

Chapter 6

BOOM AND BUST: DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II, 1930-1945

During the Great Depression, Colorado went on a road-building binge fueled by federal work programs. The 1930s is remembered as a decade of transformation for Colorado's roads, and substantial credit for the improvements is due to the leadership of State Highway Engineer Charles D. Vail. Appointed in December 1930, Vail immediately established a policy of oiling the state's roadways as the only method to ensure miles of safe, dustless, hard-surfaced highways. He was described by a colleague as "blunt, undiplomatic, tough as leather, he never dodged a fight or an issue" (Williams, 1945: 30). Vail used those characteristics to win appropriations from the state legislature and the federal government to build more roads. In 1930, Colorado counted only 533 miles of hard-surfaced routes, mostly concrete pavement. By 1941, asphalt covered 4,200 miles of highways statewide (Rocky Mountain Contractor, January 8, 1941: 22-3) [Figure 5].

6.1 Back to Work – PWA/WPA Building Roads in Colorado, 1933-1941

If Vail had the vision, Federal New Deal programs supplied the money to hire and pay the necessary labor. In the early 1930s, drought and dust storms blew the state's agricultural economy toward disaster. The federal government responded with 16 work-relief road projects in southeastern Colorado totaling over \$1 million. The National Industrial Recovery Act was the first federal program to affect highway development in Colorado in the mid-1930s (Colorado State Highway Commission, Minutes of Highway Advisory Board Session, Book 5, April 12, 1935: 8-9).

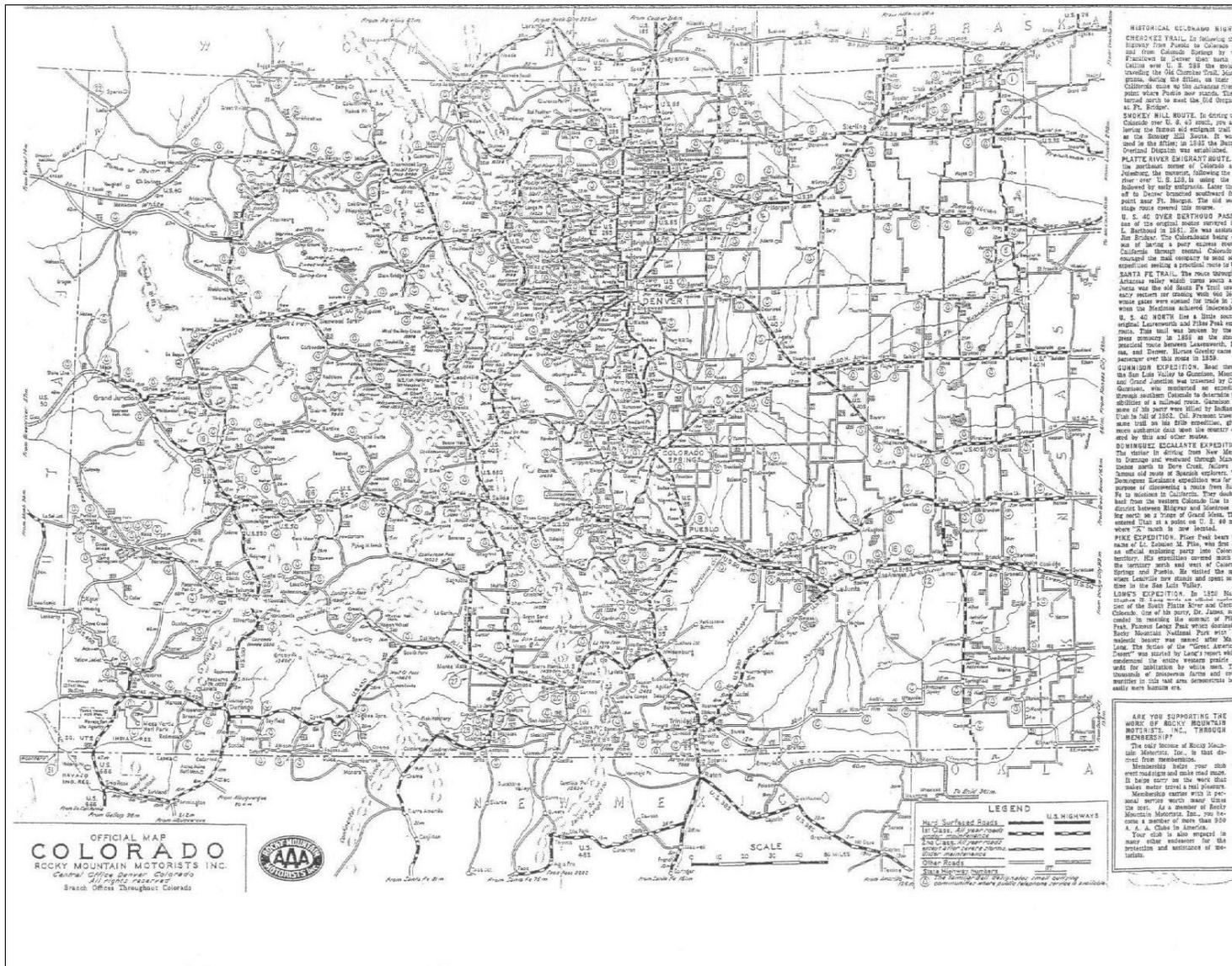


Figure 5. By 1930, a patchwork of hard-surfaced roads were in place across Colorado (Source: Rocky Mountain Motorists Official Map of Colorado, 1930. Courtesy of Rocky Mountain Philatelic Library, Denver).

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Work Progress Administration (WPA) left the greatest legacy to the state's highway system. There were 2,070,000 workers on WPA rolls by the end of 1939 and over 900,000 enrollees building highways or streets (Thomas, 1996: 115). In Colorado, WPA employees built or improved 5,760 miles of highways and constructed or repaved 2,553 bridges from July 1936 to December 31, 1939. Most of this work was concentrated in rural Colorado, where WPA men widened, graded, and resurfaced 5,065 miles of farm-to-market roads. Some important WPA jobs included reconstruction and oil-surfacing of 38 miles of State Highway 12 west of Trinidad in Las Animas County; construction of 31 miles of new oil-surfaced highway north of Fort Collins to the Wyoming border; and the completion of a four-lane, oil-surfaced highway extending West Alameda Avenue 11 miles through Jefferson County. Construction on the new West Alameda skirted Green Mountain before joining US Highway 40 on the other side of the hogback rock formation. In addition to roads, WPA workers also built 1,698 bridges across Colorado from 1936 to 1939 (Rocky Mountain Contractor, March 27, 1940: 8).

Despite the Depression, tourism remained an important element of the state's economy. During the 1930s, tourist travel contributed "an estimated gross income of \$100,000,000 a year" while the transportation and communication industries regularly employing "some 35,000 Coloradoans" (Workers of the Writers' Program, 1987: 73). Both the Highway Department and federal work programs were involved with a number of mountain construction projects throughout the 1930s. Work progressed on six main highways leading to the Rockies: the Big Thompson and North Saint Vrain highways serving Estes Park and the Rocky Mountain National Park in northern Colorado; the Mount Vernon Canyon-Floyd Hill highway on US Highway 40 between Denver and Idaho Springs; US Highway 24 west from Colorado Springs and Manitou Springs by the Ute Pass and Florissant to Buena Vista and Leadville; US 50 west from Canon City to Salida; and US 160 west of Walsenburg over La Veta Pass to Alamosa and then over Wolf Creek Pass to southwestern Colorado. Approximately 1,700 miles of new roads were built during the last half of the 1930s. A large portion of that mileage went through the Rocky Mountains. Construction through the Rockies did not come cheap -- engineers estimated that blasting an auto road through the solid granite of a canyon cost between \$25,000 to \$130,000 or more per mile (Figure 6).

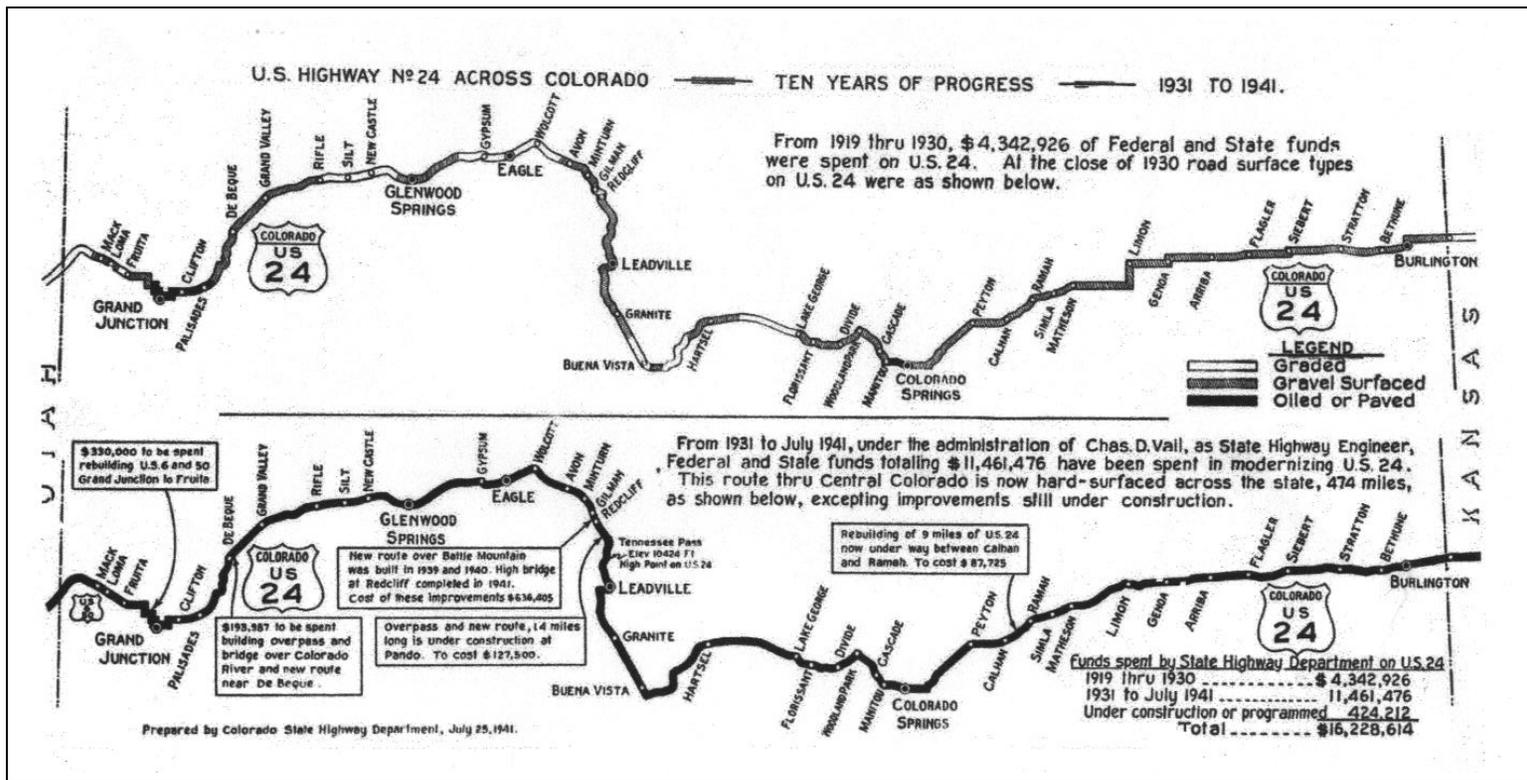


Figure 6. During the 1930s, the State Highway Department transformed US 24 from a graded and graveled road to a hard-surfaced highway across Colorado (Rocky Mountain Contractor, September 4, 1941:8).

During the late 1930s, the state highway department rebuilt US 160 and Wolf Creek Pass along its present alignment. US 160 linked the San Luis Valley to the Colorado-Utah border. The highway covered a distance of 315 miles from Walsenburg to the Utah state line past Cortez. Construction of a 7.5-mile road segment proceeded along “precipitous walls of granite” at a cost of \$2.6 million. Completion of US 160 and upgrading Wolf Creek Pass in 1938 brought far southwestern Colorado several hours closer to the rest of the state with its completion (Williams, 1937(a): 7).

By the late 1930s, the Public Works Administration (PWA) replaced the WPA as the primary federal work program in the state. PWA labor forged a new route between Wheeler Junction and Minturn, now known as Vail Pass. In June 1936, the Highway Department conducted a reconnaissance survey from the road near Shrine Pass northwesterly over the top of an unnamed pass near Black Lake and following Black Gore Creek to Gore Creek. During 1939 to 1940, two crews of PWA labor built 4.6 miles of highway between Wheeler Junction and the top of the new pass, while a contractor tackled the 9.5-mile stretch from the top of the pass down the west side to Gore Creek. Another contractor built the remaining 9.8 miles from Gore Creek to the town of Dowd. Several mountain counties passed resolutions urging the department to name the new road Vail Pass, after State Highway Engineer Charles Vail. Bowing to popular demand, in December 1939, Vail ordered the department’s shop to create signs along the pass bearing his name (Wiley, 1976: 27).

Vail also was busy behind the scenes. Eager to gather additional federal-highway funding, the highway department passed a 1938 resolution expanding the state highway system by 2,700 miles of previously local roads. State Highway Engineer Vail recommended this should be accomplished “in such a way as not to materially change the proportion of the mileage of state highways in each county.” Many of these routes were short spurs and links that the state eventually turned back to local jurisdictions by the late 1940s (Colorado Department of Highways, Minutes of Advisory Board Session, April 22, 1938: 2).

The crafty Vail knew that the state would need all the miles it could count as state highways when Congress passed another highway aid package. This maneuver was Vail's final contribution to the state, as he died in office in January 1945 (Figure 7).

MAP SHOWING STATE HIGHWAYS AS OF APRIL 22, 1938

MAP OF THE STATE HIGHWAYS OF COLORADO

Scale 1:500,000

