

# Construction of road up Mt. Evans fraught with peril for crews

The summit of Mount Evans, one of Colorado's most impressive 14,000-foot-plus peaks, is reached on the highest paved road in North America.



**Frances Melrose**

Rocky Mountain Memories

People from throughout the world make the drive up for what has become one of the state's greatest tourist attractions. They go up for a view of Pikes Peak, Longs Peak, the Sangre de Cristo Range, Mount of the Holy Cross, Kenosha Pass and Trail Ridge Road, plus the thrill of a destination well above timberline.

Last year, according to Carl Sorrentino, public information officer for the Colorado Department of Highways, an average of 150 cars a day visited the summit during the 70 days the road was open. The yearly total of visitors sometimes reaches 150,000.

Opening up this scenic wonder was one of the engineering feats of the age. Colorado's governor was determined to see that a road reached the top of Mount Evans, and made strenuous efforts to achieve this goal.

On Dec. 10, 1923, U.S. district forester Allen Peck announced that an area of 100 square miles in the Mount Evans section of Pike National Forest would be opened to the public with the building of a road to the top.

The road was built in three sections. The contract for the first, from Echo Lake to Summit Lake, was awarded to Ed H. Honnen with a bid of \$57,500. This section of the road is the first to be opened each spring. It was completed Sept. 8, 1924.

The second section, from Summit Lake to the saddle between Mount Epaulet and Mount Evans, was contracted to the Dooling Brothers for \$26,900. It was completed Sept. 7, 1925.

The final and most difficult leg to the summit was started Aug. 24, 1926, and completed Oct. 4,

1927. Luke E. Smith was the contractor; his bid was \$74,300.

Surveys preceding the road-building were as awe-inspiring as the construction. *Colorado Highways Magazine* of February 1924 tells a story of the Mount Evans Road Survey in a first-person account by Drexel Lacey.

With four others, Lacey set out from the Royal Ranch in Deer Creek Valley on Sept. 8 to survey the road from the then-terminus at Summit Lake, over the ridge of Mount Evans and down the other side to connect with the Deer Creek road.

Each man led a horse loaded with equipment, including a two-month supply of bacon and beans. They were inexperienced packers and nearly all had to cope with packs that slipped up, or down, or turned under the horse's belly, requiring stops and delays for correction.

On the southern slope of Mount Epaulet, 13,000 feet high in a spot somewhat protected from the wind, and near a spring, they pitched their tents. The camp was about 3 miles from Summit Lake, and getting lost in the morning fog was an almost daily occurrence, Lacey said. In addition, they were buffeted by snow and high winds.

"Notwithstanding the days of severe winds and snow, we succeeded in bringing our line to a point in the saddle between Mount Evans and Mount Epaulet, where a future road will branch off to the summit of Mount Evans," Lacey wrote. The road, he said, would reach an altitude of 14,260 feet.

"Here we were overtaken by a blizzard which lasted several days, during which one of our party, John Campion, died," Lacey continued.

The next day they took the body down to Royal Ranch, a 10-mile trip that took 8½ hours. During that journey they named the pass between Mount Evans and Mount Epaulet Campion Pass.

Two days later the surveyors returned to find their tents down, the canvas slashed and poles

splintered by the wind, and their bedding covered with snow. Fortunately, they had brought up an additional tent.

"The next day we ran a line of about a mile toward Mount Rosale, and then had to abandon it when we came to a chasm 1,000 feet deep and 1,000 feet across," wrote Lacey.

"Only one possible location remained, taking us around the west side of Mount Epaulet, where the country is very rough, with great rock bluffs rising about 1,500 feet from the lake-dotted basin below."

They had to plan for three short tunnels through the bluffs. In the process, they found rocks and ledges covered with snow and ice and used extreme caution in lowering one another on ropes to set up transits.

"This portion of the road will open to the public a wild and rugged country unsurpassed for scenic grandeur," said Lacey.

The surveyors also found themselves working against time so they wouldn't be marooned on top in deep snow. But the work was not without many incidents.

"The wind blew so hard it took two men on the level rod," said Lacey. And they often faced temperatures of 25 degrees below zero.

The pack train had to make several trips from the ranch to the top bringing in supplies, and the men had to go about 2 miles to get wood.

A picture accompanying the *Colorado Highways* article shows a pack burro in snow to its shoulders. One horse became frightened and ran away, falling over a 500-foot cliff.

Camp was moved three times during the survey.

"Then came the 3-foot snow and we were forced to chain and shovel out 3 miles of stakes in order to run our levels. . . ." said Lacey. "Beyond the creek we located a switchback and dropped at an average grade of 4% over the ridge and into the Deer Creek Valley. . . ."

The surveyors tied-in their line to the Morrison-Bailey survey June 13, 1924, having run 25 miles of location with a maximum grade

of 6% and dropping 5,000 feet in elevation.

The Mount Evans road at first was named the Warren G. Harding Highway, after the president.

"When completed it will open to the world for all time a wonderland of rare scenic beauty. . . ." said the *Colorado Highways* article, "a worthy tribute to the memory of our late president."

Today the Mount Evans Road is open from July 4 to Labor Day, with occasional openings in mid-June if snow is lighter, said Larry Lindner, U.S. Forest Service district ranger for the Clear Creek district.

From 1940 to 1979, visitors to the summit could find food, facilities and souvenirs in the Crest House, a native-stone structure built in 1940. The building, operated by a private concessionaire, burned in 1979 when propane used for heating exploded into a fire.

Since the fire, arguments have been waged about rebuilding the concessions house. In March 1990, Skip Underwood, supervisor of the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forest, decided against the rebuilding. The following month, The Mountain States Legal Foundation filed suit against the decision in behalf of the concessionaire.

"It currently is in litigation," said Lindner.

The red portable toilets that so irritated visitors after the fire have been replaced with standard pump-vault toilets like those used in all forest service campgrounds, he said.

"Our idea is to keep the mountain top for lectures and nature demonstrations of flora and fauna," Lindner said. "The ruins of the Crest House serve as a background. As for food and souvenirs, visitors to the top have to pass through the Echo Lake Lodge area going and coming and can get those things there."

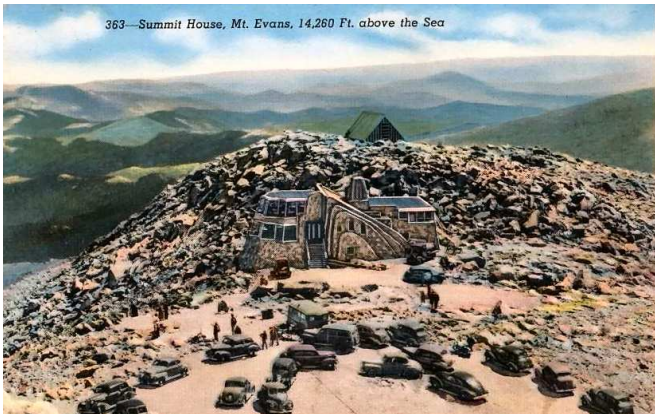
*Readers are invited to submit questions of regional historical interest and their own long-ago memories and photographs. Address: Frances Melrose, Rocky Mountain Memories, Rocky Mountain News, P.O. Box 719, Denver 80201.*



Mt. Evans Crest House Alt. 14,260



363—Summit House, Mt. Evans, 14,260 Ft. above the Sea



SUMMIT HOUSE ON MOUNT EVANS, NEAR DENVER, COLORADO