



Chief Mountain International Highway Relief Work¹

It was no secret J. B. Harkin, commissioner of national parks, had hoped for years to get a road built to link Waterton and Glacier, one section of which would be built on the Waterton's east side. It was an idea he suggested in 1915 and never lost sight of.² Sixteen years later the time seemed right to pursue his dream in earnest and he broached the subject with his U.S. counterpart Horace M. Albright, director of the National Park Service in Washington D. C., who, after a preliminary survey, was of like mind. "This project appears to have considerable merit," Albright told Harkin in a letter at the end of



Teams of horses were used to begin the highway construction in the absence of heavy motorized equipment. (Photo: Galt Museum and Archives)

national parks with costs paid by the federal government and administration costs, including material, borne by the province. A program of public works, which included major roads, would form the backbone of the new relief program.⁶ This paved the way for the plan to be released for construction of road linking the two parks via a new east side highway. Work would begin the following autumn.⁷ The new road would shorten the connection between the two parks by some 48 kilometres by cutting a north-south direct route rather than the existing longer east-west route taken through Cardston and Carway.

No time was lost orchestrating this new road. Starting in the autumn of 1932 the first camps were constructed to accommodate the men and were added to progressively as work proceeded toward the international boundary. The first camp, initially used by the workers but soon converted to an office, was erected east of the Maskinonge, a second was on the Stony Creek ridge, a third on Crooked Creek, a fourth near the Belly River and the fifth near the international boundary.⁸ The first crew of men from Lethridge arrived by the third week in November and were put to work immediately erecting permanent log buildings for camps and cutting rights of way, clearing and grubbing the

1931. What Albright wanted, however, was assurance that the Canadian portion of the road would be built before he would contract for the U.S. portion of the road.³

The two men met in Ottawa the following May to discuss the proposed road. Harkin told Albright that if another appropriation (for unemployment relief) were made, he would see "that the Waterton-Glacier Project is undertaken."⁴

A new relief agreement between the province and the federal government was announced in August, 1931,⁵ establishing work camps for single unemployed men in

route in preparation for the spring.

While this work was underway, the road survey, which had begun 10 years previous but was halted, resumed in November.⁹ After a brief winter hiatus, more than 100 men from Lethbridge were back on the road building job in March, 1933.¹⁰ Work continued apace with winter layoffs required when snow was the deepest and the temperature the coldest.

There was a great deal of interest in the road's progress. In September, 1934 *The Great Falls Tribune* speculated that visitation to Waterton would be greatly increased once the road was open: "With the opening of the scenic motor way connecting directly the sister parks, another big increase is looked for.... The highway will open an entirely new section of Waterton Park, with numerous trails accessible."¹¹



In places the progress toward the international border was easy to gauge by Chief Mountain which dominates the skyline. (Photo: Parks Canada)



The camp cooks and their helpers were essential employees, keeping the hard working crews well fed. (Photo: Parks Canada)

The passage of the Public Works Construction Act of 1934 and the Supplementary Public Works Construction Act of 1935, proved to be a boon for national parks projects and this road was no exception.¹² According to Historian Bill Waiser, "Once the various projects went on the PWCA footing, married men with dependents were to be given preference at all job sites."¹³ Minimum wages were increased to 45 cents an hour for labourers, up from 20 cents a day and the work day was defined as eight hours.¹⁴ Single men were on their own to find work elsewhere as they could.¹⁵ The relief camps ended in 1935 by which time the Chief Mountain International Highway was nearly complete.¹⁶ It opened to motorists June 14, 1936.¹⁷

While the road was under construction it had been referred to in a variety of ways including Kennedy Creek Cut Off, and Kennedy Creek-Belly River Road. The name finally agreed upon by

park officials on both sides of the border was Chief Mountain International Highway, which was suggested by Herbert Legg of Canada Customs.¹⁸

Nearly all of the Canadian side of this seasonal road, constructed between the fall of 1932 and spring of 1935 lay in Waterton Lakes National Park with the exception of a crossing through the Blood Indian Timber Limit. The Glacier National Park section was just five and a half kilometres in length. The balance of the U.S. portion, about 20 kilometres, was built on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The southern part of the highway was built over a total of 13 months between the fall of 1934 and the summer of 1936 by Montana state employees and contractors.¹⁹

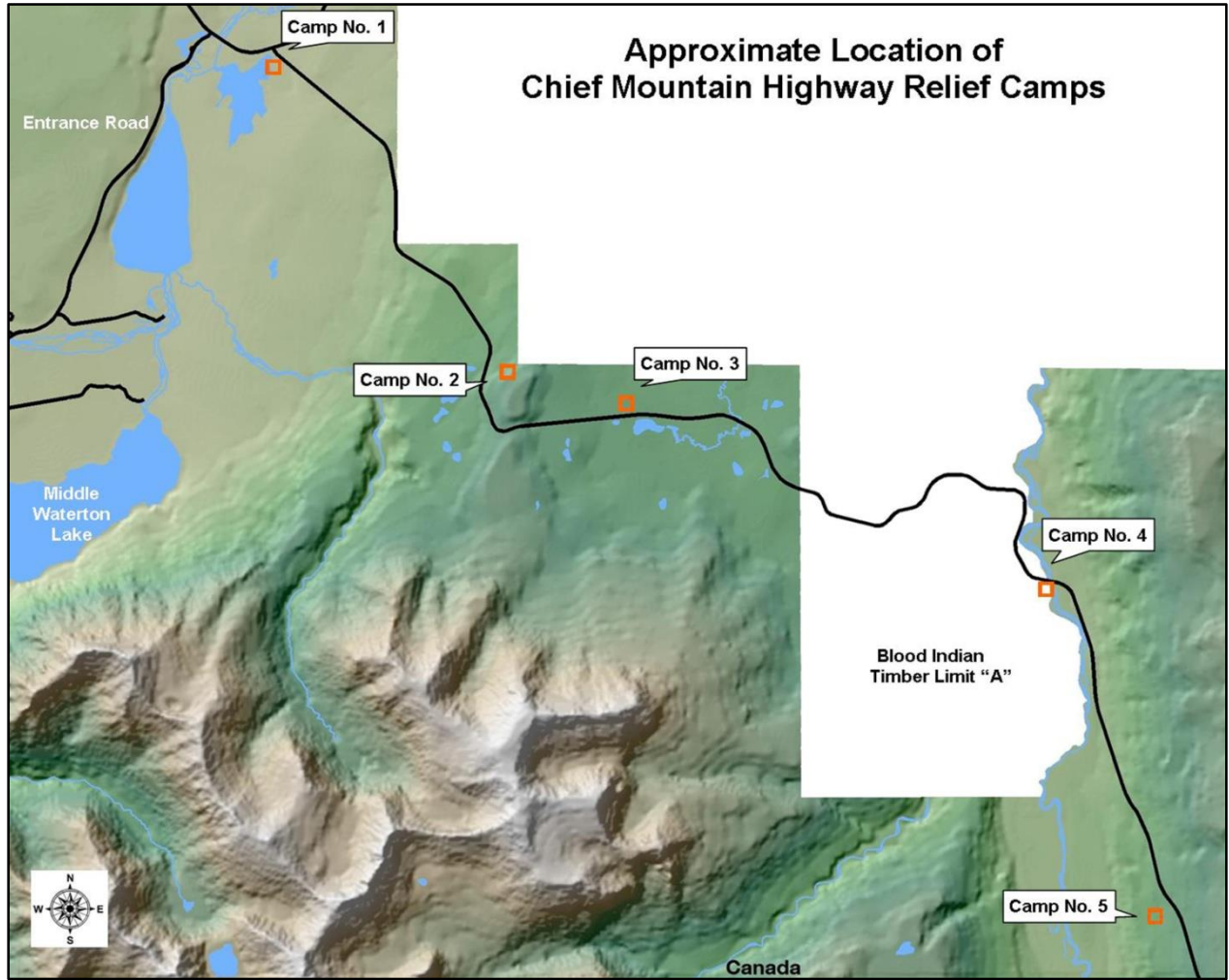


*The Chief Mountain International Highway cut the road distance between Waterton and Glacier and opened scenic vistas between the two parks.
(Photo: Parks Canada)*

With the start of the 1936 season, the Great Northern Railway, long a proponent of a shorter link between the two parks to serve its hotel guests, reopened the Prince of Wales Hotel after a three summer closure.²⁰ The hotel, where the Rotarians had first proposed establishment of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, provided a venue for a formal dedication of the Canadian portion of the Peace Park and served as ceremony headquarters.²¹ No formal ceremony was held to mark the opening of the Chief Mountain International Highway.

Visitors literally flocked to Waterton that summer. More than 59,000 people, an increase of nearly 30 per cent over 1935,²² came to the park to participate in the associated events, travel the new highway and enjoy Waterton. Unknown to national park officials until early 1936, was the fact that they had violated Blood Indian treaty rights. The government had failed to pay compensation for building the highway over a portion of the Blood Indian Timber Limit.²³ The matter was not resolved until 1955 when passage of an amendment to the National Parks Act provided for a land exchange in lieu of monetary compensation.²⁴

In the years following the 1936 opening, all improvements to the Canadian side of the Chief Mountain International Highway were done under normal labor conditions at full wages. No formal recognition or acknowledgement was ever made for the work done by the relief workers who built the highway, making their story one shrouded in time.



¹ Very little documentation could be found in Canada related to construction of the Chief Mountain International Highway. However, the Archives of Glacier National Park (Montana) was able to provide some correspondence and drawings.

² Annual Report for the Department of the Interior for Year Ending March 31, 1915. Sessional Paper 25, in *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, Fifth Session of the Twelfth Parliament, 1915 (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1915) part V, Dominion Parks, 13.

³ Letter to J. B. Harkin, commissioner, Ottawa, from Horace W. Albright, director, Washington, D.C., Dec. 30, 1931. Glacier National Park (Montana) Archives, Box 130, Folder 3.

⁴ Letter to W. P. Kenny, president of the Great Northern Railway, St. Paul, MN from Horace M. Albright, Washington D. C., June 1, 1932. Glacier National Park (Montana) Archives, Box 130, Folder 3.

⁵ "Regulations Governing Federal Unemployment Relief Scheme Outlined," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 19, 1931, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 11.

⁶ "Blank Cheque Scheme for Relief Draws Fire from Liberal Benches," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 30, 1931, front page. "Regulations Governing Federal Unemployment Relief Scheme Outlined," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 19, 1931, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 11.

⁷ "Will Build Waterton-Glacier Cut Off," *Lethbridge Herald*, Oct. 24, 1932, front page.

⁸ The Maskinonge camp was at mile 1 of the new highway, the Stony Ridge camp at mile 4, Camp 3 (Crooked Creek) was at mile 8, Camp 4 at mile 12 and Camp 5 at mile 14.5. The road and its related mileage spots has since been slightly altered. Frank Goble, *The 20 Cent Men*, (Lethbridge: Goble Publishing Ltd. 2000), 19, 30, 40, 48, 54.

⁹ Letter to E. T. Scoyen, Superintendent, Glacier National Park (Montana) from J. M. Wardle, Chief Engineer, National Parks of Canada, Nov. 4, 1932. Glacier National Park Archives, Box 130, Folder 3.

¹⁰ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 14, 1933, 3. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Box 11.

¹¹ "New Kennedy Creek Highway Cutoff to Waterton Park Progressing; Road Will Open Another Scenic Setting," *Great Falls Tribune*, Sept. 23, 1934. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 11.

¹² J. B. Harkin, *National Parks of Canada, Report of the Commissioner, 1935-36*, 21

¹³ Bill Waiser, *Park Prisoners, The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Park, 1915-1946*, (Altona: Fifth House Ltd., 1995), 114.

¹⁴ Bill Waiser, *Park Prisoners, The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks*, 114.

¹⁵ The men could take a transfer to the National Defense relief camps if they were willing to go. Bill Waiser, *Park Prisoners, The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks*, 114.

¹⁶ J. B. Harkin, *National Parks of Canada, Report of the Commissioner*, National Parks 1935-36, p. 21. Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), 281.

¹⁷ Chris Morrison, *Chief Mountain International Highway Waterton-Glacier's Promised Road*, (Lethbridge: Gothaunt Publishing, 2010), 92.

¹⁸ Letter to The Director, National Park Service, Washington,, D. C. from E. T. Scoyen, superintendent, Glacier National Park, May 19, 1936. Glacier National Park Archives, Box 130, Folder 3.

Customs officials were key in the operation of the highway since it crossed the international boundary. At 1,624 metres, it is still the highest border crossing between Canada and the United States.

¹⁹ Chris Morrison, *Chief Mountain International Highway Waterton-Glacier's Promised Road*, (Lethbridge: Goathaunt Publishing, 2010), 92.

²⁰ The Prince of Wales Hotel was closed due to declining numbers of guests during the Depression and the desire to pressure the construction of a shorter road link between Glacier National Park and Waterton.

²¹ *Programme at the Consummation and Dedication of the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park*, July 4, 1936. Author's collection.

²² Historic visitation statistics, available from the Visitor Experience section, Waterton Lakes National Park.

²³ Library and Archives Canada, , RG10 , Indian Affairs , Volume 7730 , Reel C-12032, 1933-1942; and Volume 7765, Reel C-12032, 1889-1937. Letter to M. Christianson, inspector of Indian Agencies, Calgary from A.F. MacKenzie, secretary of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, Jan. 24, 1936; and letter from J. B. Harkin, commissioner of national parks, Ottawa, to A. F. MacKenzie, secretary of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, March 5, 1936.

²⁴ Bill 261, an act to amend the National Parks Act, was passed by the House of Commons April 25, 1955. WLNP Archives, Box 229, no item number.