

Fall River Road
100th Anniversary
Opened September 1920



Photo by W. W. Wiswall

Copied from 1940 scrapbook donated to Grand Lake Area Historical Society

Fall River Road East side – Estes Park, Colorado

2020 is the 100th anniversary of the completion of Fall River Road from Grand Lake to Estes Park. The road was constructed by the state and by Larimer and Grand counties as a scenic route across the mountains between Estes Park and Grand Lake for the purpose to encourage tourism to what was being promoted as the “American Switzerland.”



“Tom Tynan’s Boys” began construction on the Fall River Road in September 1913. During this period convict labor was utilized to build roads around the state and so cabins were built at Fall River and tents set up to house the 38 convict “boys” with Tom Tynan as their warden. The drive proved to be very popular during the construction phase of the road and local newspapers asked those who traveled the road to refrain from asking questions of the convicts. It held them up from doing their work. The convicts were called off from work in late 1915.

Rocky Mountain National Park was proposed and passed the House on January 12, 1915. The Senate passed an amended form of the bill the following day and on January 26, 1915 the act creating Rocky Mountain National Park was signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson. The park final boundary was set at 358 ½ square miles. On September 4 several hundred people gathered at Horseshoe Park for a dedication ceremony.



C. R Trowbridge was sent to organize the new national park. He was given the title “Acting Superintendent” and provided with three rangers and an annual budget of only \$10,000. He was not assigned an automobile and had to hire one at times to make trips into the park; he soon urged the Interior Department to purchase a two-seated vehicle for patrols and inspections.

There were not many roads in the park and there was little money for development of roads or the park at all. Automobiles were new, railroads were being built, and people enjoyed enough prosperity to travel.

Soon after the establishment of Rocky Mountain National Park in 1915, acting park superintendent reported: Generally, Fall River Road was well built, although some sections were only eight to ten feet wide. The dirt road was completed as far as Chasm Falls. One particular turn known as the second switchback was reached by a 12 percent grade. Here the average vehicle would have to seesaw on a precarious edge as it swung to complete the corner turn. Park crews were widening switchbacks and constructing retaining walls to keep cars from veering off the cliffs. He recommended against further construction until a full survey was made of the remaining work. Grand Lake had just completed a new road extending north 1 ¾ miles from Grand Lake. This was an excellent road, at least 16 feet wide and with a grade of less than 1 per cent.

The survey was carried out in 1916 and indicated that 16.13 miles remained to be constructed. The supervisor was instructed to consider the road a state road and was prohibited from expending federal funds on the project or on maintaining the road. He then asked for authority to hire two men and a horse team to work over the summer season to keep the road in passable condition.

The National Park Service published “Useful Hints to Motorists” for the 1917 season outlining general regulations for the use of automobiles in the park. No permits were required, but cars could only enter and leave the park between 6:30 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. The speed limit was 12 miles an hour, except on straight stretches where 20 miles per hour was permissible. Horns were to be sounded when approaching curves, vehicles, pedestrians, and saddle animals. Automobiles were required to keep a distance of at least 50 yards from other conveyances except when passing, and had to keep their gears enmeshed except when shifting. Horse teams had the right of way. Motorists were required to carry at least one spare tire. The government disclaimed any responsibility for accidents.

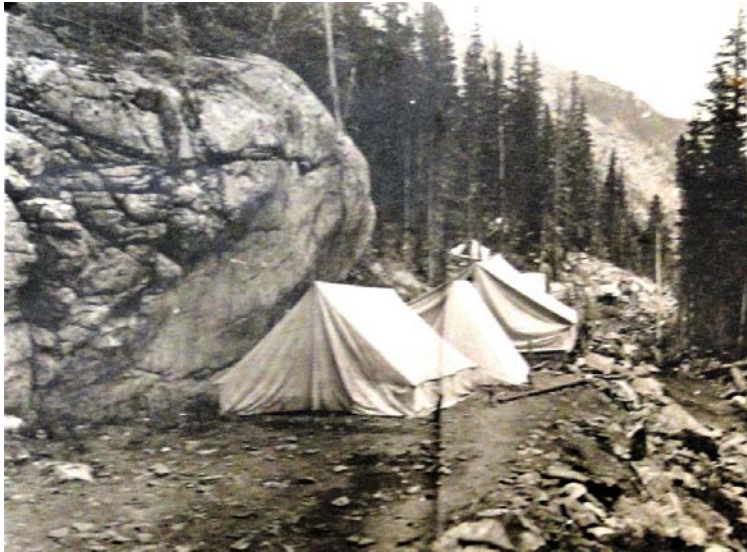
The first reported fatality on the park road system occurred on August 22, 1918, when a car driven by a man from Illinois veered off the incomplete Fall River Road killing his wife, two sons and another passenger. Twenty-two minor accidents were reported mostly involving mishaps between automobiles and saddle horses.

Some road work was financed partly by private subscription. Roe Emery of the Rocky Mountain Transportation Company funded some construction on Fall River Road in 1918 and took over the supervision in May 1918. The National Park Service refused to work on a road not under its jurisdiction as the state and counties still controlled the roads.

A Japanese-American contractor, the Hokasona Construction Company began work on the east side but made meager progress. Hokosana was replaced by his foreman N. I. Jacobson. Both Jacobson and McQueary (contractor on the West side) complained of shortages of labor. 110 men were working on the road but the difficult terrain and severe weather conditions at the higher altitude hampered operations and discouraged many potential workers.

All work was with hand tools, horse teams, and some explosives. Due to heavy snowpack, work could be discontinued by early fall.





Work was restarted in 1920 despite difficulties in funding, finding workers and retaining their services. In September the state highway engineer informed the highway commission that the project might not be finished before the onset of winter. Outraged at the prospect of further delays, the commission dispatched additional crews and the road was completed at the end of the month.





Fall River Entrance Station in Estes Park was constructed in 1920.



Entrance Station 1930s

Up from Grand Lake - West Side

A dirt road followed the Colorado River north out of Grand Lake servicing the mines in the Never Summer Mountains. In the spring this road was muddy and nearly impassible. There were lots of logs placed in the muddy portions of the roads giving them the name of corduroy roads.

People traveled from Grand Lake to Estes Park by hiking the old Indian and animal trails or by horseback or snowshoes. The idea of a road to connect the two towns had been brewing for a long time. As early as 1909 merchants of the two towns on opposite sides of the Continental Divide wanted to connect the villages by road through intervening wilderness. Dick McQueary, then 41 years of age decided to make a trip by horseback over the area. "I saw an old Indian trail going in that direction. I knew that Indians invariably followed the easiest course and lowest passes. On the summit was a beautiful lake with trout jumping on the surface. Circling the rim, I found the outlet going down a grassy valley with evergreen trees on all sides. Deciding to climb higher I walked and led my horse because the way was steep. From the crest I could see the larger creek flowing north. I figured it was Cache la Poudre River. The big valley of Fall River could be seen."

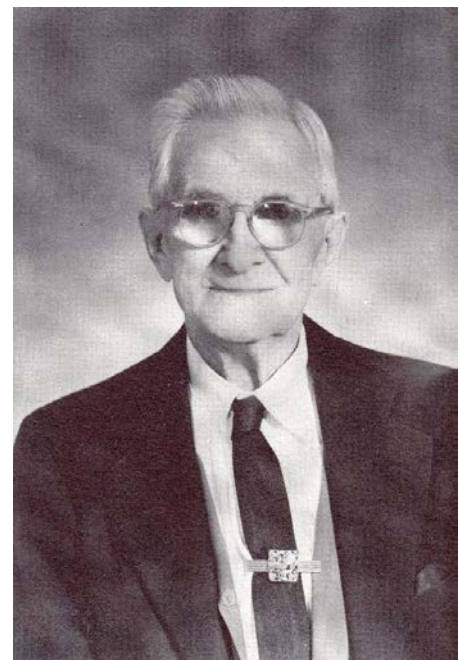
A few days later McQueary discussed his trip with Frank Huntington, Grand County surveyor, who was much interested. A pack trip of several days was planned. In September the two friends rode five days over this route. On returning home Frank drew a map to show county commissioners how easy it would be to build a road over the mountain. The commissioners said they didn't have money to build any road that was not a necessity, so the matter was dropped.

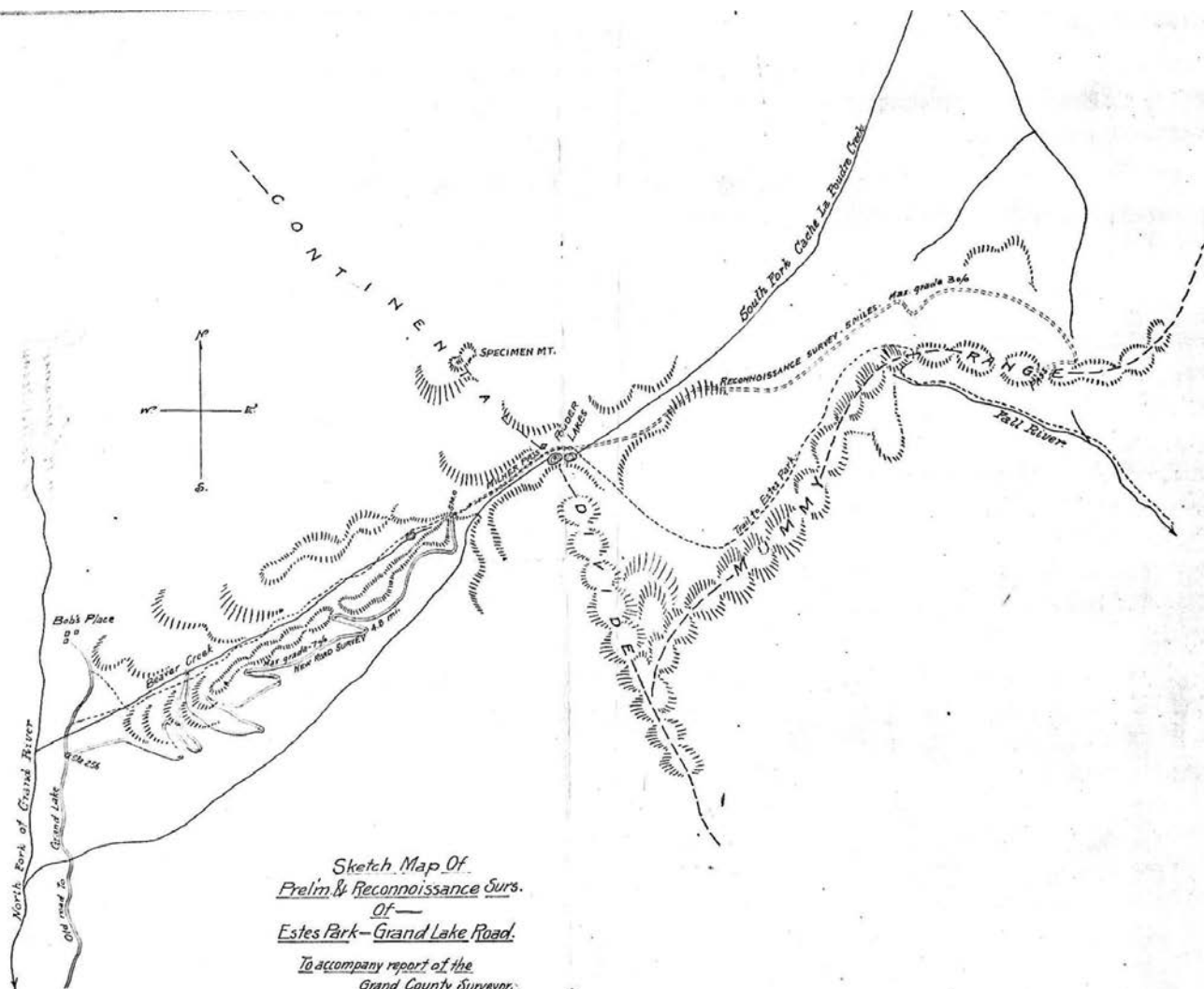


< **Frank Huntington**

Richard McQueary >

This picture was taken later in his life.





Sketch Map Of
Prelim & Reconnaissance Surs.
 Of—
Estes Park—Grand Lake Road.
 To accompany report of the
 Grand County Surveyor.

(from a letter by Franklin Huntington Dated Oct 29, 1918)

“About Sept 1, 1912 Mr. A. M. Cook, Supervisor of the Arapaho National Forest, at Fraser, wrote to the Chairman of the Board of Commissioners of Grand County and to me, I being County Surveyor, saying that the Supervisor of the Colorado National Forest at Ft. Collins had arranged a date when we were requested to meet the commissioners of Larimer County at the Rangers Cabin at the head of Fall River and there to take up the matter of the construction of the Fall River Road. Mr. Wallace and I accompanied by Mr. Cook made the trip over the range and at the Rangers Cabin met and conferred with Mr. Graham, Chairman of the Board of Larimer County, Mr. Sprague, one time surveyor of Larimer Co, Mr. Hondius of Estes Park and the ranger of the Colorado National Forest. It was unanimously agreed that the Fall River or Chapin Pass would be the summit of the grades. “

“As we proceeded homeward, Mr. Wallace requested me to make a survey and estimate of the difficult section of the proposed road on the Grand County side, from Milner Pass down the western slope of the continental divide and connecting with the county road in the Grand River bottom. This I did immediately with the assistance of Mr. Cook and survey party, the results being reported at the next meeting of the Grand County Commissioners who paid the expense amounting to about \$70.00.”

A letter by Frank Huntington on October 8th, 1912 was sent to the Grand County Board of Commissioners. “At the invitation of Arthur Cook, Supervisor of the Arapahoe National forest (about Sept 1, 1912) and by the order of your body I have made an inspection and surveys of the route of the proposed Auto and Wagon Road between Estes Park and Grand Lake, especially that portion of the route which is on the Grand County side of the range; west of Fall River Pass and Puder (sic) Lakes.”

“The accompanying sketch map is a part of this report and shows the location of the proposed road ...on a maximum grade of 3% for a distance of 5 miles to a point $\frac{3}{4}$ miles west of Puder (sic) Lakes. ...I have run a preliminary line to the North Fork of Grand River over an additional distance of 4.8 miles on a maximum grade of 7% which comprises the most difficult location features along the western slope on account of the great elevation overcome in the short distance traversed.”

(Report from the letter of 1918) “During the middle of October of the same year (1912) The Estes Park Commercial Club stated the Commissioners of Larimer County desired me to extend the Grand County survey over to and down Fall River to Estes Park, having set aside \$300 for the purpose and that the commercial club agreed to meet any

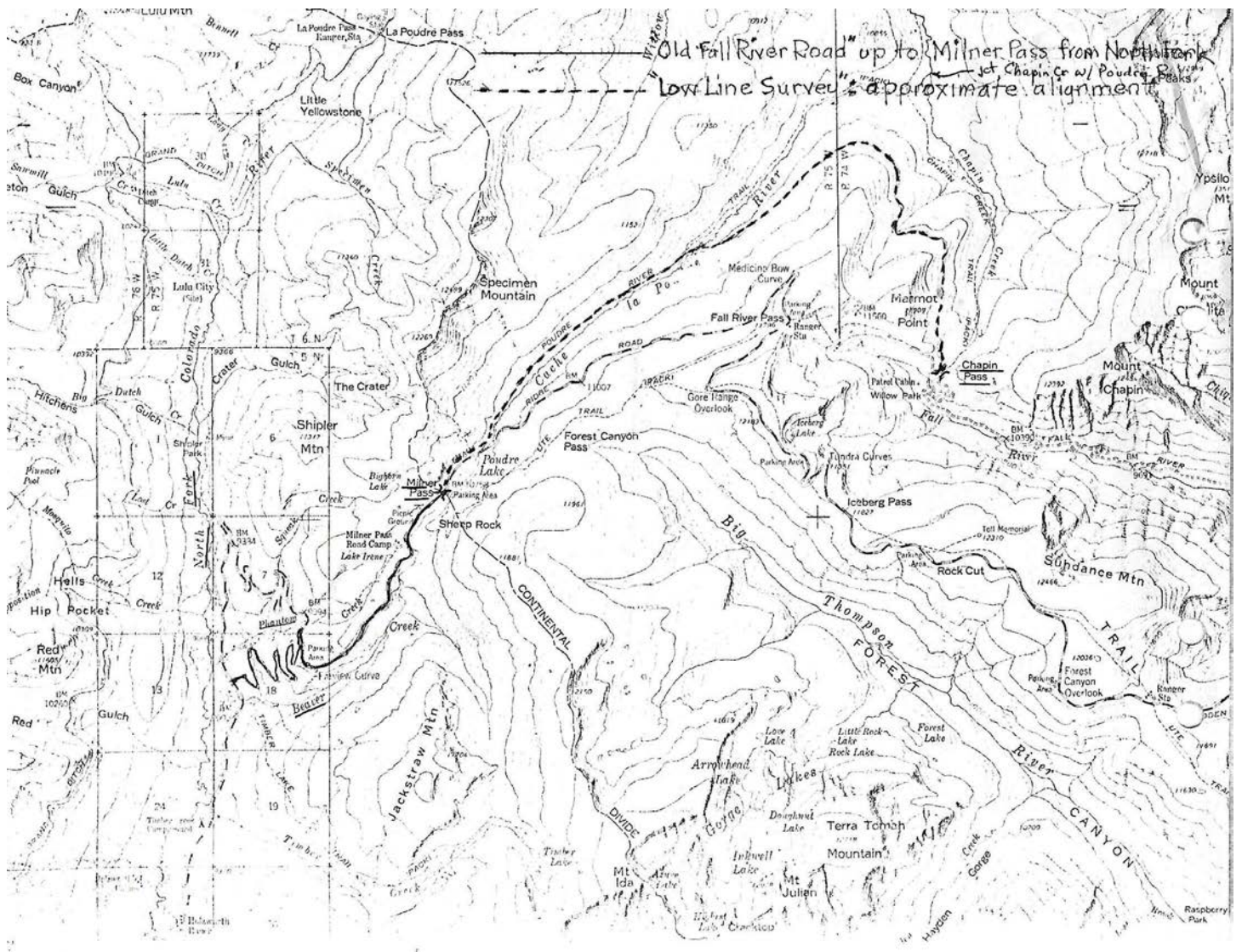
expense above that amount. I made the survey, presenting the bill to Larimer County which was paid in due time.”

A newspaper article from January 23, 1914 reported on a Good Roads Association convention held at Colorado Springs. This organization is known as The North Range State Ways Association and its primary object is to perfect arrangements for the building of a highway across the range. The route selected will be from Fall river to Grand Lake and from there on over the Gore range to Steamboat Springs and Utah points with the western terminus at Salt Lake City. No change will be made except in some of the minor details. It was proposed to call a meeting of the boards of county commissioners of Larimer, Boulder, Grand, Jackson, Gilpin, Jefferson, Clear Creek, Adams and Denver. A survey of the proposed route was made by Surveyor Huntington of Grand County more than a year ago and was found to be an ideal route from various standpoints.

The summer of 1915 when Rocky Mountain National Park was established, the commissions asked Dick McQueary to build roads in the North Fork section to Squeaky Bob Wheeler’s place. Dick asked Frank if he’d heard any more about a road through the park. He said the park just wanted a scenic road over the highest points.

Dick went to Denver to see if the Denver Post could do anything. With publicity there was more interest in the road. A few weeks later Huntington reported that the State Highway Department would make a survey of the proposed road. Dick said, “Frank and I can do the work in a few days.” Later the two men started to survey from the top at Poudre Lake, keeping the grade under 8 percent. The plan called for 9 switchbacks in 5 ½ miles. The two men nicknamed their planned route “Giant’s Ladder.”

Frank compiled a report for the Highway Department. The survey called for nine switchbacks to climb 1750 feet in altitude. The state engineer accepted the plans but nothing more was heard about the project until the June 27, 1917 when Frank received a letter from the State Highway Commission requesting a “location survey made on the road from the foot of the hill where your late survey joined with the old county road, up to the top of the Divide. This we would like to have an accurately laid out location line, so that contracts can be immediately let upon it.



A letter written in 1972 by M. Parke Huntington (Franklin's son) tells his memories of the road project. "Huntington had four assistants for the alignment survey: Andrew Eairheart and Ezra Kauffman, both elderly men of Grand Lake who were seasoned timbermen and outdoorsmen and Pat____ of Hot Sulphur Springs and myself who handled the leveling rod and chain (steel tape). The other helpers carried sacks of survey stakes. Father carried his transit and his book pouch.



The Highway Department announced that bids would be accepted for 5 and 1/2 miles of road from the North Fork of the Grand River to Poudre Lake on the summit. Bidding slightly less than \$49,000, Dick McQueary received the contract to build the road.

In August, a camp of tents was established for twelve men.



Before winter set in they accomplished preliminary plans with scrapers, fresnos, and graders – drawn by two, six, and eight head of horses.



(from M P Huntington) “Our first base camp was a Robert (Squeaky Bob) Wheeler’s summer resort, “Hardscrabble Inn”, where we occupied tents set up on Squeak’s board tent platforms. After about two weeks, we had Squeak pack our gear up to Poudre Lakes where we occupied the ranger cabin.

After a couple more weeks, he brought up his pack outfit with tents, and took them and our cooking gear about three miles down the Poudre for us to pitch camp. At a prearranged date he came over with his “string” and “packed us out”.



A letter from the State Highway Commission on June 20, 1918 asked Frank Huntington to look after the construction of the road over Milner’s Pass from the top of the Pass to Grand Lake this year and this will take in the McQueary contract. This letter will be your authorization to act as Engineer for the State Highway Commission on this work.



Huntington's son M. Parke Huntington worked with his father on the project during construction keeping yardage measured while his father caught up on other urgent matters. "We used a trail up Phantom Creek past Lake Irene and across Milner Pass which Father called the old Ute trail. It crossed the Poudre close to the outlet of the Lakes and headed up the shoulder on the bias without switchbacking. I trod it for a couple of miles or so when I walked the 21 miles (going over Fall River Pass) between Milner Pass and Estes Park in 1918 on my way out to enter High School in Longmont. Our survey party had used this stretch to get to Chapin Pass a couple of times."





In June of the following year, deep snowdrifts were broken to establish three camps on the project. Enlarged forces of workmen cut trees or used picks and shovels to remove rubble made by shattering huge boulders with dynamite.





The man is standing on the feathers on the Indian head



In the process of building the road, dynamite had been used on an outcropping of rock a mile south of Poudre Lake. The remaining cliff resembled an enormous profile of a stately Indian head – as though it were the petrified spirit of wizened old Spi-quet Pah observing the Widening Trails leading into his beloved Middle Park.

One legend says a tribe was camping in the area and one member was guarding some sheep. He heard a lamb crying and left to rescue it. Because he left his post he was turned to stone.

In some places it looks like the Indian is carrying a sheep on his back. When Trail Ridge Road was built the road was moved and is now above the rock sculpture, located about 1 mile above Farview Curve.

(photo taken in 2019)

During the First World War much difficulty was experienced in hiring men, although wages were raised to \$5 per day with board costing \$1.50. In 1919 the Denver Post reported “McQueary is pushing two sections of work on the Grand Lake side – one near the town of Grand Lake and the other near Poudre lakes. He needs 100 more men at once. He is paying the highest wages ever paid for road work in Colorado.

Camp at Poudre Lake



In 1920 the road ran on the east side of the lake. The pinnacles can be seen in the distance. You are looking south.

Farview Curve







On September 13, 1920 the east portion of Fall River Road was linked with the west side's Giant's Ladder. The 37 mile road was completed. Its highest point lay 11,797 feet above sea level. "It was not a road for timid drivers." The narrow dirt path, tucked onto the southern slope of Mount Chapin, zigged and zagged up the canyon of Fall River.

Motorists encountered sixteen hairpin curves along the route, some with turning radius so tight that it was necessary to backup several times to negotiate the curves. In some stretches the grade was 16% slope. Because of the peculiar gear ratio in Model T's and gravity fed fuel systems, some driver could progress only by backing up the road in reverse. Vehicle speeds were limited to 12 miles per hour on grades and sharp curves. On straight stretches autos could travel up to 20 miles per hour.



In celebration, McQueary ordered all of his workers to fish. No work – just go fishing. With several huge washtubs filled with fish at Grand Lake he set off up the roadway. He chugged down the Fall River Road, through Estes Park and arrived in Denver eight hours after he began – the first auto to have been piloted on the dirt road over the Continental Divide.



Grand Lake Entrance Station



Dick prepared festival grounds on the sagebrush flat west of town and a large crowd enjoyed the fish fry, rodeo and baseball games.





The park superintendent was furious that someone from Grand Lake had traveled the road before he did. So on September 29, the superintendent gathered four autos at Estes Park and set out for Grand Lake via the new road. The group made its way with only one incident, getting temporarily stuck in a large bank of soft snow. On their arrival in Grand Lake, a press release was issued that declared the “official” opening of the road was on Sept. 29 by a caravan of Park Service officials.

After the initial opening in 1920, Richard McQueary continued to do maintenance and upgrades on the Fall River Road for several years.

He was employed by the Park Service but placed under the supervision of the State Highway Department. McQueary’s men were veterans of the Fall River Road construction and made many improvements on Fall River Road. Switchbacks were being widened and safety retaining walls built.



Park superintendents recommended more work on the decaying timber bridges as they were not holding up to the increased traffic.

This bridge was over Timber Creek.



Engineers insisted on relocating seven miles of road along the Grand River as high waters covered the old road each spring with a thick sticky sediment. The road was to be relocated to the side of the canyon rather than following the river bottom lands and two bridges must be erected because of the high waters of the Grand.

In 1925 the park erected a stone cabin, Timberline Road Camp, east of Fall River Pass to protect road workers at the higher elevations and to offer them some degree of comfort. Another road camp was constructed the following year at Lake Irene.



On May 13, 1919, the National Park Service awarded an exclusive contract to the Rocky Mountain Parks Transportation Company to convey visitors to the park from railway terminals and through the park for hire. Park Service administrators wanted to ensure that reliable transportation would be available at reasonable rates and decided a monopoly concession would be the best way to guarantee regular service. In addition to the transportation from the outlying cities, the concession offered sight-seeing trips through the park at the following rates:

Fall River Drive (incomplete) approximately 20 miles	\$3.00
Fall River Drive and High Drive	\$3.50
Longs Peak Inn or High Drive	\$2.00
Fall River Drive, High Drive, and Longs Peak Inn	\$5.00

In 1921 the road was widened so few of the switchbacks required backing up. More than 30,000 vehicles traveled the road in the first full summer of 1921.

In 1922 the State of Colorado, acting in behalf of citizen complainants, brought suit in federal court against Park superintendent Toll, challenging the federal government's right to regulate traffic over the roads in the park. The suit was dismissed and remained unresolved. The controversy continued for another six years, as long as the state and the Park Service remained embroiled in the question over jurisdiction of the park roads. The transportation concession itself was not particularly successful, as only about 15 percent of park visitors made use of the Rocky Mountain Parks Transportation Companies services.

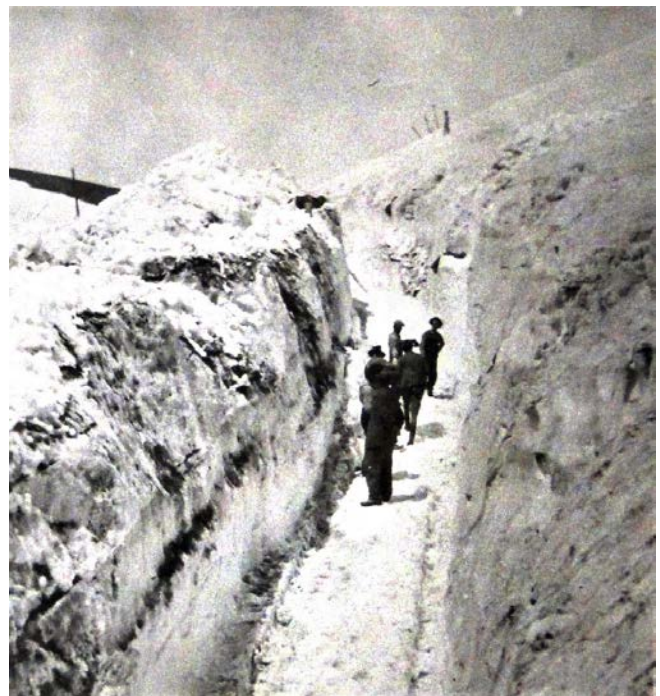
In 1924, the National Park Service, having received \$7.5 million for major road projects in the parks, made it clear that no funds would be spent on any roads at Rocky Mountain that were not under park jurisdiction. If roads were ceded, several major projects including the new highway (Trail Ridge Road) would be placed in the budget.

The state still had not ceded jurisdiction in 1927 and Congress held up all appropriations for further work on the Fall River Road. The Secretary of the Interior threatened to close the road unless the state made the cession and suggested that the park itself might be abolished. The cession bill failed to pass the state senate in April and the appropriation for the park was withheld. The Colorado General Assembly was advised that \$457,000 would be earmarked for roads and maintenance in the park if jurisdiction was ceded by March 3, 1929. The Park Service also indicated it would construct the new scenic mountain highway to replace the Fall River Road if control over the roads was transferred. The act was then approved by the house and senate in February and Governor William Adams signed it into law and sent to Congress. President Calvin Coolidge signed the act on March 2, 1928.

The narrow road was partly replaced by Trail Ridge Road in 1932. A rockslide closed Fall River Road in 1953 and it was not reopened until 1966 when the Park Service cleared the rocks and paved the lower third of the route. Another heavy rain in 1981 washed out 100 feet of road. Both the one-way Old Fall River Road and the paved Trail Ridge Road are maintained and open to motor vehicles from Memorial Day weekend through the first major autumn snowstorm.

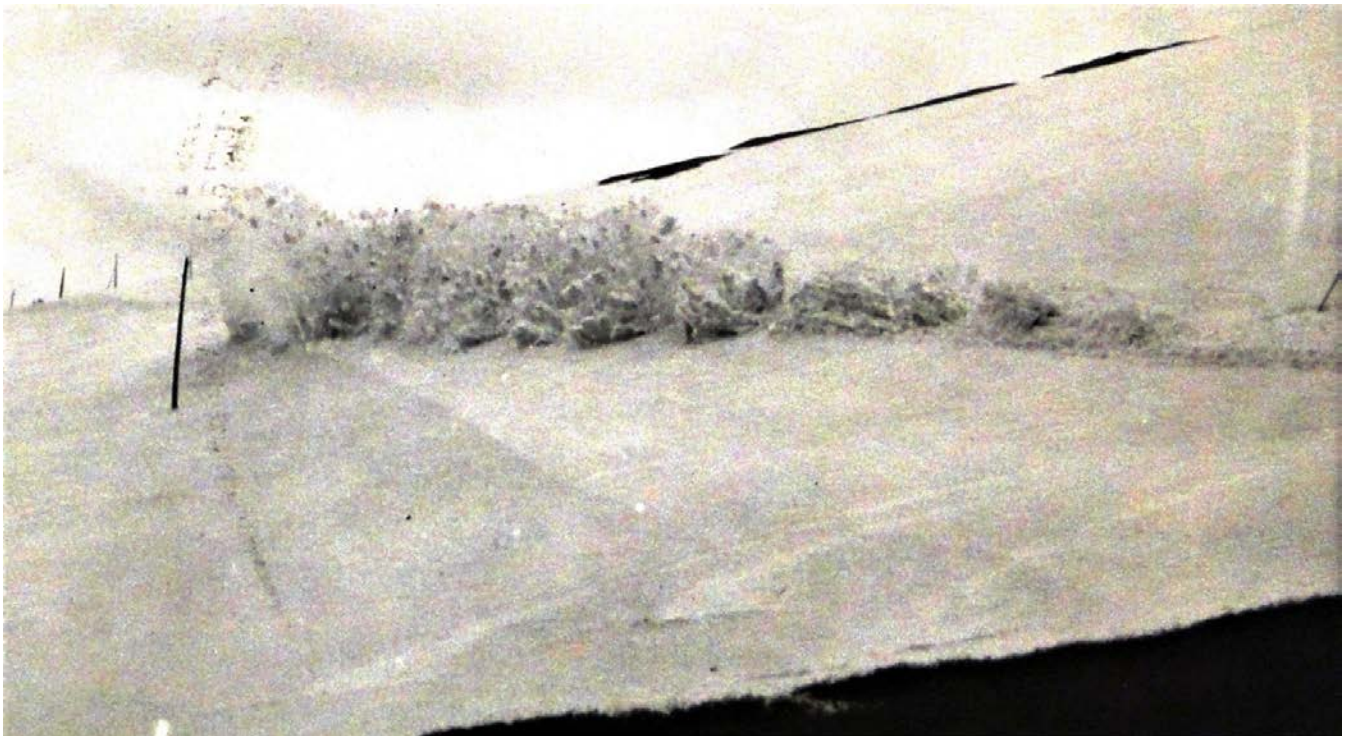


Due to high altitude and narrow road sidecuts, Fall River Road would be covered with winter drifts of 40 feet in addition to avalanche debris. Lack of power equipment in the early days meant the road had to be cleared by hand labor and horse teams. Using shovels and dynamite and working in a high cold environment, many snow removal workers quit after 1-2 days of work





In October of 1924 crews put in 13 boxes of dynamite at the point of Big Drift 20 a few feet apart. They then lit them the following spring by dynamite cord that had been put in a vertical pipe on top of the drift. The dynamite set off a single explosion creating a 3000 foot trench 15 feet wide and 6 feet deep. This removed 1000 cubic yards of snow at once. They then employed a steam shovel, horse teams and men with hand shovels. Using dynamite allowed the road to be open significantly earlier.







Finally, in April 1931 the park acquired its first snow plow, however, dynamite was still needed to loosen the wind-packed snowdrifts.



At 4.3 miles on the road, the fan slide (an avalanche path) periodically covers the road in late spring and a little further up is the Gully which carries the Old Faithful avalanche slide which slid and covered the road every afternoon for 13 days in a row.



Driving the road was seriously scaring drivers. A ranger had to be stationed at the worst switchbacks to drive frightened drivers through.



It wasn't long until the park seriously considered building a new road to avoid the maintenance problems connected with Fall River Road.

Construction on Trail Ridge Road began in September, 1929 and was completed to Fall River Pass July, 1932. The historic, gravel route was too narrow for the increasing number of vehicles. The new road provided greater scenic views.