

This Day in History... November 27, 1932

Bixby Creek Bridge Opens

On November 27, 1932, the Bixby Creek Bridge opened on the Big Sur coast of California. It was the longest concrete arch span in California and the highest single-span arch bridge in the world at the time of its completion.

The Bixby Creek is named for New York businessman Charles Henry Bixby, who first came to the area in 1852. He received a land patent for 160 acres south of the Bixby Creek (known then as Mill Creek) and established a successful sawmill. Bixby also discovered lime deposits that he collected and sold for use in cement and other building materials. Bixby requested a road be built to the creek, but the county refused. So he had the first wagon road built between the Carmel Mission and Bixby Creek. Bixby eventually sold his property to a lime company and the area hosted a resort and ranch in the years to come.

By the early 1900s, people living in the Big Sur area were cut-off from surrounding areas during the winter due to poor conditions on the Old Coast Road. In 1919, the state began constructing Route 56, also known as the Carmel-San Simeon Highway. This new road required several bridges, including the largest one that would cross Bixby Creek. Planners considered building a large coastal bridge or a smaller bridge upstream. However, the smaller bridge would require cutting a tunnel into the Santa Lucia Mountains.

They eventually decided to build the larger coastal bridge because it would be safer, more scenic, and have the smaller impact on the environment.

The bridge's builders chose to construct it out of concrete rather than steel. Steel would be more expensive and need more maintenance. They opted for a concrete bridge so they could pay their workers more, reduce costs, and the color would match the surrounding natural rock formations.



The bridge is part of the Carmel-San Simeon Highway and drastically reduced travel times to the Carmel Mission.

Construction on the Bixby Creek Bridge began on August 24, 1931. Construction had to be briefly halted due to harsh winter storms that brought tall waves. Workers began laying concrete on November 27. The bridge was completed on October 15, 1932, and was built for \$3,400 under the initial budget of \$203,334. The highway took another five years to complete. The Bixby Creek Bridge opened to traffic on November 27, 1932. Dr. John L.D. Roberts, who had pushed for the creation of the road,

led the ceremony and ribbon cutting on that day. At the time it was completed, it was the longest concrete arch span in California's State Highway System with a main span of 320 feet and a length of 714 feet.

With its completion, the Bixby Creek Bridge introduced automobile travel to Big Sur. Prior to its opening, travelers endured rough wagon roads. The 30-mile round-trip journey from Monterey to Big Sur used to take 3 days. The bridge improved travel and opened up tourism to the region.

Bixby Bridge became a tourist destination in itself. Using Art Deco style, the sweeping arch and slender columns make it appear part of the natural landscape. Rather than cut through the countryside, Bixby was purposely designed to preserve and complement it. The two large pillars are set wide apart, allowing Bixby Creek to run its natural course. The columns are also set directly into the canyon wall, reducing the amount of excavation needed.

In 1965, the highway along which the bridge runs became the first in the state to be designated a Scenic Highway. First Lady Lady Bird Johnson attended the scenic road designation ceremony that was held at the bridge. Bixby Creek Bridge is one of the most recognizable landmarks in California, appearing in films, television, and games.



2010 Express Mail stamp picturing the Bixby Creek Bridge.



Bixby Creek is one of the most photographed bridges in California.

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