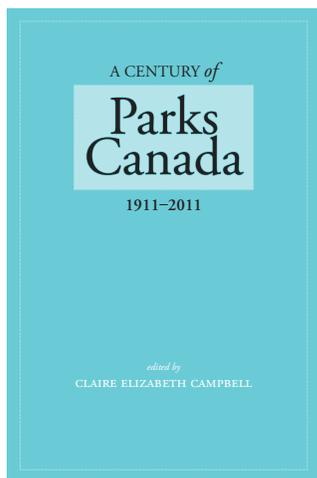




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# “A Questionable Basis for Establishing a Major Park”: Politics, Roads, and the Failure of a National Park in British Columbia’s Big Bend Country



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In the history of Canada’s national parks there needs to be a place for parks that never were, for parks that were proposed but failed. Areas that might have become national parks, but did not, deserve to be treated as integral to the larger history of the national parks system because they provide important context for the better-known success stories. The failures hidden in the history of Canada’s national parks serve to illustrate the changing political, economic, and aesthetic criteria involved in constructing the present-day parks system. They also help denaturalize or demythologize the existing national parks by revealing the myriad actors and interests involved in determining which proposed parks went forward and which fell by the wayside.

National parks have been proposed by the federal government, provincial governments, regional boosters, tourism promoters, and environmental

organizations. The proposals made by provincial governments are of particular interest because, without provincial cooperation, it has been effectively impossible to establish national parks in southern Canada since 1930, when the *Natural Resources Transfer Act* gave the prairie provinces control over their lands and returned the Dominion Railway Belt to British Columbia. As Alan MacEachern has shown in his study of national parks in the Atlantic provinces, the provincial governments' willingness to give land for new national parks usually depended on the federal government's willingness to invest in the development of regional infrastructure, most often in the form of roads.<sup>1</sup> Thus the history of Canada's national parks during the middle decades of the twentieth century – including both the success stories and the numerous parks that were proposed but never established – needs to be recognized as having been linked to intergovernmental politics and infrastructure priorities. This chapter examines the intertwined histories of parks and roads in British Columbia's Big Bend country. It tells the story of an area that could plausibly have become an important national park during the mid-1930s, and again in the early 1940s, but was rejected by the federal government and ended up becoming more of a national "sacrifice area," where irreparable damage was done to extensive swathes of land in the name of progress and the greater good.

Few people have heard of Hamber Park, but it is an especially noteworthy example of a failed national park. The government of British Columbia established Hamber Provincial Park in 1941 as part of a scheme to have the federal government incorporate it and several other provincial parks into the national parks system. This scheme was tied to a larger effort to get Ottawa to build, improve, and maintain automobile roads in B.C.'s rugged and sparsely populated Selkirk and Rocky mountains. Hamber's size and location make it particularly important: when it was established, Hamber was one of the largest parks in Canada, and was contiguous with Jasper, Banff, Yoho, Glacier, and Mount Robson parks. To understand why British Columbia created this enormous, strategically located park with the expectation that the federal government might have made it into a national park, it is necessary to go back to the late 1920s, when a network of automobile roads was taking shape in the mountains of western Canada.

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The completion of a road between Lake Louise and Golden in the summer of 1927 meant that the only gap in an interprovincial route between Vancouver and Calgary was located between Golden and the town of Revelstoke, a distance of less than one hundred kilometres as the crow flies. The road connecting Lake Louise and Golden had been built by the engineering service of the National Parks Branch and the B.C. Department of Public Works, and after it was completed, many expected those agencies' construction crews would move west and begin work on a link between Golden and Revelstoke.<sup>2</sup> However, the federal government was opposed to building a road through the Selkirks via the notorious, avalanche-plagued Rogers Pass, even though this would have made Glacier National Park accessible to tourists travelling by automobile.<sup>3</sup> Ottawa instead proposed that the two governments build a road *around* the Selkirks by following the horseshoe-shaped course of the Columbia River, known as the Big Bend.<sup>4</sup> An agreement was reached whereby the province would build the western section of the road – from Revelstoke to the site of Boat Encampment, an old fur trade rendezvous located at the apex of the Big Bend – while Ottawa would have the National Parks Branch build the eastern section, from the outskirts of Golden northwards to Boat Encampment.

The advantages Ottawa saw in the roundabout Big Bend route are difficult to discern. A road paralleling the Columbia River would be more than double the length of a road through the pass, and would traverse a veritable howling wilderness for more than three hundred kilometres. There were no farms, mines, or logging camps in the Big Bend country, only a few prospectors' cabins and half-observed trails. True, it avoided the treacherous Rogers Pass, but the Big Bend country experienced heavy snowfall, especially on the western slope of the Selkirks where between five and ten metres fell annually. Dense forests with jungle-like undergrowth climbed high on the mountainsides, and the Columbia was un-navigable between Revelstoke and Golden, which meant that during the short construction season all supplies would need to be delivered by pack trains hacking their way through the forest. No one could have guessed it in the summer of 1929, but the two governments could not have chosen a worse moment to begin such an ambitious project.

Construction began in early 1930 but was slowed by the area's difficult terrain and inaccessibility. The downturn in the global economy also played a role. British Columbia's economy was based on primary resources, and

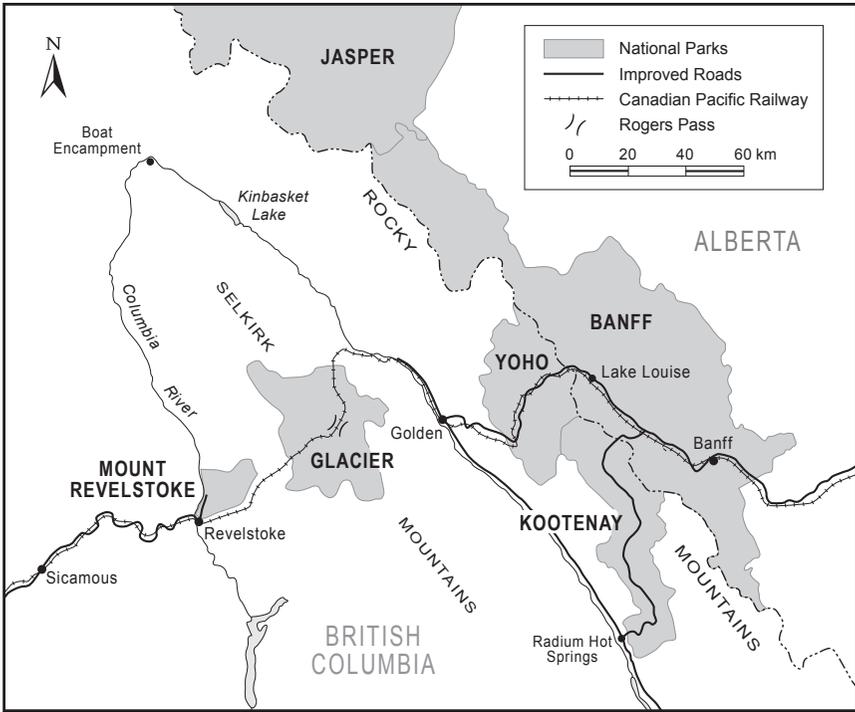


FIG. 1. TRANSPORTATION ROUTES AND NATIONAL PARKS IN THE ROCKY AND SELKIRK MOUNTAINS, 1927.

government revenues depended on fees collected on logging, milling, and mining activity. As a result, the province was hit particularly hard when commodity markets collapsed in late 1929. Simon Fraser Tolmie's government slashed spending on public works, but work proceeded on the Big Bend road because Victoria had made a commitment to Ottawa that it would complete its share of the project. However, fewer resources were put into the western section than originally planned.

By early 1931, British Columbia's unemployment rate hovered around 28 per cent, compelling the provincial government to provide relief employment on public works projects. The construction camps on the western half of the Big Bend project were converted into relief work camps, which further slowed progress on the road. The efficient construction techniques used by

professional road building crews were rejected in the relief camps because they would reduce the total amount of work available; shovel brigades and horse-drawn scrapers became more common than caterpillar tractors and steam shovels. It is no surprise that the relief work camps made slow progress, for they were intended as much to prevent unemployed men from congregating in urban centres as they were to complete important infrastructure projects.<sup>5</sup>

British Columbia was effectively bankrupt by the summer of 1932 and unable to meet its public works commitments. Emergency federal funding helped keep the Big Bend relief work camps open until the Department of National Defence took control of relief camps nationwide the following year. This meant Ottawa was paying for construction of the entire Big Bend road project, with the National Parks Branch overseeing work on the eastern section and the Canadian Army on the western.<sup>6</sup> It was during the summer of 1932, when British Columbia was in its direst financial straits, that the National Parks Branch approached the provincial government about having forest scenery protected along the Big Bend road.

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J. M. Wardle was responsible for overseeing the Parks Branch's major construction projects in western Canada. In August 1932 he asked Tolmie's government to establish a quarter-mile-wide reserve along thirty kilometres of the surveyed right-of-way on the eastern section of the Big Bend road.<sup>7</sup> The tall ancient firs and cedars found between Kinbasket Lake and Boat Encampment were thought to be worth preserving as an attraction (or distraction) for motorists who one day would be driving through an unpopulated wilderness for many hours. As John Sandlos shows in his essay, encouraging auto tourism was one of the federal government's key priorities for the national parks in the interwar years. Wardle said nothing about a national park in the Columbia River valley, but provincial politicians may have interpreted his request for a scenic roadside timber reserve as an overture to a proposal for a new park. This is because the situation with the Big Bend road closely echoed their experience with Kootenay National Park a decade before, when Ottawa had agreed to complete B.C.'s section of the Banff-Windermere Highway project in exchange for three hundred and twenty thousand acres (twelve

hundred square kilometres) of Crown land on which to establish a new national park.<sup>8</sup> Thus the idea of swapping park land for road development in the mountains of eastern B.C. was quite familiar to provincial leaders.

British Columbia's deputy minister of lands replied that the province was not opposed in principle to the preservation of tall, scenic timber along the Big Bend road but that implementation of such a reserve would be difficult.<sup>9</sup> Over the years many timber licences had been issued in the Big Bend country, including in the desired strip between Kinbasket Lake and Boat Encampment. No cutting had actually been done due to the area's inaccessibility, but logging companies and timber brokers held onto these licences as speculative investments. This made it impossible to say when the timber rights might revert to the province.

There the issue was left until early 1934, when Minister of the Interior Thomas G. Murphy wrote directly to T. D. "Duff" Pattullo, the new premier of British Columbia, to draw his personal attention to the National Parks Branch's desire for a roadside timber reserve.<sup>10</sup> "[T]his department is naturally interested in the scenic attractions of the Big Bend Highway," Murphy explained. He argued that the ancient forest that the Big Bend road would traverse between Kinbasket Lake and Boat Encampment deserved to be protected from unsightly resource exploitation because it was "the only stretch of virgin timber of fairly large size along the whole route of the Trans-Canada Highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific." Murphy urged Pattullo to act on the National Parks Branch's request and predicted a "storm of protest from the general public" if logging was allowed to mar roadside scenery along this section of the Big Bend Highway.

Pattullo agreed that a scenic timber reserve was a good idea. However, while it was fine for the National Parks Branch to desire unspoiled forest scenery along the new highway, the premier felt it was unfair to expect the impoverished province to bear the cost of acquiring it. He suggested that if the federal government truly believed the preservation of tall timber along the Big Bend Highway was a matter of national importance, then it should arrange to buy up all the valid timber licences in the area.<sup>11</sup> Pattullo had been B.C.'s minister of lands between 1919 and 1926, when the Banff-Windermere Highway agreement was negotiated and the land base for Kootenay National Park transferred to the federal government. By dragging his feet on the scenic timber reserve and coaxing the federal government to make



FIG. 2. NEW GRADE AND BIG TIMBER AT BOULDER CREEK, BIG BEND HIGHWAY. [SOURCE: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PARKS CANADA COLLECTION/e010836790.]

further expenditures along the Big Bend road corridor, he may have hoped to manoeuvre it into proposing a new national park in the area.

Pattullo's reluctance to preserve the scenic roadside timber must have struck Thomas Murphy as rather ungrateful, given that Ottawa had been paying for all the work on the Big Bend road since 1933. Murphy reminded Pattullo that the Department of the Interior had agreed to participate in the project in 1929 on the basis that it was meant "primarily to increase the revenue from tourist traffic." It was therefore "of first importance that the scenic advantages of the road be duly capitalized."<sup>12</sup> If there were no scenic attractions to make driving between Golden and Revelstoke a pleasurable experience, then further federal involvement in the project would be called into question. If Murphy expected his veiled threat – to quit work on the Big Bend project – would convince Pattullo to protect the scenic timber desired by the Parks Branch, he must have been taken aback by the response he received. "The time has come," Pattullo's minister of public works asserted in November 1934, "when the Canadian National Parks [Branch] can advantageously assume the whole of the Columbia-Revelstoke Highway, *together with a strip of land ¼ mile wide on either side of the road which will be available for park purposes* [emphasis added]." The province took the position that the completed Big Bend road would form "an integral part of the National Parks System connecting [Mount] Revelstoke Park ... with the Rocky Mountain and Yoho parks to the east." Thus it was only logical that Ottawa should establish a national park or parkway along the road and assume permanent responsibility for its maintenance. Once Ottawa agreed to B.C.'s proposal for a new national park along the Big Bend road corridor, legislation would be passed along the lines of the 1919 bill that had transferred provincial Crown land to the federal government for the creation of Kootenay National Park.<sup>13</sup> Such an arrangement would permanently relieve British Columbia of the cost of maintaining almost all of the roads between Revelstoke and the B.C.–Alberta boundary. The province had little to lose by this proposal, for the forests of the rugged Big Bend country were of little value to timber companies in the days before long-haul truck logging.

For Thomas Murphy and the National Parks Branch, B.C.'s offer of land for a national park along the Big Bend road appears to have come out of the blue. No official reply was made to the province's proposal, but Pattullo was informed through political back channels that Ottawa was not interested

in a new park if it meant being responsible for maintenance of the road.<sup>14</sup> This left the terms of the completion of the road project up in the air. As the Department of National Defence began preparing to return responsibility for relief work camps to the provinces, British Columbia pleaded for the National Parks Branch to take over the camps on the western section of the Big Bend. In the months before the 1935 construction season, Murphy delivered an ultimatum to Pattullo. The eastern section of the road between Golden and Boat Encampment was nearly finished, and, once it was, the federal government would be under no obligation to do further work on the project. Murphy was willing to have the National Parks Branch take over construction of the western section, but only after the two governments had reached a satisfactory agreement. He set out three key conditions. First, the province had to agree to maintain the completed road. Second, it had to “conserve in perpetuity” the desired strip of tall roadside timber between Kinbasket Lake and Boat Encampment. Third, Murphy wanted an agreement that “should the Dominion at some time in the future apply for Mount Assiniboine Park area, Mount Robson Park area, [...] or an area west of Waterton Lakes Park for an extension of [the] National Parks system, the Province will transfer same free of all encumbrance.” The nationalization of Mount Robson and Mount Assiniboine provincial parks had been under discussion for several years, and Murphy no doubt saw the province’s urgent desire to have the Big Bend road completed as a means of acquiring them – but not a new park in the Big Bend country itself – on favourable terms. Murphy concluded his ultimatum to Pattullo with a warning that “it is necessary that definite arrangements be made immediately.”<sup>15</sup>

Pattullo agreed to maintain the completed highway and to preserve the strip of scenic roadside timber desired by the National Parks Branch. However, he equivocated on the question of turning over provincial parks and other land for national parks. His government would be “glad to cooperate” on this matter, but further discussion would be needed regarding the developments the federal government would undertake in exchange.<sup>16</sup> This was enough to satisfy Murphy, and he assigned the National Parks Branch the task of completing the western section of the Big Bend road. Discussions about parks and scenery along the Big Bend Highway disappear from Pattullo’s correspondence with Ottawa after the Conservatives lost the October 1935 federal election and T.A. Crerar replaced Murphy as minister

responsible for national parks. However, this was not the end of the idea of a national park in the Big Bend country.

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When the Big Bend Highway finally opened to the motoring public in June 1940, the provincial government made it the centrepiece of an elaborate publicity campaign to lure American tourists northwards. The road was described in brochures and magazine advertisements as “a splendid new highway extending for 200 miles through a scenic wonderland,” providing motorists with “a thrilling travelogue of mountain peaks, glaciers, and entrancing views of the mighty Columbia River.”<sup>17</sup> However, doubts quickly emerged about how splendid and thrilling the new highway really was. Driving around the Big Bend was a test of endurance, taking between five and seven hours. The gravel-surfaced road was narrow and twisting, and incredibly dusty in hot, dry weather. The dust made driving unpleasant and sometimes hazardous, and coated the roadside foliage, turning the immediate scenery drab and lifeless.<sup>18</sup> Promotional materials neglected to mention there was no food, gas, or lodging available in the “virgin territory” between Golden and Revelstoke.<sup>19</sup> A month after the highway opened, Revelstoke’s board of trade reported that “not a day goes by that we do not have two or three accidents” but pinned the blame on Prairie drivers unaccustomed to mountain roads.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, heavy winter snowfall meant the road was only open to traffic between May and October.

Soon first-hand reports began to demonstrate why the highway might fail to become popular with drivers. “I have just been over that stretch of road,” one motorist wrote to Premier Pattullo, “and have been told that you have had the consummate nerve to spend money advertising the Big Bend road in American newspapers and magazines. You should be ashamed of yourself!”<sup>21</sup> Austin Cross, travel writer for the *Ottawa Citizen*, savaged the new road in an article on the nascent Trans-Canada Highway. “It is positively the loneliest road in North America,” he complained, with “not a town, not a village, not a hamlet, not two houses together, not a suggestion of civilization.” The road itself was “villainous,” “built by people whose minds must be back in the 1920s.” Even the tall timber along the highway failed to impress Cross, for there were few open vistas, and the dense, seemingly

endless forest crowded claustrophobically close to the roadway. In terms of scenery, Cross concluded, “the much-touted Big Bend Highway could play second fiddle to many another British Columbia turnpike.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the early bad publicity for the Big Bend Highway – or perhaps because of it – Pattullo decided to take another shot at convincing Ottawa to assume responsibility for its maintenance and improvement. In an election campaign speech in Revelstoke in August 1941, he promised to press the federal government to pay the estimated \$1 million cost of paving the road, because making it faster, safer, and more comfortable would help draw American tourists and bring in hard currency that was vitally important to Canada’s war effort.<sup>23</sup> Pattullo recognized that the establishment of a national park in the Big Bend country remained the easiest way to get the federal government involved in the highway’s upkeep, but convincing Ottawa to create such a park remained a tricky problem. While the province’s 1934 proposal for a half-mile-wide park along the road corridor had been firmly rebuffed, Thomas Murphy’s 1935 conditions for the National Parks Branch to complete the Big Bend road project had indicated a lingering interest in absorbing Mount Robson and Mount Assiniboine provincial parks into the national parks system. Previous discussions of this idea had foundered over disagreements about natural resources and a suggestion that the two parks were too small to become national parks in and of themselves. This could be read as implying that a larger area would be more acceptable. Thus one way to get the federal government involved in improving and maintaining the Big Bend Highway was to establish a very large new provincial park that would be made available for transfer to the national parks system.

The creation of provincial parks remained a cavalier process in British Columbia during the early 1940s, and Pattullo had the executive authority to establish a new park that might prove tempting to Ottawa. Abruptly and with little consultation, Pattullo issued an Order-in-Council on 16 September 1941, that created an enormous new park called Hamber.<sup>24</sup> Named after a former lieutenant-governor, Hamber Provincial Park was nearly 2.4 million acres (9,700 square kilometres) in size and consisted of archetypal British Columbia wilderness: mountainous, glaciated, heavily forested, cleft by icy watercourses, and almost completely uninhabited; large areas of the park had never been surveyed or accurately mapped. Hamber’s boundaries encompassed the eastern slope of the Selkirks and the western slope of the



FIG. 3. GOLDEN REVELSTOKE HIGHWAY, BASE STA 240 + 100 LOOKING WEST, BIG BEND HIGHWAY, AUGUST 1939. [SOURCE: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, PARKS CANADA COLLECTION/EO10836789.]



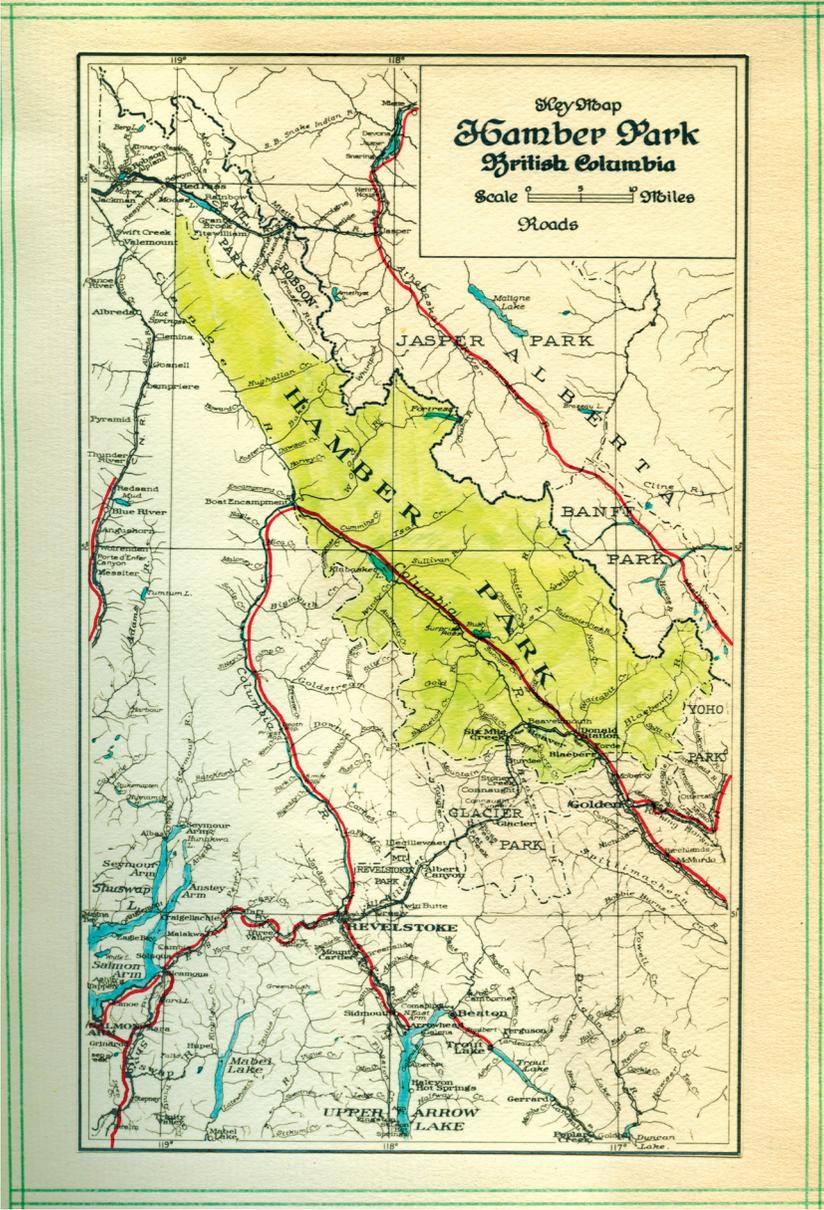


FIG. 4. HAMBER PROVINCIAL PARK. FROM THE PAMPHLET "HAMBER PARK, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA," 1942. [COURTESY OF THE BRITISH COLUMBIA MINISTRY OF FORESTS AND RANGE.]

Rockies, from the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the south to the Yellowhead Pass and the Canadian National Railway's main line in the north. The park's boundaries took in the eastern section of the Big Bend Highway, and had been carefully designed so that it would act as a kind of land bridge: Hamber bordered against Mount Robson Provincial Park in the north, Jasper and Banff national parks on the east, and Glacier and Yoho national parks in the south. Pattullo must have felt certain that this magnanimous and rather spontaneous gesture would finally convince Ottawa to take over British Columbia's provincial parks in the Rockies, for an unbroken chain of national parks covering both slopes of the Rockies from Mount Robson in the north to Radium Hot Springs in the south was bound to be a great tourist draw, even in wartime. Underlying it all was the expectation that if the federal government did agree to take over Hamber Park, it would be obliged to maintain and improve at least half of the Big Bend Highway, and to undertake other possible infrastructure developments.<sup>25</sup>

But this bold scheme quickly fell apart, for the federal government showed no interest in taking over Hamber or any other of B.C.'s provincial parks. The war effort was the main preoccupation for Canadian governments in 1941; moreover, the Mackenzie King administration had previously informed British Columbia of its desire to have national parks spread all around the country rather than concentrated in the mountainous west.<sup>26</sup> But probably the most important factor in Hamber's failure as a gambit towards a new national park was a lack of opportunity to discuss the subject. Pattullo was abruptly pushed out of the premiership by members of his own party on 3 December 1941, just weeks after he had won his third term as premier and less than three months after Hamber had been established. It is unclear whether a tentative proposal for Hamber to be incorporated into the national parks system had been made by then, but losing the man who had been the architect of the scheme to have a new national park in the Big Bend country would have scuttled any plans that had been discussed. Four days after Pattullo was forced out, Japan attacked the American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor. In September, when America had not been involved in the war, it might have seemed reasonable to gamble that the federal government would look favourably on the establishment of an enormous new national park along the route of the emergent Trans-Canada Highway. However, once the United States had been drawn into the war, American motorists' pleasure

travel was sure to be curtailed, and thus the immediate rationale for establishing Hamber Park was lost.<sup>27</sup>

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Four years later, as the end of the war neared, British Columbia found itself stuck with an enormous provincial park of questionable utility. Loggers and sawmill operators in Golden and Revelstoke complained that Hamber would stifle the region's postwar forest industry, prompting members of B.C.'s coalition government to ask difficult questions about the new park. In an attempt to salvage something from the situation, the Parks Branch of the B.C. Forest Service was dispatched to investigate possible developments in Hamber Park in the summer of 1945. The reconnaissance report was profoundly unenthusiastic about Hamber's value as a park, despite the fact that no attempt had been made to explore beyond the immediate right-of-way of the Big Bend Highway. In fact, dissatisfaction with the road was a key factor in the provincial Parks Branch's initial reluctance to retain the park. The Big Bend Highway was described as "well-built from a constructional point of view, but poorly located from the aesthetic point of view. In general, it is above and beyond view of the river and often separated by a narrow fringe of timber. There are many cases where a better location would have been possible so as to improve the view and break the monotony of the drive." Trees and underbrush crowded right up to the verges of the road, producing an uneasy sense of confinement. According to the B.C. Parks Branch, driving the Big Bend Highway had "a tendency to being monotonous, due primarily to the lack of cleared look-out points." Most of the interesting sights along its route were obscured by intervening forest; the Columbia River was hidden from view for long stretches, and motorists got only a few fleeting glimpses of glaciers and mountain peaks. The open vistas along the shores of icy Kinbasket Lake were deemed the only section of the drive that had high scenic value. The B.C. Parks Branch considered the Big Bend Highway a failure as a scenic drive, and Hamber's inadequacy as a park was an extension of this.<sup>28</sup>

In its reconnaissance report, the B.C. Parks Branch recommended that Hamber be cancelled and replaced by a handful of small roadside viewpoints and campgrounds. However, because some kind of mechanism for the management of land use was needed along the route of the Trans Canada Highway,

Hamber was instead downgraded from a class A to a class B provincial park.<sup>29</sup> This gave the provincial Parks Branch the power to permit mining and logging activity within Hamber's boundaries, for, whereas conservation principles were increasingly being incorporated into the management of the national parks, British Columbia was careful to avoid permanently locking up land and resources in its provincial parks.<sup>30</sup>

Hamber's story following its designation as a class B provincial park is one of neglect and drawn-out decline. The B.C. Parks Branch did nothing to develop, publicize, or indicate the existence of the park. No roadside signs were erected to inform motorists that they were traversing one of the largest parks in Canada when driving between Boat Encampment and the outskirts of Golden. No public campgrounds were developed along the highway, no scenic pullouts were cleared, no trails were developed, and no brochures or pamphlets were published. Tourist bureaus were dissuaded from mentioning Hamber Park in promotional material about the Trans-Canada Highway.<sup>31</sup> Even when effectively ignored by the B.C. Parks Branch, some staff still believed that Hamber represented "a needless burden to the provincial park system." They advocated a liberal approach to allowing logging within Hamber's boundaries, on the basis that it had been "set aside for a reason only remotely related to its recreational values" and "should not be a park to start with." Eventually it was decided that logging operations would be permitted anywhere inside the park, provided they were "not obvious from the highway." In 1950, Forest Service headquarters bypassed its own Parks Branch and began to sell timber licences inside Hamber Park just as they would anywhere else in the province. By the mid-1950s, provincial park planners were musing that Hamber should be deleted except for the area around Kinbasket Lake, deemed the "the scenic high point" of the Big Bend Highway.<sup>32</sup>

In the mid-1950s a consortium of municipal power companies from the American Pacific Northwest approached the B.C. government with a proposal to build a series of dams on the Columbia River, including a large impoundment dam one hundred and fifty kilometres north of Revelstoke at Mica Creek. This proposal fell through, but a dam at Mica was later incorporated into the international negotiations that led to the Columbia River Treaty.<sup>33</sup> The dam's reservoir was projected to inundate hundreds of square kilometres of the Columbia and Canoe river valleys, destroying Boat Encampment, Kinbasket Lake, and the eastern half of the Big Bend Highway. The

proposed destruction of the Big Bend section of the Trans-Canada Highway was the most problematic aspect of this scheme until 1956, when the provincial and federal governments agreed to share the cost of replacing it with a modern, paved, all-season highway through the Selkirks via the Rogers Pass and Glacier National Park – the same route that Ottawa had rejected in the late 1920s. No one was likely to miss the lonely, roundabout Big Bend road, for Canadian motorists' perceptions of what constituted a proper highway had changed during the postwar years, and narrow, dusty, gravel-surfaced roads that were closed to traffic half the year were no longer considered up to date.<sup>34</sup> The *Vancouver Sun* welcomed the demise of the unpopular Big Bend Highway, which it called “the weak link” in an otherwise safe and scenic drive between Vancouver and Banff, “just a road through the trees and plainly boring.”<sup>35</sup>

By the late 1950s work was underway on the new highway through the Rogers Pass, and the future construction of the Mica Dam was all but assured. In anticipation of the Big Bend country being flooded out, the province threw Hamber Park wide open to logging, even in scenic areas that were visible from the highway. Portable sawmills were set up inside the park, and in February 1959 the reserve over the tall, ancient roadside timber between Kinbasket Lake and Boat Encampment – which in 1935 Pattullo had assured Murphy would be conserved in perpetuity – was cancelled so that the timber could be made available for logging. As completion of the new highway through the Rogers Pass approached, the impending relegation of the Big Bend Highway to the status of a back road removed the last reason for maintaining the charade that Hamber Provincial Park had become. In late 1960 B.C. Parks Branch staff were circulating confidential memos about how to proceed with its cancellation.<sup>36</sup>

In the briefing document that recommended Hamber's deletion to the minister responsible for provincial parks, the director of the Parks Branch was at a loss to explain why it had been created in the first place. “There is no report, even a general analysis, on the park potential of the area which would outline the purpose of its dedication,” he complained. Scrutiny of the files revealed only that Hamber had been established in a vague hope that the federal government could be induced to take it and Mount Robson over as national parks. “This,” he concluded, “would seem to be a questionable basis for establishing a major park.” Nothing was remembered about

the province's 1934 proposal for a national park along the Big Bend road, or about Hamber's complicated relationship with the completed highway. In the spring of 1961 almost the entire park was deleted, with only a sixty thousand acre (240 square kilometre) rump retained around Fortress Lake, isolated high in the Rockies and accessible only by floatplane. Hamber's evisceration drew nary a whimper from the public, for few realized it had ever been there.<sup>37</sup>

Construction of the Mica Dam began in the mid-1960s. When the dam became operational in 1973, it gradually inundated hundreds of square kilometres of the Columbia and Canoe river valleys that had formerly been located within the boundaries of Hamber Park. The province had tried to clear huge amounts of timber from the reservoir area, but extensive forested areas ended up being submerged. The Kinbasket Reservoir, as it is known today, took three years to fill to capacity, destroying in slow motion the remnants of the old Big Bend Highway, the small roadside service centres that had been developed at Boat Encampment and Kinbasket Lake, and the habitat of grizzly bears, mountain caribou, and Columbia River sturgeon.

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If few people were aware of Hamber Park's existence between 1941 and 1961, even fewer have heard of it today. Its story – like those of most failed, deleted, and unrealized parks – has escaped the attention of Canadian historians and parks supporters.<sup>38</sup> On the rare occasion Hamber is mentioned, the focus is on its unfortunate history after 1945, with its origins in the intertwined politics of roads and national parks going overlooked.<sup>39</sup> Yet Hamber's deletion in 1961 takes on a new significance in light of the fact that the provincial government had created the park in the hope of giving it away: Hamber had been a gambit, meant to convince the federal government to incorporate it and B.C.'s other provincial parks in the Rockies into the national parks system. In retrospect this may seem “a questionable basis” for establishing such an enormous park, but it made perfect sense in the context of the province's sustained campaign to get Ottawa to build, improve, and maintain automobile roads in the rugged terrain of the Selkirk and Rocky mountains. After Pattullo's 1934 proposal for a linear national park along the Big Bend road had failed and the highway had been completed (albeit to a not very

high standard), British Columbia could only hope to tempt the federal government into such a scheme by offering up a much larger block of park land.

In addition to shedding light on some of the political, economic, and aesthetic criteria that have shaped proposals for new national parks, the intertwined histories of roads and parks in B.C.'s Big Bend country invite speculation about how things might have turned out differently. For example, how might a park in the Big Bend country have fit into the larger national parks system? Could it have proven popular with North American tourists, who were fast becoming accustomed to open vistas, modern roads, and a growing number of roadside services in their national parks? How might a national park along the Columbia have affected plans to dam the river at Mica Creek? How would a large park on the western slope of the Rockies have affected the ecological integrity of the mountain parks as a block? These kinds of questions show how examining failed park proposals can encourage us to think differently about the present-day park system. Failed parks' stories remind us that there was nothing natural or inevitable about decisions to accept or reject areas for national parks. What happened in the Big Bend country is particularly noteworthy because of the great size of Humber Provincial Park and the fact that the forests drowned beneath the surface of the Kinbasket Reservoir are located so close to the 'crown jewels' of Canada's national parks system. However, many other never-realized national parks need to have their histories told so that we can have a fuller understanding of the threshold between success and failure.

## NOTES

- 1 Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935–1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
- 2 R.G. Harvey, *Carving the Western Path: By River, Rail, and Road through BC's Southern Mountains* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 1998), 86.
- 3 R.G. Harvey suggests that political pressure from the Canadian Pacific Railway was behind the federal government's reluctance to build an automobile road through the Rogers Pass. *Carving the Western Path*, 89–91.
- 4 Charles Stewart, Minister of the Interior telegram to Nelson Lougheed, Minister of Public Works, 4 October 1929, cited in Harvey, *Carving the Western Path*, 87–89.
- 5 See University of British Columbia Special Collections, Simon Fraser Tolmie papers, box 8, file 19, Minister of Public Works R.W. Bruhn to Premier Tolmie, 17 June 1931. The cynicism that 'make work' projects engendered amongst Canadian relief camp workers is touched on in James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914–1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 133–34; and John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada, 1922–1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), 268–69. Also see Bill Waiser, *Park Prisoners: The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks, 1915–1946* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1995), chaps. 2–3.
- 6 See Thomas William Tanner, "Microcosms of Misfortune: Canada's Unemployment Relief Camps Administered by the Department of National Defence, 1932–1936." MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1965; Lorne Alvin Brown, "The Bennett Government, Political Stability, and the Politics of the Unemployment Relief Camps, 1930–1935." PhD dissertation, Queen's University, 1983.
- 7 British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), GR-1222 Premier's Papers, box 97, file 2, J.M. Wardle, Chief Engineer to H. Cathcart, Deputy Minister of Lands, 31 August 1932, cited in Cathcart to Wardle, 10 April 1933. Also see box 15, file 7, Cathcart to Pattullo, 4 June 1935.
- 8 On the Banff-Windermere Highway and the origins of Kootenay National Park, see John Sandlos's chapter in this book and W.F. Lothian, *A History of Canada's National Parks*, vol. 1 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1976), 58–60.
- 9 BCA, GR-1222, box 97, file 2, [H. Cathcart] Deputy Minister [of Lands] to Wardle, 10 April 1933. The province only responded to Wardle's request after the B.C. Forest Service reported that the feasibility of profitable logging in the desired area was uncertain. British Columbia Ministry of Forests Library, W.A. Johnston, "Big Bend, Columbia River Reconnaissance" (Victoria, 1932).
- 10 BCA, GR-1222, box 97, file 2, Thomas G. Murphy to Pattullo, 26 January 1934 and 9 June 1934.
- 11 BCA, GR-1222, box 97, file 2, Pattullo to Murphy, 15 February 1934, forwarding A. Wells Gray, Minister of Lands, memo for Pattullo, 13 Feb 1934.

- 12 BCA, GR-1222, box 97, file 2, Murphy to Pattullo, 8 September 1934.
- 13 BCA, GR-1222, box 15, file 7, [Frank M.] MacPherson [Minister of Public Works] to Murphy, 10 November 1934, attached to Department of Public Works to Pattullo, 30 May 1935.
- 14 BCA, GR-1222, box 15, file 7, E.A. Boyle, Secretary, Big Bend Highway Committee to Pattullo, 27 April 1935; W.A. Gordon, City Clerk, City of Revelstoke to MacPherson, 11 May 1935.
- 15 BCA, GR-1222, box 15, file 7, Murphy, telegram to Pattullo, 28 May 1935; Pattullo to Murphy, 30 May 1935; Murphy telegram to Pattullo, 1 June 1935.
- 16 BCA, GR-1222, box 15, file 7, Pattullo telegram to Murphy, 4 June 1935. Also see Murphy to Pattullo, 19 June 1935; Pattullo to Murphy, 10 July 1935. Due to the need to acquire the remaining valid timber licenses, the tall roadside timber between Kinbasket Lake and Boat Encampment was not formally put under the protection of a provincial Crown reserve until April 1936.
- 17 University of British Columbia Special Collections, British Columbia Government Travel Bureau, *Advertising Campaign for Promotion of Tourist Travel, 1940* (Victoria, 1940). On the strategic importance of encouraging American tourists to visit B.C. during the early war years, see Michael Dawson, *Selling British Columbia: Tourism and Consumer Culture, 1890–1970* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), chap. 4.
- 18 Driving conditions on the Big Bend Highway are recalled in Bob Metcalfe, “Goodbye to the Big Bend,” *Imperial Oil Review* 46, no. 4 (August 1962): 16–19; Donovan Clemson, “Goodbye to the Big Bend,” *BC Motorist* 9, no. 1 (January–February 1970): 4; and Tom Parkin, “Disappearing Highway,” *British Columbia Historical News* 28, no. 4 (1995): 31.
- 19 In May 1940 the B.C. Ministry of Lands had identified Kinbasket Lake, Downie Creek, and Boat Encampment as locations along the Big Bend Highway that were suitable for gas stations and other roadside services. However, it was several years before any such operation opened. BCA, GR-1222, box 34, file 5, Minister of Lands, memo to Pattullo, 30 May 1940.
- 20 BCA, GR-1222, box 34, file 5, Revelstoke Board of Trade to Pattullo, 21 July 1940.
- 21 BCA, GR-1222, box 34, file 5, W.B. Hill to Pattullo, 31 August 1941. Stories about unsafe and un-scenic conditions along the Big Bend road can also be found in the pages of the *Revelstoke Review* throughout the summer and fall of 1941.
- 22 Austin Cross, “The Big Bend Highway,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 December 1942.
- 23 *Revelstoke Review*, 7 August 1941. Also see Dawson, *Selling British Columbia*, 120–26.
- 24 Hamber Park was created by an Order-in-Council (#1305) because the Legislature had been dissolved in preparation for an October election. The fact that Pattullo waited until after the dissolution of the Legislature to create such an important provincial park suggests that he may have been involved in backroom negotiations with the federal government regarding

- its possible incorporation into the national parks system.
- 25 An automobile road through the Yellowhead Pass is one development that the province may have expected in exchange for Hamber and Mount Robson parks. It had also been suggested that a road from Boat Encampment to the Yellowhead Pass via the Canoe River valley might form a leaping off point for a future road to Alaska, which was one of Pattullo's pet projects. "Big Bend Road Looms Large in Alaska Highway Plan," *Revelstoke Review*, 27 April 1939; Robin Fisher, "T.D. Pattullo and the British Columbia to Alaska Highway," in *The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium*, ed. Ken Coates, 9–24 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985).
  - 26 In 1938 T.A. Crerar informed the provincial Minister of Lands that funds were unlikely to be found for more national parks in B.C. due to the federal government's focus on establishing parks in the east. BCA, GR-1991 Parks and Outdoor Recreation, reel 1754, Crerar to A. Wells Gray, 25 August 1938, cited in H. Cathcart, Deputy Minister of Lands memo to Premier John Hart, 1 December 1944. Also see C.J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada's National Historic Parks and Sites* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 109–11; MacEachern, *Natural Selections*, 45, 52–53.
  - 27 Dawson, *Selling British Columbia*, 120–26. When Pattullo visited Revelstoke in August 1941, he had been approached with complaints about the need to make the Big Bend Highway more attractive to auto tourists. *Revelstoke Review*, 7 August 1941.
  - 28 British Columbia Ministry of Forests Library, C.P. Lyons and D.M. Trew, "Reconnaissance of Hamber Park and Big Bend Highway" (Victoria: B.C. Forest Service, Forest Economics Division, Parks Section, 1945), 13, 11.
  - 29 *Ibid.*, 6; BCA, GR-1991, reel 1754, Percy [illegible] to [Premier] John Hart, 19 March 1945; Thomas King, MLA (Golden) to E.T. Kenney, Minister of Lands, 6 April 1945.
  - 30 On B.C.'s classification system for its provincial parks in the postwar years, see Jeremy Wilson, *Talk and Log: Wilderness Politics in British Columbia, 1961–1996* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 93–98.
  - 31 For example, see BCA, GR-1991, reel 1754, E.G. Oldham to Ontario Government Department of Travel and Publicity, 17 May 1950.
  - 32 BCA, GR-1991, reel 1754, C.P. Lyons memo to F.S. McKinnon, 15 July 1946; D.M. Trew to E.G. Oldham, 25 May 1949; G.A. Wood, report, 1954. The oral agreement whereby the Forest Service bypassed the Parks Branch regarding timber sales in Hamber is described in Minister of Lands and Forests to Earle C. Westwood, Minister of Recreation and Conservation, 3 February 1961.
  - 33 Neil Swainson, *Conflict Over the Columbia: The Canadian Background to an Historic Treaty* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press for the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1979), 54–56.
  - 34 See David W. Monaghan, *Canada's 'New Main Street': The Trans-Canada Highway as Idea and Reality, 1912–1956* (Ottawa: Canadian Science and Technology Museum, 2002), 23–24.

- On the enthusiastic reception that the opening of the highway through the Rogers Pass received from the motoring public, see Daniel Francis, *A Road for Canada: An Illustrated History of the Trans-Canada Highway* (Vancouver: Stanton, Atkins, and Dosil, 2006), 1–5.
- 35 “Reporter Finds Vancouver-Banff Highway Good and Getting Better,” *Vancouver Sun*, 22 July 1959.
- 36 BCA, GR-1991, reel 1754, R.H. Ahrens, Reconnaissance Section [Parks Branch] to Forester-in-Charge, Parks and Recreation Division, 14 November 1956; H.G. McWilliams, Director, Provincial Parks Branch to C.T.W. Hyslop, Superintendent of Lands, 6 January 1959; E.W. Bassett, Deputy Minister of Lands, “Notice of Cancellation and Establishment of Reserve” pursuant to Order in Council #213, 6 February 1959; Director, Provincial Parks Branch to W.H. Hepper, 30 September 1960.
- 37 BCA, GR-1991, reel 1754, H.G. McWilliams, Director, Provincial Parks Branch to D.B. Turner, Deputy Minister, Department of Recreation and Conservation, 25 April 1961.
- 38 An important exception to this is Jennifer Brower’s history of Buffalo National Park, which was located in eastern Alberta prior to being deleted and turned into present-day Canadian Forces Base Wainwright. Brower, *Lost Tracks: Buffalo National Park, 1909–1939* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2008).
- 39 See, for example, Wilson, *Talk and Log*, 95; Robert William Sandford, *Ecology and Wonder in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2010), 201–2.