

Guy W. Talbot State Park parking lot opens with new restrooms at Latourell Falls in Columbia gorge

*By Karol Dietrich, Special to the Oregonian
September 26, 2012*



Doug Theil, a masonry worker for Nature's Edge Stone Art, Inc., works on walls at Latourell Falls that historically match the original retaining walls on the Historic Columbia River Highway completed in 1915.

As fall leaves begin to color, visitors will once again have a place to park when they visit Latourell Falls along the historic byway drive in the Columbia River Gorge, but not for long.

The restored parking lot and restroom at Guy W. Talbot State Park near Latourell Falls will close again Oct. 1 through the end of the year because of work on the historic Columbia River Highway. The highway will be closed to traffic from Larch Mountain Road to Latourell Falls through Dec. 31.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department completed restoration work on the parking lot for the park two weeks ago after a four-month closure. In addition to repairing the lot, workers rebuilt retaining walls and constructed an overview seating area and a new restroom building, both with handicap accessibility.

Over this summer, visitors were forced to find makeshift parking to stop and snap a photograph of the tucked away Latourell Falls.

The parks department is using a \$618,590 grant from the Federal Highway Administration's Scenic Byway Program to pay for the project at Talbot park and another project about to get underway at Mitchell Point State Park.

J. P. Contractors, a well-known Portland construction company, is doing the restoration and subcontracting with Don Olmstead of Hood River to do the masonry work on the retaining walls along the highway.

The work of Olmstead, an artisan mason and owner of Nature's Edge Stone Art Inc., meets federal highway criteria for installing "historically accurate retaining walls" that match the original work when the highway was completed in 1915.

"Olmstead's work is truly a work of art," said Steve Paul, employee of the family-run J.P. Contractors.

Paul's company will move next to Mitchell Point State Park to install new signage and to build redesigned parking and overlook areas with historically replicated rock work, says Rocky Houston, a project director with the state parks department's recreation trails program. Workers also will build an interpretative panel near the trails that describes the engineering highway feat that once was Mitchell Point Tunnel.

Travelers often visit Mitchell Point park with hopes of seeing the tunnel. But it no longer exists. The tunnel was blasted through solid rock and featured five window 'adits' overlooking the river. It served as a primary car and truck route until 1932, when the Tooth Rock Tunnel opened. When Interstate 84 opened in 1955, the narrow Mitchell Point Tunnel was permanently closed. In 1966, because of crumbling rock conditions, the Oregon Department of Transportation decided to dynamite the cliffside, destroying the tunnel.

But, there may be new hope for this section of the historic highway.

A recent feasibility study prepared by GRI (formerly Geotechnical Resources, Inc.) for the state and funded by Friends of the Historic Columbia River Highway says it is geotechnically possible to design a 1,200-foot-long tunnel through Mitchell Point to connect the two existing segments of the Historic Columbia River Highway. The report says "three to five side adits will be constructed near the tunnel midpoint to provide windows for viewing the Columbia River."

The study shows "it can be done," but "the cost would be upwards of \$10 million," says Jeanette Kloos, president of the friends of the highway group. Her group is now focused on the approaching 100th year anniversary of the historic highway.

Highway engineers saw the nearly mile-long Mitchell Point Tunnel as a marvel of engineering not only because it bore through solid rock, but also because of its adits or windows that gave motorists glimpses of the Columbia River.

The concept of including window openings in the tunnel is attributed to the highway's engineer, Samuel C. Lancaster, who had visited roads throughout Europe to help him understand highway construction alongside mountain terrain. He was inspired by the Axenstrasse Tunnel near Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, which has a series of windows mostly cut out of the natural rock to let in light.

– Karol Dietrich