they roared out into space. Engineers guesstimated that millions and millions of rocks were hurtling at fantastic speeds toward the river — some as large as houses. Spectators compared the roar of the avalanche with a series of rapid-firing thundering cloudbursts. The avalanches continued unabated over 10 minutes. Then the event was all over — long to be remembered by the witnesses.

Several months after the explosion and after highway construction plans had been revised, it was determined by Highway Dept. engineers that a lot more than just the roadway section has been severely weakened, so that additional work had to be performed under contract to bring the highway up to safety standards for protection of the traveling public. Engineers were forced to redesign the lost section to include a full two-lane bridge nearly 500-feet long. The work was finally completed on December 15, 1930, with the bridge and highway being opened for public travel the next day.