



*A Historical Handbook  
for the Employees of*

# **LAKE McDONALD LODGE**

*by the  
Glacier Park Foundation*

*May 2024*



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Dear Lake McDonald Lodge employees,

Welcome to Glacier Park, and a season at one of the most unique and historic hotels in the entire National Park system! Visitors have been traveling to this spot for well over a century, longer than Glacier has been a National Park, drawn by Lake McDonald's spectacular scenery and serene setting. This summer will be another chapter in a long and exceptional tradition, and we've prepared this handbook to help set the stage. We hope the material here will help you orient visitors to the hotel, and enhance your own experience in working here.

The Glacier Park Foundation, which created this handbook for you, is a citizens' group primarily made up of former Glacier lodge employees. We have about 800 members, from all the lodges and from all eras. Many of us have maintained a decades-long love of the park and its visitor services.

We seek to promote the public interest in Glacier, with an emphasis on historic preservation. We work cooperatively with Xanterra (Glacier National Park Lodges), Pursuit's Glacier Park Collection, and the National Park Service. All of our directors and officers serve on a volunteer basis.

We publish a membership journal called *The Inside Trail*, which features articles on public affairs, park history, and stories of Glacier. Past issues are posted on our website, [www.glacierparkfoundation.org](http://www.glacierparkfoundation.org). We invite you to join us through the website. (We offer a complimentary annual membership to current Glacier employees.)

We look back with great pleasure on our summers in Glacier and cherish the lifelong friendships we made there. We wish you a delightful summer!

Sincerely yours,

The Directors of the Glacier Park Foundation

## HISTORY OF LAKE McDONALD LODGE

On June 15, 2014, Glacier Park officially marked the centennial of Lake McDonald Lodge, the cozy and inviting hostelry that has long been the hub of visitor life on the park's west side. The lodge is a charming place, with a unique history very different from that of the better-known Glacier hotels east of the Continental Divide. Unlike the railway-built lodgings elsewhere in the park, the buildings at Lake McDonald reflect the legacies of pioneer homesteaders and individual entrepreneurs – and reveal a story that even predates the creation of the park itself. And though the lodge building itself has turned 110, the location has now hosted summer visitors for close to 140 years. As such, it is easily the oldest of Glacier's park concessions.

The Lake McDonald area first became a tourist destination in the early 1890s, after the Great Northern Railway built into northwestern Montana in 1891. The railroad's completion helped draw homesteaders into the area, several of whom settled along the shore of the lake. The land they chose wasn't at all suited for farming, but the homesteaders were well aware of their spectacular location, and before long several of them went into the tourist business. As the decade progressed, a series of cabin camps and other visitor services began appearing along Lake McDonald's shore, both at the present site of Apgar and near the head of the lake. The latter locations were only accessible by boat.

One of these early hostelries was at the present site of Lake McDonald Lodge, and was hosting visitors by at least 1895. A local settler named George Snyder operated the property during its first years, building a small, two-story wood-frame hotel at the site. Snyder's property was inaccessible by road, so he purchased a 40-foot steamboat and begun a launch service from Apgar to the head of the lake. In those early years, visitors heading to the new Snyder Hotel were obliged to walk a quarter of a mile from the train station at Belton to the Middle Fork of the Flathead River where they were taken across in a rowboat. On the opposite bank, a buckboard service carried them to Apgar where they boarded the steamship to the head of Lake McDonald.

Snyder operated his hotel until 1906, when he sold the property to John E. Lewis, a Flathead Valley businessman who was destined to transform the Lake McDonald Lodge site. Lewis soon began erecting a string of 11 guest cabins, constructed of cedar and larch, running along the shoreline to the north. (Several of these remain in use today.) By 1910, when the U.S. Congress made Glacier a National Park, Lewis was the most prominent hotel proprietor in the area.

The formal establishment of Glacier National Park brought still more attention to the beauty of the Lake McDonald region, and the number of travelers to the area continued to slowly climb. A record 5,500 visitors traveled to the lake in the summer of 1913, a number that was destined only to grow, and Lewis realized that it was time to transform his rustic hotel. Determined not to be outdone by the Great Northern Railway, which was rapidly building Glacier hotels and chalets, Lewis began planning the construction of an entirely new hotel that would truly be "something worthy of the park."

Lewis enlisted the noted regional architect Kirtland Cutter to design his new building, and construction commenced that November. Fixtures, furnishings and other materials were freighted across the ice of Lake McDonald during the winter months and carried by boat in the spring. The three-story chalet-style hotel, which featured steam heat, electric lights and running water contained 64 guest rooms (with 20 additional rooms in the adjacent cabins). The first floor featured an elegant lobby and eight two-room guest suites; the adjacent dining room was housed in a rustic log wing that had been constructed three years earlier. Guests arrived at the hotel by boat, climbing a long set of steps that led

from the dock, and passing under a lakeside balcony to the main entrance. No expense was spared in providing visitors with first-class accommodations and ambiance, although Lewis also made sure that his long-time friends and acquaintances from the Flathead Valley were made welcome. The new “Lewis Glacier Hotel” opened to the public on June 15, 1914.

In addition to the hotel and cabin facilities, Lewis oversaw the construction of a number of other buildings at Lake McDonald, providing housing for employees, special services for guests and other auxiliary functions. All shared a straightforward, rustic design that blended in well with the primeval forest setting. A small barbershop building appeared in 1909. Snyder Hall, a two-story log building, was built in 1911 as a public assembly room with a stone fireplace and seven upstairs bedrooms. A large commercial laundry, a steam plant and a hydroelectric facility were constructed along Snyder Creek in the late 1910s. Other buildings added to the site included a caretaker’s house (1922), the “Garden Court” employee dormitory (1927), and a soda fountain/dance hall building (also 1927). Lewis also built a handsome home at the site for himself and his wife Olive – a building later known as “Cobb Cabin,” for the author Irvin S. Cobb, who stayed in the house for a time.

The Lewis Glacier Hotel flourished through the 1920s. Glacier’s Superintendent Ross Eakin called the property “one of the most popular hotels in the country,” and it was often filled to capacity. A major factor in the hotel’s success was the ongoing construction of the Going-to-the-Sun Road, which was opened as far as the hotel in 1921. This ease of access drew an ever-increasing number of visitors to the park’s west side, a number that grew even more after the road was completed from Lake McDonald to Logan Pass in 1929.

The arrival of the automobile greatly changed the character of Lewis’s hotel, and of the visitor experience there. Until 1921, the lakeside door was the building’s main entry, and the doors on the opposite side led to a vegetable garden, a pasture and horse corrals and then the wilderness. The construction of the Sun Road nearly reversed the landscape; roads and parking lots gradually filled the old pasture area and the trailheads and stables were moved farther away. To absorb the feeling of the wilderness, visitors now headed out the former front doors to escape the automobiles and relax on the shore of the lake.

Lewis continued operating his Glacier Hotel through the 1920s, though his enthusiasm for the venture had faded by the end of the decade. The massive 1929 Half Moon forest fire in the Apgar area destroyed much of the lovely cedar-hemlock forest at the foot of the lake, and perhaps reminded Lewis of the fragility of the hotel’s setting. At the same time, continually increasing tourist numbers prompted the Park Service to pressure Lewis to expand his operation, a project that Lewis felt he could ill afford. When the Park Service and the Great Northern Railway’s Glacier Park Hotel Company proposed the construction of a competing hotel on adjacent federal land, Lewis felt that he had no choice but to sell. Through a series of financial transactions in 1930 and 1932, the hotel complex became federal property, and the business was incorporated into the Glacier Park Hotel Company’s larger concession. The Lewis Glacier Hotel became the Lake McDonald Hotel, the newest addition to the Great Northern Railway’s portfolio of Glacier Park lodgings.

Under its new ownership and management, the hotel and its grounds saw a series of gradual changes during the 1930s. The Sun Road was rebuilt to slightly bypass the hotel area in 1936-37, creating the alignment that remains in use today and adding the handsome stone bridges across Snyder Creek. Associated projects saw the construction of the circular drive that now marks the hotel’s southern entrance, as well as the long parking boulevards connecting the hotel area to the main road.

The Glacier Park Hotel Company completed the location's new campstore building in 1938, a facility that served both as a stopover point for auto travelers and a grocery store for the seasonal residents who maintained summer homes near the lakeshore. The campstore also housed the Lake McDonald post office for many years. In the hotel itself, private bathrooms were finally added to a number of the guest rooms. At the end of the decade, the hotel and cabins offered a total of 72 rooms, with space to accommodate approximately 135 overnight guests.

Along with most of Glacier's guest facilities, Lake McDonald Hotel was closed during the World War II years, but the property was back in full operation by 1946. Things were little changed for the next decade, though the hotel received a bit more local competition in 1955 with the opening of Frank Stuart's "Stuart Motel" (later called "Motel Lake McDonald") on an inholder tract just behind the campstore. (Other privately owned lodging facilities also operated for years on inholdings farther east, some until the late 1970s.) The mid-1950s also saw a major fire at the hotel laundry, which resulted in its closure and later conversion into an employee dorm. Cobb Cabin and the old hydroelectric plant also became employee housing, and the barbershop became a nurse's station.

Meanwhile, the Park Service began to talk more and more openly about the prospect of replacing the Lake McDonald Hotel altogether, in large part because the agency felt that it didn't best meet the needs of the era's automobile-based travelers. The park had been pushing for more motel and cabin-type accommodations in Glacier since the 1930s, an effort that resulted in the construction of new facilities at Swiftcurrent and Rising Sun, and the closure of the grand old chalet complex at Sun Point. Plans for a replacement motel complex at Apgar were considered, but the Great Northern resisted the proposal and it was ultimately dropped.

Instead, Lake McDonald and the other concessionaire properties underwent a late-1950s refurbishment underwritten by the Great Northern Railway. The GN in 1956 contracted with the Knutson Corporation of Minneapolis to refurbish its Glacier facilities, partly to appease the Park Service and partly to make the properties seem more appealing to potential buyers. Improvements to the Lake McDonald Hotel included the addition of a cocktail lounge and gift shop in 1958; reconfiguration of the first floor office and bathroom facilities; and the construction of a new front desk. The hotel was also renamed "Lake McDonald Lodge," a term that was felt to be more contemporary and inviting.

As the railway completed the refurbishment of its Glacier properties, it began to more actively search for a buyer for the concession, and the business was finally sold in December 1960 to an Arizona businessman named Don Hummel, who had also owned concession facilities in Lassen and Mount McKinley (Denali) National Parks. Hummel began operating Lake McDonald and the other Glacier concessions in 1961, under a new incorporation of the name Glacier Park, Incorporated (GPI).

During Hummel's 20-year tenure in the Park, a number of changes took place at the Lodge complex. Snyder Hall became an employee dormitory, and the soda fountain and dance hall were modified to serve as an employee recreation facility and public auditorium. A gas station was built near the campstore in 1962. In 1966, Hummel privately purchased the Lake McDonald Motel from the Stuart family, and began operating it as part of the lodge property. Still more employee housing was added in 1968, when ten guest cabins from the Swiftcurrent auto camp were trucked to Lake McDonald and converted to dormitory space.

Torrential rains fell in the Park in early June 1964, causing disastrous flooding on both the east and west sides of the Continental Divide. At Lake McDonald Lodge, Snyder Creek flooded its banks

and Lake McDonald rose significantly as up to eight inches of precipitation fell on the southern portions of the Park. The flooding damaged portions of the lodge dining room and the grill in the employee recreation hall. Probably in response to the flood damage, a new coffee shop building and associated parking lot were constructed at Lake McDonald the following year, on a prominent location near the east end of the complex. In contrast to the earlier buildings at the site, the coffee shop displayed contemporary architectural lines that, to some eyes, conflicted with its environment.

The concession operation changed hands again in 1981, when Glacier Park, Inc. was acquired by a corporate predecessor of Viad Corporation. In 1988-89, the Park Service undertook a \$1.2-million renovation of Lake McDonald Lodge, restoring the lobby to its original flavor and general historic configuration. A totem pole was erected near the lodge's vehicle-side entrance, commemorating a similar pole that once stood by the lakeside façade. Other improvements included the restoration of the lobby fireplace, and massive changes to the landscaping surrounding the building.

Changes at the lodge during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century focused heavily on employee housing. A large new employee dormitory and cafeteria complex was developed behind the existing coffee shop, using new buildings that were suggestive of the chalet-style architecture that had characterized the park for a century. The historic old Hydro and Johnson dorms were razed in favor of additional parking, while the Snyder and Cobb buildings were transformed into additional visitor lodgings. And the summer of 2013 brought the promise of still other changes to come, as the Park Service announced that the Glacier concession contract would be given to the Xanterra corporation. (The Motel Lake McDonald property, however, remains a part of GPI, now Pursuit.)

Today, Lake McDonald Lodge enjoys full bookings virtually throughout its season of operation. Visitors, in the same fashion as their predecessors in 1914, enjoy its lovely grounds and setting along the shore of Lake McDonald, eat in its log dining room and gaze up at the summit of Mount Brown, more than a mile above them. And like the first guests that arrived at the lodge via George Snyder's steamship, they can catch a glimpse of its lakeside entrance from the deck of the *DeSmet* and imagine arriving at the Lewises' Glacier Hotel at the beginning of the last century.

# ARCHITECTURE AND ART

## The Lodge's Design

Early advertising campaigns sponsored by the Great Northern Railway billed Glacier Park as the “Switzerland of America,” and the park’s major lodging facilities embraced this description by employing variations of Swiss chalet architecture. The design is particularly strong in some of the facilities built by the Great Northern, including the Belton Chalet and Many Glacier Hotel, and the style is an architectural hallmark of Glacier Park.

The design of Lake McDonald Lodge is influenced by Swiss chalet architectural styles, as well, particularly the building’s exterior appearance. The building is visually similar to some of the chalet buildings built by the Great Northern during the same era, but Lake McDonald also includes numerous details that make the building fit into its forested setting particularly well, such as the large, unpeeled logs in the lobby and around the exterior porches.

The massive lobby in some ways contrasts with the Swiss chalet feel of the exterior, creating an interior space reminiscent of a forest hunting lodge. The massive fireplace and the concrete floors scored to imitate stone strongly add to this feel, along with the large false truss supporting the lobby ceiling. The taxidermy displayed in the lobby reinforces the feel. In the hotel’s early years fresh-cut evergreen boughs were placed in the lobby structural members to reinforce the feel even more. (Some old advertisements actually made the false claim that the hotel was “originally a private hunting lodge.”)

Other parts of the hotel complex are beautiful examples of what is sometimes called Park Service Rustic architecture – using logs and other local materials to make a building fit into its visual setting. The lodge dining room is an exceptional example of this, with its log walls and reconstructed stone fireplace. The Reading Room wing of the auditorium building is another good example.

Some of the oldest buildings at Lake McDonald (like the cabins, and Snyder Hall) also display the log work reminiscent of Rustic architecture, but that probably wasn’t a conscious design decision. Those buildings were just constructed as quickly and efficiently as possible, and logs happened to be the handiest building material available. Historians call these “vernacular” designs.

The newer buildings in the lodge area display still other design features. The campstore is from the era when the Great Northern Railway managed the hotel, and architecturally it is the closest to the chalet-style buildings that the railway favored. Hints of that same design ethic were incorporated into the recently constructed employee housing nearby. The coffee shop is entirely different; it is from a period in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when architects and park planners rejected traditional designs in favor of simple, contemporary forms. This “mid-century Modern” design philosophy makes the coffee shop design somewhat incompatible with the rest of the location’s buildings.

The appearance of the hotel grounds has changed dramatically over the years. During the hotel’s first years, the surroundings very much had the feel of a primeval forest – people would arrive at the hotel via boat as there were no roads, so the hotel’s back doors were nearly an entrance to the wilderness. In the 1910s, the area now occupied by roads and parking contained only a pasture and corral for pack stock, and a large vegetable garden that supplied the hotel dining room. The “hunting lodge” feel of the lobby was a perfect fit for such a setting.

The arrival of the automobile changed things considerably, and by the 1930s the hotel grounds lost much of their primeval look in favor of lawns and asphalt. More and more formal landscaping and pathways have been added in the years since, and today the hotel grounds have a much more formal appearance than they did in historic times.

One resort-type improvement from the early years has disappeared, though – the hotel once featured an outdoor swimming pool! It was removed decades ago.

## **Artwork and Details**

### *Taxidermy*

Nearly as much as the fireplace and the log columns, visitors remember the Lake McDonald Lodge lobby for the taxidermied animals on display. Other taxidermy is found in the dining room. Though some of the taxidermy is a recent donation to the hotel, many of these animal mounts have been in the hotel since its earliest years – John Lewis, the man responsible for constructing the hotel building, was an avid hunter and displayed many of his personal trophies in the building. Some of Lewis’s original work has been lost over the years due to damage and theft.

### *Native American designs in the lobby*

The concrete lobby floor includes a series of incised Native American words, many of which are often missed by casual visitors. These were part of the building’s original design, and have their origins in several regional Native American languages. Differing translations of some of the phrases are sometimes seen, but the word “Kla-how-ya” at the lakeside entrance, for example, means “Welcome.” Ne-Nas-ta-ko translates as “Looking toward the mountains.” Interestingly, though, the best-remembered phrase, in front of the fireplace, is in English: “Fires of uncertain light are fires burning at night.”

The incised petroglyph-style designs in the lobby fireplace have long been the subject of some historic controversy. They were also part of the initial hotel design, but popular legend claims that they were created by the noted Montana artist Charlie Russell. Many historians are skeptical of this claim, but a few others suggest that it just might be true. Russell was a frequent visitor to the hotel and a friend of the owners, and his art studio at the south end of the lake features a fireplace that is similarly large and similarly detailed.

The massive lobby chandelier lanterns display a Native American motif similar to that of the fireplace designs, but surprisingly the lanterns are not original to the hotel – they were originally at the Prince of Wales Hotel in Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta, Canada, and were moved to Lake McDonald in the late 1950s. The original lantern parchment designs were drawn by Blood Indians in Alberta, but the current parchments are an artist’s interpretation of those originals.

### *Paintings and photography*

During Glacier Park’s early years, the Great Northern Railway was known for bringing a series of talented artists and photographers to the park, creating images that were used to both decorate the park hotels and advertise it to potential travelers. Several fine examples of this art are on display at Lake McDonald today, along with other paintings commissioned specifically for the hotel itself. All in all, Lake McDonald hosts the largest and most eclectic collection of art of any of the Glacier hotels.



The two largest paintings in the lobby – “Avalanche Lake” and “Trouble in Camp” – have apparently hung above the lobby balconies ever since the lodge was opened. A local artist named Herbert R. Bartlett, about whom very little is known, painted both of the works. The wood-bark frames around the paintings were added in the late 1920s by a man named George Paige (or Page), who served as a park ranger at the lake.

The other two large paintings that are original to the site are in the auditorium building – “Bear in Camp” and “Bucking Horse and Rider.” These relatively primitive but entertaining works were most likely also painted by the park ranger George Paige, probably about 1927 or 1928.

Some of the other art in the hotel may have come from John Lewis’s personal collection, but the best-known pieces were commissioned by the Great Northern Railway during the park’s earliest years and originally displayed in other park hotels and chalets. Perhaps the best of these works is the handsome painting of Lake McDonald that hangs near the dining room entrance. It was painted by the noted Impressionist artist John Fery, who was commissioned by the Great Northern to create over 300 paintings of the park. (The railway provided Fery with a studio in St. Paul, and a second studio space in West Glacier.) This painting originally hung inside the Going-to-the-Sun Chalets, before they were razed in the 1940s.

Two other Fery paintings hang on either side of the lobby fireplace, and probably also came from Going-to-the-Sun or one of the other chalets. The lobby area also includes hunting-themed paintings created by a well-known period illustrator named Frank Stick. These originally hung in Many Glacier Hotel, but were moved to Lake McDonald in the late 1950s. In 2015, GPI generously donated the Fery paintings and other historic artwork from the Great Northern era to Glacier National Park.

The historic photographs in the lodge’s guest rooms and public spaces are modern reprints of historic images shot by photographers who worked for the Great Northern as well as others. The best-known of these photographers was a man named T.J. Hileman, who was the official Glacier Park photographer for the Great Northern in the 1920s and 1930s. His work included numerous landscapes as well as evocative portraits of Blackfeet Indians. Another well-known park photographer was R.E. Marble, who also worked for the Great Northern.

A recent addition to the decor of the hotel are copies of Blackfeet portraits done by German-born Winold Reiss. Inspired by his boyhood reading of the *Leatherstocking Tales* by James Fenimore Cooper and the westerns of German writer Karl May, Reiss emigrated to America to paint portraits of Indians. Impressed by Reiss’s vivid and authentic portrayals of Natives, Great Northern chairman Louis Hill hired him beginning in 1927 to focus on the Blackfeet, whose reservation is adjacent to Glacier on the east and who played a key role in railway advertising for the park. Hill purchased dozens of Reiss’s paintings and until 1958 featured them on railway calendars, playing cards, train menus, blotters and promotional brochures. A number of the portraits on display were used in those promotional efforts.

## PERSONALITIES AND EVENTS

### George Snyder

George Snyder was a local settler and entrepreneur who arrived at Lake McDonald in 1895 and built the first hotel at the current site of Lake McDonald Lodge. Using the Homestead Act to claim ownership of the government-held land at the site, he constructed a small log hotel building just east of the creek that now bears his name, operating it for some 10 years. Snyder also purchased a small steamboat to shuttle passengers to his hotel from the end of the road at Apgar, also serving other hotels and homestead properties at the upper end of the lake. His hotel, never an opulent or sophisticated operation, was sold to John Lewis in 1906 and fully redeveloped over the next two decades. No buildings from the Snyder era still remain at the current lodge site.

Relatively little is known about the specifics of Snyder's hotel operation, but Snyder himself proved to be a fairly problematic figure, at least in later years. After selling his property at the head of Lake McDonald, Snyder continued to operate his steamboat and a small hotel near Apgar, running afoul of the park rangers there for operating a saloon and using the government dock to load his steamboat. His career apparently ended in 1923 when the car he was driving hit a Park Service wagon and team. Too drunk at the time to even answer investigators' questions, Snyder received a six-month jail sentence for reckless driving and illegal transportation of liquor, and he never returned to the park.

### John Lewis

Snyder sold the future site of Lake McDonald Lodge to Columbia Falls businessman John Lewis in 1906. In contrast to Snyder, Lewis was a savvy, well-connected and successful businessman, someone able to fully develop and expand the hotel operation in response to the establishment of Glacier National Park in 1910. He owned the first hotel in Columbia Falls and was a Flathead Valley fur trader and land speculator. It was the latter activity which first drew him to Lake McDonald, where he purchased not only Snyder's hotel but other tracts around the lake.

Lewis and his wife Olive arranged for the construction of the current hotel building in 1913-14, and successfully operated it until it was sold to the Great Northern Railway in 1930. Throughout that time, he managed to retain generally good relations with both the Great Northern Railway and the Park Service – in marked contrast to his predecessor.

### Charles M. Russell

The artist Charles M. "Charlie" Russell is one of the best-known and most beloved figures in Montana history, and his western-style paintings are famous throughout the state and beyond. Arriving in Montana as a teenager in 1880, he soon became known for his evocative paintings of Native American and cowboy life, and the vanishing frontier. Today, his major paintings can sell at auction for millions of dollars.

Russell's permanent Montana home was in the town of Great Falls, but he developed a special fondness for Lake McDonald even before the establishment of Glacier Park, purchasing land near Apgar in 1906 and building his summer home there. The property, which he dubbed "Bull Head Lodge," included a good-sized log home and a separate studio building, with a large skylight and a fireplace

occupying nearly an entire wall. He spent considerable time at Bull Head Lodge until his death 20 years later, and the Lake McDonald area was the subject of some of his paintings.

Over the years Russell became good friends with John Lewis, the owner of the hotel now known as Lake McDonald Lodge, and he was a regular visitor there for years. Legend has it that Russell is responsible for the petroglyph-style artwork incised in the concrete of the lodge fireplace, and while this story is usually considered apocryphal, some art historians consider it to be a possibility.

## **Literary visitors and residents**

While Charlie Russell was by far Lake McDonald's most noteworthy regular visitor during its early years, other well-known artists and authors also visited the hotel during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the early visitors was the author Mary Roberts Reinhart, who toured Glacier as a guest of the Great Northern Railway in 1915. She arrived at the lodge after a long horseback trip over Gunsight Pass and was thrilled by the civilized atmosphere, the good food and the beer she found there. Reinhart's trip is recounted in a book now reprinted as *Through Glacier Park in 1915*.

Though he is not well-remembered today, the Kentucky essayist and humorist Irvin S. Cobb was a well-known literary figure of the 1920s and he spent the summer of 1925 living in John Lewis' home at Lake McDonald. Encouraged to visit the park by his friend Charlie Russell, the summer was reportedly an idyllic one for Cobb, and he enjoyed both time at the lake and interacting with the Blackfeet Indians. (Cobb's biography notes that he was made an honorary member of the Blackfeet tribe, with the Indian name "Fat Liar.") In honor of Cobb's Lake McDonald summer, the Lewis home later received the name Cobb Cabin.

Another literary figure who visited Lake McDonald in the early 1920s was the American poet Vachel Lindsay, who traveled to Glacier in 1923 and became completely enamored of the park. He later wrote two books of poetry based on his Glacier travels, including one titled *Going-to-the-Sun*.

## **Inholders and community members**

One of the things that sets Lake McDonald apart from most other National Park hotels is the fact that it isn't isolated from other buildings and people ... it has always been part of a small but cohesive community of summer residents. This is because a small handful of settlers arrived here back in the 1890s, before the area became a National Park and claimed a series of private homesteads around the upper end of the lake. (The Apgar area, at the lower end of the lake, shares a similar history.) Much of this former homestead land remains privately held today, occupied by summer cabins that have often been in the same family for generations. For many years, Lake McDonald Lodge was the center of that community of summer residents ... they'd come to the lodge for social activities, collect their mail at the post office and grab essentials at the campstore.

Among the lake's summer home residents were two men who were among Montana's most influential politicians in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Burton K. Wheeler, who occupied a cabin just past the Lake McDonald ranger station, was a powerful U.S. senator from Montana. In office for 24 years, he was also a third-party candidate for vice-president in 1924. U.S. Senator Thomas J. Walsh owned a large summer home to the south of Wheeler's. He held office for some 20 years, dying just after being appointed U.S. Attorney General.

Other former homesteads near the head of the lake were developed into tourist facilities much in the same way as Lake McDonald Lodge. The earliest is a spot known as Kelly's Camp, almost directly across the lake from the Lodge. A few of the old camp buildings remain today, though most were destroyed by the terrific Howe Ridge Fire in 2018 (see the Timeline). Smaller tourist developments existed just beyond the lodge along the Going-to-the-Sun Road, the last of which closed after the 1978 summer season. The current Motel Lake McDonald, constructed in 1955, was another such property.

Other summer homes are visible right along the lakeshore, both east and west of the lodge. While some of these buildings are now owned by the Park Service, many remain in private hands today, their owners continuing a century of summer tradition.

## **Don Hummel**

When Don Hummel and his newly founded company Glacier Park, Inc. bought the Great Northern's money-losing hotels in December 1960, it was a last-minute decision. Hummel, an experienced concession operator in Lassen and Mount McKinley National Parks, was courted by the railway but reluctant. Only after the railway agreed to a generous financing package did he agree to the sale at the last minute.

Hummel, a lawyer and mayor of Tucson, Arizona, had strong political connections with the Udall family and with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He was first and foremost a very skillful businessman and this made him somewhat of a controversial figure in Glacier Park history. He feuded frequently with the National Park Service and once used his political influence to have the director of the Park Service fired.

He struggled constantly to make Glacier's lodges break even in a short season (about 90 days) and a harsh environment. He was extremely frugal in maintaining the historic buildings and in other matters, often alienating members of his staff. At the same time, though, he was genial to employees outside the work environment and was known to give hitchhiking concession employees rides in his Mercedes.

Hummel spent much of the summer season at Glacier Park Lodge, where the company's general offices were located, but he also owned a cabin on Lake McDonald, located just below the hotel building. (Hummel owned the motel complex privately.) He thus spent considerable time at Lake McDonald every season, and maintained an office in the back room of the coffee shop building.

## **Tragedies and misadventures**

Throughout Glacier's history, the park's human visitors have had uneasy interactions with its resident grizzly bears. Occasionally, hikers were mauled by these powerful and often truculent beasts. But surprisingly, Glacier's first 57 years of history were free of known bear-caused fatalities.

This changed in horrifying fashion on August 13, 1967 – the so-called Night of the Grizzlies. Two GPI concession employees were killed by two separate bears that night, in unrelated attacks at two widely separated backcountry campgrounds. Julie Helgeson, a laundry employee at Glacier Park Lodge, died at Granite Park Chalet, hours after being attacked by a bear at the nearby campground. Michelle Koons, a gift shop employee at Lake McDonald, was killed in her sleeping bag while camped with three companions at Trout Lake.

Both bears were later tracked down and killed, and the incidents encouraged continued change in the way the park attempted to manage human-bear interactions. The tragic events became the subject of Jack Olsen's book, *The Night of the Grizzlies* (1969), as well as a later television documentary.

Grizzly bears have killed several Glacier visitors in the years since, including two other employees of Lake McDonald Lodge. On July 24, 1980, bellman Kim Eberly and waitress Jane Ammerman were attacked and killed by a bear while sleeping in a tent along Divide Creek, just outside the park boundary at St. Mary. The grizzly, which was later killed, had become habituated to eating discarded garbage left by St. Mary residents and visitors.

Other Lake McDonald employees have lost their lives due to hiking and climbing incidents over the years. Concession truck driver Harry Donaghey was killed in a fall while attempting to summit Mt. Stimson in 1981. More recently, Lake McDonald kitchen employee Jakson Kreiser fell and drowned in the Floral Park cirque above Avalanche Lake in 2013.

Many other lodge employees have experienced misadventures during their Glacier summers, though the vast majority returned to the hotel safely, with only a great story to tell!

## LAKE McDONALD LODGE – A HISTORICAL TIMELINE

**1892.** The Great Northern Railway, under the leadership of James J. Hill, completes its line into the Flathead Valley, part of its future main line from the Twin Cities to Seattle. The Great Northern's arrival in northwest Montana brings the first real wave of white settlement into the Flathead Valley and the nearby forests, and the public slowly starts to become aware of the magnificent beauty of the Glacier Park region.

**1895.** George Snyder homesteads the tract of land now containing Lake McDonald Lodge, and builds his first primitive hotel at the site. Snyder is one of a number of homesteaders who claim land near both the head and the foot of Lake McDonald. Most are people who plan to build tourist accommodations for Lake McDonald visitors. A small steamship ferries travelers from Apgar to Snyder's hotel and other lodgings near the head of the lake.

**1897.** The federal government creates the Flathead and Lewis & Clark Forest Reserves – the predecessors of today's Flathead National Forest. The reserves included all the land west of the Continental Divide in today's Glacier National Park. (The portion of the park east of the Divide was part of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation until 1895, when the tribe signed a treaty transferring the land to the federal government.)

**1906.** Snyder sells his homestead land and hotel to John E. Lewis, a Flathead Valley businessman. Realizing its potential, Lewis begins gradually improving and expanding the hotel operation.

**1907.** Lewis builds a row of guest cabins above the lakeshore just east of the hotel. Most of these cabins still exist today, and continue to host visitors (cabins #1-4, 7, 8, and 10-14).

**1909.** A small barbershop is constructed near the hotel. This building later serves as a nurse's station.

**1910.** President William Howard Taft signs a bill establishing Glacier as the country's 10th national park. The Great Northern Railway immediately begins to develop a network of hotels and chalets in and near the park, and to advertise it as a tourist destination. The railway constructs the Belton Chalet at the park's western gateway, but decides not to compete with the established hoteliers along Lake McDonald.

**1911.** Lewis constructs a two-story log building just south of Snyder Creek to serve as a recreation and dance hall. Later known as Snyder Hall, the building served as a men's dormitory for decades, and was remodeled to provide additional guest lodging in 2014.

**1913.** Lewis engages a noted Spokane architect, Kirtland Cutter, to design a large new hotel at Lake McDonald. Construction work on the hotel begins that November, and continues throughout the winter.

**1914.** The new hotel is completed, at a cost of \$68,000; it opens for business on June 14 with a gala celebration attended by 500 people. The hotel is variously called the "Hotel Glacier," "Lewis Glacier Hotel," or simply "Lewis's."

**1914.** The Great Northern Railway completes Sperry Chalet. Regular horse trips from the hotel to the chalet begin and Sperry Glacier continues as one of the park's landmark destinations.

**1915.** Wyoming rancher Howard Eaton takes a party of tourists through Glacier, starting from Glacier Park Hotel (now Glacier Park Lodge). Among them is novelist and *Saturday Evening Post* writer Mary Roberts Rinehart, whose account of the trip, *Through Glacier National Park*, did a great deal to promote Glacier. She returns with her family for a second tour the following year, and writes another book, *Tenting To-night*.

**1916.** Lewis forms the “Glacier Park Land Company” to subdivide and sell summer home tracts along the lakeshore near the hotel. A second subdivision in the hills south of the hotel is also later platted, but few lots are sold.

**1918.** Lewis builds a large new summer home for himself, across Snyder Creek to the southwest of the hotel.

**1918.** Lewis constructs a two-story laundry building and a hydroelectric power plant, both on the south side of Snyder Creek, upstream from the hotel area. These buildings later became the Martin Johnson and Hydro men’s dormitories. Both these buildings were torn down by the Park Service after the 2010 season and the area is now used for Red bus parking.

**1921.** The Going-to-the-Sun Road is completed from Apgar to Lewis Glacier Hotel. The primary access to the site is now by automobile rather than boat, with most guests now entering the hotel through what was originally the back door.

**1922.** The caretaker’s house is built.

**1924.** The Park Service constructs the ranger station at the head of Lake McDonald.

**1925.** The American humorist Irvin S. Cobb rents the Lewis home at Lake McDonald for the summer. The building later became known as Cobb Cabin and served as a woman’s dormitory for many years. Renovated in 2014, it now provides guest lodging.

**1926.** The noted cowboy artist Charles M. Russell dies in Great Falls. Russell owned a home and studio at the opposite end of Lake McDonald and was a frequent visitor to the lodge. An unproven story asserts that he created the petroglyph designs in the lodge fireplace.

**1927.** The auditorium building and Garden Court dormitory are constructed. The auditorium hosts dances, with an adjacent grill serving light meals. Garden Court was named for the large vegetable garden that originally existed just south of the building.

**1929.** The western side of the Going-to-the-Sun Road is completed, to Logan Pass.

**1929.** The Half Moon Forest Fire burns tens of thousands of acres of land in the Lake McDonald area. The land around the head of the lake is spared, but the event helps convince Lewis that it may be time for him to retire from the hotel business.

**1929.** The Park Service constructs the Mt. Brown Fire Lookout.

**1930.** J.W. (“Captain Billy”) Swanson constructs the tour boat *DeSmet* for the Glacier Park Transport Company. The vessel has offered summer cruises on the lake from a dock at the hotel ever since, wintering at an enclosed boathouse near Apgar.

**1930.** Lewis sells his hotel and property to the Great Northern, part of a complicated financial transaction orchestrated in part by the Park Service. The Great Northern begins operating the hotel as part of its larger Glacier concession and it is renamed “Lake McDonald Hotel.”

**1932.** Completing the 1930 business arrangement, the hotel and land are transferred to Park Service ownership, although the Great Northern continues to operate the facility.

**1932.** The full length of the Going-to-the-Sun Road is completed, and it formally opens for visitor traffic the following season.

**1934.** President Franklin Roosevelt visits Glacier Park and tours the Going-to-the-Sun Road, the only sitting president to ever do so.

**1934.** An addition to the hotel’s second and third stories adds six lake-view rooms to the building, replacing lobby windows and a balcony area.

**1936.** The first new White Motor Company buses arrive. These are the famous Red buses still on the road in Glacier today.

**1936-37.** Because of increased automobile traffic, the Going-to-the-Sun Road is routed slightly away from the hotel complex, and the former road alignment becomes an access lane for the hotel. The large boulevard parking area and turnabout are added, and the stone bridges across Snyder Creek are built.

**1937.** The campstore building is constructed, taking advantage of the increased number of automobile travelers passing through the area.

**1942.** Tourist traffic to Glacier Park – and the hotel – declines dramatically due to America’s entry into World War II.

**1943.** The Glacier Park Hotel Company, the Great Northern subsidiary that runs the railway hotels and chalets in Glacier, is renamed the Glacier Park Company.

**1943-45.** All the railway’s lodges and chalets in Glacier are closed because of wartime rationing and austerity. The facility now known as Rising Sun remains open for the handful of travelers.

**1946.** Glacier’s hotels and auto camps reopen, though a number of the old chalet facilities in the park are demolished.

**1949.** A never-implemented Park Service plan proposes replacing the hotel and cabins with new lodging units at the same site.

**1950s.** The Park Service considers internal plans to demolish the entire lodge complex and replace it with a new motel-type development near Apgar.



**1955.** Frank and Laura Stuart, owners of a private inholding just east of the lodge, construct and begin operating a private motel, one of at least three small, competing lodging facilities operating near the hotel. The Stuart motel is purchased by Don Hummel in 1966 and begins to be operated as part of the Lake McDonald Hotel complex, though it remains privately owned.

**1957.** The Great Northern hires the Knutson Hotel Company to renovate Glacier's lodges and to manage them for three years. It invests \$3 million in the renovations, hoping that this will attract a buyer. The hotel is renamed Lake McDonald Lodge in 1958, and much of the building's first floor is reconfigured. The lobby area is updated and a gift shop and cocktail lounge are added. New furnishings and other improvements arrive.

**1960.** The Great Northern sells its Glacier properties to Don Hummel, the mayor of Tucson, Arizona and operator of park concessions at Lassen Volcanic and Mt. McKinley. Hummel operates the concession under the name "Glacier Park, Incorporated," (GPI) and trims 400 jobs from the workforce to eliminate the operating deficit.

**1962.** A Union 76 gas station is added to the lodge complex, across the access road from the campstore. The service station later closes and the Lake McDonald post office moves from the campstore into the gas station building in about 1980. The post office itself finally closes in 2016.

**1964.** The greatest flood in Montana's history causes extensive damage in the Flathead Valley and Glacier Park. Snyder Creek overflows its banks at Lake McDonald, destroying the west end of the hotel dining room and causing substantial other damage. The main highway bridge from West Glacier into the park is destroyed, as is a stretch of the Great Northern Railway. Weeks of effort are required to reopen the park and its hotel facilities.

**1965.** A new Coffee Shop building is completed at the lodge complex, replacing the old soda fountain attached to the auditorium building. (The former soda fountain space became an employee lounge, and is now the Creekside Reading Room.)

**1967.** In Glacier Park's first bear-caused fatalities, two GPI employees camped at separate locations are killed by two different bears on the same day – the infamous "Night of the Grizzlies." One of the victims was Michelle Koons, who worked at the Lake McDonald Lodge gift shop and was camping with friends at Trout Lake.

**1968.** To solve an employee housing shortage, GPI trucks ten guest cabins from the Swiftcurrent Motor Inn development to Lake McDonald, and combines them with new construction to create five small employee dorms: Boys 1 and 2, Girls 1 and 2, and the Jammer Dorm. Girls 1 and 2 remain at their 1968 locations today, while the other three buildings are now part of the new employee housing complex.

**1968.** Marv Twamley begins working as the maintenance engineer at the Lodge. He and his wife Beth live at the caretaker's house year-round through 1985 – almost certainly the longest winter residents of the Lake McDonald area and among of the hotel's longest-tenured employees.

**1976.** Glacier is named a World Biosphere Reserve, with its diverse ecological niches for 70 mammal species and 260 species of birds.

**1976.** Lake McDonald Lodge is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**1978.** The Inwood Motel and Greve's Cabins, small competing businesses just east of the lodge along the Going-to-the-Sun Road, close after this season.

**1980.** Two Lake McDonald Lodge employees are killed by a grizzly bear while camped near St. Mary, just outside the park. The victims are Kim Eberly, one of the hotel bellmen, and dining room waitress Jane Ammerman. In a strange coincidence, Eberly's older brother had been mauled by a bear the year before while working in Glacier for the Park Service.

**1981.** Don Hummel sells Glacier Park, Inc. (GPI) and the concession rights in Glacier to Greyhound Food Management, Inc. (GFM). GPI is reorganized to operate the lodges for GFM, which later is acquired by the Dial Corporation and then by the Viad Corporation, its present owner.

**1983.** George H. W. Bush, then serving as Ronald Reagan's vice-president, vacations at Fish Creek and pays a visit to Lake McDonald Lodge.

**1987.** Lake McDonald Lodge is designated a National Historic Landmark.

**1989.** The Park Service completes a \$1.2 million renovation of the Lodge building. The lobby is restored to an appearance near its original, and the portion of the dining room damaged in the 1964 flood is recreated with historic materials. A totem pole is added near one of the lodge entrances, recreating an artifact from the Lewis era.

**1995.** Glacier and Waterton together are designated as a World Heritage Site.

**1999.** Scenes from the feature film *Big Eden* are filmed at the lodge auditorium building, and at an inholder summer cabin nearby.

**1999.** Glacier's famous red buses are pulled from duty due to safety issues. The buses return to service in 2002 and 2003 after extensive rebuilding by the Ford Motor Company.

**2003.** The Coffee Shop is renamed Jammer Joe's Grill and Pizzeria after red bus driver "Jammer Joe" Kendall, known for his genial attitude and informative tours..

**2003.** The Robert forest fire burns along Howe Ridge and the north shore of Lake McDonald, and the Lodge complex is evacuated as a precaution.

**2004.** Landscaping changes around the complex include construction of the long concrete ramp from the lodge building to the lakeshore.

**2010.** Construction begins on a large new employee dormitory, east of the coffee shop building; it is completed in time for the 2011 season. A second dormitory and an employee dining facility are added nearby three years later, moving employee housing away from the Snyder Creek floodplain. This gives Lake McDonald Lodge the most modern worker housing in the park.

**2013.** In a competitive bidding process, the Park Service awards Glacier Park's lodging and transportation concessions to the Xanterra corporation. The following year, operating as "Glacier

National Park Lodges,” Xanterra assumes control of Lake McDonald Lodge, Many Glacier Hotel, the motels, and the Red buses from GPI, the unsuccessful bidder. The Lake McDonald motel facility, outside the concession and on private land, remains a GPI property and begins independent operation as “Motel Lake McDonald.” GPI also continues to operate the gateway facilities: Glacier Park Lodge, St. Mary Lodge, and the Prince of Wales Hotel.

**2014.** Lake McDonald Lodge celebrates its centennial, with a 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party on June 14.

**2014.** GPI acquires West Glacier Village and Apgar Village Lodge. In 2017, GPI rebrands as the “Glacier Park Collection” under the Pursuit label, standardizing branding of the Viad collection of North American hospitality operations.

**2015.** Xanterra completes a project to modernize the lodge and cabin rooms.

**2017.** Additional rehabilitation work takes place at the lodge, including the replacement of some exterior logs.

**2017.** The Sprague fire ignites in the mountains southeast of the lodge on August 10, and continues burning for the rest of the season, greatly disrupting travel in the McDonald Valley. Heavy smoke forces the lodge to close early for the year, on August 30. The fire destroys the historic Sperry Chalet dormitory building the following day. A firefighter deployment protects the lodge throughout September, although the fire ultimately does not approach the immediate lodge area.

**2018.** Workers complete the first phase of a two-year project to fully restore the Sperry Chalet dormitory, returning it to its historic appearance and function. The chalet reopened in 2020.

**2018.** The Howe Ridge fire is ignited by a lightning strike on the evening of August 11, and the threat caused by the fast-moving fire forced the evacuation of Lake McDonald Lodge the following evening. The fire quickly burns to the north shore of Lake McDonald and beyond, destroying some 27 buildings there, including nearly all of the historic summer homes and outbuildings at Kelly’s Camp. The lodge remains closed for the remainder of the summer, the second consecutive year nearby wildfires shortened its season. The west side of the Going-to-the-Sun Road is also closed for much of August and September due to the fire activity.

**2020.** The worldwide Coronavirus pandemic dramatically impacts the operation of tourist facilities in Glacier. All Blackfoot Indian Reservation land was closed to visitor use for the summer, and the park’s east-side entrances were closed as well. This meant that most of Glacier’s historic accommodations – including Many Glacier Hotel and Glacier Park Lodge – remained closed for the season. Lake McDonald Lodge was able to open, although only registered guests were allowed to enter the hotel. The dining room, bar, and coffee shop remained closed and only take-out food service was provided.

**2021.** Coronavirus travel restrictions begin to ease and the east side of the park reopens to visitors. Pandemic concerns and staff shortages continue to impact park concessionaires, with indoor food and beverage services still unavailable.

**2021.** In an attempt to mitigate impacts of increasing visitor numbers to the park, Glacier establishes a reservation system for travelers on the Going-to-the-Sun Road during the peak summer season.

**2022.** The Park Service undertakes a major project to replace the electrical, telephone, and sewer lines that serve the lodge area, which run under the Going-to-the-Sun Road. This necessitates the closure of the road for the 2022-23 winter season.



*For additional history ...*

We hope that this handbook has whetted your interest in the history of Glacier National Park and its historic hotels! For a more detailed and beautifully illustrated history of the Glacier lodges, see *View With a Room* by Ray Djuff and Chris Morrison, available in the lodge gift shop.

# The Lake McDonald Lodge story ...

Lake McDonald Lodge is a remarkable place ... the oldest concession operation in the park, a National Historic Landmark in an amazing setting. Here are some links to tell you a little more about the Lodge.

1. Here's a short YouTube video with some info on the Lodge's history, including the voices of some of its former employees:



2. This video shares the history of the park's development in general, and the hotels that have operated here for over a century:



3. To learn even more — and be ready to answer guests' questions — here's a history of the Lodge that's worth a read:



These materials were prepared for you by the **Glacier Park Foundation**, a group founded by former concession employees in 1980. Check out [www.glacierparkfoundation.org](http://www.glacierparkfoundation.org) to learn more.