

Going to the Sun Road is a Glacier National Park Highlight

Paul Fugleberg, Flathead Author & Retired Weekly Newspaper Editor & Publisher

Source: Paul Fugleberg, 2010



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There are all kinds of adventures in store for visitors to Glacier National Park in northwest Montana – hiking, mountain climbing, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, photography, camping. Perhaps the most memorable experience most visitors enjoy is driving over the Going to the Sun Road.

In the early 1900s laymen proclaimed the project “impossible.” Today, engineers say it posed a tremendous challenge for the times. There’s probably no other road in America quite like Going to the Sun and the 51-miles of twisting, turning, climbing, descending route that in many instances appears to be literally stuck onto the face of the mountains. It has opened the interior of the park to everyone. Some “flatlanders” from east of the mountains term the route a “white knuckler.”

It’s fun to let the mind wander through an imaginary time tunnel to the summer of 1910 with its devastating forest fires, choking smoke and heavy ash fall. That’s when

the idea of a trans-mountain road was conceived by Major William R. Logan, Glacier’s first superintendent. He knew it would be a difficult, dangerous project. Hazards included steep terrain, rock falls, adverse weather, short building seasons, huge snowdrifts, and even wild animals.

Logan persuaded Congress to appropriate \$69,200 to construct the first two and a half miles of the westernmost stretch. The initial phase was implemented in 1911. And on Sept. 10 of that year the first auto caravan carried more than 200 persons into the park from Belton (West Glacier) to Apgar at the foot of Lake McDonald. By

Sept. 30, the road sported a new macadam surface. Some 4,000 persons signed the Apgar guest register that year and Glacier National Park was on its way to becoming Montana’s top tourist attraction.

At Yellowstone National Park in mid-September 1911, Major Logan told fellow superintendents that he wanted to develop Glacier “as rapidly as possible ... keeping in mind the future day ... when the American traveling public will at least realize the beauties of their own country ... and our national parks will come into their own.” Major Logan would not see his dream come true, though. He died in February 1912. But his dream and memory lives on. Two prominent landmarks are named for him – Logan Creek

at the western base of Logan Pass, the 6,664 summit of Going to the Sun Road.

Multi-year efforts were necessary to complete the road. Major construction began in the 1920s. Hardest portions – the steep-sloped Garden Wall and the west and east side tunnels – were done relatively late in the project. The Garden Wall road work was done from 1925-1928 and the Piegan tunnel on the east side of Logan Pass was completed in the fall of 1932. An excerpt from the July 20, 1933, Flathead Courier of Polson described some of the obstacles:

“... Moving along the trail laboriously hacked out of solid rock, workmen dangled on ropes, 1,000 feet above the valley floor, carving footholds in sheer walls to blast a 400-ft. tunnel through Mt. Piegan. Equipment and supplies were packed by horse along a narrow trail and then transferred to backs of men who carried them along a thready footpath and down a dangling 100-ft. ladder to drillers.”

Tunnel sections alone required removal of 552,822 cubic yards of rock. Many workmen, subjected to dangers of falling rock, wore their own version of today’s “hard hats” – surplus World War I battle helmets.

Source: National Park Service, 2009



Clearing Going to the Sun Road in winter

Source: Paul Fugleberg, 2009



St. Mary's Lake from the Going to the Sun Road

Despite the dangers only one fatality was recorded – a foreman lost his handhold on a rope and fell 60 feet to his death.

Among sub-contractors were 16 Russian nationals. During final phases of construction, they worked from the top of Logan Pass westward to meet crews working their way up the mountain. The Russians had their own pack string of 20-25 horses, their own camp and cook tent. Their food was of higher quality than the average road camp fare. One visitor proclaimed the Russians' raisin pie as the "best I'd ever eaten." The bulk of the Russian's work was hand-done with wheelbarrows, pick axes and shovels, they averaged about 100 feet per day. They did much of the high country blasting. Three drillers worked almost continuously preparing holes for black powder charges. Explosions reverberated like thunder through the park late at night – all summer long.

Some 5,000 persons attended a formal dedication ceremony atop Logan Pass, July 15, 1933. Among dignitaries present was Kootenai Chief Koostatah. Montana Governor Frank Cooney told the gathering the new route "was a priceless gift to all people of this country and all nations whose citizens come this way to view the scenic wonders it reveals." Other amenities offered along the GTS route include hiking, mountain climbing, wildlife viewing, photography, camping, fishing, and boating. Trailheads along the road provide access to back-country lakes, waterfalls, glaciers, tumbling

streams, wildlife, stone chalets.

And here's a figure to keep in mind when reviewing cost estimates of today's ongoing repairs to the road. The original total cost of the route was estimated to be about \$3 million.

But anyone who

has been over Going to the Sun Road will tell you that it's worth many times that amount for the priceless pleasures and treasured memories.

Actually, Going to the Sun Road was the second route to cross the northern Montana Rockies. In 1930 the Roosevelt Highway, U.S. 2, was completed. Prior to that motorists had to drive at least 100 miles north or south of U.S. 2 to cross the mountains. Or they could have their car ferried across the summit by Great Northern flatcar for \$12.50. Automobile occupants, however, had to travel inside GN railroad coaches.

Paul Fugleberg is the author of "Among Other Things," "Proud Heritage," "An Illustrated History of Lake County and the Lower Flathead, Mission and Jocko Valleys," "Flathead :Lake Steamboat Days," "Buffalo Savers," "Schnitzmeyer, Pioneer Photographer," and "Montana Nessie," was editor and co-publisher of the *Flathead Courier* from 1963 to 1976 and the *Ronan Pioneer* from 1971 to 1976; and publisher of the *Pioneer* 1976 to 1980. He purchased his partner's (Lorin Jacobson) interest in 1976, and sold the papers in 1980. Fugleberg has been writing stories for 57 years, and continues writing a column for the *Lake County Leader* and freelancing as a copy editor. He still resides in Polson, MT.