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Rocky Mountain Express

By Unknown

NARRATOR:

William Cornelius Van Horne
was born on a dirt farm
in Illinois.

As a young man,
he was given the task
of building the longest,
toughest wilderness railroad
on the face of the earth,
a task many considered
impossible.

Pa'?

They once roamed the earth
by the tens of thousands.
Their whistles spoke
of distant places,
of adventure and romance.

Abandoned for decades,
what memories
might still be evoked,
what spirits conjured up
from an age left behind
so long ago?

(fire crackling, roaring)

(engine revving)

(steam hissing)

(engine clicking)

(whirring)

(machinery squealing)

Their crews considered them
living things,
each with a unique personality.
Some were cranky and difficult;
others, good natured
and spirited.

2816 has been resurrected
by the Canadian Pacific
in an extraordinary attempt
to illuminate history itself,
to summon the spirits
of the past.

They were explorers, engineers,

surveyors and guides.
They traveled by boat and foot,
packhorse and raft.
They passed through landscapes
the likes of nothing else
on earth.
They fell through ice,
slipped from cliffs,
died in rockslides
and were lost in rapids.
They followed countless rivers
and many a promising route
that ended nowhere.
For years, they searched
for an ideal passage
across the vast mountain
wilderness of western Canada.
(wind whistling)
Some worked too late
into the fall
and were ambushed
by snowstorms.
Trapped in makeshift shelters,
they struggled
to survive winters
that could last
over six months.
After 20 years of exploration
spanning hundreds
of thousands of square miles,
at least 40 men had died
and still no ideal route
had been found
through the mountains.
The province of British Columbia
had joined Canada
on the condition that it would
be connected to the east
by a transcontinental railway.
In desperation, the federal
government began construction
beside a small church
on the edge of the Fraser River
in the spring of 1881.

(train bell ringing)

(whistle blowing)

(engine chugging,

wheels squealing)

(engine chugging)

(bell clanging)

Departing from Vancouver,

what lies ahead is

one of the longest,

toughest railways on earth.

An extraordinary,

3000-mile journey

for a locomotive

that first turned a wheel

over 80 years ago.

(whistle blows)

(chugging rapidly)

(whistle blowing)

(chugging rapidly)

The first few miles along

the Fraser River flood plain

were easy going

for the builders,

at least,

until the line turned north

into the jaws

of the Fraser Canyon.

Hard granite walls towering

3,000 feet above the river

brought construction

to a painful crawl

that would last

over six years.

(whistle blowing)

10,000 men worked

the Fraser Canyon

in the early 1880s.

6,500 were Chinese.

(explosion thunders)

(horse neighs)

They blasted night and day,

drilling tunnels

into the granite rock,

carving roadbeds on the sides

of vertical cliffs.

Working with hand tools
and black powder,
they averaged barely
five feet a day.

In these canyons, six men died
for every mile of track laid,
most of them Chinese.

We can only glimpse
the courage of these men
in the extraordinary work
they left behind.

(whistle blowing)

(engine chugging)

(wheels clacking)

Pa'?

Pa'?

By 1882,
construction moved out
of the Fraser Canyon
and east along
the Thompson River
as the railway climbed inland
up to the central plateau
of British Columbia.

Here the land becomes arid
and the rock gives way
to softer sandstone.

It made for easier
construction,
but this barren desert
absorbs little water.
Torrential rains erode
and sculpt sandstone cliffs
into hoodoos that can collapse
into mudslides,
and bury the line.

Pa'?

Here, engineers and tracklayers
encountered
a new set of obstacles
that could be neither
filled, nor bridged,
nor tunneled through.

When construction crews
arrived at these lakes,
they fully intended
to bridge them and continue.
But when they dropped weights
attached to 400 feet of rope,
they never reached the bottom.
The lakes would be simply
too deep to cross.

Trains would have to take
the long route around--
as they do to this day.
(engine chugging rapidly)
Where the ground was flat
and the grades easy,
General Manager Van Horne
pushed hard
to make up for time and money
lost in the canyons
and mountains.

They were Canadians, Americans,
British, Europeans, and Asians.
(men chatting, tools clanking)
They froze in bitter cold
and toiled
in fierce summer heat,
eaten raw by insects.
Yet, with bare hands,
they laid as many as six miles
of track every day.

In 1882,
nearly 500 miles of track
were laid in a single season--
a world record and a source
of enormous pride
for the track crews.

Pa'?

Pa'?

(whistle blows)

Pa'?

At the railroad town
of Revelstoke
the canyons, lakes and deserts
of the interior lay behind.

Relatively easy going,
compared to the Selkirk
and Rocky Mountains
looming ahead.
General Manager Van Horne
was an amateur geologist,
a talented artist,
and an accomplished violinist.
Though he was best known
as an all-night,
scotch-drinking poker player.
Perhaps his greatest
gamble, however,
lay in the route chosen
east of Revelstoke.
Van Horne, the CPR,
and the government
were anxious to keep
powerful American railroads
from moving
into Southern Canada.
There were two routes through
the mountains being considered:
a northern route
recommended by the surveyors,
and a southern route
considered much more difficult
by virtually everyone.
A fateful, perhaps reckless,
decision was made,
by the railway and government,
to gamble
on this southern route,
where no passes
were yet known to exist.
An American surveyor
by the name of A. B. Rogers
had convinced many,
including Van Horne,
that he could find
a southern pass
through the Selkirks.
The future
of the Canadian Pacific

was now in the hands
of two Americans.
One, a brilliant leader
and gambler,
the other, a stubborn surveyor
considered wildly eccentric.
Pa'?

(water rushing)

Rogers and his guides only
traveled in the spring
and summer months up the western
face of the Selkirks.
Ominously,
they found no evidence
that humans of any kind
had ever ventured amongst
these almost vertical slopes.
In the summer of 1882,
when Rogers declared
he had discovered
a viable railroad pass,
he did not fully appreciate
the nature of the beast
that would come
to bear his name.
When engineers and tracklayers
arrived the following season,
at the foot of the Selkirks,
they were appalled
by what Rogers
had declared a pass.
They would have to build
massive looping trestles
to give the railway distance
to lessen the steep climb
up the mountain face.
For the men working here,
it was a bad omen.
The trestles were frail,
and prone to fire in the summer
and avalanches in winter.
They were soon replaced
with stone pillars,
and eventually,

those too were abandoned.
(steam hisses)
In February of 1910,
the chief engineer
wrote to Van Horne:
"There has been
a terrible accident:
"many men died last night in the
valley of the Illecillewaet.
The rest are afraid."
In the early years,
this short stretch of track
would threaten
the very survival
of the entire railway.
Some thought Rogers
had been more than eccentric.
His ego had led him to promote
a route of total madness.
Railway surveyors seek
the lowest possible route
through the mountains,
like the rivers
they often parallel.
In Rogers Pass,
they used side canyons
to build loops,
lengthening the line
to give trains more distance
to climb the mountain.
To lower the grade further
would require tunnels,
at vastly greater expense.
In 1914, work began
on the five mile
Connaught tunnel,
the longest in North America.
This would reduce the grades
on the old route
and hide the line
from relentless avalanches.
The nine-mile
Mount McDonald tunnel
followed in the 1980s,

further reducing the grades.
It would take the CPR 100 years
and 14 miles of tunnels
to finally escape beneath
the original line--
the folly that was Rogers Pass.
(train whistle blowing)
(engine chugging rapidly)
(steam hisses)
(whistle blows)
The deep cliffs and valleys
of the eastern face
of the Selkirk Mountains
were no easier
for the builders.
As trains begin the long, steep,
downhill journey,
they will cross a series
of great bridges--
at the time of construction,
the highest in the world.
At the eastern foot
of the Selkirks,
the great steam trains
often paused for service
at the railway town of Golden.
The Rocky Mountains lay ahead.
The inhabitants
of railroad towns
once lived to serve
the appetites
of the steam locomotive.
Water, grease, oil,
coaling, running repairs,
day and night,
winter and summer...
preparing them to operate
at the limit of their power.
The locomotive engineer
was the folk hero
in the Age of Steam.
(whistle blows twice)
(engine chugs slowly)
On the modern railway,

there are two possible routes
for eastbound trains.
If the shorter main line
is blocked or damaged,
trains can be diverted
on an easier route south,
out of the mountains.
By 1900, the railway sought
to relieve the pressure
on the main line,
and the terrible grades ahead,
constructing an alternate track
south, along the Columbia River,
through a pass called
the Crow's Nest.
But to an already long journey,
it would add hundreds of miles.
(gentle acoustic guitar
intro playing)

FEMALE VOCALIST:

If you miss the train I'm on
You will know
that I am gone
You can hear
the whistle blow
A hundred miles
Hundred miles,
a hundred miles
-(whistle blows)
- A hundred miles
A hundred miles
You can hear
The whistle blow
A hundred miles
Lord, I'm one
Lord, I'm two
Lord, I'm three
Lord, I'm four
Lord, I'm 500 miles
From my home...
500 miles, 500 miles
500 miles,
500 miles

Lord, I'm 500 miles
From my home...
Not a shirt
On my back
Not a penny
To my name
Lord, I can't
Go a-home
This a-way...
This a-way, this a-way
This a-way,
this a-way
Lord, I can't
Go a-home
This a-way...
If you miss the train
I'm on
You will know
that I am gone

(fading out):

the whistle blow...

NARRATOR:

easy southern route was opened,
the ultimate nightmare occurred
on an April night in 1903.
(deep rumbling)

At 4:

had just passed through
the mining town
of Frank, Alberta,
when much of Turtle Mountain
collapsed.
The train's brakeman,
Sid Choquette,
made his way in total blackness
across rocks the size
of apartment buildings
in a frantic attempt
to stop an express train
coming from the east.
At the last possible moment,

he stopped the Spokane Flyer
bound for Washington...
...saving the lives
of hundreds of passengers.
He received an award
from the railroad of \$25.
Roughly 90 souls
on the edge of town
were not so lucky.
They remain buried
under the slide to this day.
(wheels clacking)
There would be no easy route
through these mountains
after all,
but there is an easy stretch
along the Kicking Horse River
before the greatest
challenge of all--
the towering
Rocky Mountains ahead.
Pa'?

The railroad town of Field
is at the foot
of the steepest stretch
of track in the Rockies.
In 1886, the Baldwin Locomotive
Works of Philadelphia
designed a special series
of locomotives
to help move heavy trains
up and down the CPR's Big Hill.
These Consolidation-class
engines
were enormously successful,
except for number 314.
Descending the Big Hill in 1899,
314 ran away and jumped
the track, killing its crew.
Rebuilt and renumbered,
but this time
climbing the Big Hill,
it blew itself to pieces,
killing another crew.

Repaired again, it worked
up and down the Big Hill
for 30 more years,
all the time feared
and despised by its crews.
(engine chugging slowly)

Pa'?

(chugging faster)

The 20 miles ahead remain,
to this day,
among the most challenging
stretches of track
in all of railroading.

Pa'?

(chugging slows)

(metallic screech)

Pa'?

20 years

after the railway was opened,
the terrible grades
on the Big Hill were reduced
by one of the most famous
engineering projects
in the history of railroading--
the spiral tunnels.

The tunnels give the line
additional distance
to climb the steep western face
of the Rocky Mountains.

Through both an upper
and lower tunnel,
long freight trains cross
over themselves
by looping around
inside the mountain.

(engine chugging)

(hammer clanging)

The Last Spike was driven
at Craigellachie
in the fall of 1885--
an extraordinary accomplishment
for the tiny new country
of Canada.

(crowd cheering)

But soon after
transcontinental trains
began running from sea to sea...
(train whistle blows)
...it was apparent the railway
had profoundly miscalculated
one significant detail--
Winter.
(wind gusting, ice crackling)
(ice crackling, rumbling)
Virtually no one
had ever ventured
into Rogers Pass in the winter,
and for good reason.
It had among the deepest
known snowfalls in the world--
as much as 60 feet
in a single season.
(rumbling)
On February 28, 1910,
a gang of 60 men were working
to clear an avalanche
in the pass.
At midnight,
another slide came down
the opposite side of the valley
and killed all but one.
Most of the men were Japanese.
At least 250 men would die in
avalanches in Rogers Pass alone
in the first few years
of operation.
When construction began,
few could have imagined
the terrible sacrifices
the southern route would entail.
The new railway
and the country itself
hung on the thinnest of threads.
The mountain sections were
ruinously expensive to operate
and the company teetered
on bankruptcy.
It would take a miracle to save

the Canadian Pacific Railway.
A miracle did occur.
Just over the top
of the Continental Divide,
on the east face
of the Rocky Mountains,
was a place the surveyors called
the most beautiful on earth.
They named it Banff.
Pa'?

The toughest route
through the mountains
was also the most spectacular.
This simple irony
would help save the railway
and perhaps the country itself.
A national park system
followed the railway.
Banff, Lake Louise,
Jasper, Glacier, Yoho.
News of a wilderness Shangri-La
spread around the globe,
and the company had a thriving

new business:

Van Horne built
a series of great hotels,
including the most famous,
at Lake Louise...
...followed by a fleet
of legendary passenger trains
to bring in the tourists.
(bell clanging)
From the summit
of the Rocky Mountains,
the big-wheeled
Hudson locomotives ran down
the long, fast mountain slope
to the prairie below.
A hundred miles an hour
was routine
for the great express trains
in the Age of Steam.
(easy, bright jazz playing)

Pa'?

As the railway grew and
prospered, the country followed.

Trains brought in settlers,
opening up the land.

They hauled produce to market,
they built towns and cities.

(whistle blowing)

They took soldiers away
to war...

...remembered

by those left behind
by the sound of a lonesome wail.

(train whistle blows)

Pa'?

Van Home's railway grew
into a vast network.

The great express trains
flowed day and night
across the high grass prairie,
the granite shores

of Lake Superior,
the rich farmland
of the St. Lawrence Valley,
and finally down

to the seaport of Montreal.

(bell clanging)

(clanging continues)

Van Horne completed
the impossible railroad
in half the time
required by the contract.

The son
of an American dirt farmer,
he rose to become
one of the greatest figures
in all of Canadian history.

(birds chirping)

But here in Rogers Pass, in
the valley of the Illecillewaet,
the legend of Van Horne
and his railway
might have had
a much different ending.

Their names are worn from wood
and stone and lost forever.
They were young and strong.
With bare hands they endured
unimaginable hardship.

Pa'?

The route chosen
was nearly impossible,
yet they had faith in the future
and they found a way.

We know them only by the railway
and the extraordinary country

they built:

Canada.

(bell clanging)

(train whistle blowing,
echoing into distance)