

Iron Mountain Road History

Marilyn Oakes, granddaughter of Cecil Clyde Gideon

In about 1929, after several years of planning, the Mt. Rushmore project was kicked into gear with a Federal grant (facilitated by Pres. Coolidge). This was a matching grant, which meant that the Mt. Rushmore Society, a group of local people who were instrumental in the planning and financing of the "project" had to start fund raising in earnest. Up to that time, there had been some money forth-coming from private donations, but much more was needed, and the matching grant was incentive.

About that time, Senator Peter Norbeck, and my Grandfather, C.C. Gideon were thinking about access to the new monument. They had previously teamed up to lay out the Needles Highway in about 1922, using an engineer named Scovel Johnson to do the engineering. He reportedly said he could build a road anywhere if you would give him enough dynamite. So Norbeck and Gideon started riding horseback along the approach to the monument from the east. They chose to use an already existing road that had been used to access the town of Cuyahoga which had had a population of about 3500 people at one time, and which was on the stage route from Deadwood to Cheyenne (WY). The town probably serviced one or more mines in the area during the 1890's and early 1900s, but it was more or less abandoned once the mining phase of the Black Hills started petering out.

That town site is located just about half a mile west of the turn-off to Lakota Lake, and is marked now by a forest service gate that blocks the side road to everything but horses and hikers. I have been up that way and other than the ruts from the stage route, you can find a few concrete foundations (from the 3 hotels that used to be in the town), and here and there you might kick up a piece of sawn lumber.

So the Senator and Gideon started there and probably followed a few deer trails and at some point made a fateful decision to take the road over the mountain instead of around it, which clearly would have been easier, but easy wasn't their focus, it was to create a scenic drive that brought people to the monument through some of the best rock outcrops and trees you could find in the Black Hills. These two men shared an intense love for the Black Hills and a desire to open them up to others to enjoy.

The road winds up the east side of Iron Mountain, over the top and down the west side. Along the way they had to create hair-pin turns and one tunnel on the east side. Coming down the west side, they realized that with a little critical engineering they could create tunnels that would frame the monument, which was only about a mile away (as the crow flies). Norbeck and Gideon were enchanted with the idea of the tunnels as they had created them on the Needles Highway and they were spectacular and visitors loved them. The only problem with the tunnels is that the location of each of them was fairly critical to line them up with the monument. When that task was done, then there was a problem on the west side of most of the tunnels - there was a need for significant "drop" in elevation in the roadbed. Norbeck was adamant about NOT using concrete and steel construction, he wanted rustic wood trestles, only. In February of 1932 he wrote to Gideon and said, "Say Gideon, I want you to be the architect, you determine the design of the spiral 'jump-offs' and don't take any suggestions unless you like them". In April of the same year Gideon wrote back, "Dear Senator - Please find under separate cover my drawings for the Spiral Trestles on Iron Mountain Road. I'm sorry it has taken me so long to get them done, but these are neither flat, level nor straight." He went on to say that the Senator should "have the boys in Washington look them over." Senator Norbeck sent copies of the drawings back to the state highway department in charge of the road construction, Owen Mann, who took them and put the CCC workers on the job to create the bridges. Charlie Smith, an engineer was also involved in the layout of the road. Gideon used to go up to the construction site and watch over the cutting of the trees, the shaping and finally the setting of them into the structure, even though he wasn't at that point directly involved in the job.

Timing on this construction was key to its success because it was during the years of great financial distress in the heartland of the county. The dirty thirties were called that partly because of the drought and the subsequent "Dust Bowl" that rendered many farmers cropless and looking for a way to feed their families, but also after 1932, when the Stock Market crashed, many other people were desperate for work. Hence the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corp, groups of men who signed on for work in order to keep themselves and their families alive.

The CCC workers were instrumental in creating many of the roads and some of the buildings in the Black Hills. There were CCC camps in numerous places not far from the Iron Mountain Road. A lady name Frances "Peg" Lamont wrote a book on the CCC workers, and I have not read it but perhaps one could find it somewhere for additional information.

Keep in mind, also, that there was very little road construction equipment in use in those days. The CCC men used picks and shovels and really earned their wages. There are pictures available that show some of the workers sitting on one of the Pigtail Bridges, during the construction.

Sometime later in the early 40's the bridges were nicknamed Gideon's Pigtail Bridges by a local guy named Paul Bellamy, who regularly wrote for the Rapid City Journal. He was quite a promoter of the Black Hills and history, and he wrote often of Mr. Gideon and his work in the Hills. One of his grandchildren just stayed with us recently at Buffalo Rock Lodge.

After Gideon had designed the first two bridges, and they had been built, Mr. Owen Mann wrote to the Bridge Superintendent at the State Department of Transportation, a Mr. Scurr, and asked "since we are getting ready to build the third bridge just like the other two, I was wondering if anyone has ever done any engineering studies on these designs?" It might be a good idea. Mr. Scurr wrote back in long hand, a four page letter, which in essence said: There are a few places where we would recommend putting metal plates in place in case of vibration, but over-all the bridges are 400% above the required tolerances of the day. I don't believe that my Grandfather was ever apprised of that fact. He expected them to last about 20 years, but they actually held up from 1932 until 1989 before there was any major work done on them.

There are two sections of the road that are one-way. One of the sections, which follows a particularly lovely stand of Birch trees was named Mary Garden Way. This came about at a dinner party in the 1930's. Mary Garden was a professional opera singer from Scotland, who was on tour in the West. A dinner was set up to honor her (and hopefully gain her support for the work being done on Mt. Rushmore that was always in need of cash). Senator Norbeck was not very comfortable at these affairs, as he was a very down to earth Norwegian farm boy, turned state legislator, then Governor (2 terms) then U.S. Senator. Mary Garden was asked what kind of place she might like to have named after her, and she responded, (very exuberantly) that she loved Birch trees and would love a little path that was quiet and serene to be named after her. Hence forth that particular section was named in her honor. I have never heard if she donated any money to the Rushmore cause, but she did come up and lavish hugs and kisses on Senator Norbeck, which caused him great distress, and also made him turn bright red.

It was always part of the original plan of Norbeck's to make people slow way down and enjoy the drive. He had no patience for people who would try to get from one place to another without slowing to enjoy the scenic beauty. It isn't hard for me to understand why he loved the Black Hills so much. He had been born and raised on a farm near Redfield, SD, which was at the time he was born, all dry land farming. As a young man, he got into the well drilling business, and as he was an excellent mechanic he devised a method of deep well drilling and was able to put wells onto farms that had never had water before, thereby enhancing the value of the homestead's considerably. He hand built all his drilling rigs and trained men to operate them.

Norbeck's first trip to the Black Hills was in 1905. He had purchased a 1905 Cadillac Touring Car and talked a friend of his into joining him on a "road trip". The two set out and were ferried across the Missouri River at Fort Pierre. They then followed the stage coach route toward the hills, eventually coming up to the Cheyenne River, which was running pretty well at that time. Fortunately for them, a group of three cowboys on horseback had seen them coming from a hill on the west side of the river and went whooping and hollering down the hill to the river, then they rode their sure-footed horse across to the east side to greet the first ever auto-mobile that they had ever seen. They offered to, then proceeded to tie their lariats to the car, dallied the ropes to the saddle horn then dragged the car across the river. After about three hours of tinkering, Norbeck got the Cadillac running and off they went again. Once in the Hills they rented horses and rode around, falling in love with the great forest and incredible outcrops of rock.