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## Stevens Finds Marias Pass

### A Feat of Railway Pioneering Through the Rockies

On the night of December 11, 1889, the winds howled through the canyons and defiles of the Rocky Mountains in the Blackfoot Indian country, while on the Continental Divide a lone engineer tramped back and forth through the snow in the darkness fighting for his very life against a temperature 40° below zero. He must live, for he had a momentous message. He had found a way to the Pacific, and knew it to be the best railroad location across the great mountain barrier! John F. Stevens had discovered Marias Pass.

Only those who have suffered can truly sympathize. To appreciate accomplishment in full measure, one must have achieved. Even to comprehend in part one must have had comparable experience or be possessed of a well-trained imagination. Pictures and narratives help to understanding; but one who has always rolled about on wheels in cushioned luxury over rails or well-built highways cannot know the self-reliance, the exertion, the privation, the fatigue, the triumph, the joy of one who on foot made his way through trackless forests, across rugged mountains, in winter's freezing winds, over treacherous snow, alone, as did John F. Stevens and other engineers of his generation.

For city-bred youths of the Twentieth Century who would get some glimmer of appreciation of the deeds of explorer, pioneer, and railroad locating engineer, the Nation has reserved a few areas where samples of experience can be collected in reasonable safety. Notable among these is Glacier National Park, in the northwestern corner of Montana. On the south this remarkable area is limited by tributaries of the Marias River flowing toward the Gulf of Mexico and by the Flathead River and a tributary, Bear Creek, draining toward the Pacific Ocean. The gorges occupied by these mountain streams, joining, gash the Rockies from east to west and form Marias Pass. Its existence was suspected for a generation before it was found by John F. Stevens, then working with James J. Hill, locating the extension of the Great Northern Railway to the Orient; for the Pacific littoral was not the boundary of Mr. Hill's vision westward. Late in 1889, Stevens was chosen to make the reconnaissance across the mountains.

About 1850, the Federal Government was sufficiently impressed with the importance of the country west of the mountains and the westward trend of settlement to undertake explorations to find feasible locations for railroads on a southern, a middle, and a northern route to the Pacific. Isaac I. Stevens (apparently no relation to the family of John F.), was commissioned to explore the northern route. In 1859, he submitted a final report to the Secretary of War on expeditions under his leadership made in 1853, 1854, and 1855.

Isaac Stevens and his associates crossed the Rockies by many passes, some of which had been known since the explorations of Lewis and Clark in 1805. In September, 1853, he got from Little Dog, a prominent chief of the Piegan tribe, "a very particular description of the Marias Pass we were in search of."

It had been much used by the Indians, but some superstition led to its abandonment. His report indicates that he thought this pass would prove to be one of the best in the Rockies.

Then came the Civil War with its blighting interruption of the country's development. When railroad building on a great scale was taken up, routes to the south had preference. Thus, it happened that Marias Pass was not really known by white men until another Stevens came into that country thirty-six years later, having been born in the year that the elder Stevens talked with Chief Little Dog.

John F. Stevens explored the mountains for many miles so thoroughly that he is reported to have said, "I know those mountains well enough to make a model of them." Consequently, when he surmounted the summit of Marias Pass and took its altitude, he knew he had found the best location through the mountains. It was better than the passes 125 miles south, which had been preferred for 80 years. It shortened the projected line of the Great Northern more than 100 miles. Its altitude is but 5 200 ft. above sea level, affording without a summit tunnel a grade of only 1% westbound, and 1.8% eastbound. Its use by the Great Northern Railway put that road "on the map" so far as long-haul, through business was concerned.

So extensive a reconnaissance kept Stevens in the field until long after the advent of winter. So forbidding are the mountains at that season that he could find no one to accompany him on his last expedition except a half-breed Indian who had recently killed a man over in the Kalispel Country and had taken sanctuary with the Blackfeet. This tribe of Indians occupied territory which Stevens would explore. Afoot and carrying packs they set forth. When about five miles from the top of the pass, the Indian gave out. Clearing the 2 ft. of snow from a little patch of ground, Stevens built a fire and left his aide. He pushed on alone, for the days were short. He went far enough through the pass and down on the west side to prove that he was in the Pacific Ocean water-shed and had not been deceived by a side canyon leading by a hidden turn back to the eastern slope. He spent the night alone on the summit, without sleep, tramping to and fro to keep from freezing. When he returned, the fire was out and the Indian almost frozen. Stevens himself had passed through the most trying night of his experience, but a wonderful physique bred in Maine and toughened by many hardships on the plains and among the mountains had survived the fatigue and bitter cold. He took his man to a settlement in the foothills and then made his way to Helena, where the then Chief Engineer was. He submitted a full report of his discovery and stated that in his opinion he had found the best railroad location possible across the Northern Rockies.

Next July, a grateful corporation will place near the spot where Stevens spent that night, at the summit of Marias Pass, an heroic sized bronze statue of the Stevens of that eventful December of 1839.