

*Guide to*  
**OLD FALL RIVER ROAD**



ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK  
COLORADO

## SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR TRIP



The road is 9 miles in length from Endovalley and one-way only. Set your odometer at 0 or write down the mileage. Mileposts mark every mile.



Use a lower gear and turn off your air conditioner to reduce the chance of the engine overheating.



Because of the narrow roadway, vehicles more than 25 feet in length and vehicles with trailers are prohibited.



Expect much cooler temperatures as you climb higher, and be alert for severe afternoon thunderstorms, especially above treeline.



**Please be aware:** Old Fall River Road is one-way, uphill only. The road is narrow and there are multiple tight switchbacks, steep slopes and no guardrails. There are no turnarounds along the way; once you begin your journey, there's no turning back!



## WELCOME TO ADVENTURE



You are about to embark upon a journey on a historic roadway. Built between 1913 and 1920, Old Fall

River Road was the first motor route to cross Rocky Mountain National Park. In the next 9 miles, you will travel from montane meadows and woodlands through subalpine forests to the alpine tundra. There, on the rooftop of the continent, you'll discover an environment similar to the arctic regions of the far north.

Old Fall River Road remains much as it was in 1920. Following the steep slope of Mount Chapin, the numerous dropoffs and hairpin turns of this narrow dirt road are still there, demanding a leisurely pace. Forget about deadlines and clocks. In this timeless land, you can have many of the same experiences motorists had in the 1920s. Today, as it was when the road was built, this remains the edge of wilderness. Here is a place to develop a sense of wonder and an awareness of the natural environment. Let this guide serve as a backseat naturalist, introducing a few of the lessons the land can teach.

# A TOUCH OF HISTORY

**P**rior to Rocky Mountain National Park's dedication in 1915, there was great interest in building a transmountain highway through this part of Colorado. By the spring of 1913, the decision had been made to begin construction in Horseshoe Park and cross the mountains to Grand Lake by way of Fall River Valley and Milner Pass. Work began in late July of 1913. Seven years later, on September 14, 1920, Old Fall River Road was dedicated.

During the early construction phase, all work was done by 38 convicts from a Colorado state penitentiary. Following construction of the wider, straighter and less-precipitous Trail Ridge Road in 1932, Old Fall River Road was designated a one-way route. Today, as you make your way up this road, imagine what it would be like if cars still traveled in both directions!

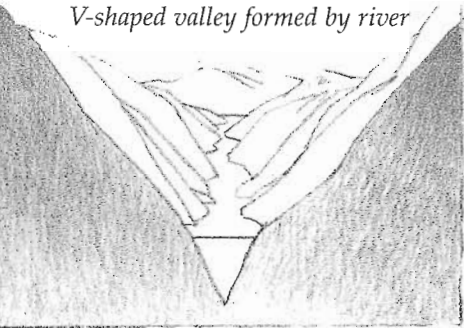
Long before the road was built, American Indians traveled this route to cross the Continental Divide. The Arapaho called this passage-way the Dog's Trail. Here, deep snow enabled dogs to pull a rig called a travois, a sled made by lashing two poles together to form a V-shape with hide or blankets stretched between.

The park is rich in geologic history. Most ancient of all formations are the mountains. Between 65 million and 5 million years ago, geologic uplift raised the Rockies thousands of feet above the surrounding landscape. Many of the rocks – mostly granite, gneiss and schist – are more than 1.75 billion years old. Since the uplift occurred, time, water, ice and wind have combined to shape and sculpt this magnificent scenery.

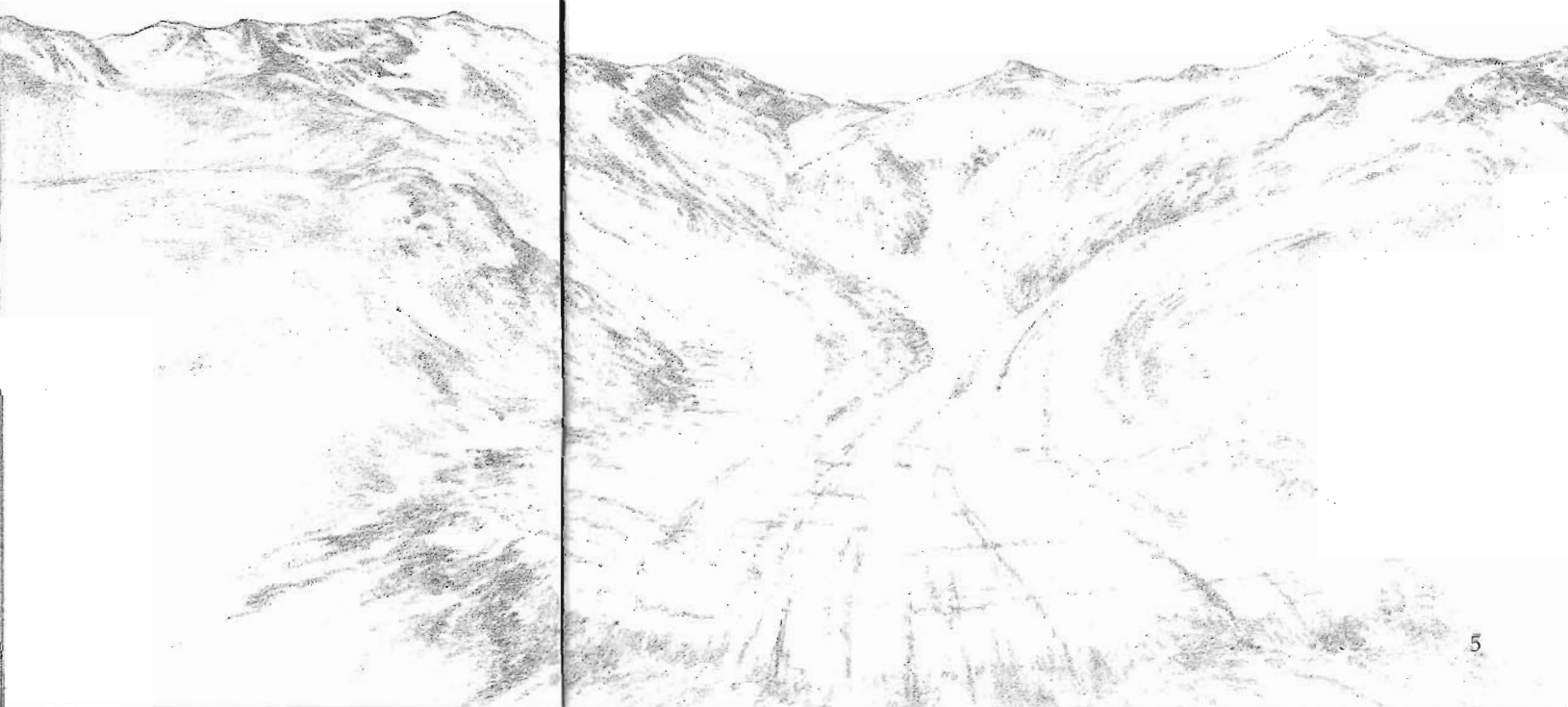
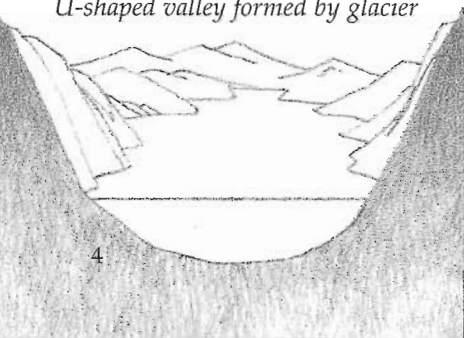
During the Pleistocene epoch, or ice age, heavy snows accumulated in the mountains, compressing into glaciers and moving down the valleys under their own weight.

Four major periods of glacial advance and retreat during the past 1.5 million years have created a very different landscape. In this part of the Rockies, the alpine (mountain) glaciers were not connected with the vast continental glaciers, although they did develop during the same climatic cooling period. The most recent advance began approximately 27,000 years ago, reaching its maximum extent 15,000 years ago and withdrawing 7,500 years later.

*V-shaped valley formed by river*



*U-shaped valley formed by glacier*



# AT THE START OF OLD FALL RIVER ROAD



Your journey begins at 8,558 feet (2,600 meters) and ends at Fall River Pass, 11,796 feet (3,600 m) above sea level. As you

climb, the temperature cools by roughly 3 to 5 degrees Fahrenheit (2 to 3 degrees Celsius) for each 1,000-foot (300 m) gain in elevation. You will pass through three life zones, or ecosystems: montane, subalpine and alpine tundra. At times, you will catch glimpses of a fourth park life zone, riparian. Located adjacent to water, the riparian zone is represented by the Fall River, its tributary streams and the plant and animal communities found along these watercourses. Riparian areas occur in all park life zones, from the montane to the alpine tundra.

A life zone, or ecosystem, includes all living things – plants and animals – and all non-living things – soils, minerals, air and water – found in a particular area. Also part of the picture is how they interact.

Throughout your trip, pay close attention to the shape of Fall River Canyon. Looking up or down the valley, you can see the distinctive U-shaped profile, evidence of ancient glaciers. Valleys carved by rivers and streams are generally V-shaped.

As glaciers descended from the high peaks, large and small rocks were pried loose, carried along and later deposited when the ice melted. In places, this river of ice was 1,500 feet (450 m) thick. Where the bedrock resisted, the glaciers smoothed and polished it. In other locations, using debris as a cutting tool, the ice left deep scratches, or striations, on the surface of the rock. By taking your time and carefully observing, you will discover many of these clues to glacial architecture.



*Alpine tundra*

*Krummholz transition*

*Subalpine*

*Montane*

Fall River Pass and Alpine Visitor Center

Mount Chapin



Fall River

Old Fall River Road

