

TETON PASS ROADHOUSES

BY ROB MURPHY

A trip to Jackson Hole at the beginning of the 20th century might include a stopover at one of the many roadhouses along the way. While much of the nation modernized, Jackson remained the “old west,” with horse and wagon the primary method of travel. One of the reasons settling in Jackson Hole happened late, more than 20 years after the Homestead Act, was that it was so difficult to get here.

As Jackson pioneer Noble Gregory, Sr. remembered, “... the roads was Indian Trails.”¹

It is hard to conceive today, but in the early 1900s, the easiest way into Jackson Hole was over Teton Pass. The Harris-Dunn mining company had improved the Teton Pass Road in 1894 to bring heavy equipment and a sawmill into the valley.²

The Snake River and Hoback canyons had only treacherous trails barely passable much of the year. Although the Army improved the road from Dubois to Moran in 1898, Togwotee Pass remained a rough trail until the construction of the Togwotee Pass Road in 1920. In the early years of recreational travel, as Jackson Hole became a destination and a gateway to Yellowstone National Park, Teton Pass became a major artery and the best way into the valley.

Traveling to Jackson Hole before 1912, a family might take a train to St. Anthony or Ashton, Idaho. They could meet the stage there, and travel by horse and wagon to Driggs and Victor, and on to Teton Pass. The Oregon Short Line Railroad was extended to Driggs in 1912 and then to Victor in 1914, shortening the wagon ride.

Beyond Victor, the trip went up towards Coal Creek, where weary travelers might stay at the Bircher Roadhouse, built by former Teton Pass mail carrier John Bircher in 1906. Bircher was among many people in early Jackson Hole who loved and cared for the Pass. In 1900, Bircher carried the mail twice a week, year-round from Victor to Wilson. He then took on the daily mail route in 1901 and married Sarah Rebecca Bowles. John and Sarah Bircher lived on a homestead south of Wilson before starting their Roadhouse at Coal Creek.³

The Bircher’s Roadhouse started out serving travelers with horses and wagons. The couple raised their family here, and their kids went to school in Victor. A visitor remembered that only curtains divided the upstairs rooms in the early Roadhouse.⁴ Bircher also built a sawmill and by the early 1920s, their business had shifted to serving cars and trucks. Construction of the new road (what we now call the Old Pass Road) began in 1913 and the road opened on July 25, 1918. This new road carried horses and wagons, cars and cattle.

The next stop on the way to Jackson Hole might be the Summit Roadhouse, built in 1908. John and Sarah’s son, Wesley Bircher, worked at the Summit Roadhouse and kept fresh horses on top of the Pass.⁵



The Harry Scott Family at the Roadhouse on the top of Teton Pass in the 1920s. JHHSM 1958.0720.001P.



Three people in a horse-drawn sleigh at Frank Crandall’s Road House on Teton Pass, January 1917. JHHSM 1958.3119.001



The Bircher Road House from the West side. JHHSM 1958.0539.001P.

The Cascade Road House, also called the Bircher Road House, in winter circa 1915. One of the men on the roof is George Fitzmyer. JHHSM HS.0245.



Teams of four to eight giant workhorses were required to haul the wagons. Before the construction of the road, and depending on the size of the load, weather, and other difficulties, the trip from Coal Creek to the summit could take one or two days.

Through the 1930s, the Cherry family and Harry and Blanche Scott offered a warm meal, a place to sleep, and fresh horses in this small Roadhouse. Just below the Roadhouse was a barn and stalls for the horses. The Scott family was known for the welcome shown to guests and travelers. Harry worked daily to clear and pack the snow from both sides of the summit and was considered a dependable and hard worker. Tragically, he died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound many years later at his house in Victor.⁶

At the foot of the Pass, a third Roadhouse offered food, lodging and horses. Forest Supervisor Louis Lockwood built a Roadhouse on his homestead near where Trail Creek Ranch is today. He sadly passed soon after.

The Roadhouse was sold to Tom Lee in 1910, who sold it to Frank Crandall, who operated the Crandall Roadhouse. Frank then leased the Roadhouse to future U.S. Commissioner A. N. Davis and business partner Austin Bean in 1914, and it became known as the Davis Bean Roadhouse.⁷

A visitor to the Davis Bean Roadhouse recalled old newspapers papering the walls. As with most roadhouses, meals were served family-style on large tables with benches. Like other roadhouses, the establishment changed with the times and, by the 1930s, advertised that they had room for 2,000 head of cattle to rest on

the way to the stock car train in Victor. Further down the Pass in Wilson, there were several hotels, including at various times: Nick Wilson’s Hotel with seven bedrooms established in 1899, the McCoy’s Hotel, and the Ward Hotel.

The bygone era of roadhouses, famous for their family hospitality, helped to set the tone for the Jackson Hole of today. From homesteaders with an extra room to hotels with a saloon and rooms to let, the roadhouse became a fixture on the road to Jackson Hole. Dude ranches, lodges, hotels, and cabins in Jackson all emerged from this early start.

CITATIONS

1. *Jackson Hole Guide*, Sept 25, 1952.
2. Doris B. Platts, *The Pass: Historic Teton Pass and Wilson, Wyoming* (Wilson, Platts, 1988), p. 23.
3. *Jackson’s Hole Courier*, Jan 16, 1947.
4. *The Pass*, p. 46.
5. *The Pass*, p. 92.
6. *Jackson Hole Guide*, Aug 31, 1950.
7. *Jackson’s Hole Courier*, Jan. 15, 1920.

ABOUT ROB MURPHY

Like many of us, Rob Murphy came to the Jackson Hole valley in the 1980s for the skiing. An avid Nordic skier with a lifelong love of history, he continues to enjoy the many outdoor recreational activities in the area. With a focus on environmental history, Rob received a Master’s Degree in History from Arizona State University in 2020. Rob is the father of two children and lives in Wilson.

TETON PASS ROAD HOUSE: AN ORAL HISTORY

WITH MAUDE FOSTER BIRCHER
JHHSM 1981.0004.001

Maude Foster Bircher was born and raised in Wilson to homesteading parents Effie May and Ulysses Foster. An accomplished horsewoman, she grew up working on her family’s ranch. In 1924, she married Wesley Bircher of Victor, Idaho.

Wesley’s family operated the Bircher sawmill on Coal Creek and the Bircher Roadhouse on Teton Pass. Soon after marrying, they ran a midway station on the top of Teton Pass for a number of years, where they serviced freight wagons traveling over the pass before settling in the valley.

JHHSM Narrator: And didn’t you tell us before that you, uh, lived out by the weigh station for a time?

Maude: His folks did, uh-huh. Wesley and I was there one winter after we were married, and then we were on top of the hill, the top of Teton Pass one winter, and took care of a place there where they changed teams and sleighs and things, and hauling down passengers over Teton Pass in the wintertime. And my job there was to cook for the passengers that they hauled. It was kind of interesting.

JHHSM Narrator: Did they change horses up on top?

MB: They changed sleighs.

JHHSM Narrator: Oh, sleighs.

MB: They came up with horses from Victor, and they came up with horses from Jackson, and on top they just changed sleighs and took them back the other way. The next day they reversed the procedure. So there was a lot of freight that was hauled into Jackson Hole at that time, and there was quite a lot of passengers who rode down there. But they – all the gasoline and things like that, that

came in here, they were just beginning to use gasoline in Jackson and that was hauled in and a lot of times it was transferred down where they started up the mountain, the steeper part of the mountain, then they would have to put on extra horses on the sleigh to haul that because it was so much heavier.

So they had quite a lot of difficulties getting to Jackson – gasoline into Jackson in 50-gallon barrels, that’s what it was all in for a long time. Then the next year after we were up there they, that summer, they started using trucks on the road instead of so many wagons, and then that winter they, oh, sort of kept the roads open most of the time. It took a long time before they had them to where they are now.



A passenger vehicle, called a gurney wagon, stops on top of Teton Pass for lunch at the roadhouse before heading down to the railway station in Victor. JHHSM BC.0048.