

## **HOW DID STRAIGHT CANYON GET ITS NAME?**

Straight Canyon has several different explanations on how it got its name. I will present three different stories and it will be up to you to decide which one suits you best.

When we as a family first moved to Emery County in the late Summer of 1979 we were told that the reason for the canyon's name is that the it is so steep and only leaves room at the bottom for Cottonwood Creek. The road is so twisty and turny that the only way you could see is straight up. We were satisfied with this explanation because it made sense so for years this is what we believed and shared with others.

I came across at the Emery County Archives two sources that caused doubt in our belief. The second source was from someone that had done a considerable amount of research but the paper had no name to give credit to the researcher.

"If you have traveled to Joe's Valley via Straight Canyon you know that the road is as crooked and winding as a mad snake; so how come it's called 'Straight Canyon'? It was so named by the "San Peters's because they could stand in a certain place on the Skyline Drive and look straight through the canyon (the top portion of it) and see a portion of the San Rafael Swell, and thus they named it Straight Canyon.

"The bottom of the canyon is narrow and rugged and filled with huge boulders. There is no 'bottom land' along the river channel on which to build a road. For the most part, the water is wall to wall.

'This canyon did not lend itself to the building of a road; therefore, settlers were living in Orangeville and Castle Dale for some 20 years before a road was built through Straight Canyon. If a person wanted to get to Joe's Valley, he had to go up Cottonwood Canyon, over Flat Canyon, down Little Joe's Valley Canyon, across Upper Joe's Valley, and down the mountain slope—to finally reach Lower Joe's Valley.

"In their December 1891 meeting, the County Government received a report from a Committee assigned to locate a route for the road through Straight Canyon. The route chosen was on the south side of the canyon, Due to insufficient funds, nothing was done for several years. The County applied to the State for monies to build this road, and at their April 1897 meeting they

received \$1000 for construction of said road. Sylvester Cox and his brother Edwin signed a contract with the County to build the road. The contract price was \$1000. The specifications were simple: When they could haul one ton of coal in an iron-tired wagon to the head of the canyon and back, the contract was satisfied. They did it and were paid. It is assumed that the Cox Brothers completed the road in the summer of 1897.

“That road served the settlers from that time until 1918—a period of 21 years. In 1916 the Orangeville-Ephraim route was designated as a State Highway (#29). The plan called for a new road to be built on the north side of the river, through Straight Canyon—to replace the 'Cox Road,' which was on the south side. A contract was awarded to Bird and Thorn Construction Company. They had a huge steam shovel, which scooped the dirt and rocks out in front of the machine. (It was not like a backhoe, which pulls the dirt toward the machine). This steam shovel had cables and pulleys and winches to move the scoop bucket, and all of this was powered by a steam engine. (A backhoe has hydraulic rams which move the working parts. The diesel engine supplies power to a hydraulic pump which supplies power to the rams).

“The contractor went broke on the Straight Canyon job. The steam shovel was so heavy and had such a wide wheel base that they had to build a road that would hold it up. They had to blast their way through outcropping ledges and huge boulders—and move many tons of material. Due to these factors, the road bed had to be built much wider than would have been necessary for traveling in a Model T Ford or with a team and wagon.

“Work on the road was intermittent due to World War I, but the section through Straight Canyon was completed in 1918 (Side note: The section up the Switchbacks and White Dugway to the Skyline Drive was completed in 1920).

“After the job was completed, the steam shovel was driven across the Lowry Water bridge and off into the brush about 100 yards north of the road, and there it sat and rusted for many years. It was 'cannibalized' for parts and scrap iron. The last nuts and bolts (remnants) of it were buried under Joe's

Valley Reservoir.”

Now the third explanation is my favorite because of the understanding of the settlers coming from Sanpete County and were called by the Prophet Brigham Young to cross the mountain and colonize this area. Being obedient to the Lord's Prophet there were many that made the long trek being a four or five days journey in the 1870's.

The following is part of Hallie Moston Cox's stories and experiences:

“Do you know why Straight Canyon is called Straight? Well, there was a cow trail through Straight Canyon in the early days; and when the people came from Sanpete, they came up- either Manti or Ephraim Canyons; and then they would go south down Wagon Road Ridge and come to the divide between the Black Dragon and The Dragon. They would go north up to Little Joe's Valley Canyon and come down Little Cottonwood Canyon. Well, the people who were riding men would leave

them at the head of Straight Canyon and walk down home. They'd get there that night, and the others would get there the next day or the next. Straight Canyon was a straight cut through. That's where it got its name because it could have been a short cut but instead of that it was a straight cut. They tell of some of the men that walked over there. One man I'm not sure but I believe his name was Woodard. He was bare-footed, and left them at the head of the canyon and walked through, and when he got down in the valley, it was the time of the year when the red berries were ripe; and he walked down through the red berries. Some cowman came along on horseback and saw those big 'bear tracks', and with his rifle went following the bear along and ran into Woodard as he had filled up with red berries and had started down the road—barefooted. That's just a little story to show of the way people lived here in the early days. I went to school with kids who went barefooted nearly all winter. Their feet were black and cracked and chapped—a hardship.

“Father (Sylvester Cox) and his brother, Uncle Ed, who was around ten years older than Dad, took a contract to build the first road through Straight Canyon for \$1000. The contract read that it had to be a road that a team could pull a one-ton load up or down the road. Now they hired help for around a dollar a day. Just imagine that a road, of course it wasn't an automobile road, it was a team road. They crossed the canyon just above the old coal mine, so they had to build a bridge. They didn't go up where the old road goes now. The road goes low, and if you'll drive slow and watch close, you can still see rock walls laid right near the bed of the creek up just so hold the dirt in some of these points. They went down into the creek. They never crossed it, but they went down into the edge of the creek I believe it was in three places, and during the high water it was sometimes rather difficult. It would take a little nerve to drive down into that water where it was deep and be sure you were going to stay on the road because you didn't know whether it was washed out or not.; I never did drive a team over that road myself, but I rode over it with older brothers and my Father, I remember. Then later they built the road up over the point which went up about 100 yards above the creek. On the bridge that was built there was a big rock, and that rock is still there; and it has a stump of a tree on with a root.; They ran the stringers from each bank to this rock near the center; and then, of course, it had to be covered with plank or logs for the covering. That was all in the \$1000 contract.

Now that the information has been given to you, you may decide which one you agree with or maybe you have yet another version that should be printed. We would appreciate your comments directed to the Emery County Archives [suzannea@emery.utah.gov](mailto:suzannea@emery.utah.gov)

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