



Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

Monte Cristo and Early Tourism: Big Four Inn

The Mining Boom and Monte Cristo

Joseph L. Pearsall discovered gold and silver in the southeastern part of Snohomish County, Washington in 1889. He and the original developers named the site 'Monte Cristo' after the main character in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It was thought that the name would make people think of the great wealth and sense of mystery associated with that character. A mining boom quickly started as news spread about the discovery of precious metals and the town of Monte Cristo was born.

Developers had to find the best way to access the mining operation. Initially, they built trails and wagon roads through the forests. In anticipation of large shipments of ore and concentrates, the developers hired engineer John Q. Barlow to survey a railroad route. The section between Hartford, near Lake Stevens, and Monte

Cristo was known as the 'Hartford Eastern Railway'. The line connecting Monte Cristo to Everett was completed in 1893.

During that period, Henry Hewitt was developing Everett as a manufacturing city in partnership with Colby, Hoyt, and Company of New York City. Major funding of this development came from the country's richest man, John D. Rockefeller. A smelter was built in Everett to extract gold and silver from the ore shipped in from mines in the area. The original partnership collapsed during the depression of the early 1890's but was later reorganized by Frederick T. Gates. Production steadily improved between 1895 and 1897 and again between 1900 and 1903.

Severe weather conditions at Monte Cristo, and along the Hartford Eastern Railway route, were an ongoing problem. Part of the railway route bordered the Stillaguamish River. High rainfall caused flooding along the river and washed out the rail lines. Tunnels frequently collapsed and had to be dug out by hand. Snow accumulated on steep hillsides and avalanches were fairly common.

Organized mining in the Monte Cristo area ceased by 1920. The cost of maintaining the rail line was far higher than anticipated. Tunnels were damaged in 1892, 1896, and, with disastrous effects, in 1897. There were also problems with retaining and paying labor through changing economic cycles. In addition to these factors, the ore in the relatively young Cascade Mountains is all located close to the surface in limited amounts.

Tourism Takes Off

The Mountain Loop area has been popular with tourists since the 1890's. Visitors enjoy the beautiful scenery and many recreational opportunities. Tourists took advantage of the rail line that went through the area. The Hartford Eastern Railway had regular passenger coaches and four open-topped observation cars. They could carry as many as 500 passengers. Gas cars were adapted to ride the rails. One of the largest groups to access the area in 1918 via the rail line, was The Mountaineers, a Seattle-based outdoor recreation group. Led by Edmond S. Meany, they toured the region for a month and visited many sites including areas near Mount Pilchuck, Silverton, Barlow Pass, and Monte Cristo.

Hotels developed in the area to take advantage of the influx of visitors. The hotel in Monte Cristo had several different owners and was reopened in 1919 as the Casscrest Inn. Wyatt and Bethel Rucker opened a hotel in Silverton in 1920. Hotels were usually filled to capacity. Boy Scout and Campfire Girl camps were constructed nearby.



Tourists in rail car near Monte Cristo. Photo courtesy of Granite Falls Historical Museum.

Big Four Inn (1921 – 1949)

The Ruckers decided to take advantage of the increased tourism and began developing a more upscale resort located near Big Four Mountain. No expense was spared in constructing the Big Four Inn. It opened in the summer of 1921. The inn included a lavish lodge, cabins, golf course, bowling green, man-made lake, and tent cabins. All the buildings had hot and cold running water and electricity was generated by nearby Perry Creek. A wood-planked trail and suspension bridge over the Stillaguamish River were constructed to access the ice caves.

In the early 1920's, newly mobile Americans had more time to enjoy leisure activities and word of the Big Four Inn spread

quickly. Visitors flocked to the lodge from nearby and from around the world. There was a custom of notable visitors signing the wall in the lodge and it became a tourist attraction.



Big Four Inn with parked rail car. Photo courtesy of Granite Falls Historical Museum.

In 1929, the Great Depression began and it had a dramatic impact on the region. In the past, if there were problems with the operations, backers on the east coast bailed them out. No one bailed them out this time. The Ruckers abandoned the railroad line in 1933. Gas cars continued to transport visitors on the tracks from Robe to the Big Four Inn. Residents in Silverton made makeshift gasoline "speeders" to drive on the tracks. In 1936, the tracks were torn out and by 1937, the route was being converted into a gravel road. Visitors flocked to the Big Four Inn again. Construction on a road connecting Barlow Pass with Darrington took place in 1938-39. The road connecting Granite Falls to Darrington later became known as the Mountain Loop Highway.

Ownership of the Big Four Inn changed hands several times during the difficult economic times of the 1930's. Oscar Hellstrom, sportswriter and owner of a Swedish newspaper chain, bought the inn in 1938. He spent \$60,000 on improvements to the property. The road finally reached the inn in 1941. However, with the advent of World War II, the inn was closed to civilian use. The federal government used the inn as a rest center for United States Coast Guard personnel between active duty assignments. Big Four Inn reopened after the war but had to close again in 1949 due to more road construction.

Early on the morning of September 7, 1949, fire broke out and destroyed the three-story lodge "like kindling". Though the cabins and outbuildings were saved from the fire, the Forest Service required them to dismantle all the structures on the federally owned land a few years later. All that remains today of the once grand inn are some sidewalks and a chimney at the Big Four Picnic Area.

Interesting Fact: Donald Trump's grandfather, Frederick Trump, had a real estate office in the town of Monte Cristo in 1893.

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