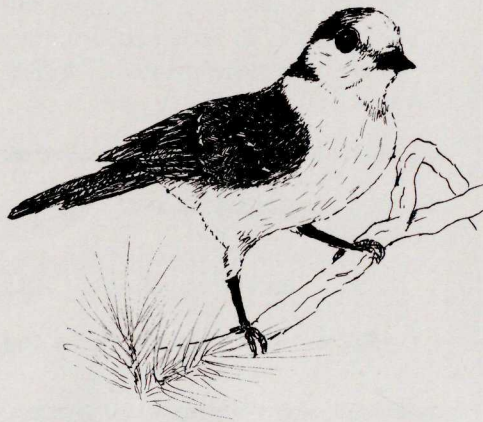


## THE HIGHWAY

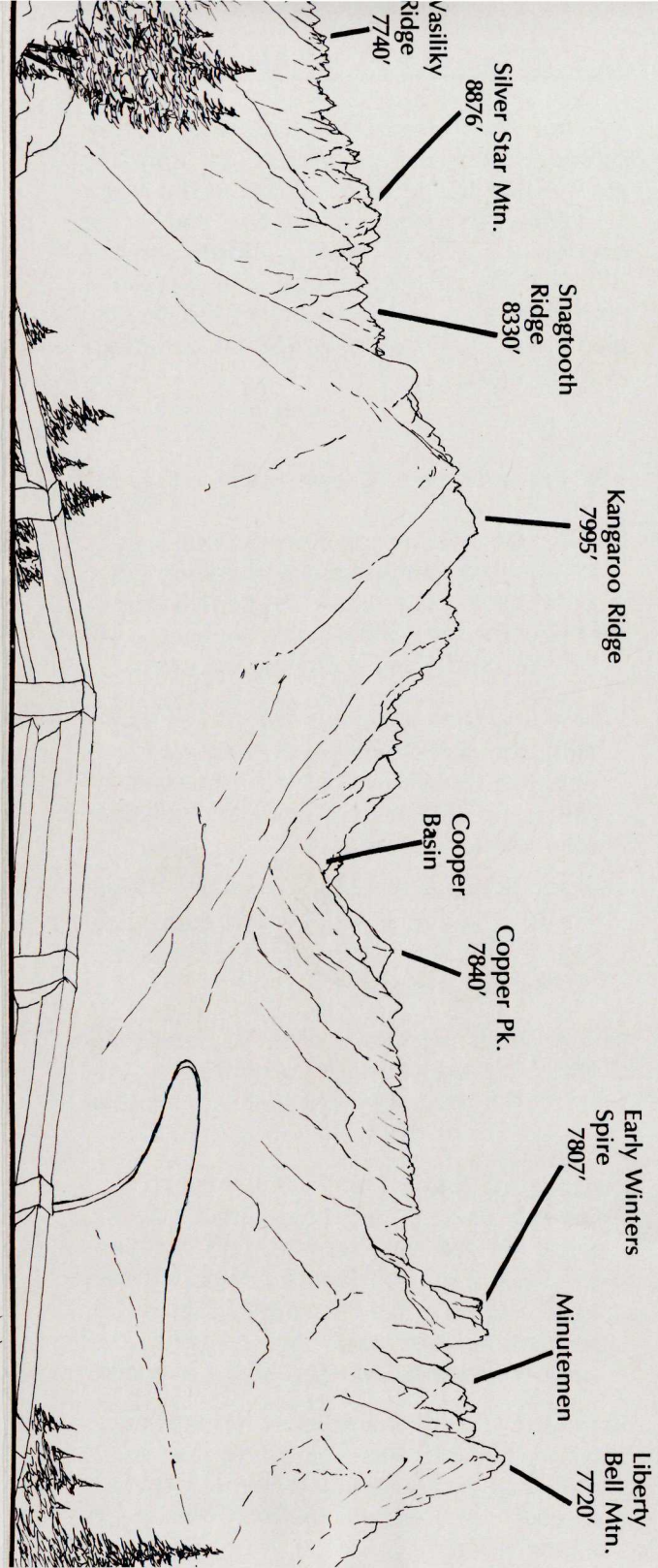
When the North Cascades Highway opened in 1972 people for the first time could drive through the highest and wildest mountains in the state. Before then only prospectors, trappers, mountaineers and a few hearty packers explored the region. By horse it took four or more days to travel the rough, rocky trail that was the original route through this part of the range.

People dreamed of a road through the heart of the North Cascades over a hundred years ago. In 1880, when gold fever hit the area, the idea became even more talked about. Miners trying to reach mineral riches they thought were buried in the mountains wanted a road from west to east. At the same time ranchers and farmers in north central Washington longed for a faster way to get their products to the profitable markets on the coast.

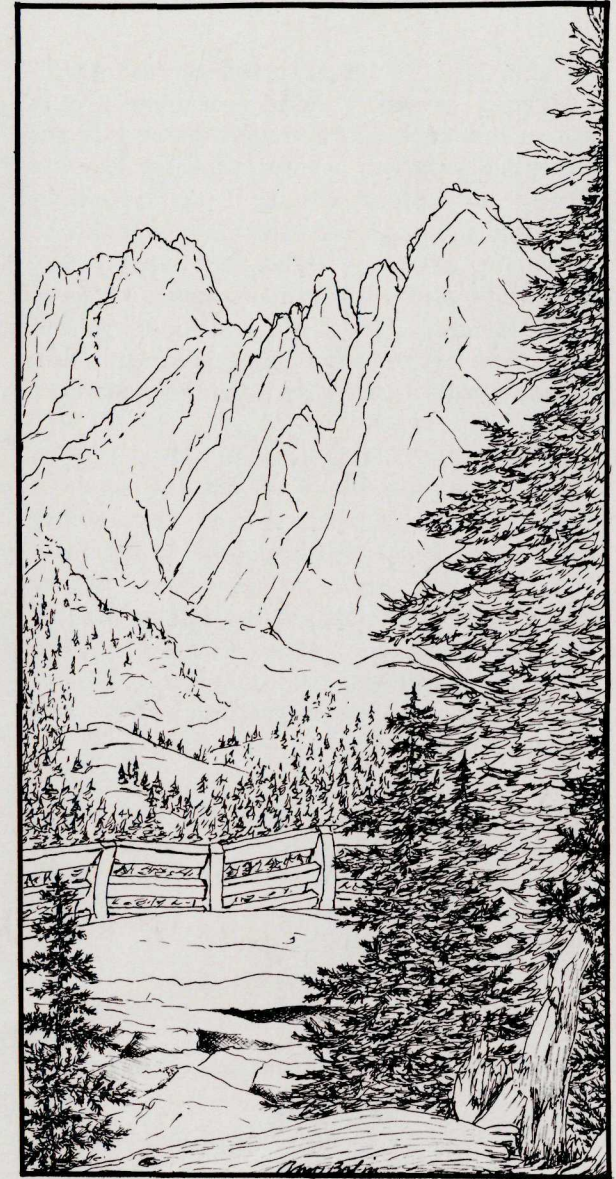
A first try at building the highway was made in 1893 when the state government budgeted \$20,000 for 200 miles of road. One year later, construction crews quit work after washouts and massive landslides defeated them. Finally, in 1960 workers met again to break the first rocks on the present route. Twelve years later the monumental project was complete.



Gray Jay



## WASHINGTON PASS North Cascades Highway



OKANOGAN  
NATIONAL FOREST



## THE PASS

### WELCOME TO WASHINGTON PASS

This is the highest point on the North Cascades Highway, lying just over a mile above sea level. East and west of the pass are the glacier-carved valleys of Early Winters Creek and State Creek, both of which eventually drain into the Columbia River. Towering above is 7,720 foot Liberty Bell Mountain and the granite fingers of Early Winters Spires. From the overlook you can see some of the other jagged, young peaks for which the North Cascades are famous.

Winter at Washington Pass lasts as long as seven months with snow stacking up to a depth of 15 feet or more. Thundering avalanches keep the highway closed from December into April and leave piles of snow on the roadside that are the last to melt in the spring. Large plows break through avalanche paths each year when the highway is opened, sometimes moving only a few hundred feet a day in the hard snow.

From the pass it is over 5000 feet down to the Skagit River valley to the west and over 3600 feet down to the town of Winthrop to the east. The drive between these two points is close to 90 miles.

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### PLEASE STAY ON THE TRAILS

Plants at this elevation survive sub-zero temperatures, whipping winds and a very short growing season, but are quickly killed if they are walked on.

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## THE OVERLOOK TRAIL

This short loop trail winds across an outcrop of Goldenhorn granite, the only true granite that has been identified in the North Cascades. The highlight of the trail is the overlook, a natural rock platform perched 700 feet above the highway. All along the path, however, are examples of the delicate plants and slow natural processes constantly at work here.

### As you walk the Overlook Trail, try to find:

**Spiral Grain:** Some trees on the trail have trunks that spiral like a barbershop pole. What causes the diagonal grain? No one knows for sure, although it seems to help the tree withstand thrashing winds.

**White Rhododendron:** A tall shrub resembling the garden variety of rhododendron, but with less showy flowers. Blossoms are white and bell-shaped. Several plants grow near the lower overlook.

**Iron Hats:** Water dissolving through granite can turn the rock a rusty, red color indicating iron. Miners call these weathered spots "Iron Hats".

**Pink Mountain Heather:** With its needle-like leaves, it appears to be a miniature pine tree until the tiny, pink, bell-shaped flowers appear in the early spring.

**Glacial Scouring:** Over 22,000 years ago moving glaciers more than a half mile thick chewed their way through Washington Pass. Rough rocks imbedded in the icy bellies of the glaciers scoured the hard rock of the valley walls and left behind the smooth, rounded surface of the overlook.

**Subalpine Fir:** Recognized by its narrow, A-frame shape, this tree is designed to shed heavy snow like a chalet. Its limbs spread to the ground dressing the tree in a long "skirt."

**Mountain Hemlock:** A lacy-looking tree with needles projecting from all sides of the branches like star clusters. Lower branches at ground level become covered with soil, develop roots, and sprout up whole new trees.



Pink  
Mountain  
Heather

**Sheeting:** Between the lower and upper viewpoints horizontal cracks in the rock wall can be seen. Geologists think that when a glacier covering this area melted its massive weight no longer pressed down on the rock surface and the ground rebounded upward. Expansion of the rock as it rose caused it to crack.

**Frost Wedging:** Water seeping into cracks in the rock freezes and expands. This causes the rock to break off and wider cracks form.

**Whitebark Pine:** The only tree at the pass with long, spike needles. Just past the lower overlook, there is a normal, straight standing pine. At the upper viewpoint, where it is exposed to driving winds, a whitebark pine grows as a flat, sprawling shrub.

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