Early Fishing at Waterton Lakes

WHEN CARDSTONIANS GO FISHING--SOMETHING HAPPENS
AT LEE'S TENTED VILLAGE, SEPT. 1909, WATERTON LAKES
WRITE W. O. LEE & SONS, CARDSTON, ALBERTA

BY VIC BERGMAN

"This is what I have seen in my dreams; this is the country for me."

- John George "Kootenai" Brown, 1865

Table of Contents

Early Fishing at Waterton Lakes

WHEN CARDSTONIANS GO FISHING--SOMETHING HAPPENS
AT LEE'S TENTED VILLAGE, SEPT. 1909, WATERTON LAKES
WRITE W. O. LEE & SONS, CARDSTON, ALBERTA

Lee's Tented Village postcard – 1909

Waterton Lakes was one of the first places in southern Alberta to become a tourist attraction. Outdoor enthusiasts, including anglers, were visiting the area even before it became established as a park (Kootenay Lakes Forest Reserve), in 1895. The deep, cold mountain lakes and crystal-clear streams teemed with trout, eager to take a fly or lure.

Kootenai Brown – Adventurer Extraordinaire

Perhaps the best-known resident, and angler, living at Waterton Lakes during the 1880s was frontiersman, John George "Kootenai" Brown. Born in Ireland in 1839, Brown came to Canada in 1862, after serving briefly in India as an ensign in the British Army's Eighth Regiment of Foot. Upon his arrival in Victoria, British Columbia, Brown prospected in the Cariboo gold-field for several years, before serving as a constable at Wild Horse Creek. By the summer of 1865, he was once again prospecting for gold, eventually making his way to Kootenay (Waterton) Lakes, in what is now southwest Alberta. Brown's visit to the lakes had a profound effect on him and he vowed to return here one day to live, saying, "This is what I have seen in my dreams; this is the country for me."

Kootenai Brown at Red River, Manitoba – ca. 1866
Glenbow Museum NA-1315-28

Brown moved on to Duck Lake, Saskatchewan and then Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, where he became a whisky trader. In the summer of 1867, he took a job with a pony express company, carrying mail for the United States Army in the Dakota Territory. The company went bankrupt and the following spring (1868) the army hired Brown to serve as a carrier, guide, and interpreter. Four weeks later, while carrying despatches and mail, he was captured by Sioux chieftain, Sitting Bull, and his warriors, but managed to escape with his life.
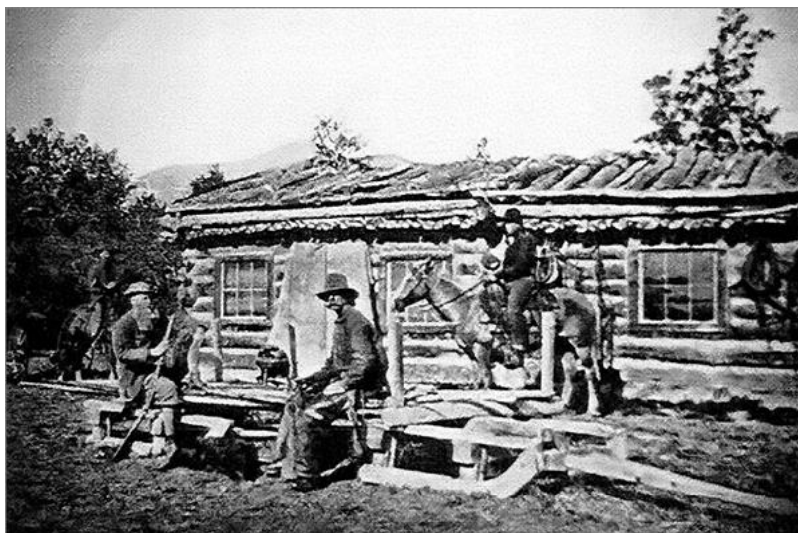

Sitting Bull – ca. 1883

Brown continued to work for the U.S. Army until 1874. Afterwards, he went on to take part in some of the last buffalo hunts on the western prairies, then took up the life of a wolfer and trader.

In May 1877, Brown killed a man in a quarrel over an alleged debt and was jailed at Fort Benton, Montana. In November, he was put on trial for murder at Helena, the territorial capital, and was acquitted, then released. The trial and acquittal marked a turning point in Brown's life. At 38 years of age, after spending six months in prison, he was a free man. Brown would go on to make the most of his newly gained freedom.

The Call of the Mountains

John George Brown returned to Canada and settled with his wife, Olivia, and their two daughters, in a cabin at Kootenay (Waterton) Lakes. He opened a trading post, which also served as headquarters for his guiding expeditions. To sustain his family, he hunted, fished, and earned money by guiding some of the early tourists visiting the area.
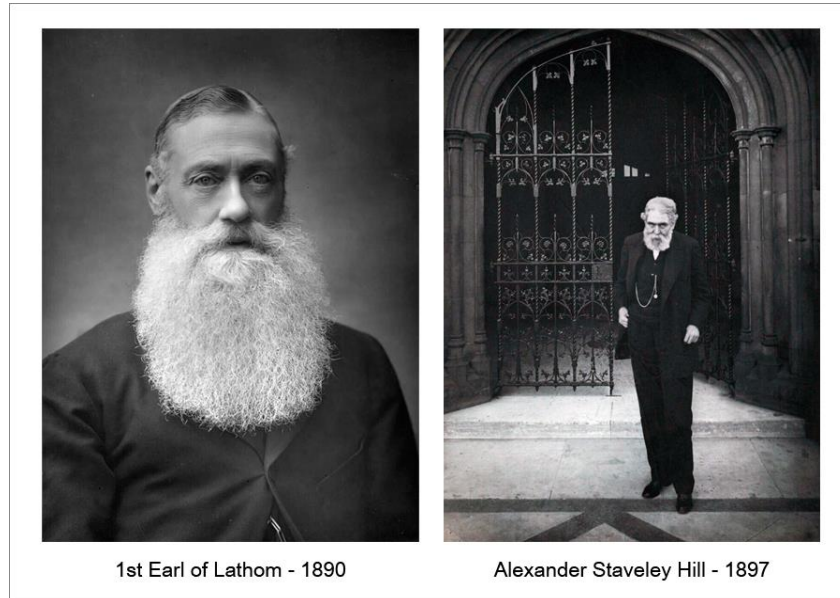
The September 23, 1882 issue of the *Fort MacLeod Gazette* contained a lengthy article on "Kootenai Lakes," where it reported favorably of J.G. Brown's ability as a fishing guide, saying, "There is a boat on the lake and horses can be procured from the guide, Mr. Brown. For trolling and fly-fishing there is abundant tackle and all the necessary requisites, and parties visiting his place are always sure of their fish, as Mr. Brown can catch them where all others fail."

John George "Kootenai" Brown's cabin – 1883

Guiding Cattle Barons

Among Brown's guests in 1883 were the 1st Earl of Lathom and Alexander Staveley Hill, a prominent lawyer and Member of the British Parliament. Both men were shareholders in the Oxley Ranche Company, north of Fort Macleod.

1st Earl of Lathom - 1890   Alexander Staveley Hill - 1897

Alexander Staveley Hill was also a traveler and author. In his 1885 book, *From Home to Home: Autumn Wanderings in the Northwest, in the Years 1881 - 1884*, he describes in great detail his experience with Kootenai Brown. By this time, John George Brown was known throughout the region as "Kootenai Brown." He would carry this name until the end of his life.

While sitting around a campfire at Brown's cabin along Lower Kootenay Lake, Hill and the Earl of Lathom arranged a two-day trip in the mountains, with one day of fishing, at a rate of five dollars a day. One of the places Kootenai Brown guided his British clients was Cameron Falls, where Hill took photographs and the earl caught a small trout. In Hill's book, he describes Cameron Falls as one of the prettiest waterfalls he had ever seen.

Cameron Falls – 1883
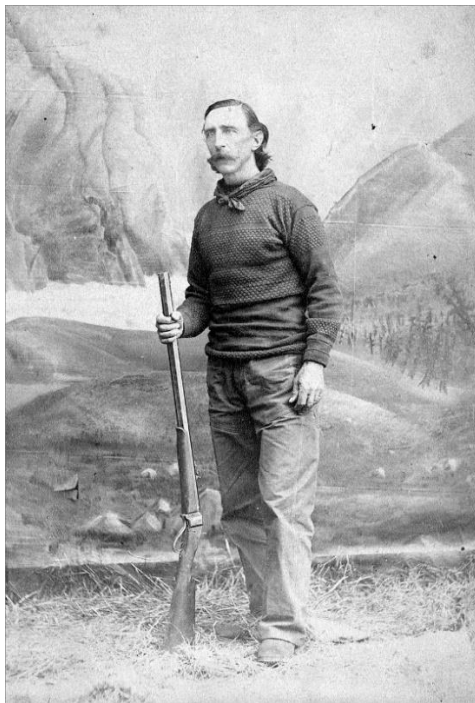

Cameron Falls – 2017

Over the years, Kootenai Brown would periodically visit Fort Macleod, making the 96-kilometre (60-mile) trip on horseback or by wagon. Sometimes, he would bring a load of freshly-caught fish to sell or barter in town. On one occasion, he delivered 300 pounds of whitefish and according to the local newspaper, the *Fort MacLeod Gazette*, he had "little difficulty in disposing of them." Another time, he came to town with a 30-pound lake trout.

Packer & Scout

Kootenai Brown would also work as a packer and guide for the North-West Mounted Police. During the North-West rebellion in 1885, Brown served as Chief Scout with the Rocky Mountain Rangers. In 1897, he was employed as a packer for a company servicing the Canadian Pacific Railway when it pushed its way through Crowsnest Pass.
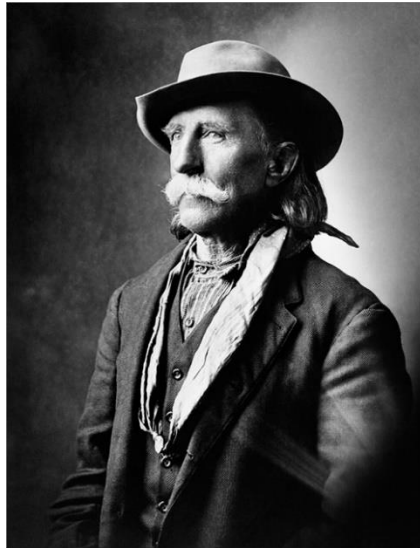

Rocky Mountain Rangers at Medicine Hat, Alberta – 1885
John George "Kootenai" Brown on the far right
Courtesy the Galt Museum & Archives 19760217095

Studio portrait of John George "Kootenai" Brown – 1890
Courtesy the Galt Museum & Archives 19770160000

Park Official

In 1901, Brown was appointed fishery officer for Kootenay Lakes Forest Reserve. In 1910, at age 70, he became the park's first Superintendent, a position he held until August 1914. John George "Kootenai" Brown died on July 18, 1916, and was buried along the western shore of Lower Waterton Lake, near the site of his first homestead.
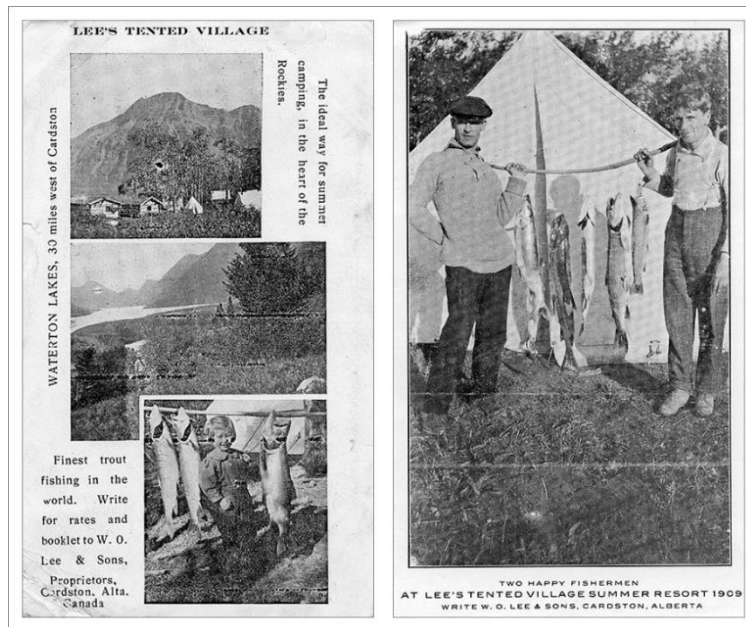

Kootenai Brown – ca. 1910
Glenbow NA-678-1

In 1909, the name Kootenay Lake Forest Reserve was changed to Kootenay Lake Forest Park. In 1911, it was officially renamed Waterton Lakes National Park. In 1932, Waterton Lakes National Park and adjoining Glacier National Park in Montana became the first International Peace Park in the world.
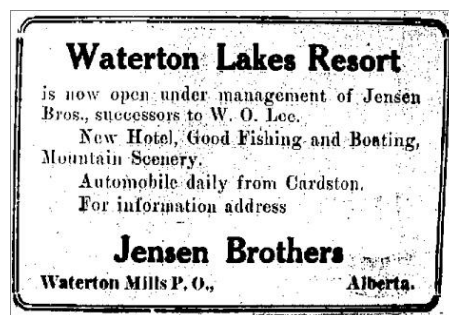

Kootenai Brown's grave – 2017

Lee's Tented Village

In 1910, approximately 2,000 tourists visited Waterton Lakes. Some of these visitors would have stayed at Lee's Tented Village, operated by W.O. (William Orme) Lee & Sons of Cardston. W.O. Lee also owned a livery, an undertaking business, and a tent manufacturing company in Cardston. In 1908, he set up two tent camps, one at Waterton Mills by Maskinonge Lake, and another at Linnet Lake, to accommodate the ever-increasing number of tourists coming to the park. The company provided fully-equipped tents, along with rowboats for fishing.

Lee's Tented Village postcards – 1909

The Lees promoted their tent camps through newspaper advertisements, circulars, and postcards. Following W.O. Lee's death in 1911, his business in Waterton Park was taken over by Christian F. Jensen Jr. and his brothers, Enoch and Joseph, of Aetna, Alberta.

Jensen Brothers advertisement
Lethbridge Daily Herald – August 3, 1911

Southern Alberta's Beauty Spot

The February 27, 1909 issue of the *Lethbridge Daily Herald* featured an article on Waterton Lakes by writer, D.H. Elton, extolling the park's attractions – its magnificent mountain peaks and scenery, the abundant wildlife, and the excellent fishing that was available. Of the fishing, Elton writes, "Every stream that flows into the lake furnishes its quota of mountain trout – those speckled beauties that delight and sometimes torment the specialist with the 'fly hook.' "

Elton goes on to describe the best way to catch lake trout, saying, "Trolling in a row boat with a spoon hook is the method employed in catching the lake trout and they are often so large that it becomes necessary to row to shore and drag the finny fellows up the pebbly beach out of their native element."

Newspaper article: Southern Alberta's Beauty Spot – 1909
(click image to read D.H. Elton's article)

Other Angling Entrepreneurs

In 1909, Bert Riggall and John "Jack" Hazzard opened a similar operation as Lee's Tented Village on Upper Waterton Lake, where today's townsite is located. They offered tent accommodation, meals, and boat rentals. The Riggall - Hazzard partnership lasted one year, and in 1910, Riggall and his new partner, James Cyril Watmough, started another tent camp nearby, where Cameron Creek enters the lake. They built four rowboats and rented them to guests. The fishing was very productive and advertised as, "a fish a minute."

In 1911, Jack Hazzard opened a hotel in Waterton, catering to anglers and other tourists visiting the park. Rates at the Hazzard Hotel in 1918 were advertised at $2.50 per day.

Hazzard Hotel advertisement
Lethbridge Daily Herald – July 13, 1918

During the summer of 1916, Cal Hunter and Harry C. Lee, son of the late W.O. Lee of Lee's Tented Village fame, were operating their own summer tent village in the park. Lee had also leased the *Gertrude*, a 30-metre-long (100-foot) steam paddle wheeler, moored at Emerald Bay. The steamboat was built in 1907 at Maskinonge Lake to serve a sawmill that was located there. For a brief time, the boat had also been used for sightseeing excursions on Waterton Lakes. Lee and Hunter would convert the boat into a floating restaurant and tea room.

Hunter & Lee Floating Cafe
Lethbridge Daily Herald – July 27, 1916

By the following summer (1917), it appears Harry C. Lee was the sole proprietor of the tent camp and cabin rentals. He also rented boats and sold fishing tackle.

Harry C. Lee advertisement
Lethbridge Daily Herald – August 11, 1917

In 1918, the *Gertrude* was scuttled in the bay, where it remains to this day. In November 1918, Harry C. Lee contracted the Spanish flu and died. His wife, Emily, would continue to operate the family's cabin rental business in Waterton Park for a number of years.

VISIT WATERTON
ALBERTA'S BEAUTY SPOT
See her in her lovely Spring costume—the loveliest time of the year at the park.

LEE'S CABINS   ARE IN READINESS NOW

PHONE OR WRITE FOR RESERVATIONS FOR THE WEEK-END
ADDRESS ALL INQUIRIES TO
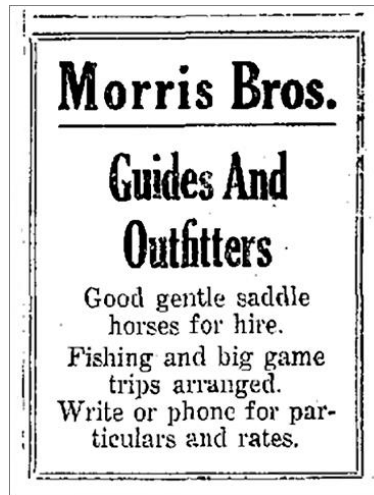MRS. EMILY LEE, WATERTON PARK, ALTA.

Lee's Cabins advertisement
Lethbridge Herald – June 2, 1924

On July 8, 1920, Mrs. Elenora Hunter (Cal Hunter's wife) caught the biggest lake trout ever taken from Waterton Lakes. The fish weighed 23.4 kg (51 lb. - 2 oz.) and was caught at the narrows between Upper Waterton and Middle Waterton Lake. Elenora was using a 16-foot bamboo pole with 15 feet of line. In 1929, the Hunters opened a summer tent camp, restaurant, and rowboat rental operation at Cameron Lake. Brook and rainbow trout had been introduced to this lake several years prior.

Catching a fish at Cameron Lake
Photo by W.J. (William John) Oliver appeared in
the 1930 Pocket Guide to Waterton Lakes National Park
Glenbow NA-4868-139

During the mid-1920s, the Morris Brothers, and other outfitters such as Jack Bevan, were providing trail rides in the park and advertising fishing trips.
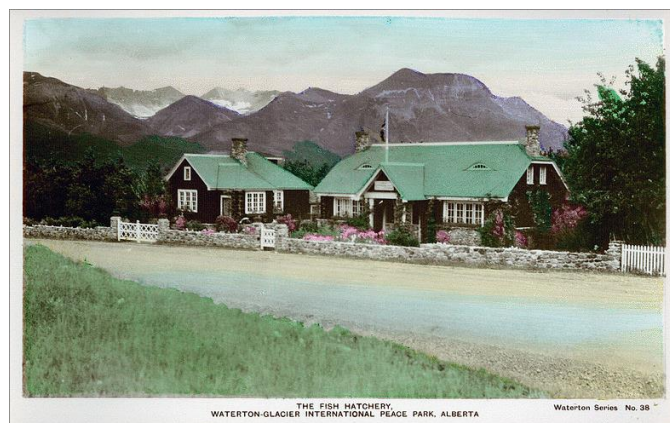

Morris Brothers advertisement
Lethbridge Herald – July 17, 1925

Stocking Trout

The first fish stocking in the park occurred in 1922 when 30,000 eastern brook trout were delivered from a Bozeman, Montana hatchery, and planted at the headwaters of Waterton Lakes. Over the next few years, other lakes and streams would be stocked with brook and rainbow trout.

A fish hatchery was built in Waterton Park in 1928 and the first hatchlings (82,000) from the facility were transplanted in the park's waters in September 1929. The following year, approximately 1.4 million fry and fingerlings from the hatchery were planted in 74 different creeks, rivers, and in 13 lakes, from the international boundary, north to Claresholm, and west to the Livingstone Gap. The hatchery remained in operation until 1960.

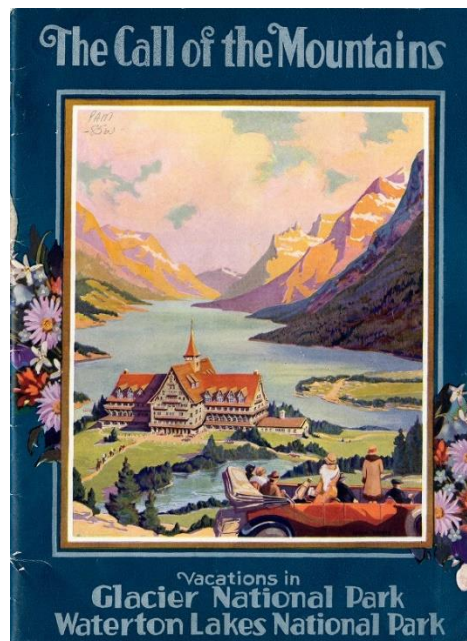Waterton Fish Hatchery – constructed in 1928

Prince of Wales Hotel

Waterton Park and the surrounding area would attract anglers for decades to come. Improvements to roads leading to the park in the 1920s, and the popularity of automobiles as a mode of transportation, brought even more visitors to Waterton.
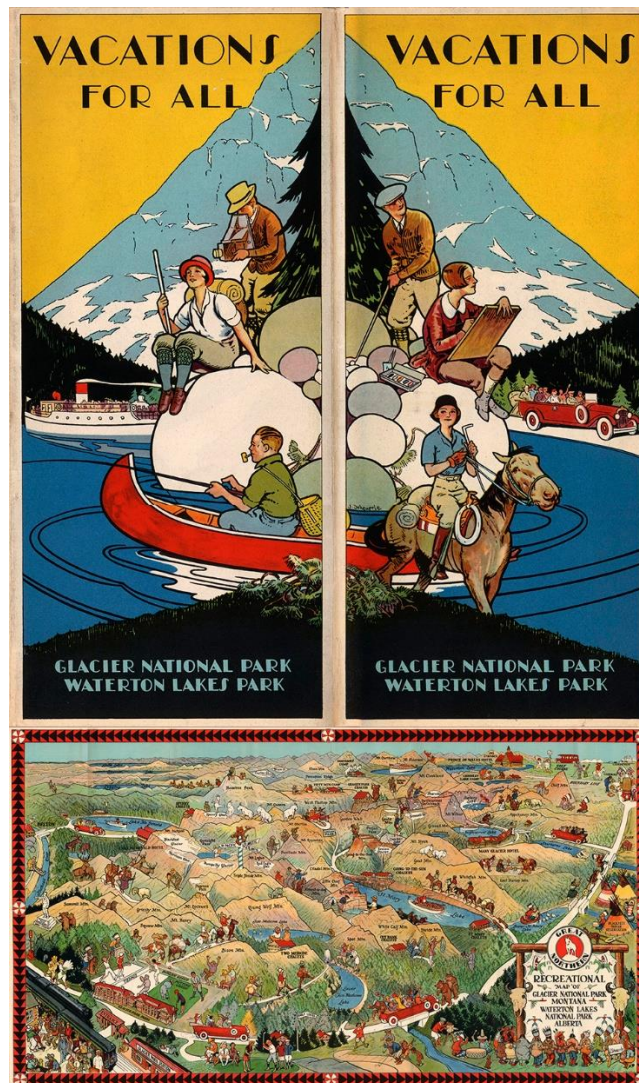

Prince of Wales Hotel – 1927

The opening of the Prince of Wales Hotel in 1927 marked the beginning of a new era in Waterton Park. Built by the Great Northern Railway company, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, the luxury hotel would draw international attention to the park and become its most recognized landmark.

The Call of the Mountains Brochure – 1927

The railway company promoted Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks through numerous posters, brochures, and maps. In 1927, they published a 48-page brochure, *The Call of the Mountains: Vacations in Glacier National Park - Waterton Lakes National Park*, featuring an artist's illustration of the Prince of Wales Hotel on the cover.

Vacations for All Recreational Map of Glacier & Waterton National Parks – ca. 1930s
(click image of map for larger view)

Final Thoughts

The Prince of Wales Hotel was one of the places I visited with my family during our first trip to Waterton Park, around 1965. I don't recall going inside the hotel, but remember my father taking our picture outside. On subsequent visits to the park, we would always stop at the outdoor fish rearing ponds near Cameron Falls, where I would toss ants, beetles, and any other bugs I could find crawling on the ground, into the ponds. The trout would go crazy for them.

Playing in Waterton Park with my sisters & brother – ca. 1965

Waterton Park was the first place I would go fishing, upon receiving a fly rod and reel from my parents. It was during the summer of 1972 and our family was camping in the park. My father drove me to Cameron Falls, so I could try out my new fly-fishing equipment. I scrambled down to the creek and started casting into the deep pool at the base of the falls, in hopes of catching a trout for supper.

I was new to fly-fishing and my casting technique left a lot to be desired. Despite my best effort, the only thing I managed to catch that day was myself, when an errant cast resulted in the fly becoming embedded above my eyebrow. It occurred in plain view of a group of tourists who were observing and taking pictures from the bridge behind me. Hoping no one had noticed what happened, I reached up and nonchalantly plucked the fly, with its barbed hook, from my forehead, then returned to camp with my father.

At the time, I knew little of the park's long and rich fishing history, let alone anything of Kootenai Brown, Bert Riggall, and others, who were among the first to cast a line in its waters. That knowledge would come, in time. Meanwhile, I, too, was listening to the call of the mountains.

Float-tube fishing at Cameron Lake – 1982

Article References & Credits

Kootenai Brown: His Life and Times, 1839-1916 by William Rodney

Prairie Grass to Mountain Pass: History of the Pioneers of Pincher Creek and District by the Pincher Creek Historical Society

High on a Windy Hill: The Story of the Prince of Wales Hotel by Ray Djuff

Bert Riggall's Greater Waterton: A Conservation Legacy (Beth Towe, Editor)

Online Resources

Parks Canada – Waterton Lakes National Park
National Park Service – Glacier National Park, Montana

From Home to Home: Autumn Wanderings in the Northwest, in the Years 1881, 1882, 1883, 1884 by Alexander Staveley Hill

A History of Canada's National Parks by W.F. Lothian

Where the Mountains Meet the Prairies: A History of Waterton Lakes National Park by Graham A. MacDonald

Fish Hatchery & Rearing Ponds in Waterton by Chris Morrison
Horse Stables in Waterton by Chris Morrison

Waterton-Glacier Views
Hazzard: A Jack of All Trades by Frank Goble (July 16, 1997)
How the Mighty Have Sunk by Shari Narine (August 26, 1998)

The Boundary
Sunken Treasure by Kathy Taylor (July 19, 2005)
Waterton's Titanic: The Wreck of the Gertrude
by Benjamin Freeland (August 15, 2008)

Digital Newspaper Archives (Fort MacLeod Gazette, Lethbridge Daily Herald)
University of Lethbridge Library Digitized Newspaper Collection
Manitoba Historical Society – Kootenai Brown in the Red River Valley
Dictionary of Canadian Biography – John George "Kootenai" Brown
Internet Archive Digital Library
Archives Canada

Photos

Glenbow Museum Archives:
John George "Kootenai" Brown NA-1315-28
John George "Kootenai" Brown NA-678-1
Catching a fish at Cameron Lake NA-4868-139

Galt Museum & Archives:
Mountain Rangers at Medicine Hat, AB – 1885
Studio portrait of John George "Kootenai" Brown – 1890

National Portrait Gallery – London:
Edward Bootle-Wilbraham, 1st Earl of Lathom
Alexander Staveley Hill

From Home to Home – Alexander Staveley Hill:
Kootenai Brown cabin – 1883
Cameron Falls – 1883

Wikimedia Commons:
Sitting Bull cabinet card by photographer, David F. Barry
Bismark, Dakota Territory – ca. 1883

Montana Memory Project:
Call of the Mountains – brochure cover (Great Northern Railway – 1927)
Prince of Wales Hotel (Call of the Mountains brochure – 1927)
Vacations for All – pamphlet and map (Great Northern Railway – ca. 1930s)

Postcards:

Lees Tented Village – VB Collection

Waterton Park Fish Hatchery – Peel's Prairie Provinces
Photo by Joseph Frederick Spalding – The Camera Products Company