THE MYSTERY PASS OF THE ROCKIES

Why Marias Pass remained a myth for more than forty years

By Rick Hull

The Marias Pass obelisk tops out at one mile above sea level.
Photo by Rick Hull

In the hallway of Kalispell's KM Building is a 1856 U.S. map that clearly shows Marias Pass.

At 5,216 feet, the pass is the lowest route over the Rocky Mountains in the United States.

It is an excellent railroad pass, with a gentle slope on the east side and a river-grade route down the west side. Other than a few shortcuts through river bends, no pesky and expensive tunnels are needed, unlike Mullan Pass near Helena.

The only problem is the map is wrong. Other than Native Americans and fur traders, no one knew where the rumored pass was located in 1856. And Marias Pass would not be found for nearly four decades.

That is when a lone surveyor, under orders from a railroad president blindly pushing tracks across northern Montana, would venture out in minus 40 degree weather and finally nail down the pass's location.

Marias Pass is named after a river, which in turn is named after the cousin of Meriwether Lewis. Lewis, of Lewis and Clark fame, supposedly had a romantic interest in young Maria Wood. The apostrophe soon disappeared from Maria's River, giving the current name.

The expedition was stymied when they hit the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers, near Loma, Montana, in 1805. They agonized over which was which, since the two had equal flows. Finally they concluded the Marias – the muddiest of the two – was swollen by spring runoff, and the correct route was south. The decision led them to the headwaters of the Missouri, but also into the wilderness of Idaho, the River of No Return, a struggle back into Montana across Lost Trail Pass, and a more logical crossing of the Rockies on the return trip.

In 1806 the expedition split, and Lewis headed up the Marias River to see if the Louisiana Purchase's drainage included the beaver-rich muskeg country of Canada.

It didn't. The continental glacier of the Ice Age had bulldozed its way south to roughly the present Montana-Canadian border. Shoved aside by a barrier now known as the Hudson Bay divide, the Missouri and other rivers had no choice but to flow towards the Mississippi.

The Marias River headed promisingly north, but soon turned west toward. Lewis gave up just past Cut Bank at what he called Camp Disappointment. And the next day his group ran into an band of Blackfeet, and a resulting race for the Missouri when the encounter turned fatal.

Marias Pass as seen from west of Browning. Meriwether Lewis would have seen a view similar to this in 1806.
Photo by Rick Hull

The irony was that Lewis had been looking directly at Marias Pass when he abandoned his quest. The fabled mountain crossing would remain unexplored for another 84 years.

The pass was largely ignored until 1853, when Isaac Stevens, the territorial governor of Washington, headed across the northwest to slap a series of treaties on the local tribes. The hasty treaties, mostly aimed at securing railroad routes, would come back to haunt both sides in future generations. But, as part of his efforts, Stevens launched expeditions to locate potential routes across the Rockies and Cascades.

Abiel Tinkham was assigned to find Marias pass. Everyone knew it was somewhere between the Middle Fork of the Flathead River and the Two Medicine River, about 50 miles south of the Canadian border. Tinkham headed up the Middle Fork and turned west at Nyack up a promising valley.

Glacier-carved terrain is deceiving. Wide, flat-bottomed valleys suddenly end where the freeze-melt cycle has chewed a vertical headwall, with the fallen rock neartly removed on a conveyor belt of moving ice. The valley between Razoredge and Tinkham mountains in Glacier National Park is no exception. On October 20, 1853, the expedition crossed a narrow divide now known as Pitamakan Pass. The 7,861-foot crossing was often just wide enough for a horse, and wholly impractical for wagons, Tinkham reported.

The real Marias pass continued to be used by local tribes and local traders, including the McDonald family of the Hudson's Bay Company post at St. Ignatius, Montana. But passes that were good for railroads were not necessarily suitable for horses. Native Americans were infamous for going directly over the top of mountains when heading to eastern Montana to hunt buffalo. And there were better passes that didn't end up in the front yard of the Blackfeet nation.

The North Fork's Trail Creek leads to Crowsnest Pass, which is just across the U.S.-Canadian border and reaches a measly 4,453 feet high.

Marias Pass remained undiscovered until 1889, when the Canadian James Hill was pushing his St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba railroad west across North Dakota and Montana. The tracks ran to Great Falls, with a spur to Butte. But Hill had more ambitious plans – a competitor to the Northern Pacific that would reach the ocean to Seattle. It would be called the Great Northern Railway, copying the name of a famous predecessor in England.

Hill wanted a more direct route than Rogers Pass, near Lincoln, Montana. And the pass that Tinkham discovered would require a tunnel two and half miles long.

It was the rumored Marias Pass that stood out in Hill's mind. After all, it was on all the maps.

Railroad construction west would start in the following spring, and it was already November

of 1889. Hill pushed his chief engineer, E. H. Beckler, for instant results. Beckler telegraphed for John Stevens, a self-taught surveyor.

Stevens traveled by rail to Havre and then cross country to Browning. There he discovered none of the Blackfeet would guide him. The pass had evil spirits linked to a smallpox epidemic, they said. So, with a supposed whiskey bribe, he recruited a reluctant Flathead named Coonsah and headed into the mountains with a wagon, mule, saddle horse and snowshoes.

Coonsah's courage and tolerance for the bitter cold ran out once in the mountains, at a site known as False Summit. Stevens continued on five miles through the minus 40-degree cold to the actual summit. A short distance later he came to Bear Creek, where quick work with a hatchet proved it flowed west – the true test of the Continental Divide. His altimeter put the height at just over 5,000 feet.

Afraid to rest in the subzero cold, Stevens stamped a path in the snow and walked in a circle until daylight. According to accounts, he felt even taking time to gather wood for fire was too risky. The date was December 11, 1889.

Hill was overjoyed with the news. The route was surveyed from the western side and in December of 1891 the railroad reached Kalispell. Stevens became chief engineer for the Great Northern, discovered Stevens Pass through the Cascade Mountains and went on to build the Panama Canal and oversee railroads in Russia during World War I.

The railroad eventually commissioned a statue of Stevens, and unveiled it in a ceremony on the summit in July, 1925. There were some who felt the courage of Stevens' trek in 1889 was overrated. Slippery Bill, a famed local resident, supposedly spoke up at the dedication and said Stevens could have spent the night in his cabin. Kalispell's first mayor, W. C. Whipps, quotes an account stating that the Blackfoot Reservation agent, Marcus Baldwin, had crossed the pass in September 1889 and had passed the information on to the railroad.

The summit is marked by an obelisk that tops out exactly one mile above sea level. For years the obelisk stood in the middle of the highway, before it was gently moved to an adjoining park and rest area.

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