

Red Rock Parkway

It is not without a certain amount of irony that the early development of the Red Rock Parkway¹ was due to the search for oil in the park at the turn of the 20th century even before internal combustion engine vehicles were commonplace. What started out as a route to potential riches in petroleum ended in a route built on priceless scenic riches and national park protection.

Those searching for oil created a wagon route devised to get their heavy drilling equipment into the Akamina Valley. From their route across the prairie, either approaching from the north or the east along what is today's entrance road, the trail entered the Blakiston Valley leading upstream for only a couple of miles. Here the route turned south crossing Blakiston Creek and ascended a low pass between Mount Crandell² and Ruby Ridge, passing along Blue Lake³ which led to another rough route heading southwestward into the Akamina Valley on to Oil City.⁴ At the time, neither the route to Oil City nor the site itself was part of the park.

Significant boundary changes in 1921, altered the size of Waterton to include, among other areas, the Akamina Valley and Red Rock Valley encompassing land all the way to the Alberta-British Columbia border to the west. The new boundaries decreased the overall size of the park but emphasized some of its most spectacular vistas. Nearly simultaneously with this boundary realignment, automobile travel to mountain parks



Originally called Pass Creek Road, the Red Rock Parkway was a prime location to spot wildlife. (Photo: Harwood Collection, WLNP Archives)



Upper Pass Creek Bridge allowed access to the Crandell Lake trailhead. The structure has been replaced many times, the latest being in 2015.

(Photo: Harwood Collection, WLNP Archives)

was done.

To facilitate construction, the road work often took place in the autumn when few visitors were in the park. Such was the case in 1926 when general conditioning was done on the Pass Creek route in late September.¹¹ While much attention was given to the Akamina road, which was potentially a link to British Columbia and Montana, the Pass Creek road improvements took second place. Even as late as 1928, this route was described as being “little more than a prairie wagon trail.”¹² But work was planned to allow cars to travel as far as Forks Cabin.¹³

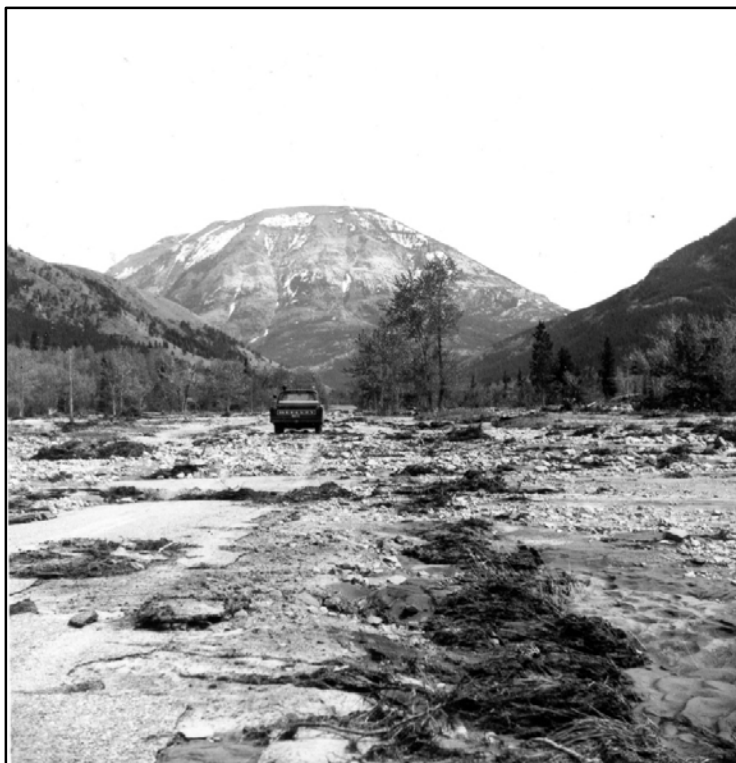
During the Great Depression, in the summer of 1931, a 35-man crew was put to work improving the Pass Creek road safety by straightening curves and putting in new

had begun to grow significantly. In Waterton’s case, there was no reasonable transportation option unlike other national parks served by railroads.⁵ The popularity of the automobile marked a new phase of the tourist industry.⁶ Roads to and within Waterton were a necessity.

Access to the Red Rock Valley by 1924 was primarily by a wagon road/trail that, under good conditions, could be accessed by automobile from the park entrance road at Pass Creek (now Blakiston Creek) crossing. The fishing and wildlife viewing was said to be excellent in this area.⁷ With work underway on the Akamina Highway,⁸ by the summer of 1925, the valley route from Pass Creek past Blue Lake (now Crandell Lake) to Oil City was said to have been graded for automobile traffic leading to the provincial boundary.⁹ An estimate of \$2,000 was passed in Ottawa in the summer of 1926 to improve the Pass Creek trail to make it a circle trip from the townsite, up Pass Creek, over the pass by Blue Lake and back, over the complete section of the Akamina Highway.¹⁰ It is not clear if this

bridges. Rainy June weather throughout the early years often washed out sections of the road as was the case in 1934.¹⁴ Repairs were never ending on this graded but unpaved road.¹⁵ The section linking the Red Rock Highway with the Akamina Highway past Crandell Lake was converted to trail status with no cars allowed. The date, however, is not known.

It was not until the decade of the 1950s that many Red Rock Parkway improvements were made. In autumn of 1953 a realignment of one section of the highway was completed to avoid repeated washouts. A rustic bridge, in keeping with the surroundings, was also built.¹⁶ In 1954 major improvements were made to the road which involved widening or rebuilding of some sections, construction of two new bridges, one at Lost Horse Creek and the other at Red Rock Canyon. For at least a couple of decades visitors were able to drive their cars across this new bridge over the canyon and travel further up the valley along what was called the Snowshoe fire road as far as Snowshoe campground and warden cabin, considerably shortening the hike to Twin and Lost lakes. Also in 1954 the entire Red Rock Road was oiled to keep the dust down. In addition, two new picnic sites were added complete with camp kitchen facilities.¹⁷ It was not until 1955 that a seal coat was applied over the oiled road surface, greatly improving the road's condition.¹⁸ Three years later road safety improvements were made at Coppermine Creek picnic area to remove two dangerous curves and rip-rap added in the creek.¹⁹



The power of rain swollen creeks overflowing their banks often wreaks havoc with roads such as Red Rock Parkway. (Photo: WLNP Archives)

Beginning in 1964, Crandell Mountain Campground, accessed by the Red Rock Parkway, increased the demand for continued road maintenance but little is known of the work or the related costs.

By far, weather and its effects on the Red Rock Parkway have been the chief factors in unscheduled closures over the years. The winter of 1989-1990 resulted in so much snowfall that it was decided to permanently discontinue snow plowing after mid-January order to reduce costs. Shortly after that decision was made, the road was permanently

closed to winter traffic. Plowing, a visitor service for 20 years, was discontinued and after an environmental assessment in the summer of 1994,²⁰ a gate was installed to prevent motorists from travelling the road in winter.

The 1964, 1975, 1995 floods did the road no favors but every effort was made after each event to make road repairs which forced brief closures to accomplish. But repairs weren't the only things that interrupted access. In 2010, the road beyond Crandell Campground was temporarily closed to private vehicles while redevelopment was done at the Red Rock Canyon parking lot.²¹ To facilitate the public, a free shuttle service was provided that summer. Storm damage in June, 2013 again closed the road because of damage to some areas of the parkway but repairs were begun quickly.²²

In early September, 2015, a major multi-year rehabilitation of the Red Rock Parkway was begun which was to see the resurfacing of the entire road, redesign and repaving of

the lower Red Rock Canyon parking lot as well as non-road work in the valley.²³



The redevelopment of the lower parking lot at the end of the Red Rock Parkway was completed in autumn, 2015 to provide more parking at this popular visitor destination. (Photo: Parks Canada)

Historically speaking, it is surprising how few records can be found regarding the development and on-going work for this road, the oldest of the three “side” routes in the park.²⁴ It is likely that the records exist but their location is not yet known. They are not in Waterton’s archives but may be tucked away in Ottawa where Library and Archives Canada keeps archival records. The difficulty in finding them may be the result of departmental reorganizations over the decades; at one time all park

engineering services were grouped by region and later centralized before becoming the purview of the parks in which the work was done. Searches have turned up very little so far.

¹ This route had numerous names over the years: Oil Road, up to its turn off to the west and Crandell Lake, Pass Creek Road, Red Rock Highway. A route through the Red Rock valley and beyond was known as the South Kootenay Trail and served First Nations People for generations. It was travelled by Thomas W. Blakiston, originally a member of the Palliser Expedition. However, that history is beyond the scope of this piece. For more information on Blakiston, an excellent source on the early background is *The Palliser Expedition* by Irene Spry (1963).

² Bear Mountain was the original name for Mount Crandell.

³ Blue Lake was the original name for Crandell Lake.

⁴ This was the site of the first producing oil well in Western Canada in 1902, now a National Historic Site.

⁵ *Sessional Paper*, No. 12, Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 1922, (Ottawa: King's Printer), Part II Canadian National Parks, Report of the Commissioner, J. B. Harkin, 96.

⁶ *Sessional Paper*, No. 12, Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 1922, (Ottawa: King's Printer), Part II Canadian National Parks, Report of the Commissioner, J. B. Harkin, 98.

⁷ "Waterton Trails Are Lure of Mountain Tourists," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 28, 1924, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

⁸ This work began in December, 1921 with the expectation the road would link to British Columbia and south to Glacier National Park in Montana. This extension from Waterton never came about.

⁹ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 23, 1925, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹⁰ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 8, 1926, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹¹ "Road Improvements at Waterton Park," *Lethbridge Herald*, Sept. 27, 1926, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹² "To Recondition Pass Creek Road at Waterton Park," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 11, 1928, 7. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 34.

¹³ "To Pass Creek Road at Waterton Park." Forks Cabin was located at the beginning of the Twin Lakes circle trail on the east side of Red Rock Canyon in the general vicinity of today's parking lot.

¹⁴ "Work on Roads, Trails, Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 23, 1934, 3. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹⁵ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 1936; July 2, 1937; July 23, 1937; Oct. 6, 1953. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹⁶ The location of this realignment is somewhat vague but is found in: "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Oct. 6, 1953, 11. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹⁷ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 29, 1954, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹⁸ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 17, 1955, 9. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

¹⁹ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 16, 1958. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

²⁰ Chronology of Significant Events in Waterton Lakes National Park, internal document available digitally and updated regularly, 2015, events are listed by year. WLNP Archives.

²¹ “Red Rock Canyon Closed for Construction, Spring/Summer, 2010,” from Waterton Lakes National Park website” parkscanada@gc.ca/Waterton. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

²² Waterton Lakes Facility Update Bulletin, June 24, 2015. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 34.

²³ Information Bulletin, Parks Canada, Aug. 22, 2015. Box 130, Item 34.

²⁴ Red Rock Parkway is the oldest, followed by Akamina Parkway and then Chief Mountain International Highway which links Waterton with Glacier National Park (Montana).