



Gallatin Canyon Road Travel - 1880s to the Present Day

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Intrepid travelers, who braved Highway 191 after the recent October snowfall, experienced road conditions that made them pine for the dusty washboard roads of summer. At mile marker 66, oncoming vehicles splattered milk chocolate mud on doors and windshields. Cars wallowed to their hubcaps while large rocks, unearthed by the snowplow, lured slipping tires toward them. The convergence of Big Sky's two seasons, "winter" and "road construction," was a force to contend with!

Daunting as the travel conditions are, current day drivers are somewhat sure of two things: they'll get through the Gallatin Canyon in about an hour AND without flat tires. Not so for canyon travelers of yesteryear when it took two days and three spare tires to get to Bozeman!

The first travelers, Indian and white, came through the canyon on foot or horseback along a narrow, difficult trail. Nels Murray, a trapper following Indian paths, hacked the first pack trail through the canyon in the mid-1800s. The trail was slowly widened during the 1890s by trappers, prospectors, and hunters who established seasonal camps in the mountains. The first true road was cut in 1901 to supply the Cooper Tie Camp in the Taylor Fork. This is where Pete Karst got his start driving mail, people, and freight to the logging camp. That "improved road" enticed Gallatin Valley ranchers to drive their cattle to the fertile summer grazing grounds in the mountain meadows. Some ranchers, like the Crail family, started homesteads in this newly opened area.

Travel was still difficult. The canyon road didn't follow the Gallatin River as it does today, and the pole bridges often washed out. Horse-drawn vehicles provided the primary transportation in the early decades of the 20th century. Even with the advent of the automobile, horses were more reliable and were used in snow and difficult situations well into the mid-1900s. Billy Lytle, whose brother Clarence homesteaded the Lone Mountain Ranch location, was the first to bring a personal car into the Gallatin Canyon in 1915, but by the 1920s, most of the Gallatin ranchers and homesteaders had cars.

1919 through 1930 saw continuous road work. But often even the "improved" roads were impassable. Before the modern highway, snow made auto travel impossible. Ranchers with livestock to feed holed up on their ranches until the spring thaw. Dude ranches, summer resorts, and hunting camps closed for the season after winterizing the buildings, and families retreated to Bozeman. The road was plowed to Karst Kamp by the mid-1930s, but winter travel was not assured until the late 1940s when George Lemon, working for the MDOT, plowed the roads for 22 years.

Launched in 1939, a major upgrade brought the roadbed down to the river. Another upgrade was begun in 1952 with the laying of asphalt. It seems that there has been continuous road construction during the last five summers, and it's nowhere done yet!

Historic Crail Ranch is a project of the Big Sky Community Corporation, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization which exists to promote, acquire, preserve, and maintain land, parks, trails, and easements for the use of the people of the Big Sky Community and general public.

So the next time you're stopped on US 191 by a flagger or that newly washed car is sprayed with mud, think about travel 100 years ago, and simply SMILE!!

Portions of this article are excerpted by *Images of America: Big Sky* by Jeff Strickler and Anne Marie Mistretta, still available at the BSOA Offices and in local stores.



1920 at Karst