

White Knuckles on Red Mountain Pass

by Dennis Payton Knight

Had I read up on Red Mountain Pass before setting out, I probably wouldn't have. They say the scenery is spectacular, but I was driving, and had the wisdom not to look. That 12-mile section of U.S 550, the Million Dollar Highway between Silverton and Ouray in Southwest Colorado, is rated as one of the most dangerous roads in the state.

The road was carved four hundred feet up in the side of the mountain that got its redness from the iron in its soils. With a posted speed limit of 15 miles per hour, it is paved all the way, but there is barely room for one lane in each direction, leaving no space for guardrails. The driver and his white-knuckled passengers develop a healthy fear of gravity, the same law of nature that increases the risk of rockslides along the road. You may manage not to fall off the mountain, yet the mountain may fall on you.

At Crystal Lake, a wider spot, is a stone garage abutting the highway where some mining investors once built a ski resort. It was supposed to open in 1939 but as time drew near, the investors had a dispute over whether the ski runs had been built in an avalanche zone. Then, after fighting over whether the resort would serve liquor, they walked away from the whole project.

Some years later, a religious organization, the Saint Germain Foundation, believing God created humanity in the Ironton Valley, purchased the lodge as a summer camp for its faithful, and the foundation's leaders were said to broadcast religious music over loudspeakers to evangelize to the faithless in the valley below. But the building burned down in 1952 after a careless caretaker thawing snow with a blowtorch caught the roof on fire. Now only that stone garage remains.

Red Mountain Pass must be important, because the highway department keeps it open as much as possible all through the winter. The pass, at 11,018 feet in elevation, gets some 360 inches of snow per year, enough to bury a three-story building. A team of four snowplow operators, or "pushers," work up to seven days a week in 8 to 12-hour shifts. With blizzards and seventy known and named avalanche chutes buffeting the highway, it is one of the most dangerous highway jobs in America. Lives have been lost, but none since 1993.

One of the pushers, Dack Klein, in 2017, pointed out some of the more acute danger spots to *Outside Magazine*. At one known avalanche path, Ruby Walls, he reported, "You've got to appreciate the dangers when you're pushing. Last winter we had a chunk of rock the size of a football field detach right here." At another chute, he reflected, "The saying goes that Blue Point will run if you sneeze."

Suddenly I feel an unexplainable urge to make another pass at the pass, but I'll wait until summer. Know any good insurance agents?