

Chapter 4

TERRITORIAL AND PRE-AUTOMOBILE STATE ROADS

4.1 Kansas Territorial Road Improvements

The discovery of gold in 1859 brought the first mass migration of Euro-Americans to Colorado. The initial edition of the *Rocky Mountain News* from April 1859 printed the region's first road map. The guide detailed routes across the Nebraska and Kansas Territories to the gold fields along the Rocky Mountains. In the early 1860s, the Rockies and the prairies still belonged to Kansas Territory. In January 1860, the Kansas Territorial Legislature authorized construction of a handful of toll bridges and roads, including a toll road from Soda Springs (today's Manitou Springs) into South Park along the "Ute Trail," now known as US 24 and a toll bridge across the Arkansas River near Pueblo (Ridgway, 1932: 163, 165). Territorial governments were not the only ones involved in road construction during the gold rush. From the fall of 1859 to the spring of 1860, private-wagon road companies constructed toll roads from Denver to Bergen Park near Evergreen and from Mount Vernon to Taryall (Ridgway, 1932: 164).

Bridges were also important during the territorial era in helping to turn mining camps into communities. In 1859, Thomas J. Bayaud obtained a contract from the Denver town managers to build a bridge over the South Platte River at the foot of Fifteenth Street. A subsequent bridge crossed Cherry Creek at Larimer Street in 1860. A handful of additional bridges followed, but a May 1864 flood destroyed most of the city's bridges (Christensen, et. al., 1987: 49).

4.2 Colorado Road Improvements

Colorado earned separate territorial status from the United States Congress on February 28, 1861. In the legislature's first session, in September of that year, lawmakers authorized construction of a number of toll roads across the territory. On July 7, 1862, the second session of the Colorado Territorial Legislature approved a motion to build a territory-wide network of 19 roads. The proposal's language identified these routes by

specific terminal points. One path, “From Denver, by way of Boulder, to Laporte,” adapted the route known by the pioneers as the Cherokee Trail. The legislature’s description partially traces the path of today’s Interstate 25 (Colorado Department of Highways, 1964: 1).

Prospectors across the Continental Divide established camps and settlements in pursuit of gold. Private toll roads, chartered by the Territorial Legislature for five dollars, brought supplies in and ore out. The Denver, Auraria, and Colorado Toll Road Company built the first of these from Denver to Bergen Park in 1859 (Ridgway: 164). From the 1860s to the 1890s, the State legislature chartered 43 toll roads statewide, varying from two to 200 miles in length. Tolls varied with the length of the road or its cost of construction. Relative rates were as follows:

Each vehicle with one span of horses, mules or cattle \$1.00
Each additional pair of draft animals attached .25
Each horse or mule with rider .25
Horses, mules, cattle or jackasses driven loose .10 per head
Sheep, hogs or goats .05 per head
Travel for attendance at funerals Free

(Source: Ridgway: 168).

During Colorado’s territorial history (1861-1876), and for the remainder of the 19th century, a small portion of the state’s Internal Improvement Fund went toward road and bridge construction. Authorized by the first state legislature in 1876, proceeds from the sale of state lands, and interest on deferred payments connected to those sales, supplied the Improvement Fund. Never a sure source of revenue, the Improvement Fund’s coffers fluctuated from a few thousand dollars a year to a peak of \$341,000 in 1889. Not every citizen approved of how the state distributed appropriations for construction. Most Coloradoans saw the fund as a “pork barrel” for politicians seeking to repay favors to cronies through construction projects (Merchant, 1955: 75-6).

Government road funding was still in its infancy, and profit-seeking stage lines, mining companies, and industrious entrepreneurs built most of Colorado’s roads during the

state's first quarter century. During the 1870s and 1880s, Otto Mears was a one-man highway department, building 383 miles of toll road across western Colorado, including today's Million Dollar Highway, or US 550. In 1881, crews working for Mears blasted a shelf through the solid rock of Red Mountain on their way to building a road at an estimated cost of \$40,000 per mile. After the road was completed in 1883, public support for Mears quickly turned to wrath when he began levying \$5 tolls for a team and wagon, \$2.50 for a trail wagon, and \$1 for saddle animals to cross his road. Public outcry pushed the county and state to assume control of the road by 1887. Despite his greed, Mears is remembered as the man who opened western Colorado to the rest of the state (Colorado Highways, March 1926(a): 8; Clay, April 1927: 6).

Elsewhere in Colorado, toll roads slowly passed from existence by the early 1890s. Increasing numbers of people establishing residency in the various mining districts and counties paid for new road construction through poll taxes. In addition to paying, many communities also went out and built the roads.

In spite of its relative isolation from the rest of the country, Colorado followed another nationwide trend in highway construction at the close of the 19th century. In 1899, the General Assembly passed a bill authorizing convict labor to build a wagon road between Leadville and Pueblo. State officials deemed the experiment a success, and once the automobile came on the scene, Colorado rapidly led the nation in the use of convicts on road construction. Colorado enjoyed the luxury of having both men and material readily available. The state quarried the lime, gravel, and stone necessary to complete the roads from a pit behind the state prison at Canon City. From 1905 to 1926, prisoners built a number of important roads still in use today, including roads from Pueblo to Leadville, Colorado Springs to Leadville, Canon City to the Royal Gorge Bridge, and roads through the Big Thompson, Colorado, and Saint Vrain river canyons. The state stopped using convict labor by the late 1920s in response to private contractors' complaints and Federal Bureau of Public Roads' regulations prohibiting the use of prison labor on federal-aid projects (Maloney and Reedy, 1929: 17).

By the turn of the 20th century, new technologies and new industries were coming to shake Colorado's government leaders from their indifference regarding improved roads. Heady from the scent of gasoline, a cadre of influential, automobile owning citizens drove Colorado's elected representatives to a legislative crossroads to make one of the most monumental decisions in state history.