

Goat Trail [Mining Road] at Devil's Corner  
On State Highway 20, 1.5 mile North of Newhalem  
Newhalem Vicinity  
Whatcom County  
Washington

HAER No. WA-19

HAER  
WASH,  
37-NEHA.V,  
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Engineering Record  
Mid-Atlantic Regional Office  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

HAER  
WASH,  
37-NEHA.1

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Goat Trail [Mining Road] at Devil's Corner

HAER No. WA-19

**Location:** Goat Trail is on Highway 20 at Devil's Corner, above the Skagit River in the midst of the North Cascade mountains, 1.5 miles north of Newhalem in Whatcom County, Washington.

UTM: Zone - 10 Easting - 630800 Northing - 5394500  
Quad: Diablo

**Date of Construction:** c. 1895. Improvements on the trail at Devil's Corner were made as early as 1884. The most significant work on the mining road at Devil's Corner, however, was carried out in 1895, when two passageways were blasted through the rock outcrop. The trail was maintained until the early 1920s, when it was largely abandoned after a railroad, built by Seattle City Light, made it possible to travel up the Skagit River in relative comfort and safety.

**Present Owner:** National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

**Present Use:** Abandoned

**Significance:** Goat Trail [Mining Road] at Devil's Corner is a spectacular example of the physical barriers which challenged those who sought to exploit America's wilderness. It was the most difficult stretch of a mining trail which ran up the north side of the Skagit River, from the present town of Newhalem to the upriver mining areas of Ruby Creek and Thunder Creek. The road not only represented a formidable barrier to the gold fields on the upper Skagit during the late nineteenth century, but was also a significant obstacle to the development of hydroelectric power on the Skagit during the 1920s.

**Historian:** Kenneth D. Rose

September 1987

As many late-nineteenth-century settlers and miners discovered in the Upper Skagit Valley, Devil's Corner was the most difficult section of a rugged trail that extended along the north side of Skagit gorge in Washington's North Cascade mountains. Prominent at Devil's Corner was a huge outcrop of granite rock which blocked the trail--two large rock-cuts would eventually have to be blasted through this outcrop--and a series of gaps in the trail which had to be crossed on narrow wooden bridges. The ruggedness and barrenness of the terrain on the Upper Skagit had long been an effective barrier to settlement and, in the area from Marblemount upstream, only ten homestead claims were made between 1899 and 1910. As late as 1906, in fact, three-quarters of the region had as yet to be surveyed, and one surveyor at that time described the area as "very rough and mountainous; consisting of deep, impassible gorges, lofty divides and snow-capped peaks ... a region of perpetual snow, traversed by great ice fields and glaciers. There is not an acre adapted to agriculture." [1] For this reason, the Upper Skagit in general and Devil's Corner in particular would not have received much attention had not gold been discovered in the Ruby Creek area in 1879. This rush brought large numbers of persons to the Upper Skagit for the first time, and though the rush was over by the early 1880s, some 600 claims were made and some 2,500 prospectors were said to have performed placer mining along Ruby Creek during these years. [2]

To reach Ruby Creek, prospectors traveled by boat up the Skagit as far as Goodell's Landing (in the present town of Newwaleam). Up river from Goodell's the Skagit became too rough to navigate by boat, and many early travellers chose to hike over Sourdough Mountain to reach Ruby Creek. [3] The grim alternative was to take the Skagit Gorge trail (which miners nicknamed the "Goat Trail") the 20 or so miles to the Ruby Creek area. This trail, as the Washington Standard described it in 1879, "follows the river for twenty miles, now at the water's edge at the foot of some towering rocky wall, again over a tortuous ascent to the edge of a precipice with the river thousands of feet below." [4]

Less than two miles from Goodell's Landing, the prospector traversing this trail would encounter what would eventually become the upper Skagit's most notorious obstruction--Devil's Corner. Devil's Corner was dominated by a massive granite outcrop which blocked the trail, but even the portions of trail not blocked by rock presented serious obstacles to the traveller. Before grappling with Devil's Corner itself, one would first have to cross a rude bridge over a gap in the trail. Next came the granite outcrop, and here the traveller was forced to find what footholds he could around or over the rock. Beyond this lay more gaps in the trail, more makeshift bridges, and another granite obstruction.

The mining boom, if nothing else, demonstrated the inadequacies of the Goat Trail and provided an incentive to build a more reliable trail through Skagit Gorge. In 1879, interested citizens' meeting at Squire's Opera House in Seattle collected over \$1,500 toward making improvements on the trail. The Day Brothers and Cochrane of Mount Vernon estimated that they could build a trail through the gorge for \$1,600 and were hired to do the job. By the spring of 1880, however, the Day Brothers had decided that their bid had been much too low, and they backed out on the job. Later that summer, Whatcom County commissioners appropriated \$1,600 for the trail, with the expectation that the territorial government would be willing to provide matching funds. However,

the territorial government was not forthcoming with the requisite funds and, when the Whatcom County commissioners discovered that they would be unable to raise their own portion of the funds, the whole project was abandoned. [5]

According to popular legend, the first real improvement made in the Devil's Corner portion of the trail was made by one "Captain Randolph," who was able to widen the trail by chiselling into the cliff walls. When Captain Randolph built a cabin across the trail, however, it soon became apparent that his motives were less than altruistic. During the summer of 1884, anyone who wanted to use Captain Randolph's improved roadway had to pay him fiftycents for the privilege of entering his cabin on one side and exiting on the other. [6] The fate of the enterprising captain or his cabin is not known.

If getting into the mining areas of the upper Skagit was difficult, bringing out the extracted ore was even more difficult. There had been much talk of building a reliable road that would connect Bellingham with the mining areas of the upper Skagit, but the project had always foundered due to lack of cooperation between Whatcom County and its Bellingham merchants, and Skagit-area merchants, who feared that such a road would lead to domination by Bellingham commercial interests in the Skagit mining regions. [7] In the early 1890s, there was another flurry of mining activity in the upper Skagit (at Ruby Creek, Thunder Creek and Slate Creek) and, in 1892, a bridge was built just upstream from Goodell's over to the south side of the gorge, in order to bypass Devil's Corner. On the south side of the gorge, a rough trail ran for several miles up to Ferry Bar, where another bridge recrossed the river and the trail was resumed once again on the north side. When one of the bridges was destroyed in the flood of 1894 (this bridge was not rebuilt until 1906), the miners' only means of bringing ore-laden pack animals through the gorge from the mining areas was eliminated. [8]

Skagit residents grew tired of waiting for government assistance and, in 1895, decided to improve the gorge trail with their own resources by blasting half tunnels through the rock outcrops at Devil's Corner. Miners' wives at Anacortes, Washington, gave fund-raising dinners and collected \$500 for blasting powder, and Albert Zabel donated his stagecoach to transport powder, supplies and workers to the site. [9] Creating a passage through the rock outcrops would not only make it possible to bring pack animals down the gorge trail, but would eliminate the necessity to cross the river several times between Goodell's Landing and Ruby Creek. Blasting through the hard granite was dangerous work, however, and a casualty resulted when a man named Jackson was buried under an avalanche of loosened rock and carried to the gorge below. During the same year, surveyors from the State Road Commission were hiking around the upper Skagit, looking for possible routes to the gold fields to the northeast. The road commission praised the efforts being made by citizens of Devil's Corner, and noted that the trail was "picturesque and shows the energy displayed by the active interests of the Slate Creek mining district in opening a way of ingress and progress." The commission, however, decided that this particular route presented too many construction difficulties for a state road, and abandoned Skagit Gorge as a possible route to the gold fields. [10]

When completed, the half tunnel through the granite averaged only about six feet across, and were too low for a person astride a horse to ride through. This, plus the narrowness of the bridges across the gaps in the trail, meant that Devil's Corner remained the most difficult and most dangerous stretch of trail through the Skagit. The hardships endured by travellers through Devil's Corner were many, but surely one of the most harrowing was the incident described by Forest Ranger C. C. McGuire, which took place in the fall of 1909:

We had a pack horse with us and when we got to Devil's Elbow [Corner] the drip from over head had completely blocked the tunnel with ice. We chopped our way through but it was very dangerous for the horse to get through for one slip would send him over the cliff into the river 50 feet below. So we tight-lined him across. To those who do not know what is meant by a tight-line, the following is in order. A rope was tied around the horse's tail and the loose end with a couple of turns around a tree. I took a turn around a tree with the lead rope and as my partner let out a few inches I would take up the slack, so at all times the horse was in the center of the tight line. Though the horse fell several times we inched him across. [11]

In 1913, the Forest Service decided to build a suspension bridge across Thunder Creek. Building supplies for this project were to come up the Skagit Gorge trail, and the main logistical problem was moving the giant cable for the bridge. The cable was so heavy and stiff that it was impossible for pack animals to move among the abrupt turns of the trail and mules that were "unfortunate to be on the inside of a turn, were jerked off their feet and thrown bodily into the rocks " At Devil's Corner, "the trail was so constricted between the rocks there was barely room for a mule to pass, even with the panniers cinched high against the fork of the sawbuck saddles." The only solution seemed to be for a gang of men to try to carry the cable the 19 miles to the bridge site, a day to walk back, and two more days to carry the remaining cable across the trail. United States Forest Ranger Thomas Thompson claimed it took three weeks for the blistered shoulders and hands of the crew to heal. [12]

The Skagit Gorge trail continued to receive periodic maintenance, including a refurbishing in 1898 when the Ruby Creek hydraulic plant was being built. According to resident Glee Davis, the trail was in fairly good shape when the plant began operating in 1908. [13] In the July 1, 1912, issue of the Washington Hatchet, a U.S. Forest Service publication, there was a report that \$450 had been received from Whatcom County and used to repair Devil's Corner and the Goat Trail, and a letter sent from Forest Ranger Thomas Thompson to Seattle City Light in 1918 shows that the Forest Service billed City Light for repairs on the trail. [14] In June 1918, a bridge over one of the trail gaps at Devil's Corner was destroyed by fire-stranding more than fifty people on the upper Skagit, including miners, homesteaders and Forest Service crews. To rebuild the bridge, one person had to climb the sheer rock face over the chasm and put an eye bolt on the other side, so that a cable could be stretched across the gap. Moving the puncheons to the site presented no great problems, but the fifty-foot stringers were both heavy and ungainly, and often had to be snaked around the tight corners with ropes. The entire project took less than a week to finish. [15] In 1922, another fire destroyed the Devil's Corner trail bridge across the Skagit (which had been

rebuilt in 1906 by the Forest Service) as well as causing considerable damage to the railroad, [16] but the Skagit Gorge trail had already been largely abandoned after completion of the railroad.

Devil's Corner made its last notable contribution to the upper Skagit in 1921. The Great Northern Railroad had built a line up the Skagit as far as Rockport, at which point Seattle City Light had taken over construction of the railroad because it wanted to extend the line to its hydroelectric sites at Gorge and Diablo creeks. By the time the City Light railroad had reached Newhalem, the contractor had decided to skirt the notorious Devil's Corner area and built instead a bridge to the south side of the Skagit just down river from Devil's Corner--very near the site of where earlier a footbridge had been built to avoid the same obstacle. The railroad bridge was called Devil's Elbow Bridge, both because of its proximity to Devil's Corner and because of the sharp turns at either end of the bridge. [17]

The extreme ruggedness of the terrain in Skagit Gorge meant that there would inevitably be construction delays in City Light's railroad and, in the winter of 1921, snow slides buried part of the rail line, and mud up to ten feet deep covered parts of the right-of-way [18] This project was also quite costly. Final construction costs of the railroad was \$2 million--a sum that seemed so outrageous at the time that Seattle newspapers editorialized that graft must be involved, and demanded an investigation. All charges of graft would eventually prove to be unfounded. [19] City Light abandoned its railroad in 1954, and all that remains today of the bridge at Devil's Elbow is a concrete pier in the middle of the Skagit. By 1958, Devil's Corner had been bypassed one last time--this time by an improved highway passing through a tunnel above the upper Skagit's most formidable obstacle.

Today, Devil's Corner, like the rest of the Skagit trail, lies abandoned. What remains at Devil's Corner is a series of dilapidated wooden bridges over various gaps in the trail, the largest of which is a 78-foot-long puncheon suspension bridge. A fifth bridge, built at an earlier date, remains intact and can be seen underneath the suspension bridge. It has not been possible to determine when these bridges were built. The other salient feature at Devil's Corner are the two half tunnels which have been blasted out of the rock outcrop, the first tunnel being nearly 60 feet long and the second being over 50 feet long. [20]

Some appreciation of the difficulties faced by travellers at Devil's Corner, especially travellers trying to coax pack animals through this area, can be gained by considering the dimensions of these bridges and tunnels. The narrowest of the bridges is only 3' 2" wide, while the height of the tunnels at the lowest point is 6' 8", with a width of about 5 feet. The narrowness of the bridges meant that there would be a small margin for error when bringing pack animals across--a margin which would be reduced even further when the bridges were covered with ice. The restricted confines of the tunnels meant that the traveller would have to dismount before entering, and that he would have to pay special attention to the girth of equipment carried by his pack animals. Glee Davis remembers that when he tried to bring a bulky Sibley stove through Skagit Gorge, his pack animal became wedged in one of the many narrow portions of the trail. [21] Because of these many difficulties, persons who regularly travelled up Skagit Gorge must have greeted the

of the railroad with considerable relief. If nothing else, the railroad meant that they would never again have to grapple with the inconveniences--and dangers--of Devil's Corner.

#### FOOTNOTES

- [1] Gretchen A. Luxenberg, Historic Resource Study, North Cascades, National Park Service Complex, Washington (Cultural Resources Division, Pacific Northwest Region, National Park Service, 1986), p. 84.
- [2] Ibid. p. 208. It should be emphasized that the strikes at Ruby Creek were not as productive as anticipated. As Wayne S. Moen has noted of the 1879 strike, "because of the inaccessibility of the area and the limited amount of placer ground, the gold rush was short lived." Wayne S. Moen, "Mines and Mineral Deposits of Whatcom County, Washington," Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Division of Mines and Geology, Bulletin No. 57, 1959, p. 10.
- [3] Ibid., p. 198.
- [4] Ibid., p. 207. One other alternate route to Ruby Creek was to travel southward from Hope, Canada. See Paul C. Pitzer, Building the Skagit: A Century of Upper Skagit Valley History 1870-1970 (Portland, OR: Galley Press, 1979), p. 38. When miners referred to the "Goat Trail," they generally meant that portion of the Skagit Gorge trail between Goodell's Landing and Ruby Creek. "Goat Trail" was a vague designation, however, and at least two maps show the Goat Trail, beginning at Gorge Creek--upstream from both Goodell's Landing and Devil's Corner. See the Western Mining Syndicate Incorporation's 1972 reprint of an 1899 map entitled "The Cascade Portion of Skagit, Whatcom and Okanogan Counties, Washington," and "Sketch of the Mountain Section of Whatcom, Skagit and Okanogan Counties, Washington. Explored and Examined by the State Road Commission, 1895."
- [5] Erwin N. Thompson, North Cascades N.P., Ross Lake N.R.A. & Lake Chelan N.R.A.: History Basic Data (Office of History and Historic Architecture, National Park Service: 1970), pp. 165-166.
- [6] JoAnn Roe, The North Cascadians (Seattle: Madrona, 1980), p. 24. See also Davis, Glee. Taped interview with Cy Hentges, North Cascades National Park, 1970.
- [7] JoAnn Roe, The North Cascadians, p. 55.

- [8] Shirley Alger, "Cascade Stories," unpublished manuscript, p. 6. See also Thompson, Thomas. Diaries, 1907-1943. Pullman, Washington State University Libraries, and Fromme, Rudo L. Papers. Seattle: University of Washington Libraries, Manuscripts.
- [9] Erwin N. Thompson, North Cascades N.P., pp. 165-166.
- [10] JoAnn Roe, The North Cascadians, p. 56.
- [11] Thomas Thompson. Diaries, 1907-1943, pp. 167-168.
- [12] Will D. Jenkins, Last Frontier in the North Cascades: Tales of the Wild Upper Skagit (Mount Vernon, WA: Skagit County Historical Society, 1984), pp. 114-117.
- [13] Glee Davis. Taped interview by Stew Fritts, North Cascades National Park, 1974.
- [14] Seattle Light Department files, University of Washington Libraries, Manuscripts. Letter of May 4, 1918, from Thomas Thompson to J. D. Ross.
- [15] Thomas Thompson. Diaries, 1907-1943. Entry of June 4, 1918. See also Will D. Jenkins, Last Frontier in the North Cascades, pp. 149-150.
- [16] United States Forest Service records--Mount Baker National Forest, Federal Archives and Records Center, Seattle. RG 95, Access #73-A-1044, FRC #1437.
- [17] Paul C. Pitzer, Building the Skagit, p. 38.
- [18] Ibid., p. 38.
- [19] Paul C. Pitzer, "A History of the Upper Skagit Valley, 1924-1970," unpublished manuscript, p. 4. See also JoAnn Roe, The North Cascadians, pp. 121-122.
- [20] Erwin N. Thompson, North Cascades N.P., p. 176.
- [21] JoAnn Roe, The North Cascadians, p. 56.d shipping on the Great Lakes.

ADDENDUM TO:  
GOAT TRAIL MINING ROAD  
Highway 20, 1.5 miles North of Newhalem  
Newhalem vicinity  
Whatcom County  
Washington

HAER WA-19  
*HAER WASH,37-NEHA.V,2-*

COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001