

Opening Imogene Pass – 2014

By Jerry Smith

July 6, 2014

For several years, one of my “bucket list” desires has been to traverse Imogene Pass immediately after it has been plowed through. Black Bear Pass is also on that list, but Black Bear had not been opened by July 6th, 2014.

On past trips in mid July and later, the plowed snow had already settled and the depths of the white, vertical walls of snow had already been shortened by the summer melt.

One of the reasons for the need to be there right after the opening was to be able to take some spectacular photos showing the depths of snow that accumulates near 13,000 feet above sea level.

Each spring/summer, Imogene Pass and Black Bear Pass must be plowed before traffic can use the trails. Most years, the plowing is complete some time in June. 2014 was not one of those years.

For weeks, we had been going onto the San Miguel County website daily looking to see if Imogene Pass had been opened. Word finally came by way of a Facebook post from Dan Mick that his party had been the first over Imogene on Thursday, July 3rd.

With the 4th of July holiday weekend beginning on Friday, we knew this would be a very busy weekend for traffic in the Ouray area — not conducive to stopping for extended photo opportunities.

Sometimes, you must just deal with circumstances not to your liking.

I had scheduled a trip to the Ouray/Silverton area for about a week prior to July 4th hoping the passes would be open. Most of the roads, trails, and passes had been open for weeks -- but Black Bear and Imogene were not.

I had expected some of the Grand Mesa Jeep Club members to respond saying they would like to go. Finally, Thursday evening, I got a response from Mary asking about when and where to meet. After a quick phone call, we had decided to meet at 9 AM and head for Imogene Pass.

The trip down to Ouray was uneventful until we were just outside of the town limits where traffic was backed up and stalled. 4th of July parades on Main Street will do that to traffic.

After refueling, we headed up Yankee Boy Basin to the Imogene Pass trailhead. Along the way, we passed a lady walking up the road.

The crossing of Canyon Creek had water nearly to the top of 35" tires. Imogene Creek was flowing a higher volume than we'd ever seen before. Some of the falls were launching water, not just spilling it.

It was not long before we began encountering holiday traffic. Many ATV/UTVs were out enjoying their day. Quite a few full-size vehicles were doing the same.

It was all too clear that many people do not know or understand the BackCountry rule: "Uphill traffic has the right of way".

About halfway up, we stopped for a lunch break. While sitting there, we were passed by the walking lady from miles back. Endurance was not her problem. We passed her again up near the first high cuts in the snow.

As it was beginning to rain, we offered a ride, but she declined.

We met some of the Wild Bunch Jeep Club from Montrose close to the top. Perry Reed told us that Black Bear was still closed — Bummer!

As we approached the top, it began to rain. Not long after, the rain became thicker and soon was mixed snow and rain. The wind was a cold one pushing the snow somewhat sideways.



At the top, we first took the side trip to the overlook. Red Mountains 1, 2, and 3 plus many others to the east were shining in all their glory. This is one of the most colorful and beautiful sights you will ever witness.

At the actual top of the pass, we took a few obligatory pictures. The walker caught up once again. Walking just a few yards at 13,000 feet is difficult for most of us. She was probably averaging 4 mph climbing the steep road.



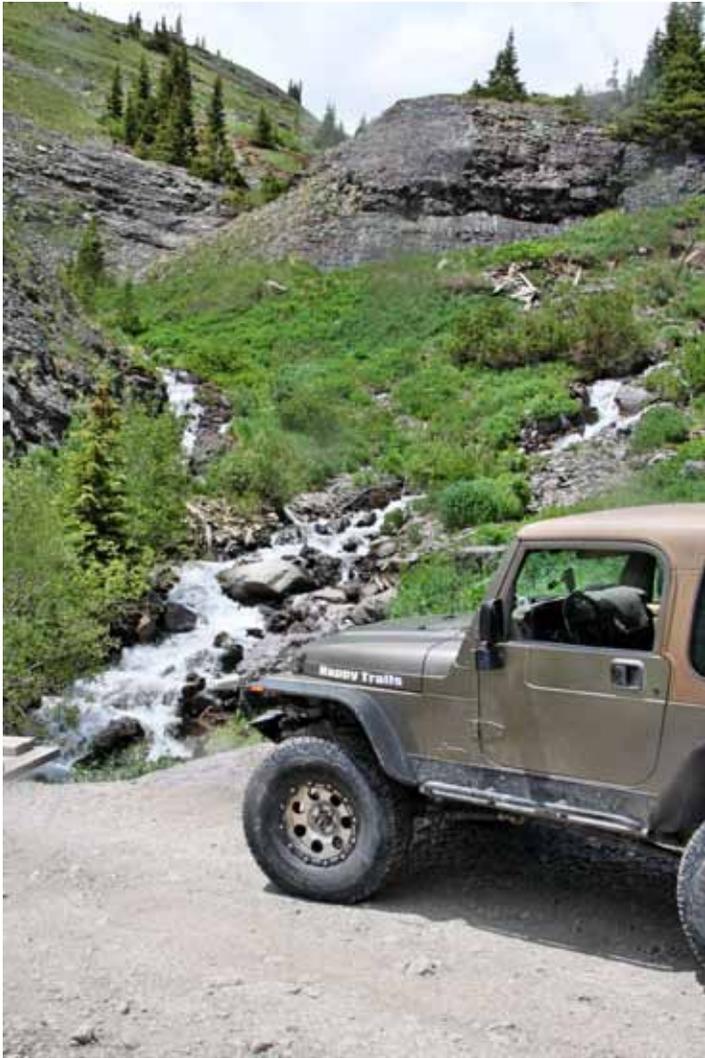
Going down the Telluride side of Imogene was more adventure. There were more vertical snow banks and snow coming down. The road became white and even accumulated on our "warm" hoods.



Soon we were traveling through the Old Tomboy Mine area. Actually, the area has several mines: the Cimarron Mine, the Lower Japan Tunnel, Ophir Tunnel, and others litter the landscape with various buildings, foundations, and mining equipment.

As you cross Marshall Creek a little way down from the Tomboy, looking down the valley you can still see some of the Bradley and Hermit mine remnants.

As you come to the point above the mouth of Marshall Creek, a spectacular view of Black Bear Pass and the Bridal Veil Falls will tug mightily at your eyes. If you pull around far enough, Ingram Falls will show off its beauty for you.



Having fulfilled the primary and only objective of this trip, no further plans were on the agenda. From here on, it was “play it by ear”. As we were coming down into Telluride, it was decided that we would camp somewhere along Ophir Pass for the evening.

That turned out to be a bad decision. Ophir Pass was in the middle of a torrential downpour as we slogged over it. Once we reached Hwy 550, it was decided to go into Silverton and fuel-up and resume looking for a

place to light for the night.

Silverton was anything but its sleepy usual self. People lined the streets at 4 PM awaiting the fireworks that wouldn't happen till about 9:30. All camping areas were full, and the party was just waiting to happen.

Our first thoughts were to drive down to Eureka to stay the night. But as we came to Howardsville, Stony Pass beckoned to Jerry and we took the right turn.

Jerry had been up Stony Pass only once, years ago. His memories were of a wide, vast open area on the east side where finding a camp should be easy. By the time we were miles up the pass, everyone was getting antsy about this decision.



Going down the backside, even antsier was added to the original. Nothing close to flat enough was found. But, as is usually the case, patience prevailed and we found what turned out to be a very good site right along the upper Rio Grande River.

Mary made a delicious dinner for the three of us and then we sat around the campfire and watched the stars peak around the clouds.

Along about 9:30, we thought we had seen lightning flash... but it turned out that we were seeing fireworks reflecting off of the clouds from Silverton. From that far away, up and over a mountain pass, you could actually hear some of them echoing.

The next morning, we had a late breakfast and then continued down the Rio Grande River. Several creek crossings were highlights along the way. The whole way is one panorama after another that just lifts your spirits.

Along the Rio Grande Gorge, the sightings of the river down deep in the dark gorge are spectacular. Steep, rocky-sided cliffs rise up to timbered forests. Unfortunately, nearly 50% of the forest is dead due to the “Preservationist” management techniques of the US Forest Service.

We did pass a miles-long area where the forest had burned recently.

Lake City graced us with the opportunity for a late lunch. Poker Alice Pizza was our choice. A small place with indoor and outdoor seating that is only slightly inviting from the outside, turned into a veritable culinary feast.

Because of the July 4th weekend, they were backed up about an hour on their orders, but we had no place to go and all day to get there. But when the food was finally ready, let me tell you— it was GREAT!!!!

Chuck and I ordered the meat Calzone. The dough was exactly fresh smelling, feeling, and tasted delicious. The meat and sauce filling were just as good. We observed a few pizzas that appeared every bit as good.

It was good enough to go back and tell them how much we enjoyed it. If you are ever in Lake City, you just gotta try them!!

Leaving Lake City fully stuffed, we got on the Alpine Loop. Following along Henson Creek for several miles was a brilliant decision. The gorge along the road is absolutely wild and beautiful.

Traffic thinned out some going up Engineer Pass, but we continued to meet the unwise who challenge you to “their $\frac{3}{4}$ of the road”.

Well before we reached the top, it began to rain. Going down the other side it got more serious. By the time we were down into Mineral Creek, the skies had fully opened the spigot.

Wet rocks were slick and somewhat dangerous. We caught up to some traffic and had to change speed dramatically.

Plans to camp in Poughkeepsie Gulch were swiftly abandoned. The rain was too much even for these seasoned campers. Homeward bound was the next thing on the agenda.

It was a wonderful weekend considering all of the holiday revelers making some of what we had planned impossible.

This trip had given all of us some new country to see and enjoy. The Rio Grande country is one we would like more time to explore. Having a fried fresh caught trout breakfast sounds like a good reason to go back.

Being in the land of crystal-clear, free flowing stream water is always inviting.

And one last thought; “When you come to the fork in the road — Take it!!! That’s where you may find your new “favorite place”. Poker Alice Pizza in Lake City is now one of mine!!