



Beautiful Banff

Banff is the crown jewel of Canada's parks system. Too pretty to leave alone, it has been the focus of conflict all through its 125-year history.
by Ken McGoogan

In the mid-1970s, decades before the digital revolution shrank the globe, I taught French for some months in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Twice a week, with my wife Sheena, I would walk several kilometres through stultifying heat to the Canadian Consulate to read wire-service stories from home. The consulate had posters on the walls, among them three beautiful images of the Rockies — Mount Rundle, Lake Louise, and Emerald Lake.

Ridiculous as it sounds, these posters of Banff National Park brought tears to my eyes. It was there, under the hot African sun, about as far away from the snow-capped Rocky Mountains as you can get, that I realized that to me, nothing says "Canada" like Banff.

The park, which is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year, is almost as old as our country. It came into being the same year the last spike was driven on the Canadian Pacific Railway — in fact, much of its early development was prompted by the railway itself. Banff became a national park — the first in Canada and only the third anywhere on the planet — under the prime minister who gave us Confederation. And it came about as a federal government response to an attempted land grab. Can you imagine a more Canadian scenario than that?

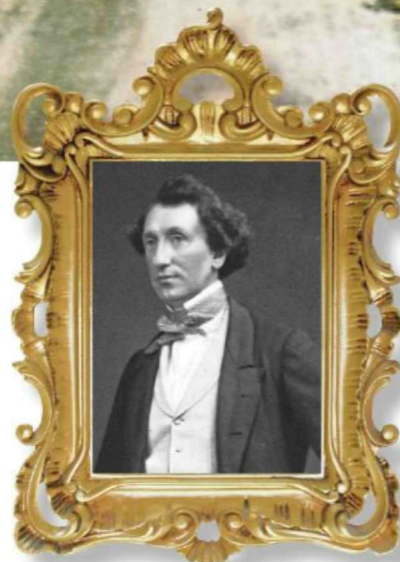
The story of Banff as a park started in November 1883. Three CPR workers chanced upon a cave at the foot of Sulphur Mountain that contained a natural hot spring. Brothers Tom and William McCardell and their partner Frank McCabe weren't the first non-natives to discover what is now called the Cave and Basin Hot Spring — surveyor James Hector mentioned it in 1859. Nor were they the first to see its potential; First

Lake Louise
in Banff
National Park
circa 1925



Above: A car on a gravel road along the shore of Lake Minnewanka in Banff, about 1930.

Right: John A. Macdonald halted an ownership dispute by setting aside Banff as a park.



Nations had always known about the region's hot springs and viewed them as sacred, as places to cure illness and maintain health. The CPR workers, however, were the first to claim ownership. Seeing its money-making potential, they threw up a fence around the cave and constructed a crude cabin nearby to help establish their right to the land. But they had rivals, including a crafty MP from Nova Scotia, D.B. Woodworth, a lawyer who tricked them into signing over their rights. Woodworth then purchased a hotel, with the intention of moving it to the site, paving the way for the area to become a tacky tourist trap.

The ensuing legal wrangle caught the eye of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, who knew a bit about scams. In 1885, he ended this one by setting aside a reserve of sixteen square kilometres around the hot springs. The

Banff Hot Springs Reserve, created by an Order of Council on November 25, 1885, took its name from Banffshire, the Scottish birthplace of two CPR directors. In 1887 the park was expanded to 416 square kilometres and renamed Rocky Mountains Park. Visitors poured in from around the world. It became Banff National Park under the National Parks Act of 1930, and in 1984 it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with nearby Jasper, Yoho, and Kootenay national parks.

Today, Banff encompasses more than 40,000 square kilometres. It is part of a spectacular system of forty-two national parks — every province and territory has at least one.

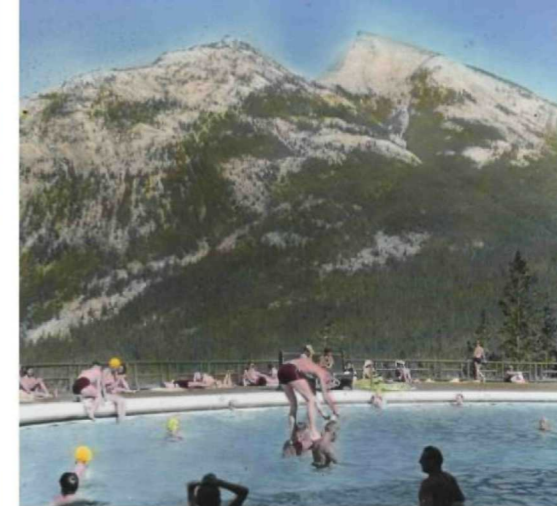
For two decades, before moving to an Ontario metropolis that is as psychologically distant from the Rockies as Dar es Salaam, I lived ninety minutes east of Banff National Park.

Because I worked as a journalist, I inevitably became aware of how Canada's most popular park was in danger of being loved to death.

From the beginning, Banff was popular with wealthy European visitors, who came by rail and stayed at the Banff Springs Hotel, which the CPR opened in 1888. The park remains a top destination for international tourists, as well as Canadians, attracting four to five million visitors each year.

With more people comes more development and more pressure on wildlife. For instance, an increase in vehicle traffic has led to an alarming rise in the number of animals killed in collisions. Parks Canada has been installing wildlife overpasses and underpasses to enable grizzly bears, wolves, moose, elk, and other animals to cross busy highways. These measures have probably reduced highway deaths. Yet an average of seventy large animals continue to die in collisions with vehicles in the park each year.

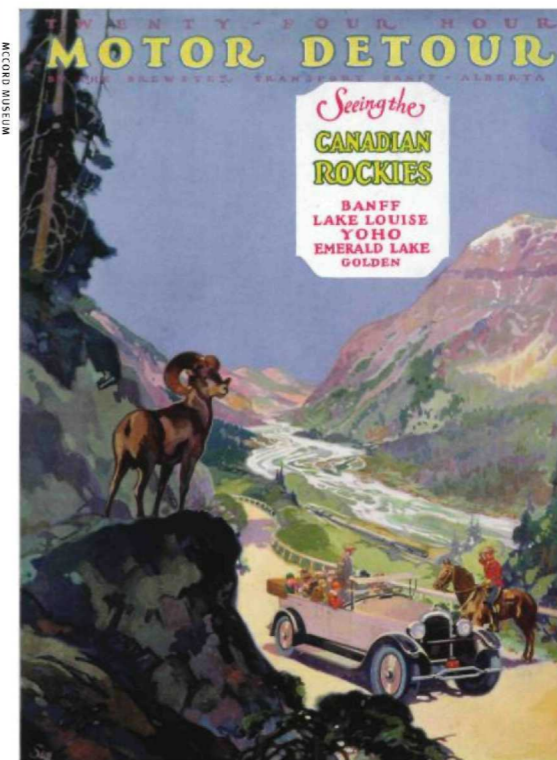
The pace of development at Banff, with its myriad shopping malls, restaurants, hotels, and vacation condos, set off alarm bells in the 1990s. And, just as it did with the



Top: A swimming pool at the Banff Springs Hotel, about 1935. The pool was supplied with water piped in from the hot springs at Sulphur Mountain.



Middle: A Canadian Pacific Railway brochure from 1897 extols Banff's scenery and the new Banff Springs Hotel.



Bottom: By 1920, the date of this Canadian Pacific brochure, cars had begun making the Rockies more accessible to tourists.



A woman skis up the Pipestone River, Banff, circa 1930.



Inset: Downhill skiing quickly became popular in the park after the first alpine runs were cut in 1926. This poster by artist Peter Ewart is from 1940.

hot springs debacle of 1885, the federal government stepped in. Ottawa quashed Banff town council's plans for ambitious new developments.

"The stresses and the strains of human development cannot be allowed to snap back and injure the wild places that we are pledged here to protect," said then-Heritage Minister Sheila Copps when, in 1997, she released a new blueprint for Banff's future. "Banff has been one of the greatest gifts that have been given to us. Let's not spoil it."

This blueprint capped the number of permanent residents in Banff at ten thousand. There are currently eight thousand people living in the town, and they all have to qualify under need-to-reside requirements. For instance, you can only retire in Banff if you have been employed in the park for five years. The town's boundaries are fixed at five square kilometres by federal law, and there is a suitably aggressive strategy to manage growth.

So Banff is under control. But what about Canmore, which sits just outside the park gates? Once a tiny mining town, its population has tripled over two decades. With twelve thousand permanent residents and another 5,600 second-home owners, the town continues to grow. Yes, it has developed a responsible economic development strategy. But that does not mean we should turn our backs on the situation in Canmore and how it affects, for instance, the grizzly bear, which is now a threatened species in Alberta. We should no more forget the grizzly than the precarious situation of the wolf in La Mauricie National Park, or the disappearing kokanee salmon in Kluane National Park.

There has always been debate about what parks are for. Are they for the preservation of nature, for the enjoyment of people, or for both? Is tourism in national parks such as Banff an exploitive industry that serves wealthy outsiders

while putting pressure on wildlife and communities? Or is it a development strategy that brings crucial economic benefits to a region?

I'm not a scientist or a town planner. I don't pretend to have answers. But because we raised two children within hailing distance of Banff National Park, I appreciate what we have to protect for future generations.

One of the great things about Banff, a microcosm of the national system, is that even with toddlers you can do day hikes. You can climb Tunnel Mountain, visit Johnston Canyon, or start from Chateau Lake Louise and enjoy fabulous views while hiking to the Lake Agnes Tea House.

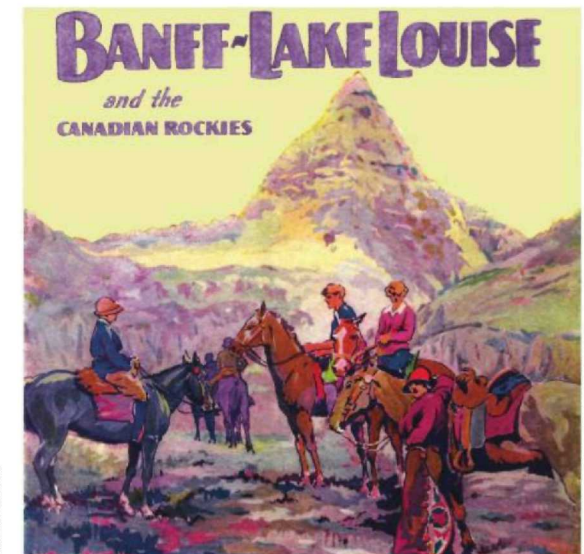
And in winter you can ski. Ever since the first alpine runs were cut into Mount Norquay in 1926 (the resorts of Sunshine and Lake Louise soon followed), skiers have flocked to what is one of the best downhill skiing areas in North America.

Every year we bought season passes. Nothing compares with chasing your son or daughter through the moguls on a bright, sunny day, and then swooshing to a halt outside a rustic cabin where you can order a bowl of soup.

Yet my most transformative Rocky Mountain experience happened long before I had children. From May to September of 1970, Sheena and I lived on a mountain in Banff National Park. I had snagged a job as a fire lookout — a posting I wanted so much that the chief warden didn't have the heart to deny me.

Sarbach Lookout was halfway between Banff and Jasper, near Saskatchewan River Crossing. To reach the fire tower, we hiked in off the highway, crossed Mistaya Canyon, then trekked five kilometres through woods to climb Sarbach, switching back and forth to emerge above the treeline at 2,225 metres.

The job of a fire lookout entails sitting in a tower and watching for smoke. As an aspiring writer, I did this while pounding away on a portable Smith Corona. Lightning storms brought excitement, because then I had to sit in the tower, supposedly well-grounded, as it rattled and shook in the wind, and mark lightning-strike areas for later scrutiny.



A 1929 brochure promotes tours on horseback. Horses were preferred by the wealthy despite the growing popularity of cars.

We fetched water from a mountain stream half a mile from the cabin. Walking the ridge we would see eagles, bighorn sheep, timid white-tailed deer, and, at a distance, even mountain goats. Once, halfway down the mountain, I came face to face with a black bear and, forgetting everything I knew, turned and ran like a scalded dog.

We took it all for granted. Late at night, when the sky was clear, we would lie on our backs and gaze up at the stars, thinking that all this would last forever, never dreaming that one day this natural world would come under siege. Nor did we imagine that, within a decade, we would find ourselves on the opposite side of the world, where three posters would evoke buried memories of that summer in Banff National Park and remind us that as Canadians we have this miraculous wilderness that is very much worth preserving. ☺

Ken McGoogan is well-known for such award-winning books as *Fatal Passage* and *Lady Franklin's Revenge*. He is chair of the Public Lending Right Commission and in October publishes *How the Scots Invented Canada*.