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BEAVER CANYON

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The discovery of gold on Grasshopper Creek in the mountains of western Montana in 1862 created the need for a transportation avenue to the mines. The Salt Lake Valley presented the best opportunity as a supply center, and a Montana road north to the mines through Beaver Canyon soon developed. At first provisions reached the mines by pack train, but additional discoveries and the resultant population increase gave birth to a freighting industry. Toll roads and bridges were built to accommodate the heavy wagons. The route up Beaver Canyon was an area where road improvements were needed, and William Murphy received a franchise from Oneida County on December 13, 1865, to build and operate a toll road here. In December 1866, Murphy obtained a twenty-year territorial franchise that was amended to fifteen years in January 1867. In the spring of that year, Murphy leased the road to B. D. Maxham, who the next year turned over the lease to Henry O. and Lauven A. Harkness. In 1871 Henry married Catherine Murphy, the widow of William, and took over control of the Beaver Canyon enterprise and the Oneida Wagon Road Company. In May of 1876, Henry sold the Beaver Canyon Road to his brother and Lee Mantle. These men remained in control until the county took over the road in 1881.

A small store and ranch at the tollgate met the needs of the Gilmer and Salisbury stage line, freighters, and other travelers, but more facilities were needed when the Utah and Northern Railway reached the area on September 1, 1879. Until the railway reached the Montana border on March 9, 1880, Beaver Canyon acted as the terminus and business flourished. Stages, freighters, and a large contingent of railway workers turned the usually serene stop into a hubbub of activity. Nearby timber reserves were soon utilized to meet the needs of the railway and sawmills were erected. Upper Snake River Valley settlers had earlier recognized this potential, and in 1865, Matt Taylor cut the timber for his Eagle Rock bridge from the area. A year later, John Creighton obtained poles from the area for use in construction of a telegraph line between Virginia City and Salt Lake City. The line was completed on November 2, 1866.

A correspondent for the Blackfoot Register in the summer of 1880 noted:

Leaving Red Rock at 1 p.m., on our return, a ride of two hours brought us to the foot of Beaver Canyon, and to

the station of the same name. The scenery down this canyon, a distance of about ten miles, is grand. The tall pine trees, the huge rocks rising on either side, with first on one side and then on the other, a sparkling stream of water, wending its way down over the rocks and falls, make it picturesque and beautiful.

Beaver Canyon was the terminus of the road about a year ago. At present the principal business is the lumber trade. Three saw-mills, owned by W. T. Van Noy, D. Stoddard, and W. N. Thomas, and employing from twenty to twenty-five men each, are kept busy getting out lumber for the railroad, for the construction of bridges, depots, houses, etc., and also ties, thousands of which have been shipped from this point. The agent of the company, Mr. Frank Bassett, has about all he can attend to in looking after the company's interest. Mr. A. Hanson has started a small store, and has a good prospect of doing considerable business. (August 14, 1880, p. 4, c. 2)

In 1881 the sawmills continued to support the local economy and supplied the railway with carloads of lumber and ties. A report of one week's work at the Thomas Mill showed: "For the week ending July 2, the mill of W. N. Thomas, working ten hours per day, with five hours delay for filing saw, cut 75,000 feet of lumber, the actual working time being fifty-five hours, nearly 1,500 feet per hour. Edward Logan of Logan, Utah was the Sawyer." (Blackfoot Register, July 9, 1881, p. 4, c. 2)

In addition to his sawmill, W. T. Van Noy also ran the railroad eating house where the trains from both north and south stopped for dinner. The Bassett brothers operated a saloon and were making preparations to start a line of spring wagons to Yellowstone National Park. They began this operation in the spring of 1882 and charged \$25.00 for the round trip. The nearness of Yellowstone and the good railway connections greatly bolstered the local economy. In addition to the mills, the town now promoted itself as "the Shortest and Best Route from the Railroad to the Eden of America." (Ibid., June 3, 1882, p. 1, c. 4-5)

D. Stoddard, one of the mill owners, also opened a general merchandise store; new saloons went up; L. Harris, yardmaster for the railway, erected a restaurant; W. T. Van Noy built a shingle mill; Messrs. E. B. Mount and Kelly opened a butcher shop; F. Blanchard started a fruit, confectionery, and stationery store; and a number of new houses were constructed. The summer of 1882 was indeed a busy time for the growing community. In November of 1882, J. H. Stringer opened a new railroad restaurant, W. P. Van Noy & Co. moved one of its mills to town, and the local citizens petitioned the county superintendent for the creation of a school district to meet the needs of local families with children. (Ibid., Nov. 18, 1882, p. 3, c. 3)

A resident described the various happenings of the town in the

following letter to the Blackfoot Register:

Maybe some of your readers would like to know where Beaver City is located. It is a very nice little place of about twenty families and is situated at the mouth of Beaver canyon on the Utah and Northern Railway at a place formerly--that is early freighting days--known as the "Devil's Dive," and very rightly named it is. The town is built on each side of the railroad track and comprises two stores and Bassett Bros. and E. B. Mount's saloons. Besides the above enumerated families, John H. Stringer, of Spring Hill fame, keeps the Utah & Northern feed house.

Beaver Canyon is a lumber camp of considerable renown, and from what I can hear, it excels any other camp in the two Territories, in more senses than one. There are eight saw mills besides W. T. Van Noy & Co.'s planing and shingle mill. W. T. Van Noy & Co., Stoddard & Co. and W. T. Thomas are the main mill owners. . . . (Ibid., February 17, 1883, p. 3, c. 4)

In May of 1883, Ah Wah opened a new restaurant to good reviews and his establishment was well patronized. (Ibid., May 19, 1883, p. 3, c. 4-5) In 1887 the population swelled with the temporary addition of some 500 railway workers who were engaged to make changes to the canyon grade, and all the merchants profited handsomely. Eccles, Spencer & Co., the leading merchants, did an immense business. H. H. Spencer, the general manager, also kept busy supplying the railway camps and local citizens with beef and products from his dairy. Other local business were also showing good gains in profit. The Bassett brothers continued to enjoy a good business and had expected to meet the needs of the many travelers to Yellowstone. (Ibid., July 2, 1887, p. 1, c. 2)

After 1887 the town began to decline. Harsh winters and the development of better situated settlements led to the moving of the town in 1897 six miles south to the new town of Spencer (named for area businessman Hyrum H. Spencer).

For additional reading see:

- Beal, Merrill D. Intermountain Railroads. (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1962).
- Gittens H. Leigh. Idaho's Gold Road. (Moscow: University Press of Idaho, 1976).
- Madsen, Betty M. And Brigham D. North to Montana! Jehus, Bullwhackers and Mule Skinners on the Montana Trail. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1980).

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