

MOWICH LAKE ROAD  
Mount Rainier National Park  
Between Mowich Entrance and Mowich Lake  
Longmire Vicinity  
Pierce County  
Washington

HAER No. WA-121

HAER  
WASH  
27-Long V,  
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~~PHOTOGRAPHS~~

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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I. INTRODUCTION

Location: Between Mowich Entrance and Mowich Lake  
Mount Rainier National Park, Pierce County,  
Washington.  
Quads: Golden Lakes, Wash.  
Mowich Lake, Wash.  
UTMs: West end: Mowich Entrance 10/582600/5197450  
East end: Mowich Lake 10/586600/5198100

Date of Construction: 1929-1934

Designer: Bureau of Public Roads

Owner: Mount Rainier National Park, National Park Service

Use: Park road

Significance: Built as a connecting link of the West Side Highway,  
the Mowich Lake Road is now an isolated, dead-end road  
providing access to the remote northwest corner of  
Mount Rainier National Park.

Project Information: Documentation of the Mowich Lake Road is part of the  
Mount Rainier National Park Roads and Bridges  
Recording Project, conducted in summer 1992 by the  
Historic American Engineering Record.

Richard H. Quin, Historian, 1992

## II. HISTORY

This is one in a series of reports prepared for the Mount Rainier National Park Roads and Bridges Recording Project. HAER No. WA-35, MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK ROADS AND BRIDGES, contains an overview history of the park roads.

### Mowich Lake Road

Mowich Lake, in the northwest corner of Mount Rainier National Park, is the largest lake in the park and is well-loved for its picturesque scenery. The clear mountain lake (once called Crater Lake) offers splendid views of a corner of the mountain over a series of lesser peaks, and is itself a popular destination point. Along with the nearby Carbon River area, the Mowich Lake region is the closest section of the park to the Puget Sound cities. However, vehicular access is limited to the Mowich Lake Road, a rough and unpaved track which enters the park from the west and runs 5 miles to the lake. Developments in the area are severely limited, and the road is only open in the summer and early fall.

The Mowich Lake Road was built as a segment of the West Side Highway, which was intended to form part of a major circuit road around the mountain. By the late 1930s, however, the National Park Service had decided against the extension of the lower part of the road beyond the North Fork of the Puyallup River, and the Mowich Lake section, which was completed in 1933, became an isolated, dead-end section.

The National Park Service initiated a survey for the West Side Road in 1922. The survey line began at Ipsut Creek on the Carbon River and would have followed the creek up towards Ipsut Pass, where a long tunnel would be required to reach the Mowich Lake basin. On account of the tunnel and the excessive grades and curves which would have been required, this survey line was rejected.<sup>1</sup>

In 1925, the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) began a new survey, beginning near Fairfax, Washington and passing through the Rainier National Forest for 4 miles to reach the park's western boundary. A new survey in 1927 carried this line from the park boundary to Mountain Meadows, where it crossed Meadow Creek and climbed along Elizabeth Ridge to reach Mowich Lake. The line from Meadow Creek to Mowich Lake was adjusted in 1928 by a new survey to follow Meadow Creek to its headwaters, then around a loop before crossing the ridge and reaching the lake. After being approved by National Park Service Chief Landscape Engineer Thomas C. Vint, this proposed route was adopted.<sup>2</sup>

A contract was issued in the fall of 1927 for clearing and grubbing 5.3 miles of road between the west boundary and Mowich Lake. The work was to be conducted during the season of 1928.<sup>3</sup> However, the construction was postponed on account of the state's failure to construct the 11-mile access road from Fairfax. The U.S. Forest Service appropriated \$24,000 for construction of a

3-mile connecting link across its lands, but the state had not programmed funds for the section between Fairfax and the national forest boundary. As a contractor would be required to construct a tote road across the gap at considerable expense, the National Park Service refused to let the contract for its section.<sup>4</sup>

The Spray Park area above Mowich Lake was under consideration as a destination for the north end of the West Side Highway in September 1927. That month, BPR engineer C. R. Short located a route along the north edge of the park and a 1,500' spur road to a proposed hotel site. The main road would terminate in a loop overlooking Mist Park and the Carbon River valley.<sup>5</sup> This road proposal was rejected when the north part of the park was reserved for wilderness purposes, and Spray Park remains a scenic high mountain meadow.

Asahel Curtis, Chairman of the Rainier Park Advisory Board, tried to arrange for the new entrance to commemorate the 1833 visit of the Dr. William Fraser Tolmie to this remote area. (Tolmie, a medical officer for the Hudson's Bay Company, entered the area in 1833 on a botanizing trip, and was the first white man to enter the present park boundaries). In 1929, Curtis had Superintendent Tomlinson send some plants from Mount Rainier to Tolmie's son, Simon Fraser Tolmie, then Prime Minister of British Columbia, inviting him to attend a celebration on the centennial. Curtis wanted a memorial arch erected at the spot where Tolmie entered the park, and suggested that it be incorporated into an entrance station for the new road. Director Albright agreed to the concept, but insisted that the state would first have to complete its approach road.<sup>6</sup>

On 18 June 1929, the Interior Department awarded the contract for the clearing of the road between the park boundary and Mowich Lake to Lucich and Company of Seattle on the basis of its low bid of \$11,091.25. The company was ordered to begin work within ten days.<sup>7</sup> Lucich completed the contract in October.<sup>8</sup>

Grading work for a 2.5-mile section near the West Boundary was contracted to Rumsey & Company in 1931. The company began its work in the Mountain Meadows area on 24 June with a crew of sixty men.<sup>9</sup> Rumsey's work was inspected in October by National Park Service Associate Landscape Architect Ernest A. Davidson. The work was approved, but Davidson ordered a couple of large boulders which had slipped down the grade pulled back and a scar made by a pioneer shovel repaired. All work on the contract was finished in September 1932, and was again inspected, this time by Mount Rainier National Park Superintendent Owen A. Tomlinson, NPS Chief Landscape Engineer Vint, and Associate Landscape Architect Davidson.<sup>10</sup>

In the fall of 1931, Davidson was assigned to design an entrance station for the still-incomplete road. Asahel Curtis wrote Davidson, reminding him of his interest in basing the design on a Hudson's Bay Company post. Davidson replied with a preliminary plan for a two-story log blockhouse adapted from a typical post. Park Superintendent Tomlinson was not impressed, but Curtis insisted that the design was very appropriate. He contacted the Park

Service's Washington office to urge acceptance of Davidson's plan. He was told that the agency could not appropriate funds for either the entrance station or to complete the road construction.<sup>11</sup>

Dismayed at the news, in part because Premier Tolmie had already been invited to the centennial celebration, Curtis arranged for the area at the entrance to be cleared and for a bronze plaque to be placed there in Dr. Tolmie's honor. The Park Service forthwith released \$20,000 for the Mowich Lake parking area in December 1931. A small contract for its construction was awarded in September 1932 to Chris Yonlick, the low bidder on the project.<sup>12</sup> The parking area contract was completed in July 1933. The small pylon at the entrance was erected by an Emergency Conservation Works crew from E.C.W. Camp No. 3 at Carbon River.<sup>13</sup>

At about the same time that the parking area was being built, the state began reconstruction grading of the approach road to the park boundary; contractor for this work was Morrison-Knudsen of Boise, Idaho. This project was finished and the approach road was surfaced on 26 November 1932.<sup>14</sup>

National Park Service Director Arno B. Cammerer toured the project in July 1933, the first Director to visit this section of the park. Cammerer was visiting Mount Rainier as Assistant Director when he was informed by the Secretary of the Interior of the resignation of Director Horace Albright and his subsequent appointment to the post.<sup>15</sup>

With the completion of the western section of the road and the state approach road, the new entrance was dedicated on 2 September 1933. Instead of the log blockhouse, only the simple log pylon stood to bear the plaque. The marker was dedicated in a ceremony held under the auspices of the Rainier Park Advisory Board. Among the visitors were now-former Premier Tolmie and R.F. Tolmie, another son of the pioneer explorer-botanist-physician, and other members of the family. More than 200 people attended the ceremony.<sup>16</sup> [The pylon and plaque have disappeared.]

In November 1933, the state began widening the approach road to Mowich Lake to a full-width two-way road. The work was undertaken as a civil works project. A camp was established November 20 at an abandoned sawmill site at Fairfax and 100 men started on the project. By the end of the month, the work force had increased to 320 men.<sup>17</sup>

Another contract for clearing for a connecting section was let in late 1932 to Erikson & Sons. This work was completed in October 1933.<sup>18</sup> A grading contract for the upper 2.944-mile section of the road (project NR-2-E2) was awarded in November to contractor A. C. Greenwood of Portland, Oregon.<sup>19</sup>

Work on this final section began in April 1934, and was completed and accepted on 6 September 1935. In addition to the grading, the work included construction of a number of pipe culverts, a reinforced concrete box culvert at the outlet of Mowich Lake, and two sections of masonry retaining wall on a

steep curve, sometimes called "Sunset Point," located at Mountain Meadows. Some 700' of log rail was to have been placed at the parking area at Mowich Lake, but the NPS Landscape Engineering Division postponed this work. Total cost of the remaining contract work was \$189,065.<sup>20</sup> The road was complete from the west boundary to Mowich Lake.

Even though the road had been finished and the new entrance dedicated, it remained closed to private automobile traffic for more than two decades. Having constructed the road as a link of the West Side Highway, the Park Service had made no major developments in the Mowich area, and was in no position to provide for large numbers of users. In 1936, the park resident landscape architect, J. Haslett Bell, walked over the Mowich Lake area in an attempt to find sufficient flat ground for a hotel or other major developments. He recommended an area around the parking area at the south end of the lake for a hotel site, and a series of benches at the foot of Elizabeth Ridge for a campground.<sup>21</sup> (The hotel was never built, and the present campground occupies the old parking lot at the end of the road.)

U.S. Representative John M. Coffee wrote the National Park Service in November 1937 to urge the paving of the Mowich Lake Road and its extension to connect with the West Side Road. In reply, NPS Associate Director A. E. Demaray indicated that, since Mowich Lake Road was located so close to population centers, the National Park Service would be forced to develop new parking, camping and sanitary facilities to accommodate much larger crowds if the road were improved. As the topography was so wild, such developments would entail huge expenses and cause great damage to the park landscape. He indicated that the extension of the West Side Road would cost some \$3 million, which the Park Service did not have in its budget.<sup>22</sup>

Private citizens also complained that the road remained closed. W. J. Young of Seattle filed a complaint in August 1938, and was told that the park was devoting all of its available funds to the ongoing projects connecting the east and west sides of the park, leaving no money available for the Mowich Lake area. A Mr. Sayre of the same city complained in September 1939 that there was inadequate space to turn around at the barrier across the road.<sup>23</sup>

Little work was done during World War II or for several years afterward. Park Superintendent John C. Preston reported in July 1947 that the lack of proper maintenance of the road had left it in very rough condition. He warned that if conditions did not improve, a number of portions of the road "would be lost."<sup>24</sup>

The Mowich Lake Road remained a service road until it was finally opened to automobile traffic on 30 July 1955.<sup>25</sup> A small camping area is now maintained at the old parking area the end of the road. Though ostensibly a walk-in camp, users can drive right to the entrance.

Much of the road had to be rebuilt after being damaged by floods in December 1977. A new 48" culvert was laid under a stream crossing, drainage and

diversion ditches were reconstructed, and the road was covered with a 2" overlay of gravel.<sup>26</sup> This gravel surface is difficult to maintain, and the road is often criticized for its rough condition.

Despite the rugged surface of the road, traffic is heavy at times and the park is constantly pressed for further improvements. Although isolated from the main park developments, the Mowich Lake area remains a popular attraction on account of its spectacular beauty.

#### Mowich Lake Road

This unpaved road in the northwest corner of Mount Rainier National Park was planned as the northern link of the West Side Road project. Construction began in 1929, and the road was completed to Mowich Lake five years later. By this time, work was winding down on the lower part of the West Side Road, and the intervening link between the North Puyallup River and Mowich Lake was never built. The Mowich Lake segment remains a dead-end road isolated from the main developments in the national park.

The 6-mile park road is a continuation into the park of Washington State Route 165, and begins at the park boundary with the Snoqualmie National Forest, 16 miles southeast of the old Pierce County mining town of Wilkerson. The entrance station patterned after a Hudson's Bay Company post was proposed for this location, but was passed over in favor of a pylon and plaque commemorating the botanist Dr. William Fraser Tolmie, who visited the area in 1833. The pylon and plaque no longer exist; only a wooden sign marks the park entrance. The entrance and lower sections of the road are located in the lowland forest zone in the wettest corner of the park. The massive trees form a dense canopy blotting out light from the forest floor. Mosses and worts flourish in the damp soil and where they can attach themselves to trees and rocks. The vegetation is so dense that visitors can peer only a little way into the dark, impenetrable woods.

The approach road pavement runs out several miles east of the park boundary in the national forest, and the route continues as a good wide gravel road. At the boundary, conditions begin to deteriorate; the gravel surfacing is not very deep, the road narrows, and the right-of-way constricts. Dust from the road cloaks the surrounding trees in the summer time.

From the entrance station at 3,560' elevation, the road strikes out northeast across the southeastern bases of Virginia Peak and Berry Peak, paralleling and keeping to the northwest side of Meadow Creek. A large parking area is located at the Paul Peak Trailhead three-quarters of a mile into the park; this is the only improvement at a site once proposed for a larger development. After 2 miles, the road traverses the north edge of the Mountain Meadows, crossing Meadow Creek at an elevation of 4,200'. The lush meadows are lower than the high subalpine parks, and are carpeted in lupines, huckleberries, and fireweed. The marshy areas in the valley floor are cloaked in wicked clumps of devils club and mountain hemlock, making close inspection difficult.

Tolmie Peak (elev. 5,939') and its lookout are less than a mile north of the road at this point. The road's condition is much worse from this point onward. Despite continual work by park maintenance crews, the gravel surface does not stand up to the traffic and the high levels of rainfall. Much of the surface is "washboarded," and motorists are badly jolted by the rough ride.

At Mountain Meadows, the Mowich Lake Road begins a steeper climb toward Mowich Lake. In the next mile, the road snakes up two sharp switchbacks, turning south and southwest to the base of Elizabeth Ridge, where it makes another sharp turn to the east up along the base of the ridge. Half a mile further, the road reaches its destination, Mowich Lake, at an elevation of 4,929'. The road skirts the southwest side of the lake, terminating at the primitive Mowich Lake Campground on a bench above the south shore.

Mowich Lake, once called Crater Lake, is the largest in Mount Rainier National Park. From its shores, visitors take in splendid views of Castle Peak (6,110'), Mt. Pleasant (6,454'), and to the southeast, Mount Rainier. The view of Mount Rainier is especially nice at dusk, as the alpenglow, or afterglow of the sunset, is captured in the mountain's icefields. From Mowich Lake, trails head off to Tolmie Peak, Eunice Lake, Spray Park, and connections with the Wonderland Trail.



III. ENDNOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. O. A. Tomlinson, Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park, Superintendent's Annual Report, 1927, 13. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Annual Reports 1926-1932 file.
4. Stephen T. Mather, Director, National Park Service, to Louis C. Cramton, U.S. House of Representatives, 17 April 1928. MORA Archives, File D22, Construction Program 1928.
5. Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1927, 4. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1924-1927 file.
6. Thompson, Ernest N., *Mount Rainier National Park, Washington: Historic Resource Study* (Denver, CO: National Park Service, Denver Service Center, 1978), 31-32.
7. John H. Edwards, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, to Lucich and Company, Seattle, WA, 18 June 1929. National Archives, RG 48 Box 1991 File 12/7, Mount Rainier contracts.
8. Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1929, 4. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1928-1931 file.
9. Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1931, 6. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1928-1931 file.
10. *Idem*, Superintendent's Annual Report, 1931, 13; Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1931, 6; Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1932, 2. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1928-1931, 1932-1935 files.
11. Thompson, 32.
12. *Ibid.*, 33; Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, December 1931, 5; Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1932, 9. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1928-1931, 1932-1935 files. Yonlick, incidentally, undertook a retaining wall contract in Glacier National Park the following year, but ran into problems in the course of the project, and was forced into insolvency in 1934. See Kathryn Steen, HAER Historian, "Going-to-the-Sun Road," HAER No. MT-67, 33.

13. Idem, Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1933, 9. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1932-1935 file; "Historical Background Information on the Construction of the West Side Highway," 1. MORA Archives, File D30, History of Roads; Halsey M. Davidson, Associate Landscape Architect, Mount Rainier National Park, "ECW Report to the Chief Architect through the Superintendent of Mount Rainier National Park, Season Ending Oct. 31, 1933." MORA Archives, Box 414, ECW 1933 file.
14. O. W. Carlson, Acting Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park, Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1932, 7. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1932-1935 file.
15. *Ibid.*, 1, 4.
16. Tomlinson, Superintendent's Annual Report, 1933, 2. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Annual Reports 1933-1935 file.
17. Idem, Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1933, 8. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1932-1935 file.
18. Idem, Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1933, 8. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1932-1935 file.
19. Utz, 3; Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1933, 7. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1932-1935 file.
20. Utz, 3-8.
21. J. Haslett Bell, Resident Landscape Architect, Mount Rainier National Park, "Annual Narrative Report to Chief Architect Through the Superintendent on Major and Minor Roads, and Trails, and Projects Other Than ECW for Mount Rainier National Park, Period: May 10 to December 17, 1936," 22 January 1937, 6. MORA Archives, File D22, Construction Program 1936.
22. A. E. Demaray, Associate Director, National Park Service, to John M. Coffee, U.S. House of Representatives, 5 January 1938. MORA Archives, File D30, History of Roads.
23. Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1938, 8; Carlson, Acting Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1939, 3. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1936-1939 file.
24. John C. Preston, Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park, Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1947, 3. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1947-1952 file.

25. Preston P. Macy, Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park, Superintendent's Annual Report, 1955, 5. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Annual Reports 1954-1966 file.

26. William J. Briggie, Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park, Superintendent's Annual Report, 1978, 16. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Annual Reports 1972-1983 file.

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