



## **America's Alps: Minnesota's Connection to Glacier National Park Video Podcast Transcript Minnesota Historical Society**

Glacier National Park is one of the gems of the U.S. National Park System. It is a protected natural wonder of mountains, lakes and wildlife encompassing over 1 million acres in Northwestern Montana.

The Minnesota Historical Society is home to a large amount of material documenting the foundation and history of the park, which exists in its present form largely because of the efforts of one well-known Minnesota-based company and its wealthy and influential director.

In the early 1890s the Great Northern Railway Company was well on its way to completing a transcontinental line between St. Paul, Minnesota and Washington state. Company officials noted the natural splendor of the area where their tracks crossed the continental divide, and decided to promote tourism to this spot, to boost ridership and contribute to the railroad's bottom line. Great Northern began lobbying congress to protect the land; in 1897 it was designated a forest preserve and in 1910 it became a national park.

Most park-related materials at the Historical Society are contained within the corporate records of the Great Northern Railroad and the papers of railroad President and Chairman Louis W. Hill. The majority of these items are concerned with two overlapping subjects: the cross-promotion of the railroad and Glacier Park, and the design, construction, and operation of hotels within the park.

Great Northern ran a series of famously successful advertising campaigns through the 1910s, 20s and 30s which used the imagery of Glacier to forge a link between the park and the railroad. Mountain goats appear again and again in ads for each. Great Northern's mountain goat logo was hand selected by Louis Hill and adopted by the company in 1921.

The land that became Glacier Park was the ancestral home of the Blackfeet Indians. Louis Hill was particularly interested in the culture of this tribe, and Great Northern began to closely associate images and motifs of the Blackfeet with its brand. Western artists like Winold Reiss were hired to paint portraits and take photos of Blackfeet, which were used in promotional materials. Tribe members were paid to set up "villages" and perform shows near the park train stations, and delegations of tribal "chiefs" were sent east on promotional junkets. In this way Glacier Park was positioned as a last bastion of the Wild West, and the railroad was the only way to get there.

In the 1910s and 20s, Great Northern set about improving both Glacier and Waterton Lakes Park, just across the border in Canada. Under the direct leadership of Louis Hill Great Northern built and operated hotels, roads, transportation, concessions and utilities within the parks.

Louis Hill envisioned the park area as an "American Alps", and set about designing a system of Swiss-chalet style hotels, lodges, and cabins throughout the park that would form an architecturally cohesive tourist destination. There were four luxury hotels connected by trails to settlements of smaller, more rustic chalets deeper within the park, some of which were accessible only by horseback or foot. All of the building sites were specifically chosen by Louis Hill for their spectacular scenery.

The hotels were never a money maker, and in the 1930s dwindling passenger rail numbers convinced Great Northern to cede most park development to the Federal Government, though Great Northern continued to operate the park hotels until 1960. The four main hotels as well as three remaining chalets all continue in operation today - each is a National Historic Landmark – and the Empire Builder passenger train, now operated by Amtrak, still passes Glacier daily. To learn more about the creation and promotion of this uniquely American park, check out the Louis W. Hill and Great Northern Railway collections housed at the Minnesota Historical Society Library in St. Paul.