



# *The Catalina Highway: a microhistory*

A brief overview of how, why, and when The Catalina Highway was built; and, most importantly, discovering *who* carried out its construction.

*June 2026*  
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# THE CATALINA HIGHWAY

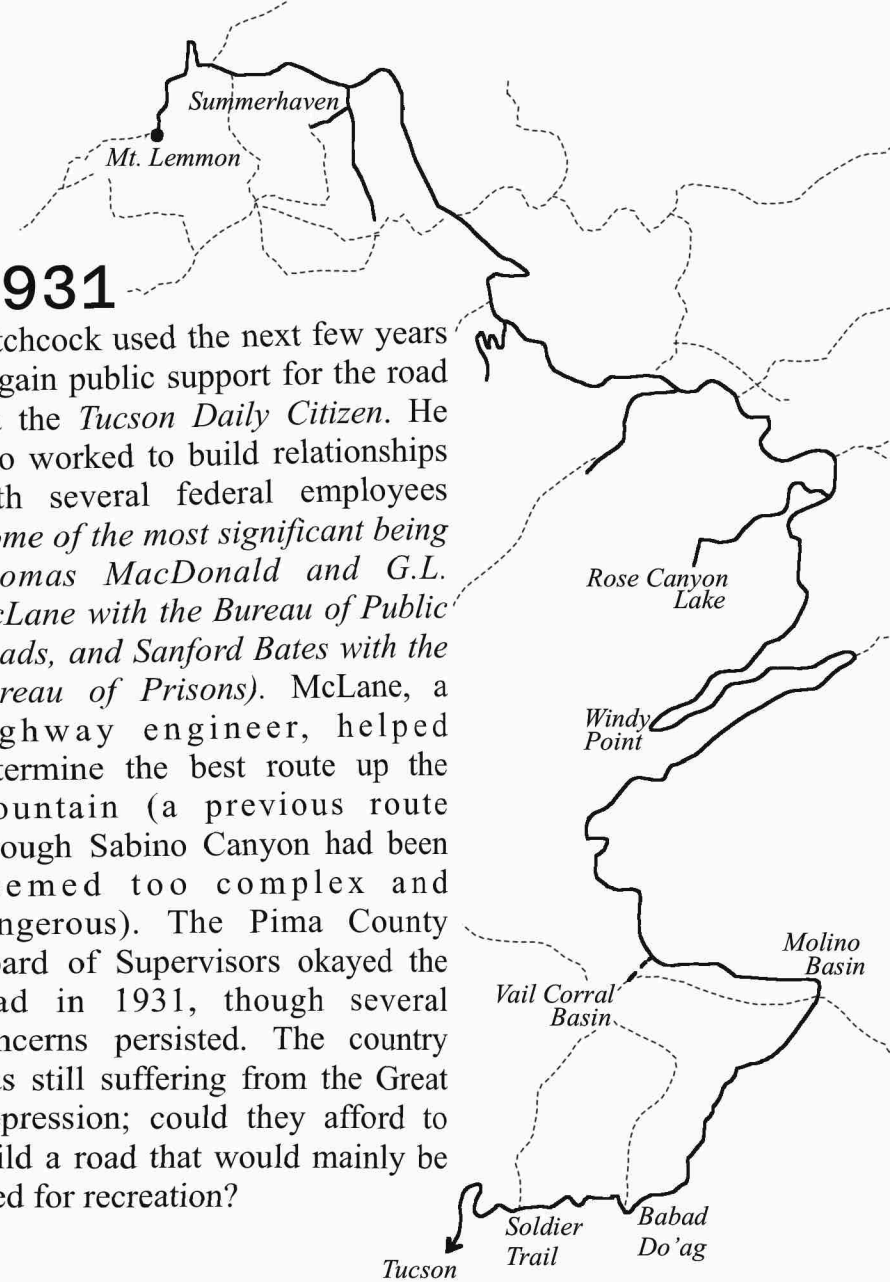
is a road of many names. You may see it referred to as *Mt. Lemmon Highway*, *Arizona Forest Highway 39*, or *Sky Island Scenic Byway*; these all refer to the 27 mile long road that runs through the Santa Catalina Mountains, connecting Tucson with the summit of Mt. Lemmon. The roadway is officially titled General Hitchcock Highway, named for Frank Harris Hitchcock. Hitchcock, former Postmaster General and publisher of a daily Tucson newspaper, was one of the driving forces in the development and construction of the roadway.

## IN THE 1920s,

wealthy Tucsonans showed growing interest in a road that would connect Tucson to the mountain. By this time, a small, affluent community known as Summerhaven had been established near the peak of Mt. Lemmon. The community could only be accessed by the Control Road, which ran up the north side of the mountain and began miles away from Tucson. Newspapers would occasionally print articles about the concept of a more accessible road, namely the *Arizona Daily Star* and the *Tucson Daily Citizen* (the latter of which was owned by the aforementioned General Hitchcock). An early proposal to build a road up the mountain was put before voters in 1928. It failed tremendously. At this point, Hitchcock became much more active in his efforts to get the road built.

## 1931

Hitchcock used the next few years to gain public support for the road via the *Tucson Daily Citizen*. He also worked to build relationships with several federal employees (some of the most significant being *Thomas MacDonald* and *G.L. McLane* with the *Bureau of Public Roads*, and *Sanford Bates* with the *Bureau of Prisons*). McLane, a highway engineer, helped determine the best route up the mountain (a previous route through Sabino Canyon had been deemed too complex and dangerous). The Pima County Board of Supervisors okayed the road in 1931, though several concerns persisted. The country was still suffering from the Great Depression; could they afford to build a road that would mainly be used for recreation?



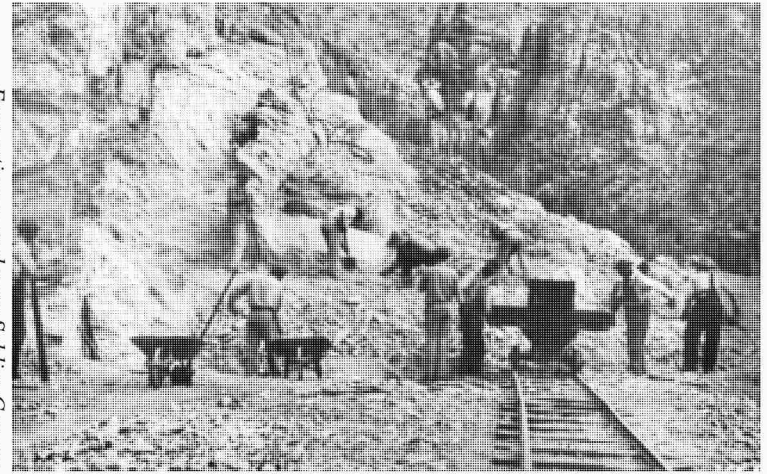
# 1933



Keeping the economy in mind, MacDonald and Bates determined that prison labor would significantly cut down on costs involved in building the road. The United States obviously has a long history of using unpaid labor for various projects. The paving of roads and highways in particular has often been completed by forced-labor. Following the Civil War, prison labor was used to replace slave labor, usually under the guise of reformation. Physical labor was believed to help rehabilitate nonviolent prisoners; this belief was firmly held by McLane, who was a huge supporter of the idea.

In June of 1933, the first batch of prisoners was 'loaned' from a federal prison in El Paso. The majority of these men were border crossers from Mexico (border crossing had been a common occurrence since the 1850s; its illegality had only recently become enforced on a large scale). The prisoners initially lived in a tent camp near the base of the mountain, with nearby land being set aside for vegetable gardens. As this was to be an honor camp, there were no fences to keep the laborers inside. The perimeter of the camp was marked by rocks that had been painted white (though early on, guards also used dogs to keep inmates contained).

Inmate duties included hand-drilling holes in granite, using gun powder to blow rock apart, breaking down rock chunks, and hauling debris. They were also responsible for tending to the gardens, food prep, laundry, water retrieval, and other camp maintenance. The camp could support a population of two hundred people.

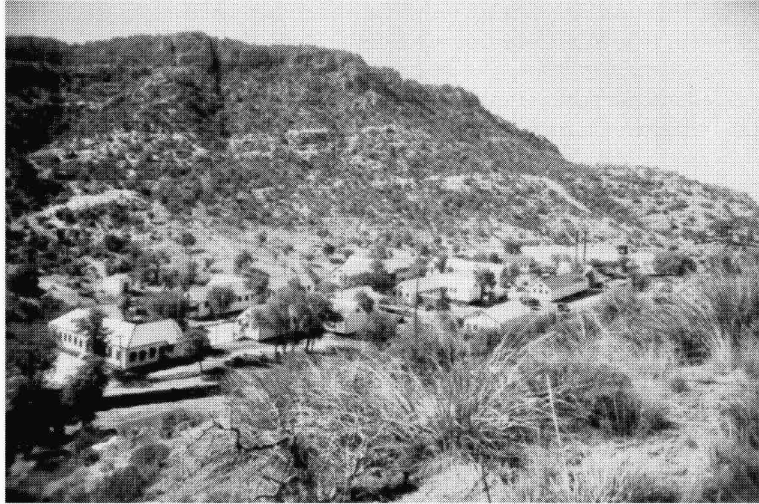


Excavating a road near Soldier Canyon.  
Coronado National Forest.

**1935** Work continued through the following seasons. Inmates were given old, defective work trucks and construction equipment to aid in their building. Those who could not handle the hard labor were tasked with camp upkeep.

When plans for the road were being finalized in 1933, the Bureau of Prisons picked a spot further up the mountain that would eventually serve as the permanent site of the Catalina Federal Honor Camp. This area — *known then as Vail Basin Corral, now known as Prison Camp or Gordon Hirabayashi Campground* — was around 6 miles into the planned route. Prisoners with previous construction experience were made to work on the buildings that would make up the camp. This included multiple barracks, a kitchen, cafeteria, laundry, septic systems, water reservoir, housing for the guards, and masonry for various bridges and gates. Work began somewhere between 1935 and 1937, and was completed in 1939.

# 1939



A view of the camp, looking southwest.  
Coronado National Forest.

Remains of the buildings give some insight into what the camp was like. Housing for the guards and their families are marked by concrete foundations, with beautiful brickwork surrounding their living quarters. Nothing remains of the prison barracks, as their foundations were made from wood. It appears that the inmates were able to relax on occasion, as there was a much-loved baseball field and shuffleboard court in the camp as well. A nearby path led to a reservoir that was used as the camp's water source.

Impending involvement in World War II led to dynamite and explosives being rationed. Still, roadwork continued. The completed section of road, up to Vail Corral, was opened to the public in 1940 with rave reviews from the *Arizona Daily Star*. Thirteen miles of road had been paved by 1941.

# 1940s

Executive Order 9066 was issued on February 19, 1942, leading to the mass relocation and internment of over 120,000 people of Japanese descent, regardless of their citizenship status. Many Japanese Americans deemed this to be blatantly unconstitutional.

Gordon Hirabayashi, a Japanese-American college student, purposefully ignored evacuation orders and curfews to protest the government's violation of the 5th Amendment. Hirabayashi was convicted, and his conviction was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1943. He spent several months in jail before carrying out a 3-month sentence at the Catalina Federal Honor Camp.

The draft for Japanese Americans, which had been prohibited in 1942, was reinstated early in 1944. Hundreds of Nisei (*American-born children of Japanese immigrants*) protested the hypocrisy of the draft and refused to take part in the war. Punishment for the resisters varied wildly from judge to judge; some judges sent them back to their internment camps, while others sentenced the resisters to years in prison. Around 45 Nisei resisters were sentenced to work at the Honor Camp, where they were joined by other groups of draft resisters and conscientious objectors (including Hopi, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mennonites, among others).

The Nisei and Hopi were both housed in Barrack C, the mixed race barrack, where they became close allies. *The Tucsonians*, as the Nisei referred to themselves, held reunions for the group beginning in 1947 (the same year that draft resisters were pardoned). These reunions occurred well into the early 2000s, and later included family members and some of their Hopi friends.



## THE TUCSONIANS ,

illustrated here at their first reunion. The original photograph includes text that reads '*January 12, 1947. First Anniversary of the Tucsonians. Sacramento, Cali!*'  
The image is credited to Kenji Taguma.

# END OF THE ROAD

By the end of 1946, sixteen miles of the road were deemed ready for the public by representatives of Pima County. The road was extended up to Summerhaven in the fall of 1947, marking the road proper as 'complete.' Still, prison labor continued. In 1950, crews were tasked with constructing a steep road meant to access a future ski hill. Dozens of other branching roads were built off of the main highway to serve future residential areas. Roadwork finally ended sometime in 1951.

Following the road's completion, a plaque was unveiled at *Windy Point*, a scenic spot on the road that looks out over the city of Tucson. The plaque is dedicated to General Hitchcock, who died two years into the road's construction. The plaque reads:

Honorable Frank  
Harris Hitchcock —  
This beautiful highway  
was made possible by his  
sincere and unceasing efforts.  
It is dedicated to him and  
shall be known as  
"Hitchcock Highway"

No mention is made of the 8,003 men that were forced to partake in this 'sincere and unceasing' effort.



*The Mt. Lemmon Highway on May 18, 1955. The Tucson Citizen.*

G.L. McLane wrote the final report on the road, as he had been overseeing the project for the Bureau of Public Roads. His report included a glowing review of the free labor provided by the inmates, with special attention being given to the Mexican prisoners. He recommended using them for all future hard-labor projects, recognizing that they would be always be plentiful if the poor economic conditions of Mexico were to continue.

The prison was closed once its purpose was over, with inmates returning to wherever they had been lent from. The prison buildings, however, would be repurposed several times in the following decades.

# 1960S & 1970S

Starting in 1957, the camp was used as a minimum-security juvenile detention center. The duties carried out by inmates at the Federal Youth Camp are not concretely defined, as they vary between sources. Most seem to agree that offenders were tasked with running a logging and sawmill operation, a sign shop, and general camp upkeep. Other sources claim that they were also involved with fire suppression, mountain clean up, and construction work. Very little information regarding this phase of the camp is readily available. Newspaper articles from the time show that prisoners often escaped from, and were quickly returned to, the camp. Detainees occasionally cited hunger and abuse as their reasons for leaving. Sometime during this period, a large space behind the camp became a landfill (this would not be remedied until 1971). By 1966, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons was considering closing the camp due to consistently falling attendance. The camp was abandoned in 1967. In the following years it would occasionally house firefighters and park groundskeepers, though it generally went without maintenance or upkeep.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs began a study on the camp in 1967, hoping to turn the derelict youth camp into a rehabilitation center for Native American youths. The center was up and running by the summer of 1969. The Southwest Indian



*One of the isolation areas at SIYC.  
The Tucson Citizen.*

Youth Center (SIYC) was intended to be self-sufficient, meaning that the detainees would be responsible for all camp and population maintenance. The SIYC also maintained several halfway houses within the city of Tucson. The Mount Lemmon location seemed to be plagued by problems; leaking reservoirs constantly led to water shortages, funding was always scarce, and a stray lightning bolt destroyed the camp's boiler system in 1972. In the same year, the FBI began investigating the camp's treatment of the youths following allegations made by a former employee and an escaped detainee. David Giles, the center's director, admitted that youths would be kept in abandoned meat lockers as punishment for wrongdoings. The National Forest Service evicted SIYC from the premises on the final day of 1972. Soon after, the camp buildings were demolished. Concrete slabs, some brickwork, and a few other artifacts are all that remain today.

The highway proved to be very popular following its completion, though it did not go without its own problems. The road soon developed a reputation as one of the most dangerous roads in the city, given its high rate of accidents. Most accidents were caused by drunk or inexperienced drivers, but the road itself also contributed to these rates. The highway was quite narrow, featured several areas without guardrails or shoulders, and had several sharp and unexpected turns. Road closures were quite common, as heavy rains, rockfalls, or general road wear could render the highway unusable. Plans surrounding the road's repaving began in 1986, but would not start for another two years. Over the next twenty years, the highway would be widened, and new safety features would be put in place (this time by paid workers). Despite there being horrific mountain fires in 2002 and 2003, work was finally completed around 2005.



*An old postcard depicting the road. Text reads "View of Gen. Hitchcock Highway Up Mt. Lemmon."*

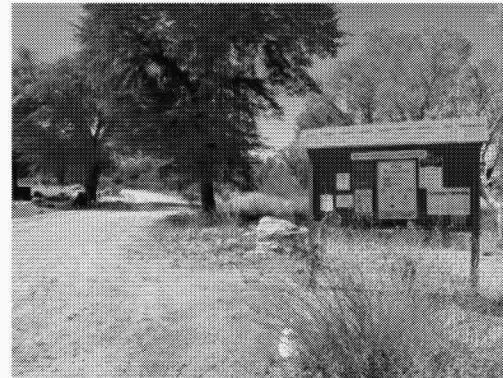
## RECONSTRUCTION

## PRESENT TENSE



*Drawing of Dr. Hirabayashi. Original portrait by Dolph Zubick.*

*Current campground. USDA Forest Service.*



Gordon Hirabayashi's Supreme Court ruling was overturned in 1987; it was determined that the internment of Japanese Americans had been a result of racist wartime hysteria. In 1999, the Coronado National Forest named the former site of the prison camp after Hirabayashi. Interpretive signs on site tell a brief version of his story. The naming ceremony was attended by Hirabayashi himself, along with several inmates who worked alongside him. Campsites

now occupy the spaces where the camp barracks once stood; barracks where countless men and boys lived for over thirty years. And now you can park your RV there.

The majority of this information is readily available, to some degree. The United States Forest Service is happy to tell you about Frank Hitchcock and his persistence regarding the highway. They are also quick to bring up Gordon Hirabayashi's stay in Tucson. Any mentions of the other thousands of prisoners are kept brief, often only amounting to a sentence or two. The youth camp and youth center are usually ignored entirely. Old newspaper articles give some of the best insights into the camp, though these too are biased. Many articles, when discussing the prisoners themselves, are focused on the rehabilitation aspect of the camps. Prisoners are said to be happy and grateful. But we never hear from them directly. All of their experiences are translated through sources that are inclined to support the prison.



Of course, the history of this road began long before the 1920s. It began before the Transfer Act of 1905 defined established forest reserves as property of the US government, before the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 made it so that public lands could be set aside for protection, before the Dawes Act of 1887 forced Native Americans to adopt the concept of private property, before the mountain was named for botanist Sara Lemmon in 1881, before the Apaches used the mountain to evade Spanish soldiers in the 1770s, before the Spanish Jesuits had given the Santa Catalina mountains their name in 1697, before Babad Do'ag (*Frog Mountain*) was occupied and claimed from the Tohono O'odham and Hohokam who inhabited it, before the Desert Archaic people lived on the mountain thousands of years ago. Every aspect of the United States, *even a single roadway*, is built on thousands of years of history. While most of it is not pretty, all of it is worth looking into.

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