

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Traveling America (X)
Glacier National Park**

Traveling America (X) Glacier National Park and Glacial Attitudes

June 21, 2009

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Reporterette and your reporter took a drive into Northwest Montana to visit Glacier National Park (GNP). Our route is shown in Figure 1. I admit that this map is not on a par with MapQuest or Google Maps. However, my map is accompanied with no advertisements. If you click on this image, you will get nothing more. But I trust this image will give you a good idea of the terrain we traversed.

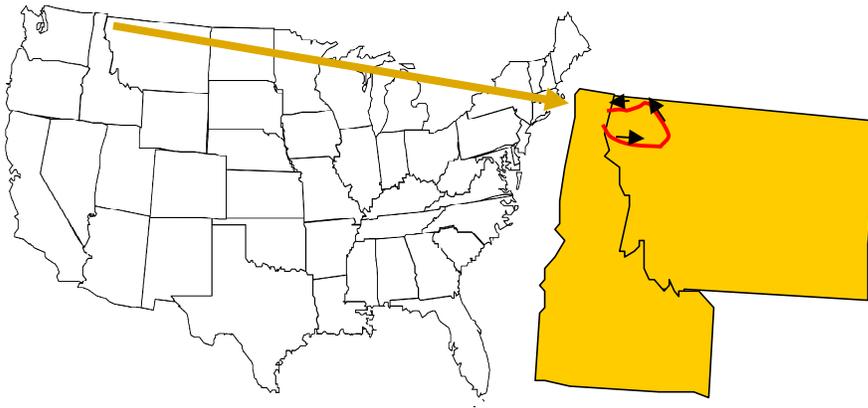


Figure 1. Touring Northwest Montana.

The short tour took us across some of the paths of the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark expedition. Lewis himself traveled around the Glacier park area on his return trip to the east. These men traversed the entire state of Montana for their outbound and inbound journeys. Thus, this state has scores of trails and landmarks commemorating the Lewis and Clark exploration.

The park was formally established in 1932. It is famous for its wilderness, with few human interventions visible. The Lewis Range is part of the Continental Divide and runs through the park, north to south. The highest peak in the range is Mount Cleveland, which rises to 3,190 m (10,466 ft). The mountains looked much higher to me, as will be seen in upcoming pictures.

The eastern part of the park abuts the Blackfoot Indian Reservation. The Blackfoot are called by this English name because they wore black-dyed moccasins. These people played a major role in the history of the park, and one of our tour guides spent a lot of time describing their past, and how it has affected their present lives.

Theme of this Park: Unparalleled Beauty

The park is the fourth largest national park in America. In natural beauty, it competes with all the national parks I have visited. I have not visited Yosemite yet, but Glacier's mountains, lakes, and rivers are as stunning and spectacular as any in the Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks. Figure 2 is a photo of Two Medicine Lake and surrounding terrain. I took the picture while we were on a boat trip around the lake.



Figure 2. Can you guess the theme of this park?

This photo does not do justice to the views. It shows a range that is treeless. Just as common are tree-lined mountains, even waterfalls, as depicted in Figure 3. These falls are called the Running Eagle Falls. They are named after a Blackfoot (Southern Piegan) woman who was respected for her great skills in battle. The site was a sacred place for the Native Americans who came here for their vision quests.¹ It is no longer a sacred place for anyone. I spotted only white-faced and white-haired tourists at the falls. Their vision quest (and admittedly mine) was to pursue and capture a JPEG vision for later Photoshop editing.



Figure 3. Running Eagle Falls.

How's the Fishing?

Due to harsh weather, the season for visiting the park is restricted to mid/late June to mid/late September. We were unable to travel the famous Going-to-the-Sun road because a June

¹ In an earlier report, I was informed by a reader that “Native American” citizens are no more native than Irish or Italian citizens. The reader offered that it was just a matter of these people arriving first. I cannot argue the point. But these early arrivals need a moniker. Some don't like the term *Indian* people. I agree; it is inaccurate. I think the name, “Those Who Came First” is accurate, but it is too long. I propose the term *FIRST*. It is derived from the idea of the people who were the FIRst to cross the STraits. It is accurate, allows a telling short-hand acronym, and carries with it a notion of dignity for these people.

18, 2009, avalanche had covered up a section of the passageway. But the park is never closed. Some hearty souls snowshoe into the park and stay for a while on the frozen lakes to do ice fishing. To catch the trout, they must hand-cut through several feet of ice. Mechanized saws are not allowed, nor are snow mobiles. If you want to explore this part of America in the winter, you do it on foot, just as Lewis and Clark did through many of their miles.

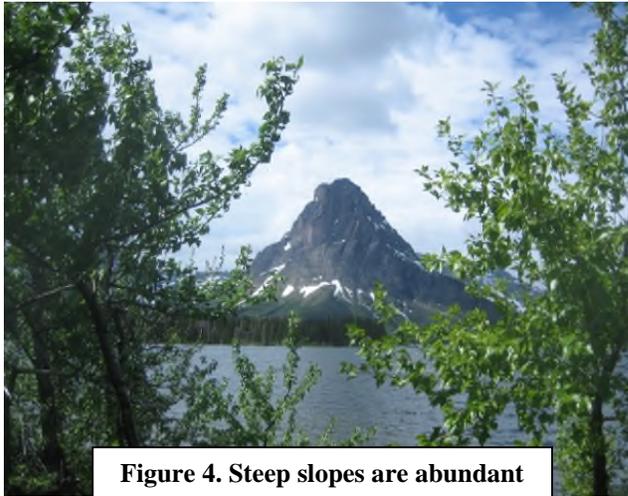


Figure 4. Steep slopes are abundant

Figure 4 shows a picture I took from Two Medicine General Store. As seen here, much of the terrain in the park consists of high, steep mountains. The park contains about 50 active glaciers. Many are small; others are several miles in area. They provide water to about 250 lakes.

The boat driver informed us, “GNP is important hydrologically.” He was a forestry major and liked to use forestry type words. Later, in order to spell “hydrologically” correctly, I looked it up in the dictionary--- which was not an easy task, because I did not know how to spell the word in the first place.

He continued, “It contributes to the Mississippi River. A lot of people in North America rely on water that starts up here. The nearby Continental Divide drains-off into the Arctic, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans.”

FDR and his Fireside Chats

The General Store is a well known landmark in the park, especially its fireplace, shown in Figure 5. The people at this store, as well as a tour guide, told us President Franklin D. Roosevelt came here with some of his staff. They spent the night and took-in the vistas.



Figure 5. The fireplace of an FDR fireside chat?

We were also told that FDR gave one of his fireside chats next to the fireplace in Figure 5. Between 1933-1944, Roosevelt gave 30 of these radio speeches. They were quite successful and attracted more listeners than most of the popular radio shows. I did some surfing to learn more about them. Many of the sources (the FDR Library, for example) emphasized that the President made sure the words in his speeches were the most commonly used words in the English dictionary. For instance, when referring to water, he did not say hydrology. Anyway, his chats spurred the sale of radios. By 1944, almost 90 percent of America’s households owned a radio.

But the guides were not of one voice on the specifics of FDR’s chat. I encountered two of them at the back of the building:

- Reporter, “Hello. So that’s the fireplace where FDR held a fireside chat?”
- Guide One, “Yes, 1934.”
- Guide Two, “No, it was 1937.”
- Two, “I was told to say it was 1934.”
- One, “No, it was August, 1937.”
- (My later surfing revealed neither date is correct. I was consulting with two people who were paid to know such facts---especially about this building. They were on a coffee break so maybe they weren’t at their best.)
- Reporter, “It doesn’t matter. But I am curious about his use of radio for the chats. Do you know if they had radio transmitters up here in 1934 or 1937?”
- One, “Hm. Not sure they even had electricity.”
- Two, “He might have used a tape recorder and played it back later.”
- One, “You sure they had tape recorders in those days?”
- Two, “Uh, I’m not sure.”
- Reporter, “Thanks for the information.”
- One, “Anytime!”

Train Company Lodges

If you travel across America, be sure to seek-out accommodations at hotels that were built by the railroad companies in the early 20th century. You may not find the comfort of a Comfort Inn in the form of a modern bathroom, but you will be staying in extraordinary places that will never again be built. For our brief trip to Glacier National Park, we stayed at the Glacier Park Lodge. Its lobby is shown in Figure 6.²

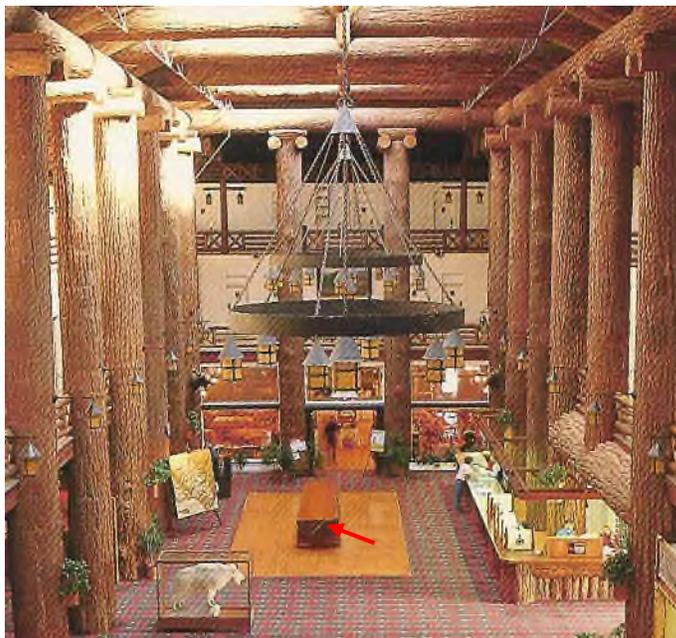


Figure 6. The Glacier Park Lodge.

² Glacier Park Lodge gift shop. Post card photography by Eric. C. Christiansen.

The building's sides are held up by large timbers, as are the ceilings. Many pieces of the furniture are hewn from large logs. Take another look at the photo in Figure 6. The table (identified with the red arrow) is made from a large tree trunk. It's over 25 feet in length and about 3 feet wide. I am not certain the current cutting laws allow the felling of such large trees. But dead trees abound in this hotel. Dead or alive, I hugged them and had fine meals and drinks on them.

Take the Red Bus

The National Park service does not have its own rangers for this park's tourist services. It uses the Red Bus company. The vehicles for the tours are called "jammers," cars that were taken from the 1930s. The word *jammer* became associated with the buses because drivers "jammed" the gears as they drove up and down the steep roads. The bus we took on one tour is shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7. A Red Bus.

Depending on the weather, the canvas top can be easily rolled-off or rolled-on. For this trip, we rolled it on and off two times. The vehicle is also configured with a high-quality speaker setup. Speakers are placed on the side of each seat.

Black Thoughts about Blackfoot

In wrapping up this Traveling America report, we return to the Blackfoot tribe. I do not ordinarily write much social commentary in the Traveling America series, but I have made an exception for Traveling America (X). I hope you abide with my taking this diversion.

One of our tour guides was a closet bigot. I am not certain he knew about his mental deficiency. But after a few hours of his homilies, we did. Before long, I was looking for an exit from the bus and an entrance to a bar. (I paraphrase from notes.)

He began by explaining how the Blackfoot's ancestors came over from Asia. He spoke about how fierce the people were and how other tribes were afraid of them, "They tortured their prisoners before they killed them."

He explained that the other tribes in the area had assimilated just fine into the white world. But not the Blackfoot, as they were principally buffalo hunters and "...the reservation on which they were placed had no buffalo... . The government tried to get them to farm, but they wouldn't plant anything."

He said the Blackfoot ate the local wild berries, but after a while, that inventory was also exhausted. "Some of them went hungry, but the government was doing the best it could. No one had any experience running reservations." Next, he introduced us to this far-fetched allegory:

- “Attitude gains you altitude.” ... Which he said was a play on words: “Altitude means getting along in life.”
- “Blackfoot have the aptitude, but they don’t have the attitude. So they don’t have any altitude.”
- “Other tribes around here have the attitude and have climbed in their altitude.”

Shortly, the speaker system began to resonate with muted Indian drums, suffused further with Indian-style flutes. I am not joking. Our guide had turned-on mood music in order to orchestrate his claim that he had Indian blood of a great, great grandparent in him. He then said he had not known about this part of his past until late in his life. It seemed to Holly and me that he was trying to puzzle-out who he could really be if he had Blackfoot blood in him.

We think he was genuinely baffled. He had harbored a dislike for the Blackfoot for most of his life and then discovered his abhorrence was directed toward himself. Sweet irony and frankly, quite weird.

Nonetheless, he told us he had managed to overcome his Indian past and had gained a lot of altitude. He made comments that he had triumphed over his ordeal. I suppose his Blackfoot vision quest was successful. Maybe he found his soul during a visit to the Running Eagle Falls.

He said he was sorry the Blackfoot had not been able to transcend their warrior ways; their past of being fearless torturers of their enemies; of living on buffalo meat and berries; of their inability to be assimilated. But he readily stated that he had transcended his Native American past.

I think it reasonable to say that most of us would be a bit miffed by such an abrupt change in life style. The Blackfoot people’s ways came about over many centuries. In less than the time it takes to drive around Glacier National Park, they were parked inside a reservation and forced to take-on the ways of the whites.

This man was *four generations* removed from his Blackfoot heritage. He had never lived on a reservation. He had never experienced the debilitating effects of social welfare and quasi-prison containment. Yet, he had the gall to put on Indian elevator music and opine about an irrelevant past. We concluded he believed his attitude was good because he did not know he had Blackfoot blood in him until he was 65. If he had known earlier, his attitude would have cramped his altitude.

While the mystical music assuaged our anxieties about a pissed-off Blackfoot possibly springing forth from the forest to scalp us, our guide offered:

- “You’ll find no deer around here. It’s too near the reservation. Deer are smart animals.”
- “Stay off route 49 on Saturday Night. (The road abutting the reservation.) Firewater makes it a dangerous place.”

So what? The Blackfoot like to eat and drink. Don’t we all?

We left the bus. I did not confront this man. It would have had no effect on his Ignorant Therefore Doctrinaire Syndrome. I paid a call on the Red Bus local office to “diplomatically” express my displeasure of a raving bigot manning a (supposedly bigot-wise-neutral) tour bus. They said they would look into my complaint.

Aside from this human’s infraction against common decency to the locals, the short trip to Glacier National Park was a beautiful experience. I have just begun to explore this part of America. I did not have a chance to pay a call on a glacier, or to see the Canadian side of the park. Those visions will be something to look forward to.

Later, I will come back to this idyllic place and send an email to you about its wonders. At least, I hope so. Time is ticking.