

Chasing Mary Tour - 2018

“ The section of country which had so long been our dream lies in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Range, directly north of that portion which is penetrated by the Canadian Pacific Railway. It is bounded by latitudes 51deg30’ and 52deg30’ ; and longitudes 116deg to 118deg. Our chief aim was to penetrate to the head waters of the Saskatchewan and Athabaska rivers. To be quite truthful, it was but an aim, an excuse, for our real object was to delve into the heart of an untouched land, to tread where no human foot had trod before, to turn the unthumbed pages of an unread book and to learn daily those secrets which dear Mother Nature is so willing to tell to those who seek.”

Wow.

If you read enough mountain literature, you come across gems like the quote given above, by Mary Schaeffer, in 1907, before she set out on the first of two extraordinary journeys taken over two years, culminating in her being the first white party to lay eyes on Jasper’s amazing Maligne Lake. And keeping in this historical bent, our group of merry voyageurs have always aligned ourselves with the following quote from Thorington:

“We were not pioneers ourselves, but we journeyed over old trails that were new to us, and with hearts open. Who shall distinguish?”

This year, we were inspired by a couple of pioneering women who blazed through some pretty rugged country, with their guide and cook, and we wanted to re-trace parts of their journey from the North Saskatchewan, to the north end of Maligne Lake. The complete journey isn’t really feasible anymore, since large sections of it constitute the Icefields Parkway- but we picked out a route that looked challenging, and scenic, and like our gal Mary, had us gazing at that azure jewel of water, in the heart of Jasper National Park, at the end. Much of this trail constitutes the Great Divide Trail (GDT), and includes the section with the highest elevation of anywhere on its entire route.

An unexpected turn of events had me residing in Ontario in the months prior to this trip, but I was determined to join this journey come hell or high water. I could not participate much in its planning, just an affirmation of my desire to go: “ Just tell me where trailhead is, and when, and I’ll be there.” Well, they did, and I was, and this is our story.

Day One – Owen Creek to Michelle Lakes

Our starting group of five were coming to start this hike from all different directions- Derek and Mark wanting two days to tackle the 3500' vertical elevation gain on this first day, were already halfway up the trail. Dan and I left Calgary very early in the morning, on one of the smokiest, greyest days imaginable, entered the mountains of Banff looking very much like Mordor, and got to the Owen Creek trailhead at around 9:30, where I got to meet the "rookie" of the group, Geoff. Now, all of us had seen the long-range forecast, and we all knew what we were getting into- a forecast that did not look promising. Still, the eternal optimist in all of us could imagine the skies clearing, and us enjoying a sunny, but colder-than-normal trip. We started off in a dull drizzle, and after passing a deep chasm where Owen Creek rushes through a narrow canyon, broke out into a wider valley, which we followed for the next hour or so. The drizzle turned into rain, and soon all of us were literally dripping water. The path bolted up precariously, with us rock-hopping on boulders right next to the torrent of the creek, and then got uglier, going steeply up a muddy track, hanging onto trees and bushes for traction. It was a nasty section of trail that got us wheezing for air, gave us our first sore shoulders of the trip, and had us wondering just who "Owen" was, and maybe they lent his name to this creek, and trail, because he was a complete idiot.



Finally, when the steepness ended, we lost the trail in a mixture of braided streams and alders – this was our first forewarning of the nature of most of the Great Divide Trail, outside of the park. It's a fickle trail- sometimes it's generously flagged, but then it will abandon you for the next dozen kilometres. We persevered, slogged away at the slope, and soon the vegetation started to thin out, and we walked up into the clouds. This was not totally a bad thing- the rain stopped, turned more into a mist- and as we trended up, the fog thinned, until finally- finally! - we reached the high point of this first day. I was exhausted, and my pack was well into its daily routine of torturing my shoulder muscles. The rain had let up and we were actually drying off in the cold breeze, but we could see the second wave of rain

headed for us, and it caught us on the descent to the lake. In a few minutes, we were down at lake level, and soon spotted our buddies' tents, bolted down on a grassy knoll a few dozen feet above the level of the lake.



Wouldn't you know it, my leg cramped on me just on those last few hundred feet to camp, and I managed to hobble in just when a wicked blast of snow and sleet battered us as we set up our tents. Thankfully it didn't last- it took us probably an hour to stop shivering, get into dry, warm clothes, and get down to the water's edge, where Derek and Mark had a tarp set up, and were enjoying the last of their supper, and the beauty of this rugged high valley. Everything seems better when you have had your soup and your supper, and the weather levelled off and we got to catch up with our respective adventures since trailhead. Now, we also had one more conundrum to decide upon, and that was - where to stash our food for the night? Normally, when you are above treeline, the most common solution is to head for the nearest rock slope, and bury it in rocks - but the terrain didn't really have that feature nearby. We gambled on no bears coming into our valley, just piled all the food on top of a boulder by the shoreline (quite a ways from our tents) and won the gamble. We dropped into an exhausted stupor for the night, hoping that our bodies got the rest needed, to begin the assault tomorrow.



Day 2 - Michelle Lakes to Pinto Lake

I remember that I didn't sleep well. But I woke up to a bright morning, gassed up on coffee and porridge, and packed up a dry tent. A big friendly marmot came over, sat on a rock just metres away while we packed up, then ambled away to start his day. We hustled around the lake and started off on our second big day in a row. The rain stayed away and the clouds lifted a bit, as we kicked up to Williams Pass – the highest point on the GDT.



It didn't seem so bad – footing was firm on the rocks, and we didn't have to deal with wet underbrush. Now, I gotta tell you here, this is where I wish I did a bit more homework on where we were headed today – on the map, I thought we were in for an easier day. The topo lines on my map didn't look like steep terrain. But peering over the other side of the pass, we had to lose quite a bit of elevation, and there looked to be about three different routes ahead, in which to surmount the intervening massif that stood in the way, before we could descend to Pinto Lake. From our lofty elevation, there was a faint trail to follow, but it soon petered out to nothing, and we were soon 'schwackin' around again, looking for the trail. This GDT trail ain't a thing of beauty. It's a little rough around the edges. It's like having a girlfriend that's a little seedy- you just don't know what she's gonna do next. Dan's GPS came out, and to our relief, the one pass that looked like the one we needed to take (and looked steep!) was not the correct one - the trail should be farther to hiker's right. After bashing around through some thick brush trying to angle up to it, Dan and Mark realized that we should be down in the valley, by the stream - so down we went again, not wanting to lose more elevation, but really wanting to find that trail. Finally – success! Big large cairns marked the way along the stream, and at the allotted spot- the trail, cutting diagonally up and over the massif. More grunting and straining under our loads, upwards through the thinning trees, until we again found ourselves above treeline, in open alpine, following cairns, approaching false summit after false summit, until finally, the truthful summit appeared! Just in time. My exhaustion level was on red alert.



One thing that struck me this day, for which I am very grateful for - the visibility stayed good, and the rain stayed away. This stretch of the trip could have been extremely ugly if you couldn't navigate by eyesight. We enjoyed a well-deserved break at the top, but we still had over 2500 vertical feet to descend still over the next 10 kilometres to Pinto Lake. We found the trail on the descent (thanks darlin' - bartender, another whiskey for the lady) and had one more rest stop where we picked up a stream, and filled up our bottles. The next 6 kilometres - till we got to our camp at Pinto - was a super steep descent into and through the trees, that gave me stumblebum and a death stare. All of us were very happy to see the camp that night. And guess how it greeted us? - with rain. Thankfully not a lot of it, but once tents and tarps were up, (I actually put my tarp up too! - first and only time on the trip. I'm not good at putting up tarps!) we got a fire going with ample firewood nearby, and tucked into our whiskey bottles (Dan and Geoff still had beer to drink!) while getting supper ready. It's now Day 2, and I am starting to get to know the Rookie better. Geoff is really only a rookie to our long-distance hikes, being an accomplished walker in his own right- he's a tall rangy drink of water, two of my strides equal one of his own, and he likes beer. Basically, he's a drinker with a hiking problem. He offered me one of his goose sausages, and damn was it ever tasty. He's OK by me. This is our first "social" of the trip, we were so

bagged on the first night, no firewood, and damp, cold bodies meant an early evening – and now we’re catching up with each other over the past year’s adventures, and team-bonding. We’re on the shores of a beautiful historic lake, one that Mary herself kept camp in, and the warmer air makes us want to stay up a little longer past dusk. No food hang here, so all of us has thrown a rope over a tree (lots of leaning trees here, makes for an easy throw), food is up in the air, and soon we stumble into our tents with a nice little 40-proof glow on.



Day 3 - Pinto Lake – Upper Cataract Valley

“The distance from the Saskatchewan River to Pinto Lake, via Cataract Creek is about 25 miles; it has been a favourite highway for centuries, as the well-worn trails show, and the fine fishing at the lake still brings a small band of Stoneys there year by year.”

By the sounds of it, Mary would have stayed here another couple of nights, if she wasn’t in such a hurry to get to the Big Lake.

With the tarp over my head, I got fooled this morning, it was darker than normal, yet it was past 7 am already- somewhat of a late start, but instead of sitting there meditating over my second coffee, I sipped on it while taking the tarp down, and still got out of camp at 9 am.



Got a bit of dog love from a pooch at the next campsite over from ours, then started down the Cline River, with our goal being to find, then ascend, Cataract Creek. Again, weirdness from GDT trail folks - yesterday, while coming down towards Pinto Lake, they blazed the crap out of the trail, and today, blazes are nowhere to be found. But between all our maps we brought, we know to stick to the shores of the Cline, and that meant fording it three times in the next few kilometres - something we hadn't banked on.



I gotta tell you, though, that even though you waste around 10 - 15 minutes per ford - by the time you futz about, seeing if you might be able to jump it, come to the conclusion you can't, then get your boots off, wade, and dry off on the other side - I find that my feet feel INCREDIBLE when I start walking again- the cold water just revives them. The fourth ford was of Cataract Creek, we found the trail on the right-hand side, and started our 20-km long ascent towards Cataract Pass. We were soon introduced to a sort of cross-fit hiking - mixed with gymnastics- as there was a lot of deadfall strewn over the trail. It's been many moons since a chainsaw made the rounds up here.



And, somewhere along this trail, while doing such contortions, the rain started again, and this time it did not let up. Out came the raingear again (for some of us, it's been out the entire time, like wearing Gore-tex anoraks) and on and on we marched, on this gentle but very long approach up the valley. I have been up here before- probably 25 years ago - and I gave my descriptions to the boys what it looked like then: hummocky, uneven ground, but soft, and lots of water nearby. But it was also sunny and warm then As supertime approached, and cold rainwater dripped off us, Dan and Geoff were out front, and looking for the first good camp spot to settle in. Then another hour passed then another we started to run out of trees. I couldn't figure out what was worse on this trail- we'd go through stretches of alders, which meant you didn't have to endure the contortions of stepping over fallen trees, but you got very soaked by wading through them. The thought of a campfire was disappearing. When we found something resembling a few level spots, no water was nearby. The GDT trail info mentioned a campsite in the upper valley, but it's either not true, or we missed it somehow. Finally, with the clouds low and swirling around us, we looked down from our dwindling little trail a couple dozen meters to the creek valley, and saw what might be flatter ground- it was on an island of sorts where the creek flowed on both sides of it. It has since been given the name Shit Island by us. It was still hummocky as hell, cold, drizzly, and we were almost in the clouds. I found a spongy spot with absolutely no shelter from the elements, and jammed my tent up, crawled in, and attempted to get warm (getting dry at this time was not an option). Incredibly, the Tarp-Masters Derek and Mark managed to get their tarp up, and sat under it, getting their supper ready! - After about another hour, when the drizzle let up somewhat, the rest of us got out, forced supper down our throats, and crawled back in our tents. For the second time on this trip, a bear-hang wasn't going to happen with trees around us no more than a dozen feet high, so I stashed my food by wedging it in between two tree trunks growing close together, and Dan stashed his on top of mine. I wore the clothing that I needed to get dry, to bed that night, and after shivering for the first hour or two, started to warm up. Not much for conversation this night. It was the worst night of the trip.



Day 4 - Upper Cataract Valley – Boulder Creek Camp

“Cataract Pass will always remain a hideous nightmare to me.”

Although I've cut this quote down so that it is just slightly out of context, we started off this day being on the same page as Mary

The last thing I heard last night before passing out, was Dan telling me “ bundle up, Jimmy, the sky's clearing up, it's gonna be cold tonight” haha, this is starting to become a recurring theme, this optimism of ours - we awoke again to a gloomy morn, with rather dramatic low-lying clouds swirling around us. But no rain. It didn't get as cold as I thought it might, I was warm enough, wearing a couple of layers to offset the rather wimpy three-season rating (minus -2) of my bag. While packing up, I noticed that we missed the snow line by less than 200', to give you an idea of the frostiness of the situation. I heard a rumour that Mark was considering pulling the plug on this trip – no way!! - I didn't believe it. We hatched a plan to sacrifice Geoff to the Sun God, since he was the rookie, and we never had this kind of weather before. But no blood was shed, and soon we all bashed our way back up the hill to the trail, and assumed following this increasingly meagre thread higher upward.



It kept wanting to go through these incredibly dense thickets of spruce, and within minutes, we were soaked again from the underbrush. We also started slowly to realize (GPS's don't lie, brother) that we were angling away from our pass. Of course! - this trail was leading us to Cline Pass, which is only a kilometre or so away from Cataract Pass. We corrected our course, and soon found ourselves following the now-hoppable Cataract Creek. The rains stayed away, replaced by a cold wind picking up the higher we got. But this wind also dried us off. I took a stretch hiking out front, and was enchanted by the beauty of this high valley just before the greenery ended, and we got to the rocks. Dan soon leapfrogged me, and the serious gruntwork began. Views opened up. The cloud ceiling lifted, and patches of blue appeared. This pass had its share of false summits, too, but finally I came over a rise, and saw Dan stationary in the distance - the top! When I got there, I saw a panorama in front of me that was breathtaking, and it took me a couple of minutes to figure out why I was so

impressed. Then it hit me- the sky was so BLUE !! No smoke !! We could see for miles and miles. The cold wind was a blessing in disguise – it blew from the north, and the BC forest fire smoke was not happening in the north. There was also a cairn, and a sign, that told us that we had finished our leg of this trip in the White Goat Wilderness area, and we now entered Jasper National Park.



There were commemorative pins in a box at the sign, and Dan and I scooped up the last two in it. Our rest stop at the top was significantly more cheerful and animated (not that we are ever not cheerful!) and we were drinking in a whole new vista, from our height – we were now pretty much due east of the Columbia Icefields.



Life was good again! - and as we descended down the other side of the pass, towards Nigel Creek, the sun came out on our next break!



You who have not experienced this, might not know, or savour, the feeling of your damp body feeling the temperature rise ten degrees or more, just by sunlight flooding your being. Stuff got spread out all over the rocks, and the snack break got a little longer- hell, it's a shorter day today, anyway. We descended down to the first of a few levels of the valley – it was quite flat, the stream (originating from the Cirrus Glacier) meandering placidly, almost prairie-like, until tumbling down to the next flat section- and wandered through a jumble of intertwined pink and grey rock- very striking visually. The trail got more defined again, and was so much more scenic, being above the trees and in the alpine. Before long, we were back on the Nigel Pass trail, the same one we were on three years ago, doing the last leg of the South Boundary Trail. We crossed over Nigel Pass, but this is hardly worth mentioning, as it is a small elevation gain to the top – we did all the hard work getting over Cataract. And, mere minutes after the descent down the other side, into the upper Brazeau valley, we got to our campsite for the day - Boulder Creek Camp.



I think it was only 2:30 when we arrived!! - what, no EPIC today?? I know we all felt the same way about this- some time to relax, everyone had wet stuff hanging off bushes in the still-with-us sunshine, time to tramp back in the forest for some firewood for the evening, time to just sit still, let the sun warm your face, and sip on whiskey while the soup's on. And what a civilized campground! - I've got a flat tent-pad, there's TWO picnic tables (built by the famous chainsaw wizards, the Flying Trail Crew circa 1994), the locker-style bear bins, and a fire ring too. We stayed up just a bit later tonight, with a clearer sky above, bugs down (fact: up until now I've not used any sunscreen or bug dope) and whiskey to make the conversation more eloquent. Derek and Mark are generous with their tasty sausage and cheese aperitifs, more goose sausage from Geoff, and Dan always offers some of his Mac and Cheese because he makes a pail-full of it – I have to decline, otherwise I won't get my

own meal finished. Mark confides to me that yes, he WAS close to pulling the plug earlier today, when all his clothes were wet - but those thoughts seem miles away now that we are dry and fed. The last words spoken before we crawl into our tents? “ Zip up tight there, buddy, she’s gonna be a cold one tonight “ two hours later, I hear rain on my tent again.

Day 5 - Boulder Creek Camp – Jonas Cutoff Camp

“That one night on the far side of Jonas Pass finished the region for everyone of our party. The poor horses, weary with the long drag of nine miles up the pass and five down on the other side, with nothing but heather on which to make a meal, were in forlorn condition. As for us, anchored on a stone pile and held there by the same, we were in momentary fear of being uprooted and blown back up the pass by the high wind which had now become a hurricane. The smoke, from the very small fire which we dared have in that blast, swept into our tent and eyes, so that by 7:30, after a supper which tasted like chilled candle grease, I crept to bed with painfully sore eyes and wished I was back on the Brazeau.”

I think this might be the one day, in which we had a better go of it than Mary did

Woke up to the same grey skies as per normal, and the rain last night meant packing up the tent fly wet again. Today is going to be a long day, but to my way of thinking, most of our trail should be easy to moderate uphill walking. But it’s Day 5 now, and what is foremost on my mind? – something I have not done yet, but certain senses tell me I should? - today is BATH day. And, getting out of camp at the usual hour, I did not have to walk far to find the bathtub! It came after about a kilometre or so, in Four Point Creek, I spied a nice little deep eddy of the stream, and steeling myself for the shock of it all, stripped down and jumped in. On a cold, cloudy day, it takes more resolve to carry through with it – but once submerged, and dunked, and the obligatory yelping out of the way, and you now emerge from the frigid water to the now-refreshing warmer air temperature, it feels so frickin’ GOOD. I probably aired out in my ginch for at least 10 minutes, before getting dressed, and this feeling stuck with me for the next couple of hours.





We made the Jonas Pass trail junction at 3 kms, and it immediately went up rather seriously, gaining a bench, before reaching the height of the lower valley, and then the gradual up got under way. All in all, it was rather pleasant walking – some low alder cover, but this time they were DRY, so I didn't get wet from them. Soon we left the trees behind, and we were to be above treeline for the next 13 kilometres! Geoff and I got into a serious rhythm of speed-hiking (must be the bath!) and we strode furiously until we made the pass, in what seemed like record time.



We thought we saw a bear, off in the distance toward Jonas Shoulder – I thought it was, it seemed to move - but nothing came of it, there was certainly evidence of bear up there (lots of scat, looked fresh) but they disappear in the minor folds of the terrain, and don't reappear, so onwards we march. Now, this is where my scant knowledge of where we are going on this trip, comes back to bite me on the backside - I could have sworn the map showed the campground to be on THIS side of Jonas Shoulder. As well, I have been this way once before, in the early nineties, on a ski trip – and we camped on this side of the shoulder, so it seemed natural that we would camp here again. Uh-uh. Our campground is on the OTHER side of the shoulder, and we have one more serious grunt in front of us, before our tents go up. And, this last grunt got the better of me, too, for even though I thought I was doing OK - did the whole slope without stopping, in low gear - my right knee

was giving me grief just before I got to the top. For those of you who don't know, I have been wearing a full-on knee brace on my left knee now, for the last 2 or 3 of these big hikes - so on the descent down the other side, my bad knee became my good knee! - thank God for my poles, they helped a lot, and I lagged considerably behind the group for the last couple of kms before hobbling into Jonas Cutoff Camp at 5:30. It's not far below treeline on the Poboktan side of the shoulder - we have now entered the Poboktan valley! - and sheltered from the wind as well. This campsite is also well-appointed, with bear lockers, picnic tables, even a 3-person throne! and for the first time since Day 2, we are sharing the campsite with others. It's a busy little place. The weather has been consistent all day - cloudy and grey, but dry - and it stays that way till about dusk, when the rains come again. Something else comes again right around dusk, eh boys? - the Asian hobo campers. A bit of an inside joke - last night, at Boulder Creek, this father and son duo came limping into camp, and saw that all the tent sites were full. Seems they knew this before they came, but they booked the next farthest campsite, knowing they couldn't make it, and hoped to "mooch" a site. They are here tonight, hoping for the same. Bad form, boys, bad form. But they found a flat spot, pretty much under the bear hang (!!) so they managed to panhandle a spot. I retired early tonight, knowing that I needed to wrap up my knee - I've been packing a tensor bandage for years, finally it gets some use! - and combined with Tiger Balm, I feel better about my chances of recovery for tomorrow. I doze off, getting high on the camphor fumes.



Day 6 - Jonas Cutoff Camp - Poboktan Camp

"With tents in order, all went off in as many different directions as possible. The feminine contingent came back first, reporting "fine scenery but no pass as far as they could see." "K." appeared next; "he had been to the end of the valley from where the last creek emerged, but that was a matter of impossibility for horses." Then Chief arrived with the cheerful intelligence that "we could still advance; a good trail led down the hill and was probably the real Pobokton trail."

Not sure where Mary was, but pretty sure we were on Chief's trail

Just another grey rainy morning again! - it's more like a heavy mist that is falling. Pretty much all the nights have been around the same temperatures, not as cold as you might think because of the cloud cover- no frost. Today is going to be the shortest day yet, only 11 kms or so, and better yet, we gain an extra backcountry brother today - our most excellent buddy Ryan is going to meet us at Poboktan Camp. All of us are already picturing the group walking into camp, with Ryan already having a blazing fire going, and offering us a beer that he has promised us he is packing in! We're laughing, and the blaze is roaring, and we're throwing back a nice cold IPA while snacking on salty treats! But back to reality. It's raining, we're all slickered up, and I am listening closely to my knee. I don't like what I hear, initially, it's bugging me. An hour or two passes, we're just hiking in the trees, easy walking, and we come up to Waterfall Warden's Cabin. A nice break is had here by all, as we open up the shuttered window and peer in to another rustic, tidy hut, with pot-belly stove and a cozy bunk bed. Some of us express our opinion (again) that people would pay a really good buck to stay at any of these cabins, and hang out and read books, but no way the wardens are gonna allow that to happen - let gorbies invade their space. This is about halfway to the camp tonight, and we push on. Just minutes later, we pass Waterfall campground, and a classic view of the Poboktan Waterfalls.



My knee is actually feeling better now, after that long rest. About another hour passes, and just about the time when the rain stops, and it clears a bit, we arrive at Poboktan Camp- Ryan has made it! The fire has not materialized yet, but the beer is in the stream, chilling, it's great to see him, we soon blast off into the woods to collect wood for the fire (and you got to go quite a ways here to get good wood, we're only about a dozen kms from the road, so this campsite has been picked over) and once we get some coals going, life is good again!! Derek is hanging his wet socks off his belt by the fire, and we rib him about it, tell him it looks goofy - an hour later, Dan and Geoff are imitating it. It works! Geoff gets more of his goose sausage out - you wouldn't believe how many he brought, the guy's pack must have weighed 80 lbs!! But they taste delectable roasted on a stick. We take pics of us

drinking mountain size beers. It drizzles again for a while, but Mark and Derek, those reliable souls, have the tarp up. We yak it up, my whiskey takes a sizeable hit this evening. More standing deadfall gets hauled in - Geoff's saw breaks while Ryan is using it. We give him the gears about this, and everyone takes turns trying to find a way to fix it. Supper gets devoured, and we carry on like this till well past dusk. The drizzle comes and goes, it doesn't get better but it doesn't get worse. Boots that have been baking by the fire, are much drier, if not perfect. We're ready for tomorrow, and I go to bed that evening, still not knowing what I should do. It's my little personal hell for the night. But I am leaning toward turning right at the junction tomorrow



Day 7 – Poboktan Camp – Mary Vaux Camp

“For the next two hours the trail led us down a fire-swept valley where the chopping was incessant and heavy. Once more reaching the bed of the stream we again found old tepee poles and a division of the way, one pointing to the Sun Wapta, the other leading into a notch in the hills with a northern trend. The stream from it really did seem as if it might be the one for which we were looking, and the opening in the hills the last possible one before reaching the end of the valley of the Sun Wapta, which we had occasionally seen to the northwest of us. The trail here was very steep and rough and, with the thought that we might be coming back over it next day,

very hard to keep on following. About halfway up the hill, down came the snow, and everyone said “Yes!” to the suggestion of stopping at the next suitable place.”

This “division of the way” is our junction today for Maligne Pass, and Mary is bang on with her description of this opening of the hills as the last possible one – we are entering a valley with the Endless Chain Ridge on our west, and the Queen Elizabeth Range on our east. Lead the way, Mary.

Today is the day that we go over the last of the mountain passes on this trip - Maligne Pass. We burned up so many kilometres in the first 4 days of this trip – over half the distance – the last few days are comparatively easy. This will be the longest of the four days left. Packed up a wet tent fly for the umpteenth time, and got on the trail first today. Didn't stop until I got to the trail junction for Maligne Pass - to the right. The knee has felt good now for over a day, I suspect that I just overused it, and it was barkin' at me. And besides, I've invested so much sweat equity into this journey, I just don't want to bail on it. Yeah, the weather sucks, but I'm USED to it now. I wait until Mark and Derek show up, let them know my decision, and carry on up the trail. First stop is Avalanche Camp, a small little campground along the way that makes for a nice rest stop. We all convene here, the grey ceiling drops a little further on us, a few drops make their first appearance of the day. Ryan and Dan and Geoff are old friends from school, so some of their kibbitzing is pretty funny – Geoff the Rookie still harps on Dan “ geez all this time I thought “ROOT-finding was kinda easy” ... Not long after, we get overtaken by three young Israeli hikers – just out of Army duty, we found out. These guys have been hiking the GDT since Waterton Park! In my eight years of these long-distance hikes, this is the first time that it felt like WE were the pussies. Maligne Pass is reached, and there is a small lake at its summit - the source of the mighty Maligne River, which flows all the way to the Athabaska. We can add one more river to our list of significant bodies of water, that we have been to the source of. One more thing about this trail, that factored in to my decision-making as to whether I should continue or not: it's de-commissioned, it's like being out of the park again, they do not maintain the trail. As we start descending down the other side, towards our rendezvous with its mighty namesake lake, we start doing more trail gymnastics, lots of deadfall over the trail.





It doesn't seem all that long before we amble into Mary Vaux Camp – by this time the rain has started up, so everything is wet in camp. Again. This will be our camp for two nights – tomorrow is our designated rest day. So, we all get our tent spots picked (kinda slim pickings here, not many level spots) , the tarp goes up over the picnic table (good ole FTC design) , and while we still have our boots, gaiters and rain pants on, we blast out into the woods and start hauling back firewood. The saw is still in working order, and we buck up some small-diameter trunks , and soon we have a great little fire going, with hot coals, and it is drying out boots and souls (soles?) My whiskey supply is seriously depleted, it is going to run out at this camp. Guys who have brought a surplus of food, start spreading it out on the table, and offer it up. Geoff has some quality gourmet cheese up for grabs, as well as some salami – we wrap the cheese inside the salami and roast it in the fire, this does not last long! We take a second run at procuring firewood, and by dusk that evening, our site resembles a small pulp mill yard. It's bloody cold out, and you feel it when you stray away from the fire. The bear hang is very close by, just a dozen feet from our campfire, but none of us are nervous about bears here, although you know that this is prime bear country, there hasn't been any fresh bear scat on the trail , and there are six of us. The fire is hot, we coax it up so that singes the hair on our faces, and we dry out what we can. A last burst of rain, right at darkness, gets me scurrying for the tent. It's a great feeling to know that there is nothing- nothing at all – that is pressing, to get me out of bed tomorrow.

Day 8 – Rest Day at Mary Vaux Camp

“At four o'clock the men returned; had found a good trail, crossed a pass, could see miles ahead, but no lake of any description could be seen. The decision was to push ahead; we always had the privilege of turning back, and the best of summer was still before us. This new pass- Maligne Pass- was a duplication of all other passes, soft and spongy; our aneroid showed the altitude at 7,200 feet. Long patches of snow made the travelling very heavy, but the pass was a short one, and , with the saddle horses ahead breaking the way, we were not long in getting over.”

We feel their frustration in not seeing the Lake – I was hoping for a stunning panorama from Maligne Pass, but intervening ridges deny us this privilege

At some point in the night, some of that rain turned to snow, and we woke up with a bit of white on the ground. I did not find out about this until around 9 am, myself, as I had no problem to stay snuggled in the warmth of my bag “till all hours of the morning” haha. Now, on other trips that we’ve had, the extra day means a day of relaxation, or maybe to go off, with light pack or no pack, on a side trip of interest. However, on this trip, we weren’t motivated to do anything special, due to weather and/or the strenuous nature of this tour – with the exception of Ryan. He hasn’t had the rigours of the journey like the rest of us have, so he disappears back toward Maligne Pass for a few hours to explore, and get a little higher up, for a look-see. The rest of us are content to get our exercise pursuing that strangely satisfying act of getting more firewood.



There is an unspoken challenge of seeing who can impress the clan the most, by bringing back a large, dry chunk of wood. Most of the day was dry, and the fire was an all-day event. Pretty much all of us now have dry boots, as we have had ample chance to let the fire do its thing. However, it soon becomes apparent that this crap weather has taken a toll - there’s a revolution afoot. Dan puts it forth to the boys – “C’mon, I propose that we blow past tomorrow night’s camp at Schaeffer, and put in a long day to get out of here.” Now, I know that he has an ulterior motive- this weekend, all of Dan’s Edmonton buddies (which would include Ryan and Geoff’s too) are hanging out in Jasper, at the Whistler Campground, there’s a party to be had!! It’s around 28 kms to the car from here. I really can’t blame them for wanting to split, but with my knee not at 100%, I am not going to push it like that- and thankfully, neither does Derek and Mark. So , it worked out perfectly - the Edmonton chapter of the backcountry brothers make out like jackrabbits tomorrow, and the Calgary chapter (we’ll include Banff in this) takes an extra day of the outdoor assault. The night

passes much like the previous one, we are down to one last supper, and all our food – which previously was packed in multiple bags- is now down to one measly half-bag. After 8 days, we are now lean, mean hiking machines too. We crawl into our bags and await the morn.



Day 9 - Mary Vaux Camp to Schaeffer Camp

“In spite of the hot night, Chief made a rousing fire as a beacon for the climber, and all sat listening for the first crackle in the bushes. Not till 10:30 did it come, then he staggered out of the black forest in the flaring light, looking thoroughly tired out. He said he had “kept hopping” the entire seven hours and though tired and hungry, greeted us with the joyful news, “I’ve found the lake!” Ascending the ridge behind our camp, he dropped 2,000 feet to another valley, then climbed a fine peak where the aneroid said 8,750 feet. Reaching the top, he looked over and there lay the lake below. The quest was over, all doubts were at rest, so there was no turning back, we could go on.”

With the wonders of modern mapping and technology, we are spared the seven-hour scramble. We are close.... so close ...

The morning dawned dark – even over the past nine days, you can see the light disappearing from the sky, I can barely read my clock at 7 am. But wait, there’s something weird about the tent- it’s sagging in spots. I smack the top of the fly, and the tension is relieved by the swooshing of snow sliding off. Yes, we’re eating breakfast in a world of white! For the Edmonton boys, this is just the motivation needed to crank up and put the pedal to the metal for the trailhead, and completion. We get one last group shot (actually the ONLY group shot) and off they go. I am happy to see them go, for selfish reasons- they are going to be first down the trail, and they’ll be sweeping the alders of all the moisture! Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that easily, and even after just half an hour on the trail, being in the lead, I am soaked on the front. We don’t have that far to go today, only 9 kms, and other than trekking through a lot of alders that line the Maligne River, pushing through some that are as high as your head, there is not a lot of steep hiking today, uphill or downhill. Maybe it’s the weather- but the upper Maligne river valley is a rather non-descript area, it

probably looks better in warm sunshine, but today we just want to push through. The light drizzle that started the trip with us has let up, and the sky seems to be clearing up- the punchline of our trip again, we've learned to just take it as it comes, and leave the forecasting to others. By around 2 pm, after one of the longer alder thrashes of my career, we slide into Schaeffer Camp- a nice little spot, nestled in some old-growth trees overlooking the alder field and the river.



The snow has disappeared now, a combination of losing altitude, and the warming day, and the sun actually comes out for awhile, and clothing gets hung over nearby bushes like a cheap yard sale. This camp is richer in dry firewood than the last, and we get enough wood to keep us going for the rest of the afternoon and deep into the evening. The last freeze-dried supper is out of my pack, and with the small amount of day-food left, I think I could survive another one, two days max. Our picnic table is just a few feet from the fire, and Mark and Derek and I spend the evening just ruminating on the culmination of our journey tomorrow, and also trying to envision what the real Schaeffer camp looked like, more than a hundred years ago. It was near here, that Sid Unwin ascended a minor peak to find out just where the lake is, as we have not been afforded a glimpse of it yet. We wonder when our first sighting will be tomorrow. When the last of our logs get fed into the flames and devoured, we douse it and crawl into our tents- one more good day of walking, and it's beers and burgers and fries and onion rings!! We're getting food-motivated.



Day 10 - Schaeffer Camp - North end of Maligne Lake (trail's end)

“The sound which woke our slumbers next morning was Chief shouting “All aboard for the lake!” The expressions on all faces were comical. Everyone got off a joke, no matter how stale, everyone being in a particularly happy humour. “K.” Had reported the lake “just around the corner,” a matter of six or seven miles; no one minded the mosquitoes and we “hiked” forth jubilant, still sticking to the river’s right, though we had a line on Sampson’s map telling us to cross to the left. But going was easy, never an axe was used, so why give up a good thing for an uncertainty. In about two hours, after passing through a little very soft ground, we came out on the shores of Chaba Imne (Beaver Lake), but found our position too low to get much idea of its size, though even there it looked quite large enough for all the time and exertion we had spent on it. As we stood upon its shores, we looked across to the other side, wondered what it all held in store for us, then wandered around while the men looked for a good campsite.”

Today is the day. Not sure if we “hiked forth jubilant” but that feeling of completion warms the spirit

Well, this weather we’ve had, is nothing if not consistent - the tent was dry but it rained again in the night, and I am packing up a wet tent again. I am feeling great - the knee issues have disappeared, and my prognosis is - I just “overused” it, nothing seems to be wrong with it now. We get right out onto the alder-choked valley flats again, and put on the kilometres, interspersed with stretches in the woods. The highlight of the day is fording the Maligne River, where the bridge washed out a few years ago. It’s over knee-deep here - the trickiest of all the fords on this trip - but it’s not too fast-flowing, and it turns out to be a nice break spot.





Soon after that, we get onto a maintained trail again - a sign that the end is near! Evidence of a chainsaw at work clearing the trail! Trail signs! ... and lastly, people!! Just in sneakers and daypacks. Cute little females, smelling like soap! Finally, we approach the parking lot, and get to Mark's truck. It's anticlimactic to me, since I was expecting at some time, to break into a clearing and get a sweeping vista of this amazing lake, and its glacier-clad peaks ringing it to the south. But I actually have to leave the parking lot to get a glimpse of this lake, so well protected by its surrounding hills it is.

Mary and her party built a raft, and travelled way down shore for 3 days when they got here. We gave it a cursory glance, and headed to the brew pub in Jasper.

Five of us went 140 kilometres over ten days, ascending six passes along the way. We ascended a total of 16,000 vertical feet, descended a total of 15,500 vertical feet, did more than half the distance in the first four days, got rained on every single day, got snowed on twice, and we doubt that the temperature got into double digits more than three times all trip. We never put on sunscreen and never put on bug dope. We crossed the headwaters of three major Rocky Mountain rivers. An exhausting trek -but what is always remembered, is the adventure of the journey, the cold breeze blowing on the high passes, the wordless sentinels of the cairns, the laughter and tall tales told around the campfire, and the satisfaction of completing a trip.

Well done, boys.

