

## Mining in Colorado

06-18-2012 by Harry Zirkelbach

*They were young, o.k. restless too.*

They had spent two weeks working as laborers on the re-do the the Squaw Pass Road, well above Bergan Park, Colorado, the five miles to the apex, which led to Echo Lake.

Work was tiring at timberline, but the permanent cadre of road builders were never demanding. It was the hours spent in driving, from Denver and return, that convinced them to change jobs. After all, work was plentiful, they were adventurous.

Next interview was for rock mining. The four of them listened to those ahead for answers, for none had mining experience. While they fumbled for right replies, their good nature, physical condition, convinced the interviewer they were worthy. Weekly he went through the same questions, knew most would bow out within the month.

And the project was in the early months of a two year dig.

The four were cheerful on the 60 mile excursion along US-285. They had listened well, wore sturdy overalls, heavy steel-toe boots, carried several pair of leather work gloves, a warm shirt. They wondered why they were encouraged to wear a warm shirt, for days had been continuously sunny, high 80 days.

They were warmly received by the veterans, only a few who fit that description.

Were reminded that they would lunch on the job, paid for that time too.

Yes, bunks and meals provided.

The task was outlined. Then teams were set for specialty, all but a few tasks menial. At 7:00 am in the early daylight, they clambered aboard one of the dozen empty ore cars.

The train moved. Did it get black fast! Only the few in the control car could see ahead and those were intent on viewing the track ahead for broken rails, rock falls on or near the track. The trip was not interrupted this morning. Heads well inside their ore car, having been told the ceiling might not clear the car by much. Cars swayed on their uneven track.

In their steel box all sounds was amplified. That 20 minute ride deafened, because as veteran miners they should have know to wear ear plugs.

In less that a mile travel ended .The lighted scene unreal. Rock and dust everywhere. All began to load the cars with rocks. These were everywhere, of all size. Last night the face of a compacted mountain had been drilled, explosives inserted in these holes, and blown.,

They pick up the detritus. This routine was their new job. Many times each day.

They quickly learned to hate this, hung on a second week.

What's not to like? Here's three.

First. Each loaded train was sent out, dumped, returned for more rubble. The area at the mine face had been cleared, the track extended toward the face, the ground leveled, the dynamiters loaded the wall. Fuzes were set and all got into the empty cars, zipped back for 15 minutes or so. The the mountain shook, the blast having only one place to go, raced down the very hole they had dug, around their hovel, toward the entrance. At that, the lead car raced as fast as possible toward the explosion, now the nearest source of fresh air. The air duct they built at the side of a wall, blew fresh Colorado air constantly toward the work face, forcing out air saturated with those unbelievably small floating rock particles

The faster they travel, the sooner lungs obtain air not rock laden. First breath always heavenly. Then the realization, we'll repeat this soon.

Second. Crews worked eleven hours a day six days a week, which they liked. But they left the hole at days end in the dark. Never saw the sun in this vale. Shower (scrub intensely), eat, indifferent to anything but sleep.

Third. They saw no others. It was almost like being in prison, they jailers and victim.

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That mine was completed. It has been a continuous source of one way travel since opening in 1960. The name, Roberts Tunnel. Since opening, water travels in a controlled gravity flow from Lake Dillon toward those million Denver customers.

Abandoned as mine, its product is priceless.  
Those four took no pride in their teeny contribution.