

U.S. 99: 1926 - 1958¹

1941 The Pacific Highway was rebuilt for a total of almost 7 miles from north of Mt. Sexton south to Jump-off Joe Road (today's junction of Monument Drive and Three Pines Road). The new route eliminated much of the narrow, twisting highway on Mt. Sexton.² It also created Windy Gap.

1948 It was supposed to be a joyful homecoming for the 1948 championship Grants Pass High football team, but on December 5, 1948 tragedy struck on Mount Sexton. The bus driver driving the team home lost control at *Windy Gap's* sharp turn. Al Newman and Sterling Heater perished.³

Bleacher Report⁴ The Grants Pass Caveman football team took state December 4, 1948, a 6-0 defensive battle against Portland powerhouse Jefferson High. The following morning, the jubilant contingent of coaches, players and family began its long journey home on U.S. 99, a two-lane highway. Most of the team chose to ride in the Greyhound bus that had been chartered especially for the championship trip to Portland. The gesture was meant as a sort of "reward," considering the usual school bus was not known for its comfort features. From Roseburg south U.S. 99 traversed a series of mountain passes with steep inclines.

The driver had been advised to not delay or make any unnecessary stops, as a surprise rally was beginning to form at the high school in honor of the returning heroes. At about 5:15 pm, the bus crested the summit of Sexton Pass and was making its final descent into the Rogue Valley.

Tragedy At Windy Gap

Some 11 miles away from a crowd of hundreds of expectant townspeople, the driver was suddenly having trouble controlling the bus' steering. The front tires caught the loose gravel on the road's shoulder and the bus skidded sideways and rolled onto its top, breaking through the flimsy guard rail, and eventually coming to rest with its rear section hanging over an 80 foot embankment.



U.S. 99 at Windy Gap on Mt. Sexton: 1951
Courtesy of Oregon Department Of Transportation

The just-fueled gas tank exploded, and the aft portion of the bus became a blazing inferno. Players who were not stunned or knocked cold by the initial impact forced their way out through windows, as the doors were jammed shut. Those exiting the rear of the bus tumbled to further injury down the steep embankment.

Grants Pass High School Championship Football Team: 1948

In a time well before cell phones and laptops, passing motorists picked up the injured and rushed them down the highway toward the hospital. Word of a terrible accident eventually made its way to the waiting throng at the high school. From there, the once-giddy crowd made its way to the hospital, overcome now with grief and panic. When details of the tragedy finally began to solidify, the toll was 25 injured and two dead: Heater and Newman.

Ray Altpeter, the student manager, testified Al, a varsity lineman, had ushered him through a window and then retreated back into the bus, presumably to help another victim. He must have been overcome by flames or smoke, as he did not return alive. The charred remains of Heater and Newman were found in the two separate pieces of the bus.

Heater-Newman Gym Shortly afterward a new gym was named Heater-Newman Memorial Gym, and it stayed that way when a new gym opened in 1999.³

Want more information? Contact an officer of the *Hugo Neighborhood*.

1. Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society. March , 2006. *Auto Camps In Northern Josephine County: 1910 - 2001*. Hugo, OR; Auto Camps & Transportation: <http://www.jeffnet.org/~hugo/autocamp.htm>

2. Right-of-Way Cleared on Sexton, *The Daily Courier*, January 6, 1941, Front Page.

3. A Community's Joy Ended With Tragedy. *The Daily Courier*, Jeff Duewel. March 25, 2010. http://web.thedailycourier.com/edition/index_spd.html?pb=8&pg=4&opb=8&opd=25&pm=03&pd=25&py=2010

4. Grande, Rojo. October 27, 2009. Bleacher Report. *Triumph and Tragedy: Where Heroes Are Forged* <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/279848-triumph-and-tragedy-where-heroes-are-forged>

Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society's Mission

This information brochure is one of a series of documents published by the Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society (*Hugo Neighborhood*). It is designed to be shared with neighbors for the purpose of helping protect our rural quality of life by promoting an informed citizenry in decision-making. The *Hugo Neighborhood* is an informal nonprofit charitable and educational organization with a land use and history mission of promoting the social welfare of its neighbors.

Land Use & History

The *Hugo Neighborhood's* land use mission is to promote Oregon Statewide Goal 1 — Citizen Involvement, and to preserve, protect, and enhance the livability and economic viability of its farms, forests, and rural neighbors. It will act, if requested, as a technical resource assisting neighbors to represent themselves.

Its history mission is to educate, collect, preserve, interpret, and research its local history and to encourage public interest in the history of the Hugo area.

Volunteer membership dues are \$10.00 annually per family and normally used for paper, ink, envelopes, publications and mailings. Send us your e-mail address if you want to know what we are doing.

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Newman & Heater Perished At Windy Gap On U.S. 99: 1948

Brochure 1G of Hugo's Auto Camp
Brochure Series



Crashed Greyhound At Windy Gap On Mt. Sexton: 1948
Courtesy of The Grants Pass Daily Courier

"The front of the Greyhound bus that crashed on Dec. 5, 1948, lies on Highway 99. It carried the Grants Pass High football team, which won the state football title the day before in Portland. Players Sterling Heater and Al Newman died in the crash."³

May 24, 2010

**Hugo Neighborhood Association &
Historical Society**