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Historic Trail Map of the Leadville 1°×2° Quadrangle, Central Colorado

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Early Transportation

freight wagons

A large freight wagon filled with ore on its way from mine to mill. Engraving by L.P. Pennibacker of a sketch by H.R. Poore. Engraving originally published in "Harper's Weekly," September 1878. (2-5269)

Freight Wagons in the Late 1870s and 1880s

Freight wagons were large and strong, and were made of durable wood. They weighed about 3,000 pounds empty. The wagon beds were about 11 feet long and 3-4 feet wide. The sides were about 19 inches high, but the addition of extra sideboards would extend the height to almost 4 feet. A chain was extended across the top middle of the bed to keep the sides from spreading too much. The ore that was being hauled was very heavy because it was composed of metallic minerals that weighed much more than an equivalent volume of quartz or common sedimentary rocks. The lead-silver ores were particularly heavy, as were the gold ores. For the most part, the driver did not sit on the wagon, but rode the nigh (left) wheeler, guiding his team by a single very strong rein which led to the bits of the leaders; he operated the brake by another strap.

The number of horses or mules and their weights varied some. Generally, four-horse teams were used. The principal team was called the wheelers. They were hitched directly ahead of the driver and on each side of the oak tongue. These horses weighed about 1,400–1,600 pounds apiece. It was their job to provide most of the pulling power and to do the backing if necessary. The front pair of horses were called leaders. They were smaller and more agile and they weighed less—1,000 to 1,300 pounds apiece. Their job was to maneuver the wagon as directed by the driver. They generally were hitched to an iron rod that extended back under the wagon tongue and connected to the front axle of the wagon. If a greater weight of merchandise was to be hauled, a swing pair of horses in a six-horse hitch was used. This swing team was added between the leaders and the wheelers to add to the pulling power of the whole team.

Some freighters owned their own rigs and they made more money than those who worked for a freighting company. Almost 600 teams were hauling ore in the Leadville quadrangle by 1878. Ore haulers were paid by the ton; for short hauls and lighter loads the haulage rate was about 50 cents per ton. For a long haul and heavier load the rate would be much higher. Griswold and Griswold (1996, p. 230) state that the weight of ore hauled was about 4,000 pounds per wagon.

Wagon freight from Denver usually cost $50 a ton in the summer, but much more in the winter. The rates were based on both weight and distance of haulage. For certain types of merchandise, the rate could be as high as $500 per ton. Before the railroads were built into the quadrangle, the freight rates were terribly high. The rates dropped greatly when the first railroad arrived. Indeed, the rates dropped even more after more than one railroad arrived and brought more competition. As a result, many long-haul wagon freighters had to change to hauling from the railroad depots to businesses in town or to places where the railroad could not reach. Some wagon freighting companies probably went out of business.

(Information from Griswold and Griswold, 1996, and other references listed in the "Sources of Information" in the pamphlet that accompanies this map.)

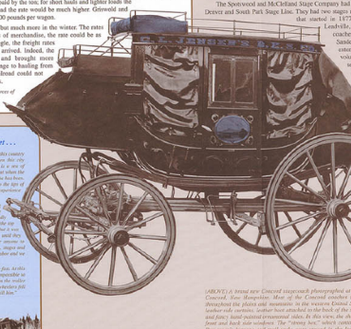
A mountain experience the travelers will never forget . . .

"No shades of jealousy ever knew the varieties and species of mud in this country until they have journed in the composition of it. Imagine to yourself, gentle reader, a road (Leadville) and Aspen, from the beginning of the terminus of the trip to it, is one of Leadville; and Aspen, from the beginning of the terminus of the trip to it, is one of Aspen; and the mud of the intermediate road is composed in every consistency, so that when the traveler alights from the coach upon this concern there is no attending where he has been. He is routed with the article from the centre of his hind and sitting pain to the tips of his shoes, and the jaunt that was under a five-hour stint now a mountain experience that the traveler will never forget to their sensors here on earth."

"Once, it was during the dead of winter, and the snow had been falling until it was as much as my first drop, the round trip to Aspen proved to be one of my worst experiences. Although night was heavy, the snow drifted so badly that the road was not kept open. We were at a place, between Bromley's and the top of Independence Pass, where the road was cut into the side of a steep hill. The driver, Summer pat stuck in the snow, mules began to lose up, unable to pass, and they touched in both directions for a great distance, and it was impossible for anyone to advance in either direction. We finally cleared up the jam by carrying sleds, wagon and wagons and their loads out of the road and to new positions. It was mighty labor and we were all exhausted from our efforts."

"There are other places, where the way down was steep, we traveled on foot. At this time I was driving a six horse team with wagon and trailer. It was almost impossible to hold the heavy load. At times I found it necessary to get four neighbors on the trailer and two on the wagon to keep them under control. Even then one of my wheelers fell and was dragged at least 100 feet before we could get stopped but it didn't kill him."

(Accounts of the risks of making a trip by stagecoach or freight wagon over independent Pass from Leadville to Aspen. Dyer, Griswold and Griswold, 1996, p. 130)



(ABOVE) Stanley Mills' Concord stagecoach photographed at the factory of Abbot, Downing, and Company in Concord, New Hampshire. Most of the Concord coaches that were built saw service on the dusty trails throughout the plains and mountains in the western United States. The new stagecoach came with adjustable leather side curtains; leather boot attached to the back of the stage, top-deck seat, hand-operated brakes, lamps, and fancy hand-painted ornamental rides. In this view, the shiny leather side curtains are rolled down over the front and back side windows. The "strong box," which contained valuables, was kept under the driver's seat. Passenger's luggage and mail sacks were stowed in the leather boot on the back of the stage. Inside, nine passengers shared three leather-covered seats; and for short distances as many as 10-12 people could ride perched on top of the stage. The coach was beautiful to look at—two hand-rubbed coats of paint were applied, followed by two coats of varnish. Photographer unknown, Between 1880 and 1900. (L-1297)

(LEFT) Concord stagecoach "No 2 US Mail," the "Virginia City Coach stage," shown in a storm of snow horses in the high country of Teller County, Colorado. Concord stagecoaches similar to this one were used throughout the Old West. Between 1900 and 1910. Photographer L.C. McClure. (MCC-1717)

Routines and Perils of Stage Travel

In the Leadville area, the first strong placer gold mining activity was in California Gulch from 1859 to about 1864, but the really big boom of mining didn't happen until the late 1870's. Many stage lines had been in business for nearly 20 years before Leadville really felt the need for additional transportation services. Several existing stage lines were in business in Leadville, including the Spotswood and McClelland Stage Company, the Wall and Winter Stage Company, and the Barlow and Sanderson Line. At the peak of the rush in 1878, twelve fully loaded coaches arrived each day in Leadville (Dorsey, 1970, p. 260-261). In 1880, daily stage lines ran from Leadville to Kokomo, Breckenridge, Georgetown, Buena Vista, Fairplay, Alma, Red Cliff, Aspen City, Twin Lakes, and various smaller mining camps. The biggest problem for stage travel was that a topographic barrier was formed by the Colorado Front Range. Most of the stage lines were in business east of the mountain range, so there were only two practical solutions: either go over the mountains or go around them. If the stage lines went around the high mountains they would need to travel many extra miles. If they went over the mountains, they faced hazardous travel all year and terrible weather during the winters. Ultimately, the stage lines took both courses. During winter, stages often went southwest across Kenosha Pass, South Park, and Trout Creek Pass, then traveled northward on a shelf road along the east side of the Arkansas River to Leadville. In the summer, stages often went southwest through South Park to Fairplay and then westward over Weston Pass, on an old Indian road called the Ute Trail, a difficult road, improved in some places by placing small logs across it (a corduroy road).

The Spotswood and McClelland Stage Company had been running a stage line since 1865 on their Denver and South Park Stage Line. They had two stages running each way daily. During their contract that started in 1877 at the start of the big mining boom in Leadville, they ordered 200 horses, 12 Concord coaches, and 50 sets of harness. Barlow and Sanderson's Southern Overland Mail system was extended to Leadville in 1878. So heavy was the volume of business that the Canon City-Leadville service ran three times daily. A total of six major coach lines linked Summit County to the outside world in the early 1880's (Gilliland, 1947). The best companies used Concord coaches and charged passengers 12-15 cents per mile. The worst used rough open wagons and charged much lower rates.

Information from Dorsey, 1970, and Gilliland, 1947, and other references listed in the "Sources of Information" in the pamphlet that accompanies this map.)

WHITE RIVER PLATEAU
THE FLAT TOPS
GRAND MESA
Leadville
Aspen
Breckenridge
Glenwood Springs
Minturn
Red Cliff
Eagle
Gypsum
Dotsero
Wolcott
Tennyson
Gilman
Climax
Fremont Pass
Tennessee Pass
Hagerman Pass
Independence Pass
Battle Mountain
Homestake Peak
Mount Massive
Mount Elbert
Mount Sherman
Mount Lincoln
Quandary Peak
Pikes Peak
Kenosha Pass
Hoosier Pass
Boreas Pass
Trout Creek Pass
Weston Pass
Tarryall Creek
Tomichi Creek
Ute Trail
Colorado River
Eagle River
Roaring Fork River
Arkansas River
Blue River
Tenmile Creek
Snake River
Platte River
Turquoise Lake
Twin Lakes
Ivanhoe Lake
Green Mountain Reservoir
Dillon Reservoir
Homestake Reservoir
Eagle Reservoir
Sheep Mountain
Gore Range
Mosquito Range
Sawatch Range
Elk Mountains
Tenmile Range
Park Range
Pando
Camp Hale
Malta
Stringtown
Granite
Nathrop
Buena Vista
Salida
Poncha Springs
Maysville
Leadville Junction
Climax Molybdenum Mine
Climax Molybdenum Mine Spur
Colorado Midland Railway
Denver & Rio Grande Railroad
Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad
Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad
Colorado Central Railroad
Denver, Utah & Pacific Railroad
Denver & Salt Lake Railroad
Rio Grande Western Railway
Colorado Midland Railroad
Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad
Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad
Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad
Denver & Salt Lake Railroad
Rio Grande Western Railway
Colorado Midland Railroad
Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad
Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad
Denver & Rio Grande