MP 257 – 258 Empire Hill

The section of US Highway 40 between Interstate 70 (I-70) and the Town of Empire is called the Empire Hill.

Route	Mile Marker	X	Y	Longitude	Latitude
[1]U. S. Highway 40	257	442797.50	4401328.87	-105.667799	39.759959
	258	444233.48	4401312.56	-105.651034	39.759908

Douglas Mountain

Douglas Mountain sits to the north of Interstate 70 and west of Empire Hill. It has an elevation of 9,518'. W. N. Byers, founder of the Rocky Mountain News, climbed the east face of this mountain in 1859, before it was named for Stephen A. Douglas. (Dr. Richard Bard, one of the first into the Empire Valley, named the mountain for President Abraham Lincoln's "eloquent opponent".) Lincoln Mountain sits just west of Douglas Mountain. Louise Harrison in her book, *Empire and the Berthoud Pass*, wrote "The first gold claim, the Iowa lode on Douglas Mountain, August 7, 1860, was recorded in the name of the Union Mining Company…"[2]   This would be the first mining claim filed in the Empire Valley. Harrison also wrote "W. N. Byers climbed Douglas Mountain in June, 1859. Discouraged by dense brush and fallen timber, he turned back and so failed to 'discover' the star-shaped valley' in this pristine wildness and its natural beauty.'"[3]

Below are two photos of the mountain taken from different locations. The shape of Douglas Mountain makes it easy to identify the location of where a historic photo is taken. This technique is used to identify the location of several historic photos used on this Auto Tour.
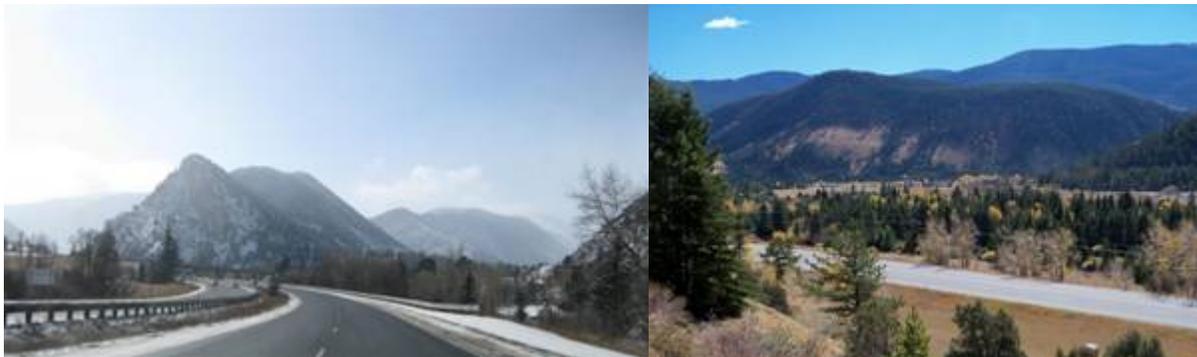
Douglas Mountain
The photo on the left is of Douglas Mountain taken at Empire Junction. The photo on the right of Douglas Mountain is taken just west of Empire.
Photos by author - 2010

[1] Taken from the Colorado Department of Transportation's website:
http://apps.coloradodot.info/dataaccess/Highways/index.cfm?fuseaction=HighwaysMain
[2] Information and quote from: Harrison, Louise C. Empire and the Berthoud Pass published by Big Mountain Press, Denver 1964 Pages 24, 27
[3]Harrison, Louise C. Empire and the Berthoud Pass published by Big Mountain Press, Denver 1964 Page 45

The Georgetown - Empire- Middle Park Wagon Road did not use this section of road. The stage route came from Georgetown, over Union Pass which is between Douglas and Lincoln Mountains, made a sharp turn west (now in front of Jenny's Restaurant) and continued on up and over Berthoud Pass. This road was used mainly to connect Empire with the Railroad Depot. (See MP 256-257 Empire)

1860 and 1861 were important years for Empire and Berthoud Pass. In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected, gold was discovered in the Valley, and a route was seen by the town leaders over what would become Berthoud Pass. William Russell was one of the owners of the Pony Express. In 1861 Colorado became a Territory and Clear Creek County was established. (Grand County was established in 1874.) Also that year, the Union Mining District was established, the Civil War began on April 12, 1861 and E. L. Berthoud left Empire to explore a route for a wagon road and railroad. The Transcontinental Telegraph is in place putting an end to the Pony Express. And finally Charles Christopher Parry, botanist, would also be in Clear Creek County. All of these people would have an influence on Empire and Berthoud Pass.
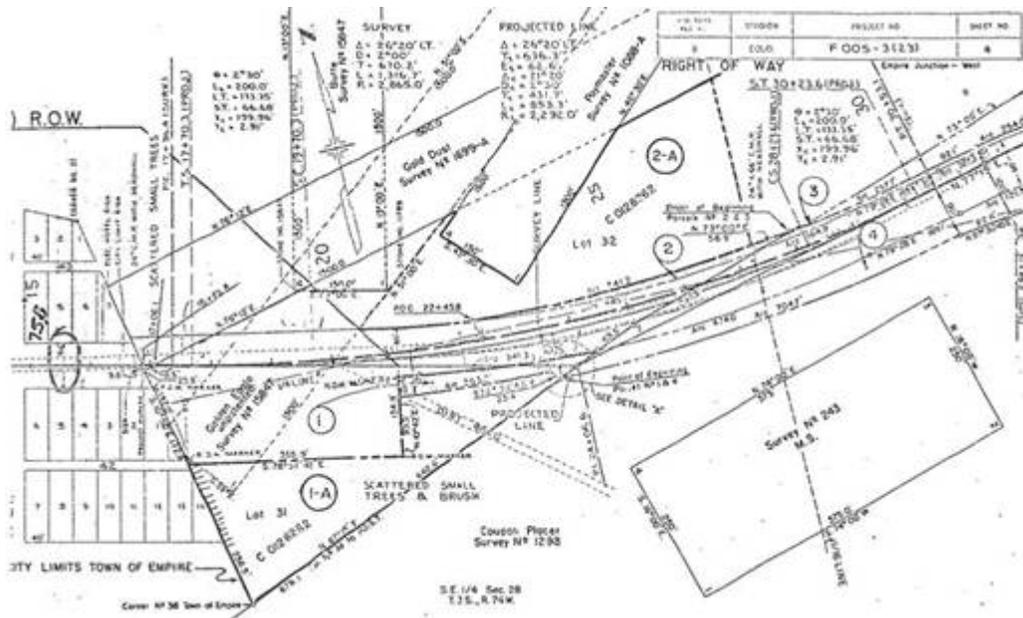
Department of Highways – State of Colorado - State Highway No. 2
Showing the mining claims found on this section of US Highway 40 in 1965
Document provided by the Colorado Department of Transportation

The Empire Tunnel
"Miners push a loaded mine ore car and a flatbed on the tramway near the
entrance of the Empire Tunnel"
Photo provided by and used with permission of the Denver Public Library
Date: 1880 - 1890

The Empire Tunnel

What had been the Empire Tunnel is located in this section of the Auto Tour. Nothing remains except the *support beam* below the Empire Tunnel sign. Everything else has been filled in.

The Empire Tunnel
Note the horseshoe above the entrance on the support beam.
Photo provided by and used with permission of the Denver Public Library

The Empire Tunnel was to be driven through Covode Mountain by the Empire Tunnel Company of which Frank Maxwell was the president and manager. The company was organized in December 1900. The tunnel was to go from this point up into the mines of the North Empire District. The estimated length of the tunnel was to be 10,000 feet.

"By the end of 1903, the Empire Tunnel Company owned ninety-three lodes and two placer claims aggregating a grand total of 425 acres in the heart of the gold belt district. The tunnel had been driven 3000 feet into the mountain and good ore, taken out of the Gold Dirt through the old Empress Tunnel, had resulted in a comfortable surplus."

The President and Board decided that too much was being paid to Denver smelting companies. They decided to build their own in the name of economy. The surplus would disappear and debts will pile up. The company would close and the tunnel boarded up and sold for taxes.[1]

Note: Frank Maxwell conducted a survey of Berthoud Pass in August 1891. His survey would be used to map the Georgetown-Empire-Middle Park Wagon Road by students from the Colorado School of Mines in 2004. His maps and theirs are used in this Auto Tour.

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1 Information and quotes taken from: Harrison, Louise C. Empire and the Berthoud Pass published by Big Mountain Press, Denver 1964 Pages 383-3, 403-405

Big Horn Sheep

The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep was designated the official state animal of Colorado in 1961. They are named for their massive, curling horns which can grow up to 30 inches in length and 15 inches in circumference at the base. A highway warning sign showing the outline of a Big Horn Sheep is found on this section of Highway 40.

Photo by Ray T. Mumford

The Colorado Division of Wildlife estimates that there are about 100 animals on Berthoud Pass. They say that Big Horn Sheep are not known to cross over the Continental Divide into Grand County.

Males (or rams) can weigh between 160 – 250 pounds and occasionally up to 300 pounds. Females (or ewes) weigh between 115 – 200 pounds.

Their horns are not shed annually like the antlers of deer, elk, or moose, but grow in length and circumference throughout their life. A ram's pair can weigh nearly 30 pounds. A ewe's horns are slender, straight and grow to lengths of 8– 10". A ram typically lives to be 9 – 12 years old, while ewes usually live to be 10 – 14 years old.

Mating season is in the fall and called the rut. In the Rocky Mountains it is between October and January. This is the time when rams clash heads to fight for dominance or mating rights. "Males face each other, rear up on their hind legs, and hurl themselves at each other in a charge of some 20 miles an hour"[1] The sound can be heard for long distances. They have a gestation period of about six months and ewes give birth to one lamb a year. The lambing season is between April – June. Newborn lambs weigh 8–10 pounds and can walk within hours of their birth. Young rams stay with the 'nursery group' until they are 2-3 years old. Females will stay with their mother's group for her whole life.

In warm months they graze on mountain slopes and in colder months they move down into the valleys. The herd that lives on Berthoud Pass can often be seen on old mine tailing piles. This herd has become 'habituated' to the areas along I-70 and US Highway 40. Their diet consists of grasses and grass-like plants.

Photos of Big Horn Sheep by author

There are several excellent websites available for Big Horn Sheep. These include the Big Horn Institute and National Geographic. The author compared several, and took the average numbers from the sites.

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1. http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/rocky-mountain-bighorn-sheep.html