

OKANAGAN *Life*

OCTOBER 1990 \$3.00

COQUIHALLA

COMMEMORATIVE MAGAZINE



COLLECTORS
EDITION

THE OKANAGAN CONNECTOR: It's Looking Good

By Holly McNeil



*An aerial view of early Connector Construction profiles the swath through mountain wilderness.
The ribbon of new highway is now visible from Peachland as a wide band perched alongside the mountain*

Question: What project is described by the following terms? A positive experience. Outstanding co-operation. Long awaited. Great expectations.

Answer: None other, of course, than the Coquihalla Highway, phase three. Otherwise known in the B.C. interior as the long-awaited Okanagan Connector.

From politicians to project supervisors to sub-contractors to tourism personnel, there are few negative words regarding this much-touted road. There is talk of how contractors stayed within budget, to the satisfaction of the taxpayers; of how highways ministry personnel prioritized and co-operated in environmental matters; of the excellent engineering; and of the economic benefits that will travel this wide ribbon of highway.

Yet, the Connector was no easy task. There have been stumbling blocks at many turns. Politicians faced hostile taxpayers after the first phases of the Coquihalla overran the budgets. Residents near Peachland were concerned about contamination of their Trepanier Creek water supply. Environment officials were extraordinarily protective of the spawning resources in that same creek. The Trepanier Valley itself proved a tough nut to crack: the summit is the second highest in a province of very high summits, and the rock work seemed never-ending. Sections that were built for two lanes were changed to four lanes part way through the project. There was the legal matter of construction crews allegedly "trespassing" on leased public rangeland, and the difficult job of carving a wider road along the length of Hamilton Hill near Merritt.

But solutions have been found. Russ Zerr, the Ministry's regional manager of construction for the Connector, is in agreement with many private industry spokespeople when he says the highway will go on the books as a very positive experience. Environmental answers were found to the satisfaction of all concerned, legal matters

expedited, and the Trepanier Valley conquered by persistence. And it all happened within budget.

"The contractors did the taxpayers very well on this road," contends Zerr. "The department estimated \$48 million for the toughest part: in fact, \$34 million is where the contracts came in."

According to the original figures presented, four-laning the entire 108 kilometres would cost \$260 million in 1984 funds but in 1987, the

Connector is still set at \$225 million but all except one short section is four-lane highway. One area near the summit has been five-laned.

Contractor Dennis Chisholm believes costs were kept lower because there was no traffic to contend with during construction of these new roads. Flagger crews were not needed and hold ups were not necessary, notes the general manager of Westrail Construction.

This rock crushing company won two Connector contracts, for a total of about \$3.5

million. Chisholm explains that, though the extensive rock work and continuous weather changes made life difficult for the crews, it was the extended width that really made the Connector "a tough road" to build.

Chisholm looks at this project from a unique perspective: most recently as a contractor, but in the beginning as the highway ministry's project supervisor. When he resigned in 1989 to go to work for Westrail, he says he was motivated in large part, by the "political hodge podge" surrounding the project.

"Changing dates, cutting it right from the exotic down to the bare bones. And there's no doubt it should have gone straight through to Kingsvale (bypassing Merritt)." But, Chisholm adds, there is also little doubt this highway was long overdue for the Okanagan and that it will be a boon in many respects.

About a dozen construction companies, representing areas throughout the province, were contracted by the B.C. Ministry of Highways to build major sectors of the Connector. They, in turn, hired many sub-contractors.

Ministry officials estimate the project created 1,150 man-years of work; by the time of completion, close to 500 people will have been employed on this new stretch of B.C. highway. Mandrax Enterprises of Kelowna appreciated the opportunity to work in "their own back yard" and to hire locally, for work on two Connector bridge (Continued on page 8)



Placing rockfill

JOE BOWLDY



Rock excavation

DON RANTA CREW

budget was capped at \$225 million. Chosen sections were reduced to two lanes but then contracts began to come in under estimate.

Zerr notes: "That kind of (fiscal) work on the part of the contractor is why the rest of it was able to be four-laned." The total cost of the

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IT'S LOOKING GOOD *continued*

contracts. Mary Mandarino, partner in the business with husband Luigi, believes the unique experience of building the ungulate overpass may have far-reaching effects for the company. (Ungulate refers to hoofed mammals such as moose and deer.)

The \$225,000 overpass for hoofed animals is the first of its kind in North America, built in an area that was too rocky to accommodate an underpass. Mandarino says construction was little different than building a pedestrian overpass, but government officials note that vegetation cover and seed caches have since been added to encourage its utilization by wildlife.

"With general awareness of the environmental situation, these kinds of ideas will catch on," adds the contractor. Neal Davies, executive assistant for Cantex Engineering of Penticton, says: "Our experience has been all good. There was an extremely good job done on the engineering side of things."

Cantex won two contracts: to realign the existing Hamilton Hill road coming out of Merritt, and to build new road at a section near Pothole Creek. The Pothole section was changed from four-lane on the original documents, to two-lane after budget capping, back to four-lanes when the figures began to look better. There were structural changes necessary when the highway finally reverted back to four lanes but it proved little problem for the crew.

"We came in slightly under budget on that section," Davies notes.

The Connector is the most recent phase of a massive freeway that has uncovered a virginal mountainous interior. There are few residents of this wilderness triangle between Hope, Kamloops and Kelowna; one significant community is Merritt, located at the hub of the Coquihalla wheel. The first section connected Hope to Merritt in 1986; the second phase completed the trip to Kamloops the following year. It was considered a necessary fastlane alternative to the historical Trans-Canada route that follows the frothing Fraser River.

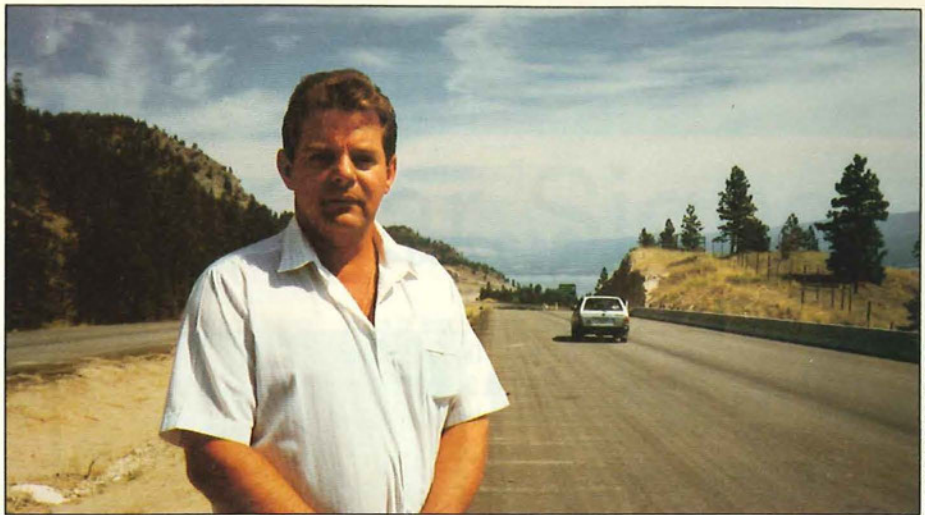
Phase four, to connect Aspen Grove to Kingsvale - bypassing Merritt for Okanagan travelers - is presently in the laps of the politicians.

The ministry's senior project supervisor, Pat Wilde, explains that there are a couple of innovative methods utilized in phase three. Two Northern Rock cone crushers and one jaw crusher were hard at work this spring, churning out 600,000 tons of "open graded rock" to finish

off the mid-section of the Connector. Not to be confused with gravel, this is larger, 75 millimetre rock used on the roadbed to reduce frost heaves. The vibration of the vehicles tends to draw moisture upward under the highway but larger particles of roadbed material mean a more difficult climb for the water.

Wilde says open graded rock has only been used once before in British Columbia, on the Pine Pass, and is apparently working well. The entire stretch of Connector highway has been built with open graded rock.

Also in use is a new design for concrete underpass construction. A prefabricated model now comes in sections for easy installation. Wilde explains that the "Earth Wall" is put in place on a regular foundation and has made the job of building underpasses much (Continued on page 10)



STEVE MACNAULT

Russ Zerr, Ministry of Highways regional construction manager, oversees the final steps of the four-year Connector project

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easier.

Environment regulations have been strict for builders through this unspoiled wilderness. There are about 100 kilometres worth of ungulate fences, with more than 400 ungulate gates for a total cost of \$4.5 million. The fences are to keep them out of the highway right-of-way; the gates are to allow them to re-enter the wilderness if they have accidentally stumbled upon a highway in their travels!

Zerr explains that the gates are prototypes: spring-loaded structures that allow the animal to go through one way but not the other. Wilde points out that locations of the gates has been changed during the course of construction in efforts to increase usage. The ones built more recently have been situated at the tip of a 'V' in the fencing, so the animals can distinguish them easier.

As one of the province's most vital trout spawning streams, Pennask Creek is a precious commodity for fish enthusiasts. Alongside the Pennask Creek bridges is a large man-made collector pond, about 80 metres by 30 metres. Into this pond has been funneled all the runoff from roadway construction.

Wilde, obviously a wildlife enthusiast himself, points to the creek and says: "We couldn't drop a speck of dirt in there. And that's the way it should be."

The rock formations encountered along the Trepanier Valley are enough to make the experienced construction supervisor shake his head. There was a wide range, he says, from the very soft to the very hard. From one five kilometre stretch, crews removed 700,000 cubic metres of rock. "It was a pretty rugged piece of real estate when we started."

Along another section, they ran into a field with boulders "the size of D-9 cats," Wilde exclaims. They expected to find more under the surface but they were, inexplicably, confined to the top layer.

Zerr concurs that the rock work was extraordinary. He points out that the three contracting jobs immediately east of the summit section, through the upper Trepanier Valley accounted for almost one-third the total cost of the highway. The cost per kilometre went as high as \$3.5 million, he adds.

The recently-named Pennask Summit is second highest in the province. At 1,728 metres, it is only 46 metres short of Kootenay Pass between Salmo and Creston. In comparison, Kicking Horse Pass on the TransCanada is 85 metres lower than this Coquihalla high point.

However, Pennask (*Continued on page 22*)

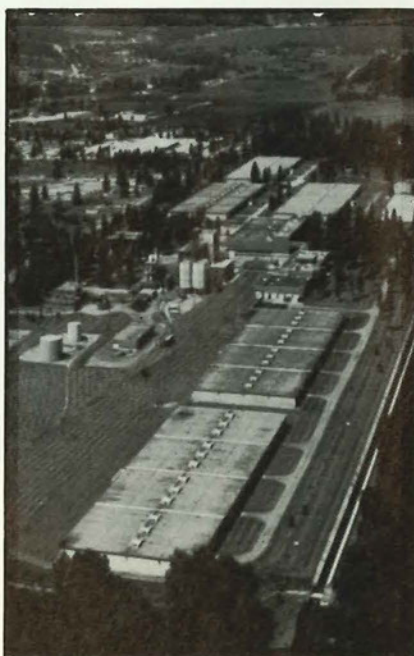


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IT'S LOOKING GOOD *continued*

Pass is somewhat more sheltered than many others and officials predict few problems in the winter. Nonetheless, Zerr suggests that summer travelers might pack wooly underwear in their emergency kit because summer snowstorms are always a possibility. And Wilde cautions that although highway work crews have experienced only as much as five feet of standing snow in recent winters, folks from nearby Brenda Mines remember winters when 17 feet blanketed the spectacular scenery.

The 108 kilometres of Okanagan Connector opens up incredibly beautiful virgin territory that was previously marked only by the occasional access road. The Connector leaves the main Coquihalla Highway at Merritt and slices through a series of dry, compacted desert grades - otherwise known as Hamilton Hill - to reach the higher, open rangeland.

Connector traffic follows Highway 5A for about 16 kilometres to Aspen Grove along the only portion that is two lanes. The view changes from dusty desert to low scrub and shrub rangeland. The wide open spaces continue past the 5A turnoff to 97C, providing a glimpse of grazing cattle and faroff lakes before the forest closes in.

Pothole Creek must be crossed before the long ascent begins. The route passes "The Wart", a small mountain top that apparently struck somebody, one day, as resembling a genuine wart! Elkhart Creek and John's Creek are consecutive landmarks on the one-hour high-speed drive to the interior; the thick forests of the high altitudes break every now and then to offer a glimpse of a faroff jewel-like lake.

Traveling up the west face of Pennask Summit and down the other side, the Connector crosses Pennask Creek in one of the most rugged regions in the province, the Trepanier Valley. Here, the highway hugs the rocky mountainsides, providing a breathtaking scenario.

The forest falls back upon descent, giving way to lower shrubs of the dry Okanagan Valley. Trepanier Creek is crossed, there are orchards in view, and a quick peek at Peachland off to the south. Suddenly, a glittering Okanagan lake is in sight: it's not so small and neither is it far off.

The journey is ended. Or perhaps, it has only just begun!

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