



A Road Runs Through It

Repairing Glacier's
Going-to-the-Sun Road for
the next generation

by Brian Schott

THE SOUND BEGINS LIKE A DISTANT JET ROAR, approaching us through the thick stand of Douglas fir, a low rumbling growing louder in intensity. I look at my friend Erick. He looks at me.

"Avalanche!" we say in unison. But we don't move.

We are safe, a mile or so from the steep 10,000-foot peak that is unleashing a torrent of snow and rock with the rising temperatures. The sound continues to carry, then rumbles away like thunder. We re-mount our bicycles and continue pushing our wheels down the pavement of the Going-to-the-Sun Road, following the yellow-striped line into the heart of Glacier National Park.

Left: Columbia Falls resident Erick Robbins bikes along the closed-to-cars section of the Sun Road on April 13, 2008 with snow-laden Mount Cannon (8952 ft.) towering in the background.

Opposite: Biking the Going-to-the-Sun Road provides the opportunity to catch the astounding views during summer, fall and spring. In high summer fireweed blooms in the foreground of Red Eagle Mountain, Mahtotopa Mountain and Little Chief Mountain.



Weather forecasts are calling for 70-plus-degree temperatures later in the day, but the morning air is cool, especially in those pockets of forest that trap the cold morning air. I'm partaking in a favorite spring ritual, biking on the historic Sun Road after plows have pushed the deep, lingering snow off the storied pavement, and automobiles are blocked from passage by a simple, brown, metal gate and a sign at Lake McDonald Lodge: "Road Open for Hiking and Biking." The road celebrates its 75th anniversary this year.

Last autumn when I biked the Sun Road from Avalanche Campground to Packer's Roost, it wasn't avalanches, but the roar of semi trucks on the road that repeatedly shattered my reverie. I counted at least a dozen trucks in different shapes and sizes thundering by us that day — but it was difficult to become annoyed by the activity — they were hauling construction supplies for good reason.

After 75 years of use, the national landmark road is undergoing a 10-year rehabilitation, a massive landscape engineering feat, as huge and complicated as the scale of these mountains. The effort involves repairing damaged and deteriorating stonemasonry retaining walls and guardrails

(features that give the road much of its historic character and architectural aesthetic appeal), inadequate drainage systems, crumbling pavement, tunnels, and bridges. There are more than 70 documented avalanche chutes along the road; new engineering allows for guardrails to be removed in the autumn to allow winter avalanches to pass over the road. Great care is being taken to preserve the historic architecture of the road, like sourcing exact Helena Formation rock from local quarries to rebuild retaining walls, while employing modern engineering technology for safety.

Over the three-decade span it took to build the Transmountain Highway, as it was then called, three men died while building this road cut into the side of a cliff, a road that could easily be called one of the most spectacular scenic drives in the nation — or even, according to past Park Superintendent Eivind T. Scoyen at the 1933 dedication ceremony, "the most beautiful piece of mountain road in the world."

Storms, avalanches, rushing water, and pounding traffic have battered the road over time and it is now time to begin to strengthen it, bit by bit, in the sleepier months of spring and fall when the majority of tourists have not yet arrived or

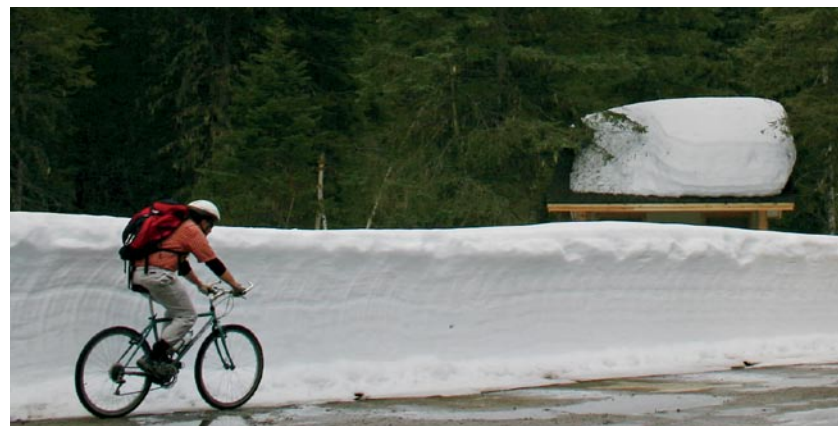


Clockwise from above: Signs warn bikers using the road in the spring of possible avalanche dangers in the higher elevations • Erick Robbins pilots his bike deeper into the plowed areas of the Sun Road • Toronto's Bryen Dunn pilots his road bike along the Sun Road toward the snow-dusted Garden Wall, a mile north of the vehicle closure at Avalanche Campground, September 19, 2007.

have already left. Over 80 percent of visitors to Glacier travel the Sun Road. To allow for construction, visitors are only able to drive as far as Avalanche (on the west) and Jackson Glacier Overlook (on the east) until mid-June and after mid-September. During the peak season, 15- to 30-minute construction delays will be commonplace, but is there a better place in the world to be stopped?

Some might call it an inconvenience. I call it a new opportunity to explore the Park.

Merely driving the road to Logan Pass is an encounter most people will remember for the rest of their lives. The construction of the road forever changed the way visitors



experience Glacier, but its rehabilitation will, in subtle ways, for a short time, change the way we experience the road itself. Beyond bike adventures, a new transit system began running last summer and surpassed ridership expectations, transporting 130,000 people to various locations on the 50-mile stretch.

"The shuttle system was designed and developed to mitigate potential impacts of the rehabilitation, not to replace cars or tours," says Amy Vanderbilt, Communications and Outreach Manager on the Sun Road Project. "It's been hugely successful and has given travelers options to do loop hikes from different start and finish points on the road, while reducing the impacts of traffic while the rehabilitation occurs and during the time that nearly 2 million people visit here."

On the road, with my bike, I feel lucky to be here now enjoying the Park in relative solitude. So far this morning we have seen only one woman, sitting on the rock wall by Sacred Dancing Cascade, reclining with her eyes closed, listening to the music of McDonald Creek as it drops over boulders on its way to the lake.

I comment to Erick that I'm surprised we haven't seen more souls.

"It's Sunday and they're in church — and we're in our church," he says, smiling. And he's right. Of any place in the world, this is the one place where I have felt closest to the presence of some kind of god, something so much bigger than these peaks who have kept their grip on me since my arrival in Montana a dozen years ago.

I could rattle off the statistics about Glacier: the trails, the flora and fauna, the lakes, the vastness of its 1 million acres, the myriad adventures waiting each summer. But I won't. So far this morning I have seen white tail, mule deer, white swans, harlequin ducks, grouse, and what's this? A single

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In the autumn, my mood felt heavier here, spurred by the dying leaves dripping from the golden aspen trees and the coming slumber of the bears. Now, snow is melting, rivers are growing, and bears are waking up. Although if I were an old bruin, I'd hit the hibernation snooze button for a couple more weeks — after a record winter of snowfall, the snow plow crews have their work cut out for them.

Bill Dakin, a Columbia Falls native, is one such former snow plow crew member of Glacier, and served on the Citizens Advisory Committee created to help the National Park Service develop initial rehabilitation construction alternatives including the “Open for Business” choice that was finally selected.

“The C-Word — the possibility of closing the road — caused a lot of people to pay attention,” Dakin tells me a couple of days after my ride. Some of his greatest memories from his time as a Park Road Crew worker from 1976-1988 involve devouring information from old timers who knew what it took to protect the road. And basking in those views.

“Every culvert had a name, every drainage basin, every arch. There were these guys who could give you this incredible historic depth. We soaked it up. You pinch yourself thinking about those beautiful days working in the



high alpine, and forget the days you almost near froze to death.”

I SHIVER AS WE PEDAL DOWN THE ROAD through a cool pocket of air amidst thick stands of larch and cedar, moving quietly on the centerline, stopping for photos in the middle of the road as we break out of the trees to take in views of the massive peaks. Something’s not right though. My brain keeps warning me about traffic.

It’s counterintuitive to stop here on the worn yellow traffic lines. Traffic safety is such an ingrained behavior, it’s hard to shut down that warning system. But when I do, I relax and it’s a freeing, boyish feeling to ride on the double-yellow line, nothing in front of me but the open road.

Six miles in, we pass the Avalanche Campground sign, barely visible in the snow bank. Clouds begin to roll in above the Garden Wall, the sheer cliff face towering before us in the distance with the unmistakable cut of the Sun Road along

Haystack Butte. Looking up at the road from the McDonald Valley, it is almost too much to believe that cars will soon hug that shoulder of mountain.

“Watching the reaction of people driving on the road for the first time is pretty interesting,” says Gale Cooke to me, a couple of days later as I am sipping coffee in Whitefish. “We took some friends from Germany and they were astounded. Everything in Germany has been cultivated and manicured for hundreds of years, and here is this unmaintained, unorderly place — pure wilderness.”

And that is the crux of the original vision. The men who dreamed big enough to believe in a road like this were pushed by the passion to share this stunning scene with as many people as possible. They were smart enough to know that the cars were coming.

Once again I feel lucky that no one else is in sight.

But soon, it’s the end of the road for us. Eight miles in, we glide over ice and snow still clinging to the pavement, tight-



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ening our grip on our handlebars as we navigate the slippery surface. In the distance, we can see people standing against a wall of snow where the dark pavement disappears into white. A father and three of his sons are spinning their bikes around as we approach.

Layne Benson and his children Caleb, Aaron, and Micah stop to say hello. Layne's wife is home in Kalispell with two sick children, but these four are out on their annual Sun Road ride.

"I like the quietness of it," says Layne. "No cars. It's nice. As a general rule, anyone who is using the road is really friendly. The bikers, the walkers — it's nice to see families getting out with the kids."

Layne moved from South Dakota five years earlier "and you just don't have this there. We were out on the prairie. You just have to take advantage of it and enjoy it. This road is such a blessing."

Erick and I spend some time gazing up at the Garden Wall, snapping photos next to the large plow that will rumble to life again on Monday morning. The snow banks are shoulder-high here. Still, no other people are in sight, but it's time to spin our tires around, retrace the roll of our wheels.


The temperatures continue to rise as we glide back along the road, following the flow of McDonald Creek back to the lake. Butterflies begin to appear in greater numbers, white wings flashing in the sun and dodging our advance. Suddenly there are people everywhere. We pass couples towing baby trailers, serious road bikers in spandex, and even a woman rollerblading while pushing a baby jogger. Church is out. And everyone is enjoying this natural cathedral.


We stop to catch our breath below the snowy slopes of Mount Cannon and meet Gregg Brauch. He is standing on the side of the road in bare feet. His ski boots, skis, climbing skins, ski poles and bike are sprawled out on the pavement. He points us to his ski tracks, beautiful arcing lines through a cliff band high on the mountain above us.

He began his adventure at 6:20 a.m. when he left the parking lot at Lake McDonald Lodge, biked six miles or so with his skis on his back, then climbed 2000 feet to the top of the bowl, skiing breakable crust with some powder on top.

I ask him why he was skiing alone. Doesn't he get afraid without a buddy?

"If no one can go and it's a sunny day, I can't pass it up," he says. "If I waited for people every time I wanted to do



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something, I wouldn't get half as much done. In the spring if you get into some kind of an avalanche, you're pretty much done for — you'll be in 200 pieces — that's the way I see it anyway."

I ask him if biking the road is part of his yearly ritual. "I wouldn't even own a bike if it wasn't for this road," he chuckles. "I hate bicycles. They chap my ass, if you know what I mean."

And I do. Already I know that my tail bone will be sore tomorrow from this first ride of the season.

The sun is high overhead as we continue re-tracing the road, stopping again when we hear the rumble of another avalanche. A group of bikers has stopped and is gawking at the show, almost like they are watching a fireworks performance. Every few minutes the rumble begins and waterfalls of snow and rock spill down the high peak in the distance. The sound seems 10 times larger than it should, but the scale of these mountains is so massive that the ton of snow and rock pour-

ing down the face is difficult to put into perspective.

When the snow plows turn on tomorrow, I know more of the road will slowly open, more people will arrive on the march toward summer, more opportunities will emerge to explore the deeper reaches of Glacier as the plow crews pioneer their way toward Logan Pass. They will dodge avalanches as they move to the apex of the Continental Divide from both directions. Road construction crews will arrive and begin their work anew. The work will continue, the park will awaken, the road will move on its way to a rebirth.

But for now, with the avalanche show on the high slopes above us still in progress, we roll on.

*Editor's note: The original dedication of the Sun Road was celebrated July 15, 1933. The 75th anniversary of the Sun Road will be observed at Logan Pass on June 27, 2008. More information about the Sun Road rehabilitation project is available at www.nps.gov/glac or www.GTSRProject.com. **BSJ***



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