

## MP 252- 253: Blue Hill and the Disney Avalanche Path

This section of the Auto Tour includes a portion of the wagon road, one of Colorado’s most famous avalanches and the remains of an old dam.

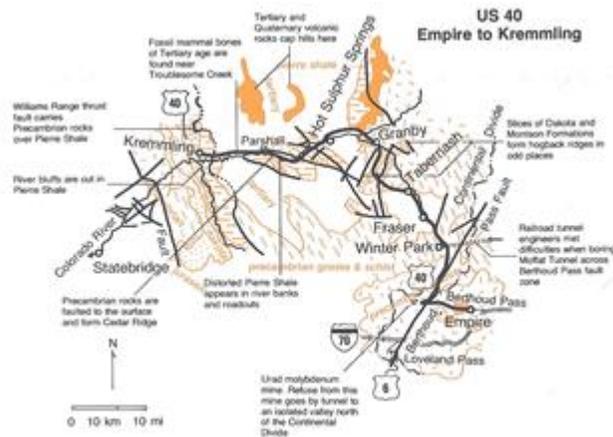
Route	Mile Marker	X	Y	Longitude	Latitude
<sup>1</sup> U. S. Highway 40	252	435087.15	440660.83	-105.757937	39.771407
	253	436421.26	4401861.97	-105.742283	39.764310

Blue Hill is named for a stream and lake found on Berthoud Pass. Blue Lake is located below the east side of Colorado Mines Peak in a cirque basin with an elevation of 11,598 ft. Blue Creek meets the highway in this section of the Auto Road with a small beautiful waterfall in the spring and early summer.

On September 7, 1987 a cultural resource inventory was conducted in this area for a proposed tunnel under Berthoud Pass. The south portal of the tunnel was to be located in this area. (Author’s note: the north portal was to be about seven miles from the summit. See MP 237-238. The report states that little work was done on the survey on the north area because of the steepness of the terrain.) “The proposed Berthoud Tunnel is a two-lane highway tunnel designed to link Winter Park and Berthoud (author’s note: Empire??) beneath Berthoud Pass. Preliminary plans include two tunnels through the mountain – one each for one lane of traffic in one direction.”<sup>2</sup>

In talking to long-time residents from both sides of the Pass, it is thought that the tunnel was not built because of funding issues, environmental concerns, and the Berthoud Pass Fault.

Diagram of the Berthoud Pass Fault taken from *Roadside Geology of Colorado* by Halka Chronic 1<sup>st</sup> Edition Used with permission from Mountain Press Publishing, Missoula, Montana



<sup>1</sup> Taken from the Colorado Department of Transportation’s website: <http://apps.coloradodot.info/dataaccess/Highways/index.cfm?fuseaction=HighwaysMain>

<sup>2</sup> Joyner, Kathie: Principal Investigator Results of an Archeological Survey of Two Portal Areas of the Proposed Berthoud Tunnel Project, Clear Creek and Grand Counties, CO Prepared for CRS Serrine, Inc. Denver, CO December 12, 1989

As you head up Blue Hill from Empire, there are two Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) pullouts on the south (left going up the hill, right, if you are coming down). The upper one is within these two mileage posts.

This area is used for snow storage and also a safe place for truckers to rest or to put on or remove chains on their big rigs for their trip over Berthoud Pass. Just off the side, a section of the wagon road can be seen. The students from the Colorado School of Mines mapped this section of wagon road and designed a wheel-chair accessible trail to access the wagon road.

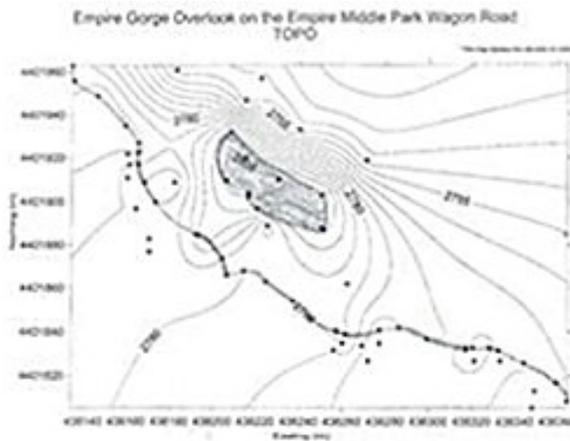


Figure 13: Topographic map of the area. Map courtesy of Team Haul[9].

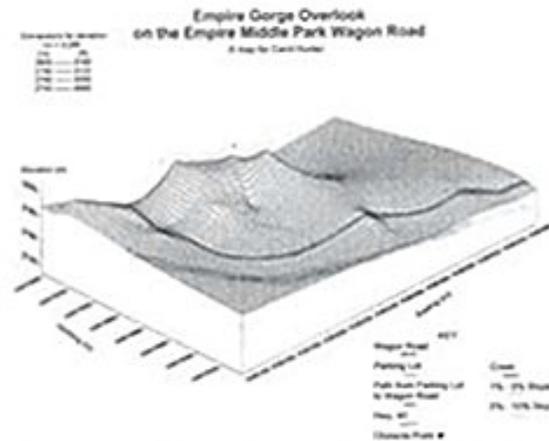


Figure 14: Wireframe map of the area. Map courtesy of Team Haul[9].

It is hoped that at some future date the trail can be built by the U. S. Forest Service and this pull off can be used to interpret the history of the wagon road.

It is **not recommended** that this section of wagon road be explored until an access path to the wagon road can be built because of steepness of the sides. There are several

sections of wagon road (that are included in this Auto Tour) that are excellent to explore and have much more to be discovered than this section.

Next is a hidden treasure, the Heckman Dam. There are no safety structures in place, so visitors should be aware that the steep sides of this canyon drop directly into Clear Creek. The rocks can be very slippery, because of the spray of the waterfall.



The drawing above was taken off the U. S. Bureau of Public Roads – Berthoud Pass Project – Empire to Fraser, Colorado – 1920 map, which shows the location of the Heckman dam. It is thought that this was the location of the Empire Power and Light Company dam in the early 1900's.

The Heckman Dam was built by Charles Heckman. He was known for his building skills, and reference is made in historical documents to the dam he built at this location. He also built the bridge crossing Clear Creek at the foot of Main Street and also the Conqueror Mine Boarding House in North Empire.

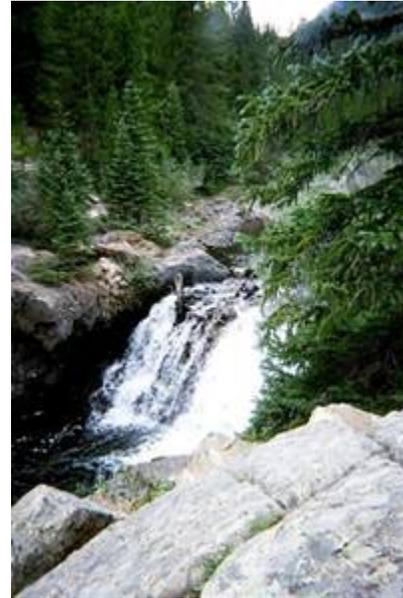


Photo by author – December 2003



There are a few remaining parts of the old dam.

This is the dam for which the Disney Avalanche was first named. (See below for additional information about this slide.)



Photos by Author



The Disney or Dam slide is the large opening on the mountain south of the highway.

Today, in the fall, the Disney or Dam slide is one of the most photographed stops on Berthoud Pass, because of the heavy aspen growth in the chute. A wide pull-off has been provided by CDOT in front of the Blue Creek waterfall.

The wagon road and auto road shared much of the same foot print in this section of the Auto Tour, so it is difficult to tell the time period for this wonderful photo showing Ball Mountain and the Dam (Disney) Avalanche Chute.

Photo provided by and used with permission from  
The Grand County Historical Society



**Avalanche Path:  
DISNEY**

**Location:** US 40 Mile 252.4

***Terrain Specifications:***

Starting Zone elevation: **11,880 ft.** Vertical fall to roadway: **2,600 ft.**  
Runout Zone elevation: **9,280 ft.** Maximum vertical fall: **2,700 ft.**  
Length of path: **6,080 ft.**

***Avalanche Data:***

Length of road affected: **800 ft.**  
Average avalanche activity/year: **1.50**  
Average avalanche activity affecting road/year: **0.30**

***Control Methods:***

Mobile control: **Helicopter bombing**

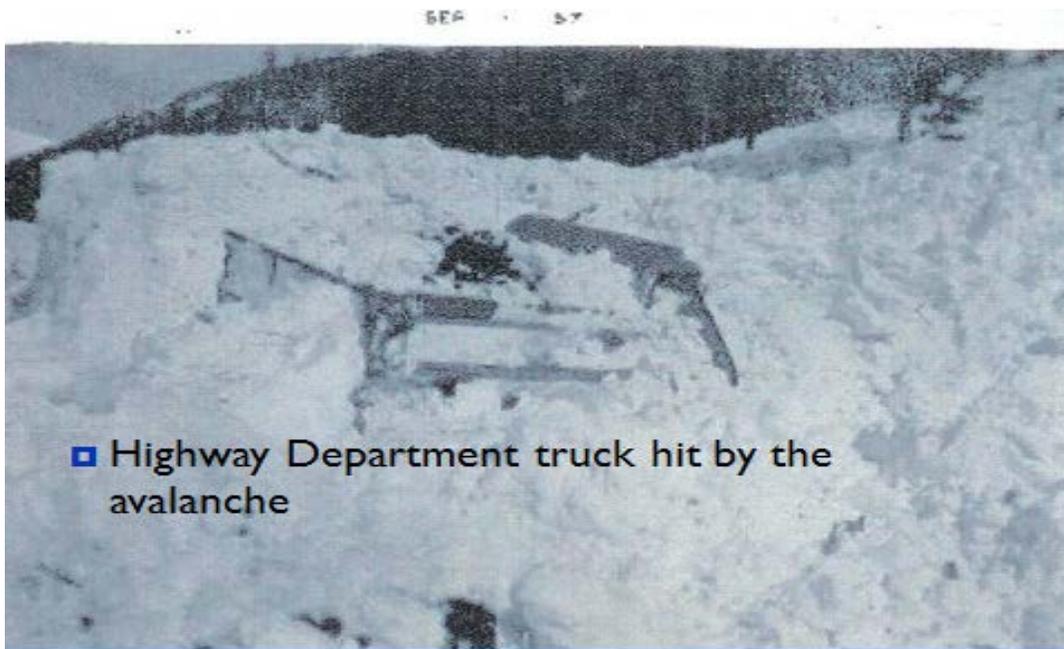
***Comments:*** Most avalanches from this path rarely reach the highway, stopping well before it crosses the highway. It was originally named the Dam slide because of a water diversion dam built in the runout zone of the path. On April 8, 1957, its name and reputation changed forever. Freelance photographer John Hermann and his assistant Roland Wyatt were contracted by Disney Studios to film a documentary on avalanches. They contacted personnel from the Colorado Highway Department about filming the shooting of an avalanche area, hoping to capture an avalanche on film. It was decided that the Dam slide would be a good candidate because the area had received seventy nine inches of snow the previous week and because of the Dam slide's reputation of rarely reaching the highway, the crew could set up the cameras closer to the runout area. Despite warnings from long time locals that because of the conditions, an avalanche could reach the highway, the assistant, Mr. Wyatt positioned himself up slope on the side of the path with remote cameras and Mr. Hermann set up his cameras on the highway directly under the path. Wayne Whitlock, a highway department supervisor, was with Mr. Hermann and his camera. When the avalanche was shot, it released an avalanche larger than anyone thought possible. The air blast ahead of the avalanche snapped large trees and launched them into the air. The powder cloud was estimated at several hundred feet high and trees airborne 200 ft. high. Mr. Rowland, who was on the side of the path, tried to scramble away from the avalanche but was knocked over and buried. Fortunately, he was able to dig his way out and suffered only cuts and bruises. On the other hand, Mr. Hermann and Mr. Whitlock stayed with the camera and kept it running. The avalanche buried the highway under several hundred tons of snow killing both Mr. Hermann and Mr. Whitlock.

After this tragedy, the slide area was referred to as the Disney slide path and has been regularly controlled since. This was the last time this sleeping giant has ever reached the highway.

Disney Studios has released a copy of the avalanche footage taken by Mr. Hermann for avalanche training purposes only and not to the public.



**This photo of the Disney Avalanche area was taken by Ray T. Mumford – May 2011**



This CDOT photo of the April 8, 1957 slide is part of the Avalanche Training Program for highway workers who work along highway sections known for avalanche danger.