

The Bad Rocks of Northwest Montana

Article and photos by Rick Hull

Flathead County's Bad Rock Canyon is not the only place with that name in Northwest Montana. The other "Bad Rock" is just east of Thompson Falls.

The notorious obstruction interfered with early traffic along the Clark Fork River corridor until it was blasted away by the railroad, and later the highway department. It also went by its French name, "Le Gros Roche."

Father DeSmet, the famed Jesuit missionary, was among those spooked by the obstacle. Describing his trip made in November 1841, he wrote:

"We were here obliged to climb a steep rough pass from 400 to 600 feet high. I had before seen landscapes of awful grandeur, but this one certainly surpassed all others in horror. My courage failed at the first sight; it was impossible to remain on horseback, and on foot my weight of 211 pounds was no trifle.."

"This, therefore, was the expedient to which I resorted: my mule Lizette was sufficiently docile and kind to allow me to grasp her tail, to which I held on firmly: crying at one moment aloud, and at other times making use of the whip to excite her courage, until the good beast conducted me safely to the very top of the mountain."

"There I breathed freely for a while and contemplated the magnificent prospect that presented itself to my sight. The windings of the river with the scenery on its banks were before me; on one side hung over our heads rocks piled on rocks in the most precipitous manner, and on the other stood lofty peaks crowned with snow and pine trees: Mountains of every shape and feature reared their towering forms before us. It really was a fine view and one which was well worth the effort we had made."

In a report from the 1850s, Second Lieutenant Rufus Saxton wrote, "Crossed the 'Bad Rock,' so called by the trappers; it is a compound of a mass of sharp, flinty stones— the termination of a high mountain which rises almost perpendicularly from the bed of the river to a great height. The feet of our animals were much injured in crossing it. Two packhorses tumbled over the precipice and rolled down fifty yards into the river: one, rolling sideways, was but slightly injured; the other, going heels-over-head was terribly cut and bruised."

A 1867 article in Harpers Magazine described it as, "an enormous knob or shoulder jutting into the river from the lateral range of mountains, 1,500 feet of an almost perpendicular ascent, exceeding dangerous, from the fact that one-half of it is a pile of loose shelving slate or shingle, while the other half is a break-neck staircase, the steps of which are broken rocks, or roots of hard old trees, which in at least a dozen places are several feet apart. A more fearful rise and fall could not be made."

The rocky slope hangs over Highway 200, and a network of cables, metal nets and detectors currently keep the hillside at bay.

Flathead County had its own obstacles to early traffic. One was Angel Hill, south of Lakeside. It



The "Bad Rock" of Sanders County, looking west.

was supposedly named by an early settler, who swore it was so high he that he could hear angels singing.

Early pioneer David Greig recounted a wagon trip along the West Shore, "Everybody that was here then knows what Angel Hill was in those days. We eased it down the North Slope by means of cables, snubbing them around trees to regulate the descent. This was not near where the present road is. It may have been a mile or half a mile away."

Mrs. Melvina Martin recalls her family entering the Flathead by covered wagon. "Things went along as expected until they came to Angel's Hill some distance out of Missoula. Several of the wagons were nearly lost in the descent. Rocks were used to hold the wagons from going down hill too fast and finally the men put ropes around the trees and fastened them to the wagon, and then gradually let the ropes out. This was perhaps the most dangerous time for the little group."

Gladys Manning has her own recollection of a similar trip. "We climbed Angel Hill the next day and found it necessary to rough lock the wheels before attempting a descent. Even so the wagon pushed the horses down what was no more than an Indian trail."

Margaret Croisettier told of a stagecoach trip along the west side of the lake. "In the morning, Dan Anker was our new driver and we were all worried about how we would get over Angel Hill. When we got to the top, we found the deep ruts down the north side were filled with ice, so the men cut a six-inch fir tree and tied it to the rear axle and we all walked down the hill with the men holding back on the stage."

It is no wonder that most freight moved in and out of the valley on Flathead Lake steamboats.

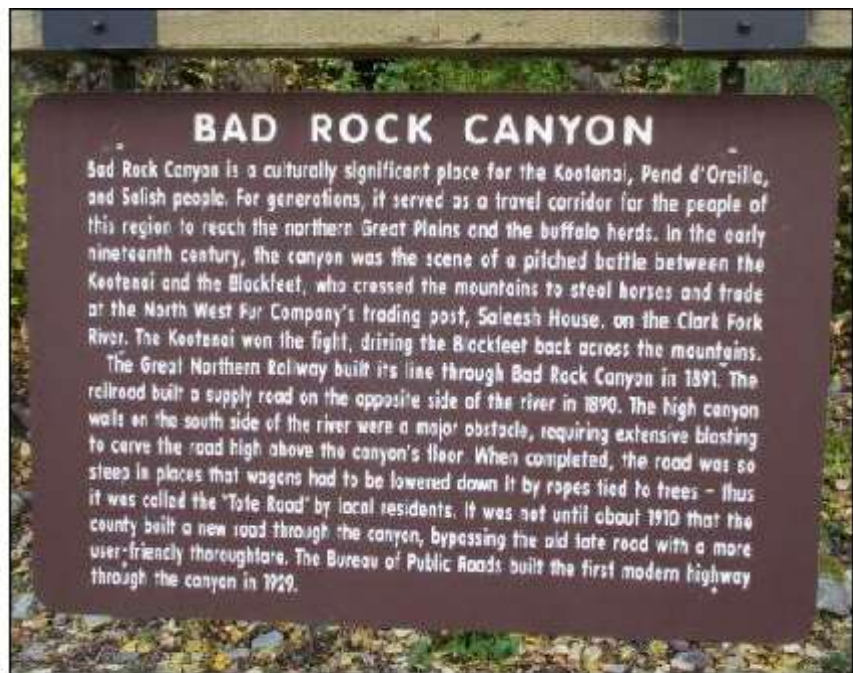
That bring the story to Bad Rock Canyon near Hungry Horse, where wagons had to be winched over an outcropping above the present road. Somehow that story was lost once a flat highway route was blasted at river level.

A fanciful, but politically incorrect, historic sign was erected along the highway that stated: "Old timers aver that a party of war whoops from the plains surged over the divide years ago seething with ambition to corral a choice assortment of cayuses and maybe scalp or two from the unsuspecting tomahawks who claimed this part of the country for range and bed grounds. They came with stealth and breezed with haste and horses.

"This foray put the home folks on the prod. They lined out on the trail of those vanishing redskins, both parties being totally uninformed regarding the good neighbor idea.

"The departing braves anticipated some such caper so, cunning and agile as pine squirrels, they took to a projecting rib on the canyon wall and laid for the irate oncomers.

"It developed into quite a disturbance. Many a warrior join his fathers in the Sand Hills that day.



The present highway sign at Flathead County "Bad Rock".

Naturally lugubrious relatives thereafter referred to that ill-omened citadel as Bad Rock."

I remembered when the sign was physically edited by gluing less offensive terms over words such as "war hoops" and "redskins".

The new highway sign also begins with a story about a battle between the Kootenai and Blackfeet, which the Kootenai won.

It then switches to a story about blasting a road on the mountain side. "When completed, the road was so steep in places that wagons had to be lowered down it by ropes tied to trees – thus it was called the 'Tote Road' by local residents."

However my dictionary says a tote road is an unpaved supply road.

There is a site in Montana that is really named for tribal ambushes. Located just east of Missoula is the Clark Fork River canyon that French fur-traders called Porte d'Enfer. It was supposedly marked by a pyramid of skulls.

The translated name is Hell Gate. The Nez Perce so feared it that they refused to accompany Meriwether Lewis any further east.

Hellgate Canyon was also a physical obstacle. Jesuit Father Mengarini traveled down the Clark Fork on his way to the St. Mary's mission at Steenville in 1841, and he wrote:

"Thus journeying we arrived at Hell gate," he wrote. "If the road to the infernal regions were as uninviting as that to its earthly namesake, few would care to travel it. The trail, for it was nothing more, ran along the sides of a steep mountain; so steep, in fact, that oftentimes it was only by attaching ropes to different parts of the wagon, and asking our Indians to help us, that we could keep the wagons upright; at other times we had to climb the mountains, and unhitching the mules drag the wagons by ropes. At last, all difficulties happily overcome, we settled on the St. Mary's river, about twenty-five miles from Hell Gate."

When you cruise down the highway at 70 mph, try to envision a time when a shopping trip to Missoula was two weeks by wagon.

Pony Tracks Nov. 2020