



Akamina Parkway (Loop Road Proposal)

Construction of the Akamina Highway (now known as Akamina Parkway) was originally proposed as a link to Glacier National Park (Montana) to the south. This link would have started at a branch off the road to Cameron Lake near Waterton's western border,¹ run through a corner of British Columbia and angled south to Montana's Flathead Valley and Lake McDonald on the west side of Glacier.² From there it would have become a connection to all the main park-to-park routes in the Western United States³ as well as providing a potential gateway to Canadian national parks.



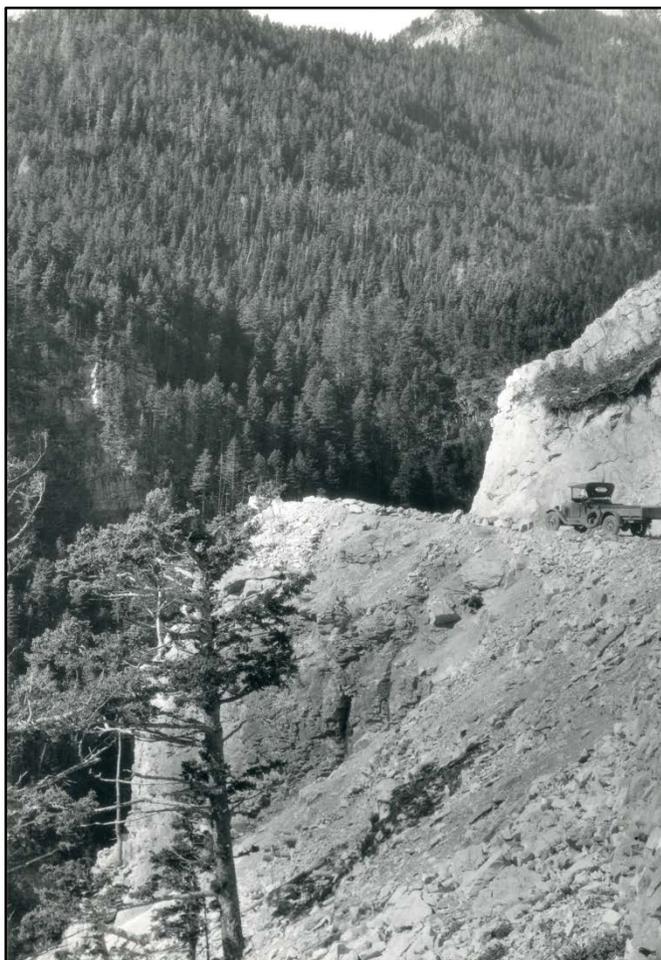
Without benefit of any safety equipment, a workman uses a jack hammer to assist the 1920s construction of the Akamina Parkway. (Photo: Harwood Collection, WLNPA Archives)

While the branch road never went farther than the Alberta-British Columbia border, the proposal itself took many twists and turns over the years as hopes were raised and dashed and raised again. With park authorities depending on governments in British Columbia and Washington, D. C. to agree with the plan, it became a long and controversial matter that never came to fruition.⁴

J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, had suggested the road link in his 1915 annual report to Parliament noting, "A main road should be built from the north to the south and make available for motor and general traffic...and a junction formed with existing roads leading across the provincial boundary into British Columbia, also across the international boundary to the United States' Glacier National Park."⁵ But with the First World War underway and reduced budgets, the idea was held in abeyance until 1921 when post-war budgets were improved and bolstered by increased visitation. Waterton and other national parks began to show promise.⁶ Waterton among Canada's national parks made the greatest advance in visitor numbers. "This is rapidly becoming one of the most popular of the parks and in spite of its comparative isolation, it promises soon to rival some of the larger reservations along the main railway line," W. W. Cory, Deputy Minister, noted in his 1921-22 annual report.⁷ To the north, the Banff-Windermere Highway was nearing completion and international inquiries were coming in from nearly every state and several countries. The traffic increase was estimated at 10,000 cars annually. "An international traffic of this magnitude means much to this country both on account of the foreign revenue it will bring in and the

increased international knowledge and goodwill that must inevitably result," Cory wrote.

The Waterton-Glacier loop road was seen as a worthy idea, given the substantial development scheme undertaken by the Minnesota-based Great Northern Railway in Glacier⁸ and the potential for tourism spinoffs for Waterton.⁹ As early as 1919 *The Lethbridge Herald* urged the construction of a road that would link Waterton to Lake McDonald in Glacier claiming the U.S. government was willing to co-operate by building 43 kilometers of mountain road if the Dominion government would build just over seven kilometers of road on its side of the international boundary.¹⁰ In 1920, Supt. George A. Bevan publically elaborated on the idea which he visualized as two roads, one running due east from the Waterton River bridge, along the Belly River valley and another road via Akamina Pass into British Columbia and south to the border. He called for the co-operation of B. C. and Glacier to connect the parks via the Kishinena Pass and the Flathead River, outlining the route in detail.¹¹



The road at the very narrow Devil's Point required cutting through solid rock. (Photo: WLNP Archives)

When construction of the Akamina Highway began in the fall of 1921, Bevan was already claiming it would be a circular route "to take in all the scenic beauties of the district covered."¹² To say the federal government, eager to reap the benefits of added tourism, was optimistic about this project was not an exaggeration.¹³

Work on the Waterton portion of the highway, which absorbed much of the park's operating budget, continued,¹⁴ if slowly. In 1925, construction had progressed only about three kilometres from the townsite to Devil's Point with a maximum road width of 3.65 meters due to the need for blasting of solid rock much of the way.¹⁵ Blasting was generally carried out during winter months, in part to avoid disturbing visitors. The following year, the still rather rough road was open to vehicles as far as Oil City. Owing to the danger from blasting in 1927, the road was only open on weekends as the crews moved to remove the travel restrictions at the earliest possible date.¹⁶

The opening of the new Prince of Wales Hotel in late July, 1927 heightened interest in the loop road as work continued through September. To complete the route to Cameron Lake, there was still much work to be done, to say nothing of the branch road to the Alberta-British Columbia border where the loop would begin. By the end of the construction season of 1927 the Akamina road had only been prepared to Mile 6, a spot just past Lineham Creek.¹⁷ It would need substantial additional work to widen the road and improve the surface as well as complete the road to the lake. According to the Report of the Commissioner, the road was completed early in 1928 from park headquarters to the Akamina Pass,¹⁸ although “completed” was a relative word. There was still much to be done: building culverts, clearing, grading and the like. Even while that was underway in the summer of 1928, J. M. Wardle, chief engineer, noted “The Cameron Lake road is becoming very popular and the daily motor traffic is quite heavy.”¹⁹



When the road opened it was a well-graded scenic drive. The absence of guard rails made it essential the driver devoted full attention to the operation of the vehicle.

(Photo: WLNP Archives)

Negotiations between British Columbia and the Dominion government began in the spring of 1928 in the hope of transferring the necessary land to enlarge Waterton and build the road past the Alberta boundary for a circle highway through both parks to connect with the Logan Pass route (Going to the Sun Highway).²⁰ But no agreement was reached. According to Donald W. Buchanan,²¹ of *The Lethbridge Herald*, “The section in British Columbia...is provincially controlled and there seems little likelihood of any construction being done there within the near future.”²²

And then a wrench was thrown into the works when Glacier officials publically offered a variation to the proposal in August, 1928. By then Glacier was involved in building three major road projects of its own,²³ and J. Ross Eakin, Glacier’s superintendent, told the Lethbridge newspaper that while he hadn’t given up on the loop road, “it would be four or five years until we get around to it.”²⁴ A year later another variation of the proposal was considered a “distinct possibility.”²⁵ But then all bets were off when the Great Depression changed everything. Under Canada’s federal unemployment relief program, \$33,000 was to be shared by Banff, Jasper and Waterton. But Waterton’s share for the winter of 1931-1932 was only \$2,000 which limited the man hours and progress that could be made on road improvements negating any chance of a start on the cross-border extension of the Akamina highway.

Reverting to a kind of “Plan B” in 1932 and utilizing the federal government’s next wave of unemployment relief money, road work focused on Waterton’s east side where construction began on what would be eventually known as the Chief Mountain International Highway. This road opened in 1936.²⁶

Three years later the Second World War began and manpower and money were focused on the war effort. It wasn’t until the war was over in 1945 that rumors began that the B.C. government had agreed to the annexing of nearly 52 square kilometers on its southeastern border to Waterton allowing construction of the long awaited loop road.²⁷ But it was indeed only a rumor.

Ever hopeful that an agreement could be worked out in the future, the Canadian government chose the Akamina project as a part of its post war program²⁸ explaining the need to reconstruct the road: “This road comprises a very scenic drive along Cameron Creek to Cameron Lake. The road is in considerable need of rebuilding—various small



*Packing dynamite into the cliff face during 1948 blasting operations on the Akamina roadway.
(Photo: Library and Archives Canada 3256496)*

culverts are in need of replacement and the general alignment of the road is in need of adjustment. It is likely that in the not too distant future this road may be lengthened into the Province of British Columbia and thence south into the United States. In the meantime, however, this road is greatly in need of reconstruction and revision not alone as a measure of safety but also as a scenic road embodying comfortable travel.”²⁹

General Contracting Company of Lethbridge won the job as the contractor of the \$200,000 project which began in the spring of 1948 and continued the work over several years. The job involved major road

reconstruction to widen, level, straighten and in some cases cut out an entirely new section.³⁰

The road was finally paved in 1952.³¹ A variety of weather events created repeated damage to the route, but because of its exceptional scenic value and the popularity of Cameron Lake at the road’s terminus, each time road time repairs were made.³² But more than major improvements was the continuing matter of the road’s extension, a topic that was repeatedly expressed. In 1959, an international trail ride was held to demonstrate the potential of a route. Later, starting in 1969 and again in 1970 and 1971, motorized treks were organized over roughly the same route to demonstrate the possibilities.³³ Opposition to the road, however, was just as persistent.³⁴

Over the next years, efforts to get this loop built and the British Columbia region



The 1969 four-wheel drive trek was staged to demonstrate the feasibility of linking the road to British Columbia and on to Montana. (Photo: Galt Museum and Archives)

annexed to Waterton came to nothing. Despite repeated pleas from the travelling public, the Waterton Chamber of Commerce and chambers throughout southern Alberta and northern Montana, newspaper editorials, support from both individual Canadian and U.S. politicians, and a resolution by the Alberta and Montana Rotary clubs, the road would never go beyond at Cameron Lake.³⁵ As loud as the voice was in support of the loop road, articles in the Lethbridge Herald in 1969 and 1970 opposing the chamber supported motorcade over the pass, echoed from the other court. Northern Development Minister Jean Chretien was asked to intervene.³⁶

Parks Canada's planners weighed in on the issue in a 1975 planning backgrounder: "Extension of the Cameron Road over the Akamina Pass, to connect with the West Glacier Park Road, would result in a trans-mountain route, the absence of which presently sets Waterton apart from the other mountain parks. The increased volumes of traffic would require

additional facilities which, even if feasible, would occur at the expense of park features. To date British Columbia has shown no interest in constructing this road link and only one half mile of the route lies within the park."³⁷

The following year, the planners were solidly behind the abandonment of the loop road idea: "It is proposed that Parks Canada officially abandon any thoughts of a road over Akamina Pass into British Columbia. Only one half mile of the route is in Waterton Lakes National Park—the remainder crosses B.C. Provincial Crown land. The proposed road connection has always been tied to a suggestion that the park be enlarged to include

the Akamina and Kishinena watershed. There is presently no indication that such an enlargement will occur. It is recommended that the one half mile of dirt road within the park be permanently closed to vehicles and be converted to a trail.”³⁸ In addition, planners noted, “Parks Canada would welcome designation of this area as a Class A Provincial Park.”³⁹ In 1977, Waterton’s Master Plan at last ended the loop road proposal. The existing short section of road was permanently closed to motorized vehicles.⁴⁰ In 1995, the British Columbia government established the Class A Akamina-Kishinena Provincial Park. Only bicycles, horse and foot travel were allowed.⁴¹

Since the Akamina Parkway was built, its high altitude location⁴² has required continual road repairs due to extreme weather, erosion and wear and tear.⁴³ So valued is this route to visitor appreciation of one of the most scenic parts of the park, it has been repaired, repaved and improved many times, the most recent scheduled to begin the summer of 2016.⁴⁴ The parkway’s loss or permanent closure would be virtually unthinkable.

¹ This location is now the Wall Lake trail head.

² W. F. Lothian, *A History of Canada's National Parks*, Vol. III, (Ottawa: Parks Canada), 1976, 49.

³ "Waterton Lake Draws Tourists Phenomenal Increase in 5 Years Akamina Trail Will Draw More," *Lethridge Herald*, Dec. 9, 1921, 8. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

⁴ Ian A. L. Getty, *The History of Waterton Lakes National Park, 1800-1937*, a research paper prepared for the National and Historic Parks Branch, unpublished, revised February, 1972, 152-159. WLNP Archives, Box 115, Item 12.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Waterton Visitation Records, available from Visitor Experience section in WLNP.

⁷ *Sessional Paper* No. 12, Report of the Department of the Interior, 1921-22, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1922), 9.

⁸ Great Northern Railway of St. Paul, MN, which provided the only rail link to Glacier and was an active park promoter, built two major hotels and a chain of eight chalet camps in Glacier between 1910 and 1915. Ray Djuff and Chris Morrison, *Glacier's Historic Hotels & Chalets: Room With A View*, (Helena: Farcountry Press) 2nd edition, 2013.

⁹ Correspondence between J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of Dominion Parks, Ottawa and Barnard Hervey, Chief Superintendent of Dominion Parks, Edmonton, March 9, 1915 and April 15, 1915. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

¹⁰ "Waterton Lakes Is Our Summer Resort," editorial, *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 20, 1919, 4. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

¹¹ Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year ended March 31, 1921, in *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, Fifth Session of the Twelfth Parliament, 1921 (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1922), Appendix 5, Report of the superintendent of Waterton Lakes Park, G. E. [sic] Bevan, Waterton Park, Alta. 45-46.

¹² "Work Starts on New Park Road: Superintendent Bevan of Waterton Park Tells About Proposed Circle Tour Route," *Lethbridge Herald*, Oct. 8, 1921, 12. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

¹³ "Completion of Akamina Highway Would Disclose New World of Scenic Beauty Link Waterton Closely with Other Park," *Lethbridge Herald*, Jan. 23, 1925, 5. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 33.

¹⁴ Ian A. L. Getty, *The History of Waterton Lakes National Park, 1800-1937*, a research paper prepared for the National and Historic Parks Branch, unpublished, revised February, 1972, 88. WLNP Archives, Box 115, Item 12.

¹⁵ Ian A. L. Getty, *The History of Waterton Lakes National Park, 1800-1937*, 88. WLNP Archives, Box 115, Item 12.

¹⁶ Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1970.0190, Box 20, file 315. Weekly Report on Akamina Pass Road to J. B. Harkin, Commissioner, Ottawa, from J. M. Wardle, Chief Engineer, July 22, 1927.

¹⁷ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept. 2, 1927, 17. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

¹⁸ Department of the Interior, Canada, National Parks of Canada, Report of the

Commissioner, year ending March 31, 1928, (Ottawa, King's Printer, 1929), 13.

¹⁹ Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1970.0190, Box 20, file 315. Weekly Report on Akamina Pass Road to J. B. Harkin, Commissioner, Ottawa, from J. M. Wardle, Chief Engineer, Aug. 29, 1928.

²⁰ Transfer of Tip Southeast B. C. to Waterton Is Being Planned," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 23, 1928, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

²¹ Donald Buchanan was the son of Senator William A. Buchanan who owned the newspaper.

²² Donald Buchanan, *A Complete Guide to Waterton Lakes National Park: Its Roads, Trails, Lakes and Mountains*, (Lethbridge: Lethbridge Herald), 1928, 42.

²³ The three roads underway were Going to the Sun Road, the Blackfeet Highway and the Marias Pass Road. "Four or Five Yrs. Before US Can Connect Up with Akamina Road," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 11, 1928, 33. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

²⁴ "Four or Five Years Before U.S. Can Connect Up With Akamina Road, *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 11, 1928, 33. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

²⁵ "Fernie-Flathead-Waterton Lakes National Park Highway Considered Distinct Possibility By Ottawa," *Lethbridge Herald*, April 30, 1929. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

²⁶ See separate piece on Chief Mountain International Highway.

²⁷ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 2, 1945. WLNP Archives, Box 130, 33.

²⁸ Proposed project in other parks included highway and bridge improvements in Banff, Jasper, Yoho as well as Waterton. Total suggested budget was \$2 million. Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR 1969.0218, Box 23, File 161, Vol. 3. Memo to Mr. Mills [sic] from J. M Wardle, Director, Nov. 22, 1946.

²⁹ Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR 1969.0218, Box 23, Item 164, Vol. 1. Public Construction Project Proposal, Mines and Resources, Lands and Development Services Branch, National Parks Service, December, 1947.

³⁰ "To Rebuild Akamina Highway," *Lethridge Herald*, April 5, 1948, 7; "Push Construction Operations on Akamina Highway Project," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 8, 1948, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

³¹ Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR 1969.0218, Box 23, Item 164, Vol. 2. Memo to Superintendent, Waterton Lakes National Park, from J. Smart, Director, Ottawa, June 17, 1952.

³² Among those weather events were avalanches in the spring of 1951 following an exceptionally heavy snow in early winter, floods of 1964, 1975, 1995 and others into the 21st century.

³³ Chris Morrison, *Waterton Chronicles: People and Their National Park*, (Lethbridge: Goathaunt Publishing), 2008, 30

³⁴ "Waterton-Glacier Highway Idea Opposed," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 16, 1970, front page. "Russell Protests Kishinena Highway at Waterton Lakes Chamber Meeting," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept. 9, 1971, 14. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

³⁵ According to Ian Getty the reason was a combination of a lack of funding and continued resistance from the British Columbia government which felt only the national parks would benefit at the expense of loss resources to the province. Ian Getty, *The History of Waterton Lakes National Park*, 159. WLNP Archives, Box 115, Item 12.

³⁶ “Reason Asked For Akamina Motorcade”, *Lethbridge Herald*, December 9, 1969; “Second protest On Akamina Motorcade”, *Lethbridge Herald*, January 7, 1970.

³⁷ Waterton Lakes National Park Planning Program, Background Information, March 1975: Indian & Northern Affairs, 11. WLNP Library.

³⁸ Waterton Lakes National Park Planning Proposals (Calgary: Planning Division, Parks Canada, Western Regional Office, May, 1976), 13. WLNP Library.

³⁹ Waterton Lakes National Park Planning Proposals, 45. This half mile is the start of the Wall Lake trail which crosses the Alberta-B.C. boundary and is an extremely popular route for both hikers and bicyclists.

⁴⁰ Mike Harrop, “Waterton Master Plan Approved,” *Lethbridge Herald*, June 15, 1977, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

⁴¹ The provincial park covers 10,921 hectares. Information on line at:

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/akamina/>

⁴² Akamina Parkway begins at 1,282 meters above sea level and climbs to 1,668 meters above sea level at the parking lot, although the highest point along the road itself is at Akamina Trailhead at 1,285 meters above sea level.

⁴³ See selection of news releases and community bulletins, WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.

⁴⁴ “Parks Canada Cutting Trees to expand Parking Lot at Cameron Lake in Waterton,” *Calgary Herald*, Jan. 14, 2016. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 33.