



Unemployment Relief Projects ¹

The Great Depression of 1929-1939 was a watershed period that scarred and transformed the nation.² Its effects were especially poignant in drought-strapped Southern Alberta, where so much of the economy was tied to agriculture. Crop failures and low commodity prices and the failure of foreign markets “hit prairie farmers like hammer blows.”³ Added to this were fixed interest payments

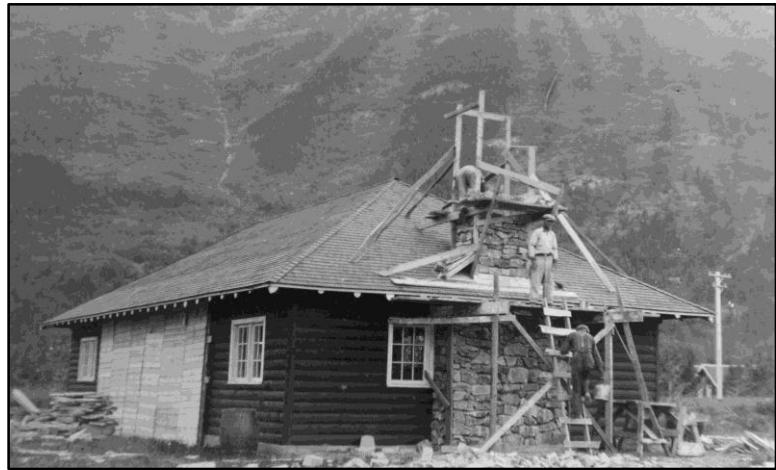
on farm debts signed in better times. Urban areas were affected as well and unemployment rose rapidly. “Nobody knew how many were unemployed in Canada because there were no verifiable statistics,” author Pierre Berton noted.⁴

As unemployment grew in the last months of 1929, Liberal Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King maintained his party’s belief that it was only a seasonal aberration. There was no co-ordinated government plan for relief because it was thought the Depression could not last.⁵ As conditions worsened, Leader of the Opposition Richard Bedford Bennett began to demand a change in government policy. An early federal election was called for July 30, 1930, which Bennett won in part by campaigning on a platform of unemployment relief.⁶ He would be Prime Minister for the next five years.

That fall the Unemployment Relief Act of 1930 (set to expire March 31, 1931)⁷ was enacted to provide \$20 million for unemployment assistance for public work projects.⁸ Hoping to take advantage of this opportunity, men who had worked at Waterton during the summer months stayed in the park believing relief work would be provided during the winter. But they were told there would be none. Asked the reason, the reply was: “No relief work authorized in Waterton Lakes Park. The parks branch of the Interior Department explain that the province relief work is to be carried on. Hence Edmonton could perhaps advise of anything contemplated later on at Waterton.”⁹

It was not until January, 1931, that it was announced Waterton would be one of three national parks in Alberta eligible for relief work when the Minister of the Interior succeeded in getting an emergency vote of \$33,000 for that purpose.¹⁰ But Waterton was allotted only \$2,000 of that amount. The pittance for Waterton was roundly criticized.¹¹ Only 35 Waterton men were employed that winter for an average of two weeks each. ¹²

Quite apart from relief activities, Waterton became the focus of a suggestion of near-monumental proportions. Over the July 1-4 weekend, 1931, Rotarians from Alberta,



This community building near the townsite campground, was an unemployment relief project. Still in use today, it features two fireplaces (Photo: WLNP Archives)

Saskatchewan and Montana proposed to members that Waterton and Glacier (Montana) national parks be formally recognized as Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. Asking for no money, only legislative approval from law makers in both governments of Canada and the United States, the Rotarians set to work lobbying their respective politicians and the concept came to fruition in June, 1932. The peace park was the first in the world.¹³



*All of the camps used by relief crews on the Akamina Highway were temporary canvas facilities.
(Photo: Parks Canada)*

Meanwhile, during the summer of 1931, the federal government announced continuation of the unemployment program for the coming fall. Locally, work projects were suggested for a number of Waterton improvements including joining the Pass Creek road with the new Akamina highway at Oil City, widening the highway, cutting a forest fireguard all the way to the golf course, making improvements to Waterton Avenue, constructing a stone wall along Emerald Bay at the foot of Waterton Avenue, and clearing of underbrush south of the children's playground among other ideas. Single

men from Lethbridge as well as those with no fixed address known as "transients" filled the jobs.¹⁴

For some Canadians, those with good jobs, and there were such people, there were no hard times. And because of deflation, everything got cheaper.¹⁵ Hundreds flocked to the summer dances at the large Waterton dance pavilion on main street where admission was free but men paid 10 cents a dance or 12 for \$1.00.¹⁶ For a man still hoping to get winter relief work, paying to dance was an unaffordable luxury.

The 1931 tourist season proved to be better than expected "in view of the financial depression throughout the continent ... this (year's visitation) being equal to that of last year which was an increase over former years." But spending, *The Lethbridge Herald* noted, was somewhat less than it had been in the past.¹⁷

On the first of October, 1931, equipment and tents were delivered for two camps on the Akamina highway, one five miles up from the start of the road, and the other at Little Prairie.¹⁸ That winter the men, mostly single, were to begin the widening of the Akamina highway using picks, shovels and wheel barrows. The goal was to extend the road all the way to the British Columbia border via Akamina Pass.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the townsite, a crew of about 30 local men who lived in the townsite were assigned to clear the balance of the surveyed townsite streets across Cameron Creek and north of the campgrounds, and re-gravel and rake the Cardston-Waterton highway to the park boundary. By the end of the month work had begun on a new bridge over Crooked Creek, and the straightening

of the road leading to the Waterton River bridge. In addition, while the water flow was low in the winter months, men diverted the course of Cameron Falls to reduce some of the erosion that was occurring at this favourite beauty spot.²⁰

A third relief camp was opened on Pass Creek in mid-November to connect the highway from Pass (Blakiston) Creek to the Akamina Highway about a mile north of Oil City, creating “a new circle scenic drive for the visiting public the next summer.”²¹ Then came a series of conflicting messages about the camps: the camps would likely be closed,²² the camps would remain open.²³ In mid-January, yet another announcement was made that work would continue until the end of February.²⁴ By mid-March, 1932, the last of the Akamina relief crews were removed from the park and the camps and equipment taken down and put into storage.²⁵ In late November, a regular park crew, one not under relief funding, was increased by about a dozen men and work resumed on widening the Akamina highway starting at the road’s entrance.²⁶

Late in October, 1932 came major news for Waterton and area. The long hoped for Waterton-Glacier road connection would be started utilizing 1,500 single men from the region. It was temporarily referred to as the Kennedy Creek-Belly River Cut Off and it would supplant progress on the Akamina Highway.²⁷ (The relief camps associated with the building the second road is documented in a separate article: Chief Mountain International Highway.)



This attractive wood and stone registration building, complete with an information counter and public toilets, was built in 1935. (Photo: Parks Canada)

When legislation for unemployment relief camps expired in 1933, it was replaced by the Public Works Construction Act (1934) and then the Public Works Construction Act Supplement (1935). Both of these programs paid better wages and included work opportunities for married as well as single men. Relief camps were closed at the end of 1935 in the hopes of getting workers back into regular employment.²⁸

The acts helped fund completion of the Chief Mountain International Highway, allotting \$70,000 to its construction, as well as a number of other improvements in Waterton including the addition of a second nine holes at the golf course, construction of a new entrance registration building, general storage building, renovations to the park administration building, a ladies bath house at Linnet Lake, and, in the campground, four comfort stations and eight community kitchens plus an additional community building.^{29,30} It was an impressive number of improvements in a very short time which served the park and its visitors well.

¹ The lack of substantial documentation were the chief impediments to telling the full story of relief camps and the work done by those paid through the Public Works Construction Act and Supplementary Public Works Construction Act.

² Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), 9.

³ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies, A History*, (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 383.

⁴ Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939*, 50.

⁵ Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939*, 10

⁶ Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939*, 63-64.

⁷ W. A. Waiser, *Documenting Canada: A History of Modern Canada in Documents*, (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992), 304. The Unemployment Relief Act, 1930, Statues of Canada, 21 George V, Chap. 1, assented to 23 September 1930.

⁸ "Push Work in National Parks as Measure for Unemployment Relief," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept. 26, 1930, front page. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

⁹ "No Relief Work at Waterton is Now Scheduled" *Lethbridge Herald*, Nov. 20, 1930, 7. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

¹⁰ "Relief Moneys are Voted for Waterton Park," *Lethbridge Herald*, Jan. 17, 1931, 3. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10. It should be noted that the "Report of the Commissioner, National Parks of Canada," year ended March 31, 1931,8, indicates that there were not three but four parks share in the funds : Banff, Jasper, Waterton and Riding Mountain.

¹¹ Waterton Park Appropriation is Criticized," *Lethridge Herald*, Jan. 29, 1931, 3. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

¹² *National Parks of Canada Report of the Commissioner*, (Ottawa: King's Printer, year ending March 31, 1931),8.

¹³ Third Session, 17th Parliament, 22-23 George V, 1932, Bill 97 An Act respecting the Waterton Glacier International Peace Park, Assented to 26th May, 1932; H.R. Public O. 116, 72nd Congress, 1st session, An Act for establishment of the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, approved May 2, 1932.

¹⁴ "\$191,000 for Relief Work: Park Relief Jobs Assured," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept. 22, 1931, 7. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 10.

¹⁵ Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), 15.

¹⁶ Chris Morrison, *Waterton Chronicles: People and Their National Park*, (Lethbridge: Goathaunt Publishing, 2008), 71.

¹⁷ "Waterton Ends Brisk Season," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept. 21, 1931, 3. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

¹⁸ Author's note: During the five months this unemployment work was funded, a total of four camp sites were used along the Akamina road as work progressed. Records from the Provincial Archives of Alberta do not include a location map for the camps and the weekly reports are vague about whether the camps themselves were moved closer to the work underway at the time or were additional camps.

¹⁹ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept 29, 1931, 3. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 10. The newspaper reported the men, mostly single, would be paid 30 cents an hour

with 75 cents a day deducted for board. Later wages would be lowered to 20 cents a day. As J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, noted in a 1934 annual report, the underlying principle was to furnish employment for the greatest number of men at the least practical cost to the taxpayer.

²⁰ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Nov. 5, 1931, 10. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

²¹ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Nov. 12, 1931, 14. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

²² “Waterton Park Relief Camps Likely to Close After New Year,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Dec. 29, 1931, 7. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

²³ “Relief Camps at Waterton Park to be Kept Open,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Dec. 31, 1931, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 10.

²⁴ “Will Continues Waterton Park Relief Camps During February,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Jan. 11, 1932, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 10.

²⁵ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, March 19, 1932, back page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 10.

²⁶ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Nov. 24, 1932, 3. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

²⁷ The Kennedy Creek-Belly River Cut Off would later be officially named Chief Mountain International Highway.

²⁸ “Dominion Govt. Hopes to Close Up at Relief Camps in Coming Year,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Nov. 28, 1935, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 10.

²⁹ “Expenditure of \$80,000 at Waterton Park Ratified; Work Commences at Once,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 27, 1934, front page. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 10.

³⁰ Superintendent’s Report for 1935. WLNP Archives, Box 206, Item 5.