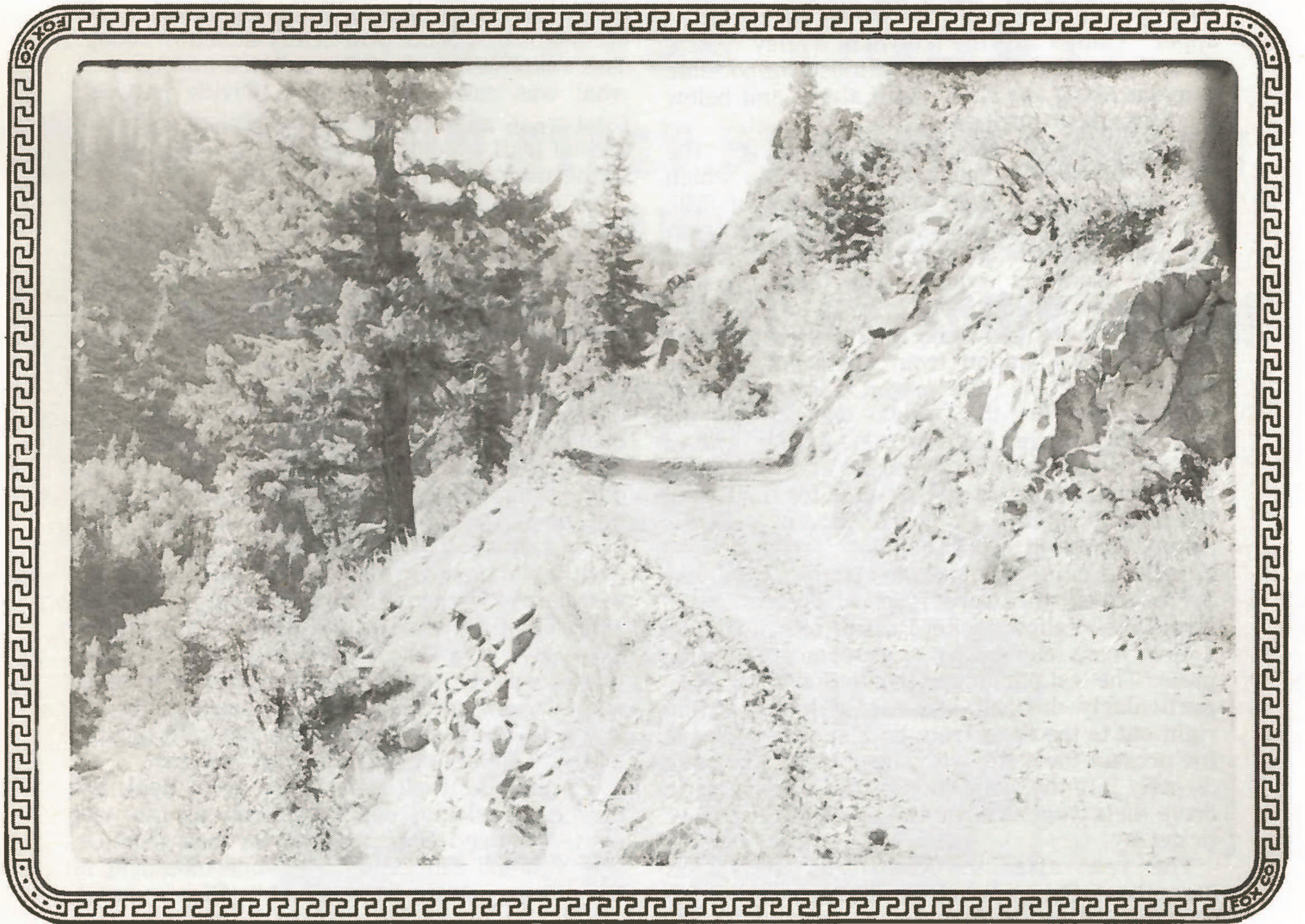


# ROUTES OF ROUTT

BY DAVID B. MAY NARRATED BY WILLIAM B. MAY



Mad Creek Canyon Road. Typical of many old time routes in Routt.

When my father (Fred N. May) came here in 1901 there were no railroads, nor was there a wagon road over Rabbit Ears Pass. Most people came to Steamboat by the stage route which linked Steamboat to the Rio Grande Railroad. The closest point on the railroad was Wolcott which was thus the terminus of the 85 mile stage line. This route can be generally followed today by taking the road from Steamboat to Oak Creek by way of Yellow Jacket Pass (the present road to Oak Creek, Yampa, McCoy, State Bridge, and Wolcott).

Although trappers and scouts may have visited parts of the Yampa Valley as early as the 1820's, these people used pack animals to transport

goods. The first wheeled vehicle to follow along the Yampa River was probably in '49 when gold seekers enroute to California dropped south from the immigrant trail across Wyoming, in search of suitable pasture where their trail worn ox teams could recuperate enough to continue on to the west coast. These explorers followed up the Yampa to the "Steamboat Springs" where they built an adobe fort and camped until their oxen were ready to travel again.

The next wheels to roll along the Yampa were those of carts and wagons accompanying the large hunting party of an Irish nobleman (Sir Lord George Gore). Gore entered the area from Middle Park via "Gore Pass" in the summer of



'54 but probably didn't come as far down the river as Steamboat.

After the Gore expedition, wagon travel to the area gradually accelerated; but the ensuing wagon trail didn't follow the river, but instead cut across this great bend in the river where Steamboat is located. This "cut across" was a direct route following Trout Creek through Twenty Mile Park from Egeria Park on the upper Yampa to the Hayden Valley below Steamboat and avoiding almost impossible canyons along the river, both above and below the Steamboat Springs.

Wagon travel also started reaching "the Peak" (or mining camp of Hahn's Peak which was established in 1866) before the year of 1870. These first wagons reached Hahn's Peak from the north embarking from points on the Union Pacific Railroad which was built across Wyoming in the late 60's

So far as we know the first settler to reach Steamboat by wagon from upstream (as the '49ers came to Steamboat Springs from downstream or the west) was when the Crawford's moved here in 1875. At the time of arrival, all this part of "Colorado Territory" was included in Grand County (named for the Grand River-now called the Colorado River) with the county seat at Hot Sulphur Springs. The Crawfords came to Steamboat from Hot Sulphur Springs over the Gore Pass to Egeria Park, hence over Yellow Jacket Pass on a trail opened a few years earlier by a government survey party. The last part of the trip to Steamboat was particularly difficult because of hills running right out to the river from both sides just above the present town site with sheer bluffs dropping directly into the river forcing the Crawfords to drive their wagons down the middle of the river to get by.

The year after the Crawfords arrival at Steamboat, Colorado achieved statehood, and in 1877 Routt County was carved from its parent (Grand County) and given the name of the governor of the state (John L. Routt) and included all of that area now covered by both Routt and Moffat counties.

During Crawford's first ten years at Steamboat there was little traffic to or from this new settlement. A mail route (horseback) was established between Steamboat and the Hot Sulphur Springs and, of course, an occasional traveler passed through Steamboat while traveling between "the Peak" and Middle Park. The Crawfords and others who gradually joined Crawford's settlement made a trip or two to the "outside" each year for their year's supply of provisions.

Then came the big change! In 1885, the Rio Grande Railroad was built along Eagle River and a stage line was established between Wolcott and Steamboat. This road even proved a better

way to haul supplies to "the Peak" than coming in from the north. And so, Steamboat became a thriving community on a major road.

During the first years of this century nearly all communication between Hayden (and points west clear to Utah line) and Hahn's Peak (which was then the county seat for all this area — the entire present counties of Routt and Moffat) was by means of a route practically unknown today. This route followed up Deep Creek and crossed what was called the Hayden Divide between Pilot Knob and Wolf Mountain. This was an old Indian trail which followed one of the principle game migration routes.

An old timer who was living on Deep Creek during the late 80's told Dad that he had seen herds of elk migrating up Deep Creek in the fall as they drifted towards their winter ranges to the west. They numbered in the hundreds (he had watched one herd pass which he had estimated to contain 1200 elk). The last of such big migration of elk was (I think) in the fall of '88. As the elk herds moved down the Yampa River they were under extraordinary hunting pressure by market hunters who supplied meat to the mining camps along the front range. These hunters gave up the slaughter as the herds moved north from around Maybell. One theory was that the elk went on to Jackson Hole, but a more accurate assessment of the facts was probably that most of the elk died from the unusually severe winter. Snow covered all the winter range that year and for some weeks was crusted so hard that the only animals able to break the crust enough to find any feed under the snow were the wild horses, and even many of these did not survive.

Ute Indians used this route a great deal, but they didn't always depend entirely on the wild game that used the same trail, for their food. On one occasion Bill Leahy was superintendent of the placer works at "the Peak". Placer works



Conestoga Wagon or "Prairie Schooner"





William May (narrator) on summer range with cattle.

was the type of mining used at "the Peak" at that time. As he was going up Deep Creek to Hayden he came upon an encampment of Utes. The Indians invited Bill to stop for lunch, an invitation he was glad to accept as he'd had quite a ride since breakfast, plenty to give him a good appetite and appreciate an opportunity to rest a bit. Bill had dismounted before he happened to notice some fresh skinned dog hides beside a teepee and realized what his lunch would be if he stayed. Knowing that he couldn't eat dog Bill did some quick thinking to come up with an excuse to move along without offending his hosts.

In my own time automobiles had replaced wagons and since the county seat had been moved to Steamboat, there wasn't a great deal of "wheeled vehicle" traffic over this route. It was, however, still the migration route for thousands of domestic sheep as they traveled between their high summer range and their winter range on the desert. These bands of sheep were generally accompanied by horse drawn camp wagons. The few bands of sheep that still move between the desert and the high country are mostly hauled by truck now, and I don't recall any trail bands moving over this route for some time, probably more than ten years now.

Another Indian trail crossed the pass between Deep Creek and California Park (which is land at the head of the Elk Head River). As far as I know the only major use of this route by early settlers was by hunting parties from Elk River and Deep Creek who hunted in California Park. My dad accompanied several of these hunting

expeditions. This was about the only use for this trail until the railroad reached Steamboat in 1909, then the whole picture changed.

California and Slater Parks together with the mountain range country both east and west of these parks was the heart of the summer range for the really big cattle outfits of the day. These included the Two Bars, the Sevens, the Figure Four, the HX, and the 00 which collectively may have had upwards toward 40,000 cattle. At one time something like 20 percent to 30 percent of this number was being shipped out as beef each year and replaced with younger animals—Texas and Mexican steers.

When the Moffat railroad reached Steamboat, this, of course, became the logical beef shipping point for cattle from this vast range area, rather than taking them to the Union Pacific at Rawlins or to the Rio Grande at Wolcott, as in earlier times. The old beef trail to Wolcott went from Hayden through Twenty Mile Park to Egeria Park and then to Wolcott by the old stage route.

With Steamboat the shipping point, the trail from California Park to Deep Creek and on to Steamboat by way of the Salt Creek Road (over Gilleland and Fisher Hills), through Fly Gulch and then on the main road over Crawford Hill, came to be known as "The Beef Trail". For several years this route played a mighty important part in the economics of Routt County. This was so until the really big range outfits were forced out of business by the Forest Service practice of limiting the number of animals any one owner could graze on Forest land and giving preference to small ranchers and homesteaders in the issuing of permits to graze livestock.

When Dad came here there were few bridges across the Yampa River and none across the



Cattle on their way to summer range.



Elk River. Wagon roads crossed rivers at the better fords, but even these were quite hazardous at high water time. My Uncle (Dad's brother, Jess May) nearly lost his life when the current of the river turned his horse over backwards on top of him while crossing the Elk River where the Cochran bridge was later built.

The Steamboat, Clark, "Hans" (as it was called by the old timers) Peak Road has changed courses several times over the years. This route used to go through Fly Gulch instead of through the Elk River Canyon. The road through the canyon was built just a little before Dad came here.

When the Steamboat-Hahn's Peak traffic used to go through Fly Gulch, it required fording the Elk River at the ford where Uncle Jess was nearly drowned and again at what was known as St. John's Ford just above the canyon. Of course, people headed for the Deep Creek area which lies west of the river didn't use the St. John's Ford on the way from or to Steamboat until the road was built down the canyon. After that, Deep Creekers had their choice of which route they took to Steamboat. Either way, they had to ford the river, but by going down the canyon they avoided pulling over quite a hill, so they usually went down the canyon.

The present Elk River Road between the Steamboat airport and Cullen's Corner wasn't built until about 1926. The gravel road which parallels the present highway to the west was the old stage route. Where this road crossed the divide between the State Creek and Elk River drainages was quite a hill, generally called "Crawford Hill" because the road (on the north slope of the hill went through a part of Logan Crawford's homestead).

Building the road through the Elk River Canyon was a much improved route to "the Peak", as it eliminated the need for crossing the river at two fords and pulling the hill between Fly Gulch and St. John's Ford. There were, however, still some pretty good hills to pull. One of these was called Turner Hill. At the Cullen corner the road didn't follow right up the river as it does now, but instead followed up the top of the shale ridge east of the river, then crossed over a bench formed by a big slide. From this point a grade was cut down the hillside toward Hot Springs Creek.

The stage route between Steamboat and Hayden at the turn of the century didn't follow the present highway because some three or four miles below Steamboat, the hills ran right out to the river with shale bluffs dropping off into sloughy areas along the river. At this point the road crossed the broad low ridge known as Four Mile Hill between the Yampa or Bear River as it was commonly called at that time and Elk River.

Where the Four Mile Hill Road hit Elk River, it forded the river into what was known as the

Trull neighborhood. The Trull Post Office was upstream a couple miles from this point. The same neighborhood had been known as Puma, because pumas or mountain lions were common here in the early days before Trulls started the post office.

Clay Monson told me about riding the stage on this old route. The driver was an Indian fellow was new on the job. When the stage was fording Elk River the driver got scared, dropped the lines and jumped off. Clay managed to grab the lines and took the stage on across and waited for the Indian to swim out and take the lines again.

From the Elk River Ford at the north end of the Four Mile Hill Road, the stage turned west following Elk River (on the north side) downstream to where the present lower Elk River road crosses back over to the south, but the old stage route continued on down the north side going up over Decora Hill and past the Pool Post Office which was operated by the Hitchens family. Some thought this was named for Poole, because the Hitchens family came from England. Actually it was named for an irrigation reservoir or "pool", since Hitchens came from Cornwall, England.

The old stage stop and post office was located just north of the present Errold Hitchens (grandson of the pioneer proprietor of Pool) ranch buildings. Remains of the old Pool Post Office can still be seen from the present highway, U.S. 40.

During the first years of its designation as U.S. 40 the road still followed the old stage route across Four Mile and Decora Hills and past Pool. The present route of U.S. 40 between Steamboat and Milner was constructed by the late W.C. Wheeler in the early '20's, using all horse equipment.



"Pool" in its days of glory. Center couple are Mr. and Mrs. James Hitchens.





Pool as it is now. David B. May left, & Errold Hitchens, grandson of James Hitchens.

My father had quite a bit to do with improving roads in the Elk River area, as he laid out several of the grades still used by our present roads. One of these was up Smith Hill between Deep Creek and Long Gulch; another was the Ducey grade (the road overseer that Dad worked for was named Ducey) on the road to Hahn's Peak above Glen Eden.



Fred N. May and Gossit daughters in buggy.

A rancher by the name of Trissle who lived just upstream a ways from the St. John Ford was drowned in Elk River, but I don't know if it was at this ford or at some other place. He was buried at the Trull Cemetery. Also buried at Trull was little Johnny Cullen who was drowned on July 4, 1895, when the Cullen family was attempting to ford Elk River at Cullen's corner, on the way back to their homestead (now a part of our meadow) after celebrating the 4th in Steamboat. This little boy was a brother of Maggie Stees and Toots Stevens who both still live here, and Jennie Hitchens who now lives at Brush. This happened before Toots or Jennie was born; Maggie was one year old, and her sister, the late Annie Squires, was three. Johnny was the oldest child.

In 1900 the Cullen family sold their homestead to Sam (Buck) Buchanan and moved on to Pat Cullen's "timber claim" on the east side of the river. This made it so Cullens didn't have to cross the river to go to town, but put the river between the Cullen children and their school. The school was at old Cora Ile's cabin, half a mile west of the schoolhouse which was later built at the mouth of Fly Gulch. On this account Pat Cullen put a cable across the river (fastened to a tree on each side), from which was suspended a small platform which ran on a couple of pulleys. The cable was just at the end of the grade between Turner Hill and Hot Springs Creek.

This made it possible for the children to cross the river during high water time and then walk the three miles to summer school, or it even worked to transport an adult across the river, unless the person happened to be on one side and the car was on the other.

Joe Critchfield, who had a homestead in Fly Gulch, once woke up with such a toothache that he couldn't stand it. The river was high, and he was afraid to attempt fording it with a horse, but thought he could cross on Cullen's cable car and then walk on to Steamboat to get a doctor to pull his tooth. Well, when he got to the cable, the car was on the other side. This was about midnight with no moon and the river at flood stage, but the toothache was so bad that Joe felt he had no choice but to cross anyway. He wrapped his legs around the cable and proceeded to pull himself across hand over hand with the water almost touching his back and knowing a slip meant certain drowning. When he got across, the toothache was completely gone! Joe was so mad, he walked on to Steamboat and had the tooth pulled anyway.

Oh, yes, I meant to mention also the Buffalo Pass Road. Some supplies were brought to Steamboat by this route, but it wasn't used much after the railroad reached Wolcott in '85.

The arrival of our own railroad (the Moffat or Denver and Salt Line) in 1909 brought an end to the old stage line between Steamboat and



Wolcott. But, at the same time, the "horseless carriage" had arrived on the scene, and a short time later (1912) the county seat was moved to Steamboat Springs, a mighty important place, even though Steamboat could claim to be county seat of only an area considerably less than half the size of the county which had been governed from Han's (or Hahn's) Peak. Anyway, this combination of factors inspired Steamboaters to deem it an absolute necessity to be linked by an automobile highway direct to Denver, and so the highway over Rabbit Ears Pass evolved. It would make another very interesting chapter to describe the various stage stations and the people who managed these places, and a few interesting incidents involving these places on the routes between Steamboat and Hot Sulphur Springs, Wolcott, Hayden, Elk River, and Hahn's Peak.

In passing I will mention one stage stop on Elk River which was one of the early "Road

Ranches" of the area (as were most of the other stage stops) accommodating freighters, ranchers and any other passing travelers. This was the Glen Eden Ranch located above Clark where the Hahn's Peak road crossed the river. Glen Eden was originally operated by George Kinney ( a brother of the Kinney's who ranched just above the Elk River Canyon and whose grandson Dean Look is still on the place). Glen Eden developed into one of the area's first guest ranches and is still in operation. At the time Dad came here, the road from Glen Eden to Hinman Park was on the southeast side of the river. This road went up over the hill just above Glen Eden, known as Kinney Hill then. Just a little later a road was started up the northwest side of the river (where the road is now). The new road was vastly improved sometime between 1914 and 1920 by road work done by W.C. Wheeler and his brother-in-laws, the Ropers.



Old horse drawn roadgrader. Man at left is Old Bill Mosher



