

## A Trip to Big Four and the Ice Caves

July 7, 2015 - This was a disastrous week at Big Four . . . one person killed and multiple people injured in an ice cave collapse. It's tragic that such accidents take place, but we need to remember that it is truly wilderness when we venture forth in our region, and hopefully such accidents won't adversely impact our opportunities to enjoy the natural beauty.

Of course, today it's pretty easy to enjoy the Mountain Loop – it's a great road with fantastic scenery. The road itself was a major undertaking, with initial discussions taking place around 1911, and completion of the "loop" thirty years later. When work began in earnest in the early '30s, the old rail line was on its last legs. By the mid-30s, local residents were anxious and restless at the relatively slow progress being made. The road was being built in "sections", through the cooperation of County, Forest Service, and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Bad weather was a factor, and unforeseen elements such as a huge blue clay slide slowed progress. By 1936, it was announced that the rails had been sold and would be taken up and shipped to Japan as scrap steel. Traffic on the rails had been reduced to a minimum, since the railroad had little or no maintenance activity.

Of course, before the rails were completely removed, a few folks had to enjoy the trip to Big Four on the remaining railbed. The following text comes from the Snohomish County Forum (the local Granite Falls newspaper of the time). The supporting pictures come from the collection of the Granite Falls Historical Museum.

July 2, 1936 - Anyone who has any doubts about the future of the mountain district at our back door should take the trip that I went on last Friday to Big Four. Through the courtesy of Walter Johnson, supervisor of the Big Four Inn properties, I chiseled in on a party he took up there.

The possibilities of the territory which will be opened up by an automobile road next year, are amazing, and the diversified attractions surpass anything Mt. Baker and Mt. Rainier have to offer. When the road is completed, it is highly probable the district will attract as many tourists as any section of the Pacific Northwest.



We made the trip from Verlot on the "Galloping Goose", a hybrid rig that is a combination of a covered wagon, a Model T Ford, and the Toonerville Trolley. The chauffeur of the "Galloping Goose" is Martin Johnson, caretaker at Big Four Inn. He knows every nut and bolt in the engine and although his kit of tools consists principally of a jackknife and a hunk of haywire, he keeps her running.

That trip over the old railway is quite an experience. The ravages of time have left their marks on the road, and in some places the track is suspended in midair, without benefit of foundation, but the Goose rumbled merrily along, regardless. But it was an open question whether the ties are there to hold the track, or the track is there to hold the ties.

### **Martin Johnson, with several of the elk transplanted into the Big Four area**

Crossing Red Bridge, Martin heard a loud knocking, which not even he could locate in the engine. It finally developed that it wasn't the engine at all -it was my heart pounding as we bumped over the unsupported rails with nothing underneath except the Stillaguamish roaring over the rocks too many

feet below. In fact, the Goose flagrantly violates the Law of Gravitation all along the route and it could justly sue the roadbed for non-support. And it's just a coincidence when the Goose and the track take a turn at the same time.



**When a raging river washed out the trestle supports, it was not uncommon for the rails and ties to remain (spiked together), simply swinging across the gap.**

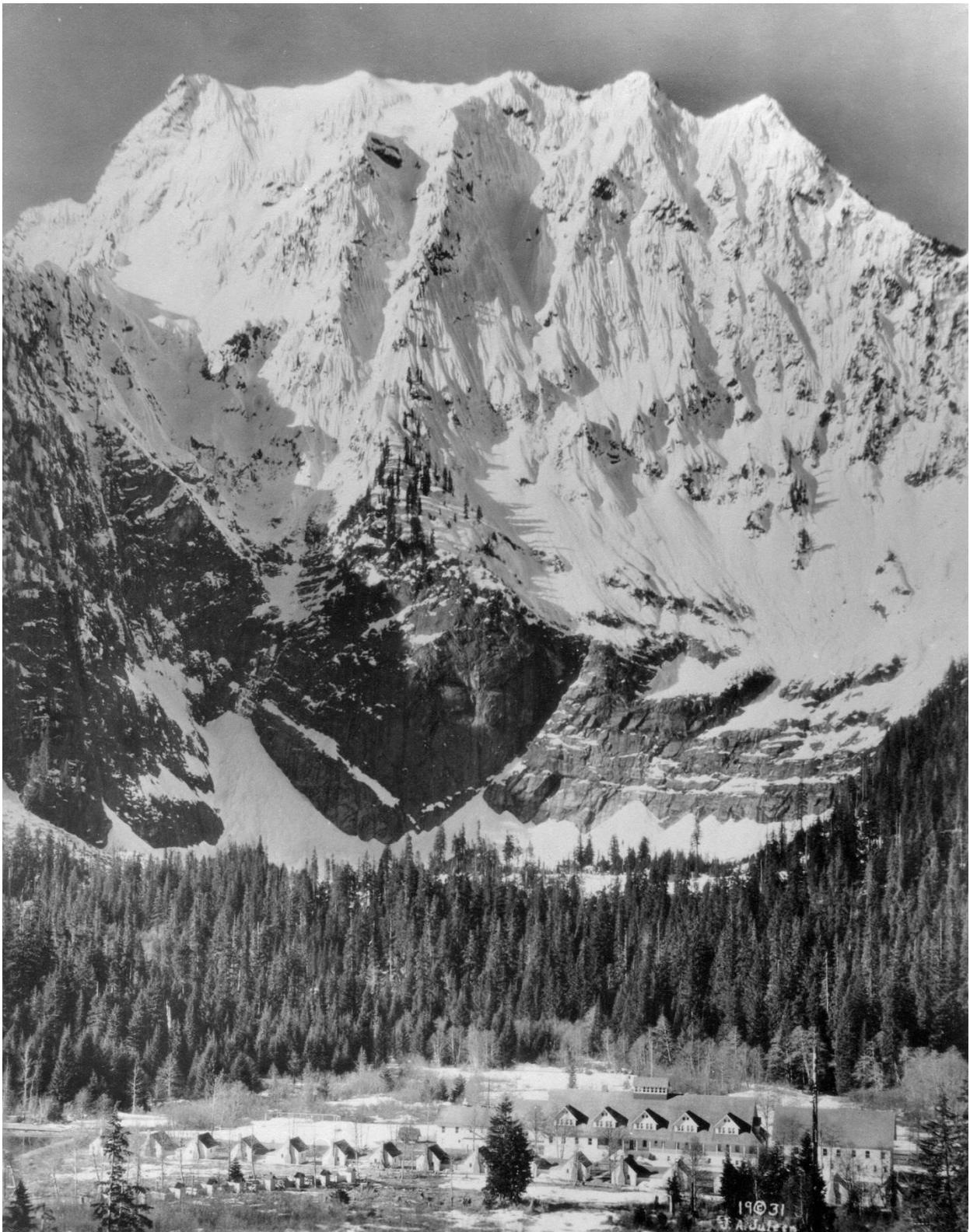


**One approach to repairing the damage was to string cables beneath the ties, and to hold those cables up with loops hanging from an overhead cable. Voila! A suspension bridge. Here you can see the Model T speeder getting ready to cross . . .**

Another thrill is the first sight of Big Four Mountain. After traveling along the shore of the beautiful Stillaguamish for nearly 15 miles from Verlot, through a most scenic country, the road takes a sharp turn, and suddenly looming majestically the sheer peak appears. A short distance further is Big Four Inn. I expected to find it in a rather dilapidated condition as it has not been open for several seasons. Instead, it is as spic and span as if were at the height of a busy touring season, thanks to the efforts of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson, the caretakers. Incidentally, one of the principal attractions of the Inn is pretty Mrs. Johnson, who fixed us a swell trout dinner.

We spent the day hiking to the glacier and ice caves at the base of Big Four Mountain, and loafing around the spacious lobby of the Inn. I even went in swimming in Crystal Lake near the Inn, but not for long. We could have stayed there a month, and still not have seen everything in the vicinity.

It's too bad most of us who live in this district don't appreciate our scenic attractions. Perhaps we're too used to them to get the proper perspective, and "can't see the forest for the trees". But a dollar will get you five that someday the drive from Granite Falls to Monte Cristo and on around to Darrington and Arlington will rank with Yellowstone, Rainier, and other "must" trips of tourists in the West.



**Big Four Inn, including cabins, at the base of Big Four Mt.**