

## **Chapter 8**

### **NOWHERE LEFT TO DRIVE, 1973-2000**

By the mid-1980s, there were few new roads left to build across Colorado as a whole. Eighty years of construction did not suddenly end. Instead, it began to centralize in those areas of the state with the greatest traffic volume. During the last 15 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most road-building projects either began or ended in Denver. In 1985, the state completed 1.2 miles of I-76 from Wadsworth Boulevard to Sheridan Boulevard. That mile-and-a-fraction represented the first interstate opening in Colorado since the May 1976 completion of I-225 in Aurora. With the completion of a 1.7-mile gap between Pecos Street and Interstate 25, the CDOT declared I-76 complete in 1993. Construction of multi-lane highways also looped their way around Denver by the mid-1980s. In 1985, the first 9.5-mile segment of the controversial Centennial Parkway (C-470), between I-25 and Santa Fe Drive (US 85) opened to public. Two years later, the second segment of C-470 opened from Wadsworth Boulevard to Ken Caryl Avenue, followed in 1988 with a third segment south of Golden.

#### **8.1 Growth Demands Pavement: Colorado's Economic and Population Boom**

The expansion of the nation's interstate system opened Colorado to more visitors and transplants in search of a new home. Much of the inspiration leading newcomers to Colorado is rooted in the environmental movement of the 1970s. In the national mind, Colorado represented a refuge of mountains untouched by over-development, urban decay, and sprawl. Ironically, the primary way to get to and travel around this idealized paradise was behind the wheel of an automobile.

In the state's largest city, the car continued to direct design and policy making while contributing to Denver's growth. By 1974, metropolitan Denver had almost as many vehicles (1,178,054) as people (1,498,000). However, during the 1970s the population of the City and County of Denver declined from 514,678 in 1970 to 492,635 in 1980. During the same 10 years, the surrounding counties of Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Clear Creek, Douglas, Gilpin and Jefferson jumped from 728,686 to 1,133,404 (Noel, 1987: 48). The automobile remained at the very foundation of Colorado's economic fortunes during the 1980s. At the start of the decade, Colorado had the

sixth-highest per capita motor vehicle registration in the country (Noel, 1987: 42). These numbers only grew as the state basked in its longest period of economic and population growth during the 1990s. Over the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state gained more than a million people from 3,294,394 in 1990 to 4,301,261 in 2000 (<http://www.dola.co.us/demog/Censusdata/oldcensi.html>).

In the face of increasing air pollution and traffic congestion, the state's voters concluded a decade of growth with the approval of a multi-billion-dollar package to upgrade Colorado's primary thoroughfare – Interstate 25. The vote ensured that Colorado's dependence on cars would continue into another century.

## **8.2 The Toll of Traffic**

By the 1980s, Colorado's heaviest traveled roads could not stand the strain any longer. When I-25 and I-70 were completed in the 1950s and 1960s, few could have seen the enormous growth along the Front Range. Engineers could not have guessed what bigger, faster, and heavier trucks could do to a road system. Nevertheless, design faults in the interchange I-25/I-70 became evident almost immediately after completion. These included substandard ramps and curves that resulted in numerous accidents. One air-traffic reporter nicknamed the knot of concrete "The Mousetrap," because drivers were never sure as they entered if they would leave in one piece. The flawed design did not stop traffic. By the mid-1980s, the interchange carried over 300,000 vehicles a day.

The dangerous interchange remained in place for another two decades. A spectacular accident on August 1, 1984, led to the reconstruction of the interchange. Early that morning a truck carrying six Mark torpedoes overturned on a ramp. Flammable propellant leaked from one damaged torpedo that threatened to start a fire resulting in a major explosion. As a result, traffic on Interstates 25 and 70 was rerouted for the next eight hours while more than 100 people evacuated homes and business near the interchange. One of the reasons for the accident was the obsolete design of the interchange. Truckers avoided it because of its dangerous curves and heavy traffic. It was later revealed that the driver that caused the accident had been advised to

use an alternate route through Denver. The incident made the national news and alerted the U.S. Congress to the dangers of the Mousetrap (Christensen, et. al., 1987: 48).

In 1987, the federal government authorized \$186 million to upgrade the Mousetrap from an area bordered by 58<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the north, 38<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the south, Pecos Street on the west, and Washington Street on the east. The new construction elevated the I-70 interchange above Interstate 25 and widened ramps for greater capacity and higher operating speeds. The Department of Highways eventually expanded the project to the east along I-70 to Brighton Blvd., raising the cost to \$266 million and pushing the completion date to 2002 (Colorado Division of Highways, 1987: 11).

Construction projects went much smoother outside of the city. Nearly 75 percent of Colorado's interstate highways were complete by 1970. Federal and state officials opened the last portion of the 299 miles of Interstate 25 from the Wyoming line to Raton Pass in 1967. CDOT completed the 184-mile route from Denver to the Nebraska state line originally designated as Interstate 80 South (now known as Interstate 76) with the opening of a 1.7-mile section across northwest Denver in 1993. The section connected I-25 south of the Boulder turnpike (U.S. 36) to I-70 near the Wadsworth Boulevard exit. The final 1.7 miles took four years and \$91 million to complete (Rocky Mountain News, September 15, 1993: 4-A).

The state's east-west route, I-70, runs a total of 449.66 miles across the state: 175.62 miles between the Kansas state line to Denver, and 274.04 miles west from Denver to the Utah border. After 12 years of controversy, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) completed work on the last 12-mile portion of the I-70 through Glenwood Canyon in October 1992. In opening the \$490-million-dollar project to traffic, Governor Roy Romer labeled Glenwood Canyon's highway design as timeless: "As a society we need to save, to invest, and to forgo instant gratification to build these kinds of monuments so when they unearth our remains in 2,000 years, they will say, 'Yes, civilization does progress'" (Rocky Mountain News, October 15, 1992: 10). After nearly a half century of construction, Colorado's interstate system – north to south, east to west—totaled 951 miles (Colorado Division of Highways, 1987, 8).

### **8.3 The Road Keeps Going -- Highway Projects: 1973-2000**

Without the fanfare of the early automobile age, Colorado saw its most monumental highway projects completed or begun during the last quarter of the 20th century. The period began with the opening of the westbound bore of the Eisenhower Tunnel and the completion of the east bore six years later. During much of this era, a battle raged over completing the last 12 miles of Interstate 70 in Colorado through the Glenwood Canyon before design and exhaustion overwhelmed both supporters and detractors. Along Colorado's two other interstates, drivers and their vehicles kept coming. Between 1985 and 1995, traffic on Colorado's interstates increased by 43 percent. In 2000, a traffic study listed metro Denver as the seventh-most congested metropolitan area in the United States. More than 230,000 vehicles drove the I-25 corridor between Broadway in Denver and Douglas County each day (Colorado Department of Transportation, 2002: 3-7).

The century of the automobile in Colorado closed with voters agreeing to fund the largest construction and improvement project in state history – the \$1.67 billion Transportation Expansion (T-REX) project. The primary objective of the T-REX project is to improve mobility through the most congested traffic corridor in the state – Interstate 25 from Broadway in Denver to Lincoln Avenue in Douglas County. In many ways, the atmosphere that set the stage for T-REX project of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century resulted from highway builders adapting and outlasting their opponents to complete the last portion of Interstate 70 during the 1980s and early 1990s. This 12-mile piece of interstate encapsulates the struggles and triumphs of highway construction in Colorado.

### **8.4 The Last Challenge: Glenwood Canyon, 1975-1992**

Those who drove US 24 through the Glenwood Canyon in the 1920s were always grateful to tell how they survived the journey. Falling off into the canyon while driving near Shoshone Dam was always possible regardless of weather conditions. Dr. Woodrow E. Brown grew up in Eagle and remembered the adventure of passing along the road during 1920s:

“The road was extremely narrow (an estimated width of a lane-and-a-half) and if you met a car you darn sure got over, got to a wide place and let ‘em go by” (Schader, 1996: 131).

Between 1936 and 1938, WPA crews blasted rock from the canyon and pushed the debris into the Colorado River to clear the broader highway. The widening and paving of the road through the canyon cost \$1.5 million. After completion of improvements to US 6 and US 24, the state reopened both roads on August 1, 1938. The reconstructed highway provided a paved lane eastbound and another westbound for traffic in the canyon (Schader, 1996: 133-4).

The late 1960s and early 1970s brought the interstate to the canyon. In 1971, the Division of Highways estimated that completing Interstate 25 through a 12-mile stretch of Glenwood Canyon would cost \$65.2 million. Six years of debate saw the cost climb to \$211.9 million. By the 1980s, the 12-mile Glenwood Canyon interstate averaged slightly over \$40 million per mile, or more than 40 times the 1957 projected cost of a mile of interstate highway. The \$490 million segment cost more than twice the first estimate for all of I-70 from Denver to the Utah border. The rise of the environmental movement and the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 reversed many people’s opinions that highways in and of themselves were a good thing. The effect of the environmental movement was to delay Glenwood Canyon and other highway projects by greater preliminary planning and environmental-impact studies. After the project was approved in 1975, opponents filed suit, lobbied against funding, and proclaimed that the interstate would wreck the canyon’s natural beauty (Thomas, 1996: 299).

Despite initial opposition from environmentalists, work on the 12-mile section of Glenwood Canyon finally got underway in 1981. Project engineers worked within a number of environmental, recreational, and aesthetic constraints. Over time, the design of bike paths, cantilevered lanes, rock-toned concrete, alpine landscaping and dozens of other design innovations “won over the staunchest opponents.” Sam Caudill, an Aspen architect who headed local opposition to project announced at the highway’s opening: “This 12 miles of highway is sensitive to the environment and graceful. This was a win-win all the way” (Rocky Mountain News, October 15, 1992: 10).

The 1980s closed with the opening of bigger and better roads along the northern Front Range. In 1988, new off-ramps known as “flyovers” loomed over the heads of drivers on I-25 and I-70, guiding cars along at greater speeds. Other accomplishments included completion of the Boulder and Foothills Parkways and Denver’s six-lane Walnut Street Viaduct. In the 1990s, the latter road served as the front gate to Lower Downtown of Denver and contributed to a resurgence of residential and business development in that area of the city.

In 1991, the legislature approved changing the Department of Highways to the Colorado Department of Transportation, or CDOT. A State Transportation Commission directs CDOT’s management of the Colorado’s highway system. The Transportation Commission formulates general policy and builds and maintains state highways and transportation systems. The commission is composed of 11 commissioners representing specific districts, headed by a chairman. Each commissioner is appointed by the governor, confirmed by the Senate, and serves a four-year term (Colorado Department of Transportation, 2000(a): 40).

On August 15, 1996, the State Transportation Commission adopted the Strategic Transportation Project Investment Program. The program identified 28 high-priority projects for placement on an accelerated construction schedule. By using projected Transportation Commission funds alone, the state originally estimated it would take 48 years to complete the Strategic Projects. Passage of Senate Bill 97-001 allowed the state to take a portion of the state General Fund revenue over five years for completion of strategic highway projects. With the indefinite extension of SB 97-001, and the ability to issue bonds granted by voters in 1999, CDOT now predicts completion of most projects within 10 years (Colorado Department of Transportation, 2000(a): 5).

A 1995 study by the Denver metro area’s planning organization, the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), found growth had overwhelmed Interstate 25’s original design from Denver to Douglas County. In 2000, daily traffic counts totaled 230,000 vehicles per day. This topped the 1995 estimate that the corridor would reach maximum capacity – 183,000 vehicles per day – by 2015 (Colorado Department of Transportation, 2002: 5). In November 1999, Coloradoans voted to allow CDOT to bond for future construction projects. CDOT’s first sale of

bonds in May 2000 brought \$530 million into the department's construction budget. CDOT made news and caused a few headaches with the biggest highway project since the beginning of the interstate era – the Transportation Expansion Project, better known as T-REX. The project brought together CDOT, the Regional Transportation District (RTD), the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Transit Authority, several counties, and cities and business districts. T-REX's primary objective was to modernize and expand the state's most important road, Interstate 25 from Lincoln Avenue in Douglas County to Broadway in Denver, and I-225 from Parker Road in Aurora to I-25. Barring delays, the 17-mile-long T-REX project will continue until 2006 and will carry the largest price tag in state highway history – \$1.67 billion (Colorado Department of Transportation, T-REX website, <http://www.TREXProject.com/about.asp/>).