

FIRST DRAFT

Douglas Pass provided the key link between Grand Valley, Uintah Basin

On July 4, 1924, 30 automobiles with more than 100 Mesa County folks rolled into Vernal, Utah, just in time for that town's holiday festivities.

They also came to celebrate the completion of an auto road from the Grand Valley to the Uintah Basin over Douglas Pass.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

But the exultation wouldn't last long.

Colorado highway officials alternately supported and neglected the road over the coming decades.

In 1948, the state's top highway engineer declared he would not "spend one cent" on Douglas Pass. It was not until the 1960s that the state agreed to give Colorado Highway 139 the attention it needed.

The road commemorated in 1924 was the result of a concerted fundraising and lobbying effort by the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce and Grand Junction Rotary Club. The groups eventually obtained additional support from Mesa County as well as officials in Vernal, Utah, and Garfield County, Colorado.

It wasn't just a new road. The route over Douglas Pass offered new economic opportunities for Grand Junction merchants and connections to the outside world for the Uintah Basin.

In a special edition on July 3, 1924, The Daily Sentinel said the new road was "expected to save people in the Uintah Basin millions of dollars and to bring millions of dollars' worth of business" to Grand Junction.

Automobiles were new to this route in 1924, but people had been traveling it since before recorded history. Spanish explorers Fathers Dominguez and Escalante journeyed over the Book Cliffs and down Douglas Creek in 1776, guided by Ute Indians whose ancestors had used the trail for centuries.

Maps from the late 19th century show a wagon road from Fruita to Rangely, topping the mountains near today's Douglas Pass.

In the early 20th century, however, the primary connection between Grand Junction and Vernal was over Baxter Pass on the Uintah Railway, which also required 50 miles of travel on a wagon road from the railroad terminus to Vernal.

Alternatively, one could drive the rough road west from Grand Junction by way of Cisco, Green River and Price, Utah, then follow 100 miles of rugged road to Vernal. The route was impassable in winter.

To Grand Junction and Uintah business leaders, these were inadequate. They saw the possibility of cutting the automobile distance by nearly 100 miles, while improving both commerce and comity between the two communities.

So, in 1919, people in Grand Junction and Vernal began stumping for an auto road to connect the regions. They also wanted a link to developing oil fields around Rangely.

By June of 1919, after an investigative trip by business leaders, it was determined that constructing a road north from Loma, then over the mountain to the Douglas Creek drainage and on into Rangely would be the best route. At Rangely, the new road would connect with an existing road from Meeker to Vernal.

A tunnel through the mountain rather than over Douglas Pass was also discussed, but it never materialized.

By September 1919, citizens of the Uintah Basin had approved \$60,000 worth of bonds to improve their section of road from the Utah-Colorado line west to Vernal and on to Roosevelt, Utah.

The effort in the Grand Valley moved more slowly. However, by March 1920, led by a local



UINTAH COUNTY REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER

J.H. Coltharp of Rangely delivers alfalfa seed over the new Vernal, Utah, to Grand Junction road. He is driving for White Bus and Truck Line of Grand Junction, which began service over Douglas Pass in June 1924. Note the tire chains.



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

A road sign near the top of Douglas Pass warns southbound travelers of the dangers to come.

merchant named J.B. Taylor, both the Chamber of Commerce and the year-old Rotary Club had created committees in support of the project and to raise money. The Daily Sentinel also backed the project.

Within a year, the two Grand Junction organizations had raised more than \$30,000 toward the road project, and officials in Garfield County had committed an unspecified amount to complete a portion of the road. The Colorado State Road Commission agreed to make the route a unit of the state highway system, and contributed several thousand dollars for its construction.

But not everyone supported the project.

A newspaper in Price noted that Grand Junction had raised money for the new road, but questioned whether "the merchants and shippers of the Vernal district will really gain anything" from the Douglas Pass road.

The paper also bemoaned the fact that the state of Utah had not done more to improve the road west from Cisco to Price.

In 1922, while the new road was being built, officials from Meeker and Garfield County set up a tourist facility in Rifle, urging auto travelers to head north to Meeker and then west to the Uintah Basin.

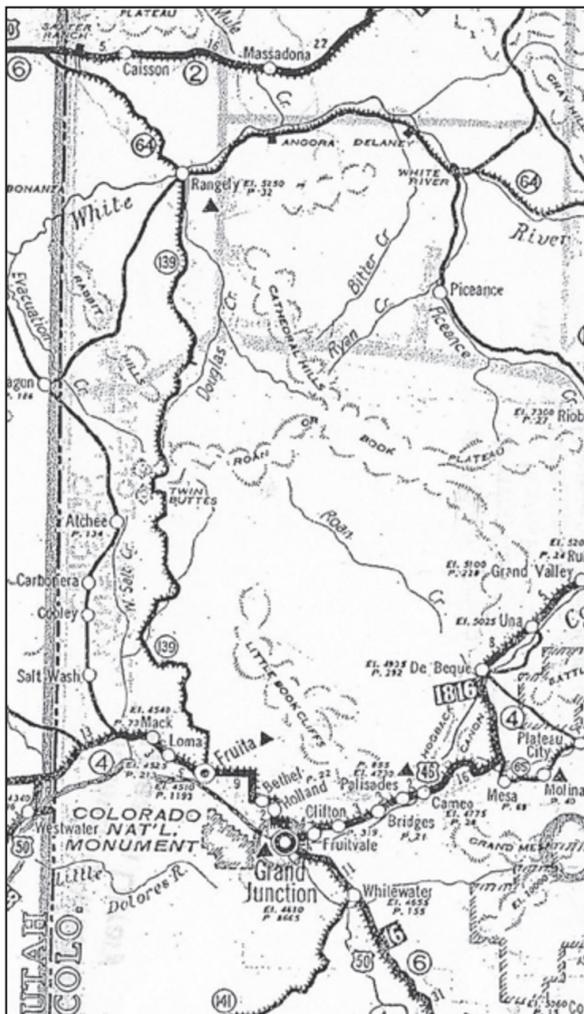
Additionally, Garfield and Rio Blanco county officials protested to Colorado's governor about the possibility of the new Douglas Pass road being made a state highway.

By autumn of 1922, business groups in Salt Lake City had taken note of the new road efforts and were pushing for additional state and federal highway funds to improve roads between the Uintah Basin and the state's capital city.

Despite these efforts, the Douglas Pass road was largely completed by late 1923, and it fully opened in time for the 1924 Fourth of July events in Vernal.

Earlier that summer, the White Bus Line of Grand Junction began operating buses and freight trucks over Douglas Pass to Vernal.

It seemed the new road was on track to provide exactly the sort of interstate connection



MUSEUMS OF WESTERN COLORADO

A 1926 map produced for Conoco shows Highway 139 from Loma to Rangely. The top of Douglas Pass is near the Twin Buttes listed on the map.

that leaders in both the Uintah Basin and the Grand Valley had sought. But there was trouble ahead.

By 1927, the Douglas Pass road was in poor condition, and the Sentinel was urging local officials to push the state highway department to make improvements. With pressure from Mesa and Garfield county, some work eventually occurred.

Still, state highway officials eventually dropped the route from the list of Colorado highways and stopped funding maintenance, even though the Rangely oil field was booming after World War II.

In 1966, almost 50 years after its first effort, the Rotary Club again took up the Douglas Pass cause. Working with Club 20, the Chamber of Commerce and Mesa County officials, they got the state to commit \$75,000 toward improvements.

The highway up the south side of the pass was realigned to reduce its grade and the

tightness of its switchbacks. Also, the highway was paved. Finally, the connection over Douglas Pass had become permanent.

Even today, however, the highway remains troublesome. It was closed for three days this past March because of avalanche danger. Snowdrifts and rockslides have closed it several times in recent years.

But the state is taking care of the highway. Just last year the Colorado Department of Transportation completed a large resurfacing project on the south side of Douglas Pass.

Today, a century after it was first proposed, Highway 139 over Douglas Pass remains the quickest auto route between the Grand Valley and the Uintah Basin. The drive from Grand Junction to Vernal that took eight hours in 1924, can now be accomplished in three.

Sources: Colorado and Utah newspapers; the Museums of Western Colorado; The Uintah County Regional History Center;



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

A southbound semitrailer nears the top of Douglas Pass last week. The Douglas Creek drainage is in the background.

Vernal, Utah; "Douglas Pass," by Herb Bacon, Grand Junction Rotary 50th anniversary edition; Colorado Department of Transportation, www.cdout.gov.

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