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# WEEKEND BREAK



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# Highway to the future

## EXPLORING HIGHWAY 30'S HISTORY

By **RON BALDWIN**  
For *The Astorian*

It is the middle of winter. The road is wet as I drive along the Wauna grade. Light reflects from the sun, southern-slung between the ridge and fog. Light begins to flash between the trees. The flashes are familiar. As I near the top of the grade, the déjà vu is so strong that I turn in to Bradley Wayside for safety's sake.

The short, winding entrance road enhances the effect. It is a feeling that I have not entertained in ages. As I park and exit my car, I am somehow transformed into the 8-year-old farm kid on his way from Mayger to get cowboy boots at Gimre's Shoes in Astoria. As a kid, I rode all these loops (known as both the Widby Loops and Bugby Loops) laying on the back seat of the car — seatbelts and car seats were unheard of then.

The flashes create a similar dreamlike state now, as they did then. The only difference is this time I didn't throw up.

The Widby Loops ascend Bugby Mountain (now called Nicolai Mountain). The Rainier Loops are just west of Rainier. Businessman and railroad executive Sam Hill and others envisioned a highway dubbed "From Portland to The Sea in 1914." The Widby and Rainier loops surmounted the last barriers to creating the highway.

At first, Oregon's development elite blanched when Hill boasted that a highway could be built from Portland to Seaside. But Hill, a master persuader, convinced the Oregon leadership to take on the project. Ironically, the proliferation of such highways would one day supplant Hill's railroads as America's main form of transportation.

Citizens in Astoria, Seaside, Rainier and Clatskanie banded together to promote the highway. They pledged to contribute to efforts made by Clatsop and Columbia counties to build the highway.

Work commenced. Columbia County withdrew its funds for the project at one point. Citizens promptly recalled county leaders and funds were restored. The newly-formed Oregon State Highway Commission also added funds. When a section of the road was completed, the state took possession and responsibility for it thereafter.

On Aug. 12, 1915, the last stretch of the road was dedicated in Clatskanie, with delegations from Portland including Hill and Julius Meier, the highway commission president. A motor parade featuring citizens from Seaside, Gearhart and Astoria was on hand to seal the link.

By 1921, the entire road was paved. It was designated as the western end of U.S. Highway 30 in 1926. By 1962, the Rainier Loops were bypassed, and the Widby Loops were gone — creating the Wauna, Clatskanie and Rainier grades. Other upgrades came along periodically.

Perennial slides, washouts and rockfalls are dangers that plague roads through the North Coast. The importance of U.S. Highway 30 becomes pertinent when it gets blocked by a slide, including one that temporarily blocked the highway near Astoria earlier this month. The fishing, logging, paper and tourist industries depend on the highway. Millions of goods are transported along the highway annually.

I enjoy traveling the old road in parts that have not given way to blackberries. When the highway was realigned, parts of the old road became county roads and other parts went to private owners.

One part of the old road that I enjoy is Beaver Falls Road. The road shows a lot of wear but is worth the trip. Beaver Falls is four separate waterfalls. Two upper falls rush and fall with rapids. The middle fall, somewhat off road, is more of a rapid. The final spectacular drop is over a columnar basalt ledge with an amphitheater behind and a jadeite plunge pool in front.

It's about a half-mile hike in sometimes muddy conditions to the falls. There is a place to view the falls on the road above with a short walk. The road ducks and dives across Beaver Creek in verdant majesty to its Clatskanie River mouth, just upstream from the Columbia River. The road is accessible from Nehalem Street in Clatskanie and from Delena Road.

The Widby Loops are long gone and replaced by the Wauna grade but the Rainier Loops are intact. They're called



Oregon Department of Transportation

A car descends a grade on the new Lower Columbia River Highway near Little Jack Falls in the 1920s.



Oregon Department of Transportation

This 1918 photo shows the future U.S. Highway 30 at Goble. Basalt cliffs had to be blasted away during construction.



Ron Baldwin

This signpost marks the intersection of U.S. Highway 30 with U.S. Highway 101. Depending on if you're in Oregon or New Jersey, this is either the end or the beginning of U.S. Highway 30.



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A montage of highway signs along the way.

Old Rainier Road now and are accessible from West C. Street in Rainier.

If you visit, you'll see why they were called loops. My mother said you could meet yourself coming back. Parts of Rainier, St. Helens, Columbia City and Scappoose have sections of the old highway too. There are plenty of miles left on the old highway still designated as Oregon's Lower Columbia River Highway, now called U.S. Highway 30.

I guess Hill and his fellow visionaries would be pleased that the road they envisioned as an economic and scenic boon to Oregon became just that — a major artery transporting thousands of citizens, millions of tons of goods and serving up a feast for the eyes.

Ron Baldwin is a musician, photographer and writer living in Chinook, Washington.



Ron Baldwin

Munson Auto Wreckers, near Alston Corner, was a magnet for local hotrodders.



Oregon Department of Transportation

A car navigates the Widby Loops in style in this 1952 photo.