

Life in LAMORINDA

The Caldecott Tunnel—History in the Making

By Andrea A. Firth



Construction on the east side of the 4th bore of the Caldecott Tunnel, October 2010. Photo Albin Reinhart



Construction of bores 1 and 2 of the Caldecott Tunnel in the 1930's. Photo courtesy of the Orinda Historical Society

Tunnel building technology has changed significantly since a group of merchants from Oakland pooled their resources to fund the first hand-dug passageway through the hills over 100 years ago. What hasn't changed is how long it takes to tunnel through the dirt and bedrock between Orinda on the east side and Oakland on the west.

Construction of the 4th bore of the Caldecott Tunnel, which got underway in February of this year, utilizes a new Austrian tunneling method with a sophisticated piece of machinery called a roadheader that was shipped in pieces from

Germany and reassembled at the tunnel construction site. It will take about three and half to four years to complete the 4th bore, which is about the same amount of time it took to build bores 1 and 2 of the tunnel in the late 1930's and the third bore in the mid-1960's.

"Tunnel building is a slow, methodical process," said Jeff Weiss, Public Information Officer for Caltrans, in his presentation about the Caldecott Fourth Bore Project to the attendees of the Orinda Historical Society Annual dinner. Weiss was joined by Ray Mailhot, a 39-year Caltrans veteran and the de facto historian of the

Caldecott Tunnel, who shared his experiences as supervisor of the tunnel along with old photos and video footage.

"It was a wet, dark tunnel," said Mailhot, describing the original tunnel that opened in 1937. The 1,040 foot-long tunnel, which was first called the Kennedy Tunnel and later dubbed the Old Broadway Tunnel, was dug from both sides and did not meet in the middle creating a four-foot jog at the center. A few of the dinner attendees recalled going through the one-way, 17-foot wide passage built with timber supports. Travelers would set wads of newspaper on fire to signal drivers on the other

side to wait until they had passed through until a lantern system was put in place.

Traffic through the early tunnel had grown to 30,000 vehicles a week when construction on bores 1 and 2, known as the Lower Broadway Tunnel, began in 1934. "Bores 1 and 2 were completely hand-dug with the excavated dirt hauled out on train tracks," said Mailhot. "It was dangerous, and there were frequent cave-ins, almost weekly," he added. Up to 1,000 men living in temporary housing alongside the project worked on the bores at any one time, and three workers were killed in a cave-in.

Orinda resident John Kirby shared a postcard that his mother, Peg Kirby, had received confirming that she was one of the first one thousand individuals to travel through the Lower Broadway Tunnel when it opened in 1937—a trek she made on horseback. The twin bores are each 3,610 feet long with a 14-foot 10-inch vertical clearance and two 11-foot wide lanes without any shoulders.

Traffic through the Lower Broadway Tunnel had reached 55,000 vehicles a day before the third bore was opened in 1964 to help relieve the congestion. The third bore is a bigger and more sophisticated tunnel and may be one of the safest places to be during an earthquake, said Mailhot. He confirmed that the Wildcat Fault runs through the tunnel but added that he was told that the bore's construction could survive a strong shake. "The third bore is so well built. The walls of the tunnel are six to seven feet thick at four feet high."

The Caldecott Tunnel has not been without accident or tragedy. In 1982, a woman stopped her car inside the tunnel and got out to use the emergency phone. A gas tanker following her car struggled to stop and was then clipped by a bus that was barreling through. A 2,000 degree flame shot through the tunnel and seven people perished. "All of the tiles popped off the tunnel walls," said Mailhot, "It looked like a cave afterward."

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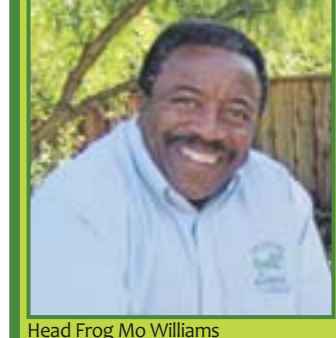
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