



Jasper-Yellowhead
Museum & Archives

OUR JASPER STORIES

Columbia Icefield



Surrounded by some of the highest peaks in the Rockies, the Columbia Icefield is a relatively new discovery. Several European explorers came close to discovering the Icefield's existence in their quest to scale these large peaks. In 1896, Walter Wilcox travelled through what is now known as Wilcox Pass, but failed to notice the Icefield. It was not until two years later when Norman Collie and Hermann Woolley climbed Mount Athabasca in August of 1898, that the first Europeans laid eyes on the Columbia Icefield. The Columbia Icefield sits on the triple continental divide between British Columbia and Alberta which feeds approximately thirty glaciers, including the Athabasca Glacier, and its waters drain into three oceans, the Arctic, Pacific and Atlantic. Filled with approximately 30,000 crevasses, some of which have a depth of 40 meters, the Athabasca Glacier is the largest in Canada. It spans 5.3km, just over a KM wide, and has a maximum depth of 304 meters. In the 1850s this icefield was 1,520 meters longer than it is today. It is no wonder that it has held such a fascination for explorers, cartographers, and scientists since its discovery.

In 1924 Jack Brewster realized that there was a growing demand from visitors to see this large icefield and began leading 3 week treks through the Bow, Mistaya, Alexandra, and Castleguard rivers to the Castleguard meadows. This was the only guided tour of the area until 1928 when Jack's brother Pat started the Brewster Mountain Pack Trains which would run excursions that lasted twenty days, with time for hiking and exploring the icefield and surrounding areas. The Icefield became even more accessible when, in 1931, survey and cutting crews began to create a road, what was then known as the "Wonder Trail" between Banff and Jasper. There were over six hundred men that worked on this road as part of the unemployment relief program, which ran through the

duration of the depression. The construction of this road began with two teams of men. One team started in Banff, the other in Jasper and they used shovels, picks, crowbars, three tractors, and fifty teams of horses to break through the rough terrain. The road was finally completed in 1940 and was christened the Banff-Jasper Highway. The opening of this highway allowed more tourists to come and see the Columbia Icefield for themselves. It was also during this year that Jack Brewster opened a chalet at the Icefield, where visitors could rest and eat after a day of exploration on the Athabasca glacier. While many people came to the icefield for entertainment purposes, it was also used for more practical reasons such as scientific study and military training. During WWII allied soldiers used the Columbia Icefields to test their snow vehicles and to train. By the 1950s, cars had become more accessible, and therefore, more people were able to travel down the Banff-Jasper Highway. In 1952, Bill Ruddy and Tom McCready were the first to offer snowmobile tours on the glacier. In 1961, the Highway was redeveloped to meet the demand of vehicles and renamed it Icefields Parkway. In 1969, Brewster took over the snowmobile tours bringing tour groups to the Columbia Icefield in their luxurious buses.

As the popularity of the Columbia Icefields grew, Parks Canada decided to open a more comprehensive interpretive Centre in 1973 and committed to clearing hiking trails and hiring more staff to keep up with the influx of visitors. By 1989, the Icefields Parkway had close to one million users each year.

In 1996, Glacier View Lodge and the Columbia Icefield Centre (later renamed the Discovery Centre in

2014) opened; this facility was a cooperative venture between Pursuit (formerly Brewster Travel Canada) and Parks Canada and is a model of environmentally sensitive design. This chalet-style stone building, with its spectacular views of surrounding mountains and glaciers, was created to serve half a million visitors every year. The newly-renovated facility features the world-famous Ice Explorer tours on the Athabasca Glacier, Glacier View Lodge, restaurants, gift shop and Parks Canada's Glacier Gallery Interpretive Centre.

Today, more than 1.2 million people pass by the Columbia Icefield each year and on a good summer day, approximately 3,000 visitors will take Pursuit's Ice Explorer tours (Columbia Icefield Adventure) up the Athabasca Glacier's tongue. The creation of the Icefields Parkway and the Brewster's commitment to guiding people from all over the world has made the Columbia Icefield one of the most accessible in North America, as well as the most photographed. Although the Athabasca Glacier is receding its popularity and the fascination it holds for tourists around the world continues to grow.

Article researched and written by Museum Volunteer Christine Debrabandere



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