



## **Marias Pass**

**by Grace Flandrau**

Travellers, unless they happen to be civil engineers, which, of course, most of them are not, are in the habit of taking the passing of railroads through mountain ranges, entirely for granted. As the train advances, the apparently impenetrable mass which blocked the sky-line conveniently opens and arranges itself to accommodate an almost level roadbed. Trains do not climb hills, it will be noticed, and yet with only an occasional, barely perceptible, grade, an occasional tunnel or switchback, sometimes with no tunnel at all, the ascent and descent are accomplished' and the mountains crossed. This, I repeat, the laity take quite as a matter of course. Unless its attention is especially drawn to them, mountain passes are the very last thing with which it concerns itself.

And yet, particularly in the western part of America where railroads followed so comparatively soon upon the first appearance of white men in a barbaric scene - the surveys being made before the general topography of the country was known or the savage inhabitants subdued - each pass has a story of historic as well as of technical interest.

This is especially true of Marias Pass through the Rocky Mountains on the southern boundary of Glacier National Park. Its whole story cannot be told. History in this particular part of the United States does not begin until recent times, while this broad natural highway across the Continental Divide witnessed many animated scenes of human activity in remote periods of purely Indian occupancy.

### **A Railroad to the Pacific**

About the middle of the last century Congress, responding to a long expressed popular demand, and the pressure of economic development in the West, took the first definite measure toward the building of a transcontinental railroad. In 1853 an appropriation was made for "explorations and surveys to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean." The forces were to "be organized in as many distinct corps as there are routes to be surveyed."

During the ten or fifteen years preceding this Congressional action, the demands for such a road had been inspired quite as much by a flowery but sincere imperialism as by the commercial advantage that would accrue. It was keenly felt that a railroad would be an important factor in making and keeping the territories West, Southwest and Northwest of the Louisiana purchase - Texas, California and Oregon - a part of the United States. That they became a part of the Union before the construction of the railroad only made the need for it the more



## ***"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925 by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway***



Unfortunately by 1850, politics had entered into and poisoned the springs of an enthusiasm largely patriotic. Everybody wanted a road, but the South did not want the North to have it and the North wished to enjoy itself the prestige and material expansion it would bring.

Five highways of travel were known and in use across the continent. These routes, as Edwin L. Sabin points out in "Building the Pacific Railway," were popularly referred to as the Northern trail, from the headwaters of the Mississippi to Puget Sound by way of passes in the vicinity of Helena and Butte, the Mormon trail from Council Bluffs to California and Oregon by way of the South Pass and Salt Lake City; the Benton "Buffalo" trail from Westport (now Kansas City) to San Francisco by way of the southern Colorado Rockies; the route of the 32nd parallel from Fort Smith, Arkansas to San Pedro (Los Angeles) and the Southern trail from the Red River across Texas and Arizona to San Pedro.

These trails had been found by the early fur traders, used and to some extent changed and improved by the stream of adventurous humanity that subsequently flowed in small but increasing volume across the wilderness to the gold fields of California and Montana and the rich agricultural lands of the Oregon country.

### **Isaac I. Stevens**

The Congress in 1853, besides authorizing the Pacific railroad surveys created the new territory of Washington out of that portion of the Oregon country north of the Columbia River and 46th parallel to the International boundary and west from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific.

Almost immediately Major Isaac I. Stevens, of the engineering corps of the United States Army, applied both for the position of territorial governor and for the leadership of that corps of the railway survey which was to explore the Northern zone. He himself stated in making this enterprising request that he asked for these positions not "as a reward for political services, but because he was the fittest man for the place, the one who could best serve the public interest" - a touch of engaging self-confidence characteristic of Isaac Stevens and amply justified by events. The administration seems to have shared his belief in himself as he was promptly given both appointments.

Stevens came from a race of sturdy New England Puritans. He was born in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1818, was an honor graduate of Phillips' Andover Academy and of West Point; won distinction in the Mexican War; took an active and important part in the reorganization of the Army and rendered efficient services as chief assistant in charge of the coast survey. He now, in March 1853, resigned from the Army and became simultaneously governor of Washington territory, superintendent ex-officio of Indian affairs and leader of the expedition to survey the northern route from the Mississippi to the Pacific.

After faithfully performing these duties he was, in 1857, elected to Congress as delegate from Washington territory. When the Civil War broke out, he offered his services and died gloriously on the field of Chantilly leading his troops to the charge.

### **Survey for the Northern Route**

The responsibilities so eagerly assumed by Isaac Stevens in 1853 as head of the northern railroad survey are well summarized by his son Hazzard Stevens in his "Life of Isaac I. Stevens,"





## ***"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925*** **by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



"It is difficult to realize the magnitude of the task here outlined. It was to traverse and explore a domain two thousand miles in length by two hundred and fifty in breadth, stretching from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, across a thousand miles of arid plains and two great mountain ranges, a region almost unexplored, and infested by powerful tribes of predatory and warlike savages; to determine the navigability of two great rivers, the Missouri and the Columbia, which intersect the region; to locate by reconnaissance and to survey a practicable railroad route; to examine the mountain passes and determine the depth of winter snows in them; to collect all possible information on the geology, climate, flora and fauna, as well as the topography, of the region traversed; and finally to treat with the Indians on the route, cultivate their friendship, and collect information as to their languages, numbers, customs, traditions and history; and all this, including the work of preparation and organization, to be accomplished in a single season."

"During the next four weeks Governor Stevens drove forward the work of preparing and organizing the expedition with tremendous energy. He applied for and obtained the assignments of officers and men from the Army; made requisitions upon the administrative branches for supplies and funds for the several parties" - as the operations were to be carried on in different divisions, one to proceed west from St. Paul, one to go up the Missouri, one to cross the Isthmus, ascend the west coast by water and explore eastward from Puget Sound; all to meet at appointed rendezvous.

By May, 1853, Governor Stevens had effected the organization of the entire expedition and had arrived at St. Paul to take command in the field. The party went forward from there in several separate detachments. Keeping constantly in touch with each other, the various groups made steady and successful progress across the territory of Minnesota and what is now North Dakota to Fort Union - the headquarters of the American Fur Company at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. Their route can be traced almost exactly by the present line of the Great Northern Railway by way of Breckenridge, New Rockford, Minot and Williston.

The astronomical observations and surveys, as well as the botanical and geologic studies which were features of this expedition were carried on, Indian camps visited and, when the vast prairies were darkened with buffalo, exciting hunts were engaged in.

On August 1st the Stevens party reached Fort Union, having been almost two months enroute. He estimated the distance from St. Paul to be over 700 miles. It is now 638 miles by rail and accomplished in 19 hours. They found there one of the principal agents of the American Fur Company, Mr. Alexander Culbertson, who agreed to act as Governor Stevens' special agent with the Blackfeet.

The expedition remained at Fort Union a week preparing for the continuation of their journey. Their next stopping-place was to be Fort Benton, a post of the American Fur Company, established for trade with the Blackfeet, at the head of navigation, some 400 miles up the Missouri from Fort Union.

On the ninth of August they set out. The route offered little difficulty, and game was plentiful. Antelope, deer and buffalo were seen in great numbers and the streams found to be well stocked with beaver. Bands of Blackfeet and Gros Ventres were encountered and parleys held - all of the Indians behaving, Governor Stevens writes, "with great propriety." On September 1st the party reached Fort Benton where they were ceremoniously welcomed by a salute of fifteen guns. The fort was to be general headquarters for several weeks. It was



***"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925  
by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway***



conveniently situated for the examination of the many approaches to the mountains and for treating with the Blackfeet.

**The Blackfoot Bogie**

The reason that a special agent had been provided for dealing with these people and with none other runs through all the early history of the century and has considerable bearing on the story of Marias Pass.

When Captains Lewis and Clark accomplished their magnificent journey from St. Louis to the mouth of the Columbia in 1804-05-06, they had only one serious misadventure with the native peoples. This occurred on the homeward journey. After crossing the Bitter Root Mountains, the expedition divided into two parties, one under Lewis and one under Clark. They were to advance by different routes and meet at the mouth of the Yellowstone. Lewis was to go directly to the Great Fans of the Missouri, proceed from there to the headwaters of the Marias River to ascertain in what latitude it had its source and very probably to discover whether there were a better and lower pass across the mountains in this northern region than those traversed farther south.

On a tributary of the Marias River a few miles north of the present station of Meriwether on the Great Northern Railway, his party met a small band of Minnetarees of Fort de Prairie - one of the two distinct tribes to whom the name of Gros Ventres was applied. The Indians attempted to steal the rifles of the Americans, and in the altercation that followed two of the savages were killed.

The early adventurers habitually confused the Gros Ventres with the Blackfeet. The legend became current and has persisted to this day that Lewis killed two Blackfeet and by this act incited that people to undying enmity against the Americans.

There are many other instances of sanguinary hostility falsely attributed to the Blackfeet and, of course, many authentic manifestations of enmity on their part. But the reasons advanced for their aversion to the presence of white men among them are usually as factitious as they are puerile. The real reason was fundamental. The Blackfeet were an Algonquian nation who had slowly advanced westward. Equipped from a very early period with guns and ammunition furnished by the French and British traders of Canada, they had been able to drive the original lords of the plains, Flatheads, Kootenais and others, out of the vast buffalo ranges east of the Rockies and force them to an unwilling exile across the mountains.

The arrival of traders in these remote regions meant that the weapons of the white men would reach their enemies and bring about perhaps a fatal retaliation. It was this eventuality which the Blackfeet tried to prevent. Many a mountain man bent over his beaver trap on some lonely stream never to rise again while a triumphant Blackfoot rode off with a still smoking scalp; trading posts were harassed and had repeatedly to be abandoned; war parties fell upon whole caravans of traders returning to St. Louis, killing whom they could and taking their furs.

But it must be remembered that mortal combats took place between white men and many other tribes - notably Gros Ventres, Aricara and Sioux, yet rumor never invested these peoples with anything like the glamour of dread which surrounded the Blackfeet. It became a cult, a superstition. Voyageurs, traders, mountain men loved to believe it, as children believe in a bogie man, and to exaggerate the perils.

The legend of the terrible Blackfeet, partly fact, partly





## **"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925 by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



fiction, prevailed throughout the frontier period and had much to do with postponing the discovery of Marias Pass until long after other less prominent features of the northern Rockies were well understood. Free trappers avoided the vicinity, nor did the company send out its own trappers, but was content to let the Indians bring their furs to Fort Benton and the earlier posts - Forts Piegan and McKenzie - which had preceded Benton in that vicinity, and trade under the precarious protection of the little cannon. The legend, as we shall see, was still current in 1853, when Isaac Stevens arrived at the foothills of the Rockies with his Blackfoot agent Culbertson, and had its effect on the operations of the parties, although Governor Stevens writes that "during the whole course of the exploration the Indians were uniformly friendly and our intercourse with the several tribes of the Blackfeet nation was especially of the most cordial character!"

### **Information Concerning Marias Pass**

We find that Governor Stevens knew in a general way of the existence of Marias Pass. In 1840 Robert Greenhow published as a part of his "Memoir Historical and Political of the North West Coast of North America" a map which is remarkably complete and accurate for that time. Almost exactly where the Great Northern Railway now goes through Marias Pass, a trail is shown and marked "Route across the Mts." This is, so far as known, the earliest published record of the existence of the pass.

The Blackfeet knew of it and had in remote times used it, but some misadventure lost in the deep twilight of Indian tradition had caused it to be shunned as the haunt of evil spirits. Little Dog, a chief of the Piegan tribe of Blackfeet, visited Governor Stevens at Fort Benton and gave him a fairly accurate description of the pass-----. "a broad, wide, open valley" the latter writes, "with scarcely a hill or obstruction on this road excepting here and there some fallen timber. At present the Little Dog described it as being grown up with underbrush; though the trail was visible and well marked on the ground."

It is plain from the many references to it found in Stevens' Pacific Reports that the pass occupied first place in his attention. When he appointed Mr. Lander in September, 1853, to make the reconnaissance he felt it to be of such importance that he "gave Mr. Lander authority to select his animals from my whole train, deeming it important that he should be exceedingly well fitted out." He himself planned to go north at the same time to the main camp of the Blackfeet to secure the best possible guides for the survey.

But the fate which guarded the pass brought about a change of plans after both Governor Stevens and Lander had started on their respective journeys. Stevens received a dispatch which induced him to return to Fort Benton and rumors of dissension in Mr. Lander's party caused him to recall that expedition.

The leader now found himself confronted with a serious difficulty. The inadequate funds allotted for the surveys were almost exhausted. His strong sense, however, of the importance of his undertaking would not permit him to give it up at this point and he wrote to the Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, that he had decided to carry out the survey and incur a deficiency which, he felt sure, Congress, when in full possession of the facts, would sanction.

Because of this shortage of money he very reluctantly: decided to postpone the exploration of Marias Pass until the following season, although in writing to Davis he says: "I am sanguine that it will prove the best pass, as it more naturally connects with the line of Clark's Fork of the Columbia River." A small party was left at Fort Benton, in charge of Mr. Doty, to explore





## ***"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925*** **by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



the country further, make meteorological observations, and especially to obtain information relating to the Blackfeet.

On September 22, 1853, the main party continued westward, crossing the Continental Divide by Cadotte's Pass. When Governor Stevens reached the summit he entered his own domain, and in the ceremonious fashion of the day proclaimed the beginning of civil government over the new Territory of Washington. Descending to the Bitter Root Valley a winter camp was established there early in October.

It now appears that Governor Stevens could not bring himself to wait until another season for the information which he felt to be of such great importance concerning the country at the headwaters of the Marias "on which my mind had so long fixed as a practicable and direct pass." He, therefore, determined to detach one of the engineers, Mr. Tinkham, from the main body and send him back across the mountains.

At this juncture the tale of the wicked Blackfeet reappears to threaten Mr. Tinkham's departure. The Flathead guide who had consented with great reluctance to accompany him, and one or two others of the party, suddenly refused to go, the trapper guide Munroe having amused himself by scaring them with gruesome accounts of these "terrible" people.

A short time before this we notice a similar intrusion of the legend. Lieutenant Saxton, who had reached the North West coast by way of the Isthmus and was surveying eastward, had been compelled to increase his escort because the guide Antoine, "an excellent man, would not come further than St. Mary's village [into Blackfoot territory] unless the party numbered twenty men. It was his [Saxton's] intention to bring but four across the mountains to Fort Benton, but he was thus compelled to bring an escort."

### **Search for Marias Pass**

Mr. Tinkham got off, however, on October 7, followed the Jocko River to its confluence with the Flathead, which he ascended; skirted the west shore of Flathead Lake and some distance north again struck the river. He continued to follow it, penetrating the mountains by its most eastern fork, now called Middle Fork. "On this," Tinkham writes, "lies the trail leading to the Marias Pass."

He describes the valley as narrow, wooded and precipitous, with a bare rocky ridge offering foothold for a horse, but by no means practicable for the passage of wagons. He crossed the divide at a height of 7,600 feet and dropped by a rapid descent 2,000 feet to the headwaters of one of the tributaries of the Marias. A further descent of a dozen miles brought him to the prairies. From thence he seems to have made his way as rapidly as possible to Fort Benton. He had crossed by Cut Bank Pass, now in Glacier National Park, and frequently used by summer tourists.

Why Mr. Tinkham should have felt so certain that this was the Marias Pass Governor Stevens so assiduously sought does not appear. It did not correspond with the description of the pass given by Little Dog with which Tinkham must have been familiar. It is surprising, in view of this discrepancy, and of the well-known interest of his chief in this exploration, that he did not take time to examine from the east other approaches to the mountains. It seems probable that the fear of the Blackfeet may have had some part in it; Tinkham's party was well into Blackfoot territory and, already frightened by Munroe's tales, it is quite likely they did not





**"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925  
by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



care to linger there. At any rate, he hurried south across the plains, passing many miles to eastward the real Marias Pass.

Tinkham was the first white man to make a recorded journey through what is now Glacier National Park, although this same Munroe or Rising Wolf, as he was called by the Blackfeet, was familiar with much of the region.

Munroe belonged to a distinguished Canadian family, and came to the far West in 1815 in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company. From his post on the Saskatchewan he was sent among the Blackfeet to learn their language and ways. J. Willard Schultz, in one of his admirable stories of Indian life, has given an enchanting picture of the young Munroe, fascinated by the wild freedom, the pageantry and color, the primitive life of these magnificent nomads of the American plains. He tells us how Munroe fell in love with a Blackfoot girl, married, adopted the way of life of the tribe and became a kind of white chief among them.

For years he followed the buffalo up and down the plains east of the Rockies and doubtless visited many parts of what is now Glacier National Park. We know that in 1846 he went to the St. Mary's Lakes with Father de Smet at which time the name the lakes now bear was given to them; we assume that long before this the abundance of game as well as the unsurpassed beauty of the wild scene must have tempted the young hunter. Elk and deer pastured in the high valleys; mountain sheep and goat clung to the rugged slopes between the belt of dark forest and the towering glacier - hung crags; lakes and streams abounded with trout and beaver, and, when the morning mists swam upward, mirrored the infinite blue depths of the sky; the thin clear air was sweet with the smell of flowers and grasses and the tonic breath of pines; the stillness as perfect as in the morning of the world.

### **Elusiveness of the Pass**

There is much more we should like to know of Munroe while he was acting as guide to this government expedition. Why did he frighten Tinkham's men with stories of the terrible Blackfeet when he knew that the attitude of the tribe toward the whole expedition had been uniformly friendly and helpful and that his own presence with them was a perfect guarantee of safety? Why did he not direct Tinkham to the real Marias Pass of which he must have heard from Little Dog even if he himself had not seen it? Was it the mere indifference, the laziness, bred of his carefree life, or - more than half Blackfoot as he had become - was it a desire to impede rather than aid the advance of white civilization, which he knew would put an end to the immemorial ways, to the very life of the people he had preferred to his own?

To leave speculation, however, and return to sober fact. Governor Stevens was not satisfied with the result of Tinkham's exploration and we find him writing later to the Secretary of War that, from the general depression of the mountains and the greater frequency of the streams which stretched out to meet each other from the opposite slopes of the divide, it was not to be doubted that better passes existed than the way explored and that a whole season should be devoted to a thorough examination of this region.

In February, 1854, a dispatch from the Secretary of War reached Governor Stevens. It was a curt, ungracious message, disapproving the arrangements made by the latter to carry on the survey after the allotted funds had given out and ordering him to discontinue all operations at once. It will be remembered that Jefferson Davis was a southerner and an ardent advocate of the southern route.





**"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925  
by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



Although Stevens replied that the Secretary's order would be obeyed and the surveys discontinued, we find the report of an expedition undertaken by Mr. Doty in May of that year (1854) which is of particular interest to us.

Doty proceeded from his base at Fort Benton to the Great Falls of the Missouri, thence along Sun River to the east slope of the mountains and northward to the Canadian border. On May 24, Doty makes the following important entry in his journal:

"Morning clear and warm. The Marias River comes through a gap in the mountains some fifteen miles in width - his [Tinkham's] description and topography of the pass and mountains do not agree with reality and it would certainly seem as though he could not have passed through here."

On his return journey, Doty again paused to observe this pass. He climbed to the top of a hill from which he "obtained a commanding view of the pass and the course of the river for a long distance to the southward. The pass continued about fifteen miles in breadth ... up the pass to the southward no mountains obstruct the view; and I am satisfied that Mr. Tinkham could not have passed over this trail or he would not pronounce this portion of the pass so difficult as his report and topography present it. This pass is not vouched for as a good railroad or pack train route, yet it is believed worthy of further examination and I only regret that I cannot make it, as your instructions require me to be at Fort Benton on the last days of the month."

Here, seen but not explored, was the location of Marias Pass just as described by the Blackfoot Chief Little Dog, and it would seem that then was surely the time for Mr. Doty to exceed orders by a few days and make a more complete examination. Governor Stevens expresses his regret that Mr. Doty did not "continue on and ascertain where the trail issued on the western side of the mountains."

In this part of the Rockies the eastern approach to these mountains is an open, rolling country, by which the prairie actually touches their rugged bases, while the western approach is more abrupt and broken. Thus it is that coming from the west, as Tinkham did, the projecting and overlapping folds and the deep intervening crevasses completely obscure the route leading to Marias Pass, while coming from the east, Doty could see the depression in the long jagged sky-line - the gap called Marias Pass - which is easily discernible from anyone of many hummocks on the prairie for a distance of twenty miles or more.

It is interesting to remember that the object of the expedition was the discovery of the best route to the Pacific and that members of the parties were many times within a few miles of the pass which would have given them the key to that route, that the pass was heard of and actually from a distance seen, and that nevertheless it eluded capture!

With this report of Doty's made in the spring of 1854 history again says good-bye to Marias Pass for thirty years and more. When the first railroad in these latitudes was built it did not make the further investigations of Marias Pass recommended by Isaac Stevens but crossed the mountains further south.

**John F. Stevens**

In the meantime the Great Northern Railway, then called the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, had been creeping slowly northwestward through Minnesota and North Dakota. In





## ***"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925 by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway***



those days of land grants, speculation, wildcat financiering and receiverships, it was a somewhat unique figure among railroads. Economically built and managed, supported by the traffic it had created, amply fortified with branch lines, it paused at Minot, gathering strength for the long leap it contemplated across hundreds of miles of empty prairie and worse, of Indian-owned territory, to the growing communities in the heart of Montana.

In the year 1887 it reached Helena, but there was no intention of its stopping at this point; there merely remained the problem of finding the best way to cross the mountain ranges which opposed their formidable barriers to its westward progress. And it is altogether in keeping with the character of the man who built and directed the destinies of the road, James J. Hill, that when he did carry it across the mountains, he should take it by the lowest, most direct and practical route - through the lost Marias Pass Chief Little Dog had described to Governor Isaac Stevens.

John F. Stevens entered Mr. Hill's service at this time. He was placed in charge of the Rocky Mountain reconnaissance in 1889.

Stevens, like his predecessor in our narrative Isaac I. Stevens, was a New Englander. He was born in Maine in 1853, the very year, it will be noticed, in which the other Stevens was exploring the Northwestern mountains. John F. Stevens attended a grade and normal school but did not go to a technical college. After fifteen years of steadily advancing responsibilities he became in 1889 principal assistant engineer of the Great Northern Railway, of which he was soon to be chief engineer and general manager.

In this position and later when operating chief of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific he proved to be as great an administrator of railroads as he was constructing engineer. The positions of international importance, which he was subsequently to fill, amply tested and proved him in both capacities.

In 1905 he became chief engineer and in reality chief executive of the Panama canal. It was largely to the way in which he inaugurated this work that its successful accomplishment was due.

In 1917, ten years after he left Panama to assume responsibility of large railroad operation and construction in New England (New York, New Haven & Hartford) and on the Pacific Coast (Spokane, Portland & Seattle system) and after forty years of intensely active engineering and railroad work in America, John F. Stevens went to Russia as head of American Railway Advisory Commission, and also as Minister Plenipotentiary. It was an undertaking from which even a man of Stevens' experience and ability might have shrunk. The World War was at its height. The Czarist regime in Russia had fallen and Kerensky was at the head of a nation in tumult, over which the shadow of further revolution already hung. The railroad system had almost entirely broken down.

It was Mr. Stevens' job to reorganize the Trans-Siberian and Chinese railways and keep open the important line of communication between Vladivostok and Moscow. This is not the place to tell of the complications, the almost insuperable difficulties which were to be met and overcome. Suffice it to say that he proved more than equal to his great task and added still another splendid achievement to his crowded record.

In March of this present year (1925) Mr. Stevens was awarded the highest honor American engineers can pay to one of their number - the John Fritz medal.





## ***"The Story of Marias Pass" was written in 1925*** **by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



Mr. Stevens brilliantly inaugurated his career with the Great Northern by an achievement of interest to us. In mid-winter of that year – 1889 - practically alone, he discovered our elusive Marias Pass.

He set out on his reconnaissance from the military establishment of Fort Assiniboine, which was situated some seven miles southwest of the present city of Havre on the Great Northern Railway. The road turned southwest at this point approximately following the Missouri River to the rail head at Butte.

He had covered the territory from Butte and Helena north-ward for nearly 100 miles without finding the favorable route he sought. Now his course lay almost west from Fort Assiniboine. He had a wagon and mule, a saddle-horse and a man whom he had brought from St. Paul. His companion, however, carrying out the old frontier tradition, fortified himself so constantly against the blizzards they already had encountered, and perhaps against the Blackfeet, that Stevens dispensed with his highly problematic assistance and sent him home.

At the Blackfeet Agency on Badger Creek, 160 miles from Fort Assiniboine, he tried to secure a Blackfoot guide. But the old taboo which existed in the days of Little Dog and Isaac Stevens and long long before, still obtained; none would accompany him. Fortunately the evil spirit of the pass seemed to be a purely Blackfoot fetish - for a Flathead was found who was quite willing to disregard it and undertake the job.

It was December now and the snow was so deep that the small outfit was abandoned and Stevens and his guide set out on improvised snowshoes they themselves had strung with rawhide. It was very cold. When they reached what is known as False Summit, a place some miles east of the pass, the Flathead declared himself unable to proceed and Stevens went on alone. He modestly attributes to mere chance the fact that he walked right into the present Marias Pass and continued by it far enough west to make sure the divide was really crossed and he was in western drainage.

Then he turned back. At the summit he made a bivouac for the night. The deep snow prevented his having a fire; without it he dared not lie down for the extreme cold. Tramping out a runway, he walked back and forth all night to keep from freezing to death. He learned afterwards that at the Agency on the plains the thermometer fell almost to forty below zero; what it was up there on the ridge of the continent, hundreds of feet higher, Mr. Stevens makes no attempt to say.

At daybreak he set out. The Flathead, with what seems the most surprising nonchalance, even for an Indian, had allowed his fire to go out, and he was found by Mr. Stevens almost dead from the cold. They returned together to the Agency on Badger Creek.

Mr. Stevens' only comment on this achievement is that it took a rather strong man to carry it out, but that he was pretty strong in those days. His modest attitude towards the importance of what he had accomplished, this quiet disregard of personal danger and attention to duty at whatever cost, are characteristic of the men of the frontier period then reaching its close; and eternally characteristic of the profession whose finest traditions Mr. John Stevens has so brilliantly upheld.

Isaac I. Stevens, in 1853, had rightly estimated the importance of Marias Pass. Without such a pass a railroad built on his survey from St. Paul to the vicinity of the present city of Havre, Montana, must then turn southwesterly from the direct westward route, follow





**“The Story of Marias Pass” was written in 1925  
by Grace Flandrau for the Great Northern Railway**



generally up the Missouri River and cross the Divide by Cadotte's or some other pass in that latitude and thence down the Blackfoot and the Clark Fork of the Columbia to emerge from the mountains in the neighborhood of Pend d'Oreille Lake, whereas Marias Pass would make it possible to proceed directly west from Havre and almost continuously by water grade from the summit of the mountains to Pend d'Oreille Lake, the route following for some distance the Flathead River, then the Kootenai and finally the Clark Fork. A detour of some five hundred miles would thus be avoided - saving a hundred miles of distance - and a more advantageous mountain crossing secured.

It is due to the discovery made by John F. Stevens in 1889 that four years later the evil spirit of the Blackfeet fled forever from Marias Pass before the onrush of a transcontinental express. A continuous highway of steel at last connected, by the straightest and lowest route, the Headwaters of the Mississippi with Portland and Puget Sound.

The traveller crossing the Continental Divide by the Great Northern Railway now may see on a ledge overlooking the pass, discovered by him, a statue in heroic bronze of John F. Stevens as he appeared in 1889. In this commemoration of a great reconnaissance engineer, a tribute is offered to the many devoted members of his profession who have played so important a part in our wonderful territorial development, a type which has practically passed out of existence in this country as the demand for their services has disappeared.



*John F. Stevens - Circa 1910*

