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Roads for the Modern Tourist: a Case Study

For years the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) has had a close relationship with Rocky Mountain National Park (ROMO). UNC owns a research facility, "Old Man Mountain", located within the boundaries of the park itself, from which diverse types research has been conducted, including wildlife observations, climatological surveys and archeological investigations.

In 2001, a UNC historian, Prof. Michael Welsh, was writing an environmental history of ROMO and in one of our conversations described to me the small library and archival collection which is available in the park's administrative complex in Estes Park. We were both interested in the park's unique collections, i.e. the information resources that were assembled for administrative use and never published either in the general literature or as government documents, and consequently the park library owns the only copy. For example, the park library houses a large collection of original photographs that were taken over the years by park personnel to document progress on infrastructure projects such road and trail construction, park buildings, tourist services, etc. There are reports on wildlife research, conducted by park personnel and others, that were never published in journals. There is a monthly report, written by the park superintendent addressed to the director of the national park service that documents the evolution of the park form 1913 into the 1960's.

Professor Welsh and I agreed that it would be highly desirable if UNC students and faculty could access these unique resources without having to drive to Estes Park. I should point out here that, while Estes Park is only 50 miles from Greeley, the route (highway 34) is a narrow canyon road that occasionally impassible. The park did not have the staff or the computer space to create a digital collection and make it generally available on a web site.

In late 2002, we were informed of an IMLS grant project called the Colorado Digitization Project (CDP) that was funding digitization projects with the theme "Western Trails". We came up the idea of doing a project on Fall River Road in ROMO. ROMO was established as a national park in 1914 and Fall River Road was the first major infrastructure project. The road had been originally conceived by the Colorado

Highway Commission as a highway connecting the town of Estes Park with Grand Lake. In those days, construction and maintenance of roads at such high altitudes challenged available technology and there were no commercial construction companies willing to submit bids. Consequently, the first few miles of Fall River Road were constructed by road gangs of convicts from the Colorado State Penitentiary.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the 40 hour work week was becoming standard, and Henry Ford was able to manufacture automobiles within the affordable price range of the average working man or woman. The automobile tourist industry was just being born.

An online collection of images of the construction and maintenance of Fall River Road seemed like a good idea. While we were assembling our grant proposal we visited the ROMO Library and Archives and spoke with park personnel. Their major concern was that our project would increase their workload somehow. When we reassured them that we would do all the work and that the images, once mounted on the web site, would include a copyright ownership statement, the ROMO people encouraged us to continue.

We submitted our CDP proposal and received funding. Our obligation was to scan 900 images and to provide metadata in Dublin Core format. The images would reside on a UNC server while the metadata records would be loaded into a search engine on the CDP website.

In summer of 2003, I and a graduate research assistant made a number of visits to the ROMO library and scanned most of its Fall River Road images as well as a few unpublished documents from the collection. We also visited the Estes Park Historical Museum and scanned some images and some documents that were not available in the ROMO library. Finally we scanned some public domain government documents from the UNC Libraries' collection that were not available in the ROMO library. All of this is still mounted on UNC server at:

www.unco.edu/library/gov/westerntails/romoweb/roads.htm

and the images are still searchable with the CDP search engine. The title of the collection is Roads for the Modern Tourist.

We were hoping that the "Roads ..." project would evolve into a larger partnership that would be of mutual benefit. Perhaps it would put us in a better position to apply for National Park Service grants for digitization projects. However, not much new material has been added since 2003. The park has

conducted some in-house digitization initiatives using volunteers, but they haven't put any of the images on a generally accessible Internet site.

I think one "area of sensitivity" might have been that the park employees we talked to didn't have the authority to give us permission to do what we did. There is a regional archivist who should have been consulted and who should have signed off on the project. Furthermore, the National Parks Service might not have had funding for projects like this one for the last two or three years. The park also might not consider public access to its materials to be a high priority.

Still, I think the potential for a fruitful partnership still exists. The park has unique materials that would be of interest to UNC students and scholars, not to mention, around the country and around the world. UNC has server space and professional expertise in handling these things and a labor pool consisting of work-study students and research assistants who need projects, and for whom the opportunity to work with NPS materials and personnel would enhance the learning experience. We also have time and expertise to chase down documents and photographs that the park library does not have.