

THE WAGON WHEEL MYSTERY.

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By: Bob Jamieson

This story begins, as all good stories do, around a campfire, at last light, deep in the evening shadows of the Rocky Mountains....

High in the Rocky Mountains, far from any road, there is a quiet pass over the continental divide. Few people go there anymore. But 175 years ago, it was a busy place. It was our Canadian equivalent of the Oregon Trail. Now it is just a windy, lonely place, home of ravens and mountain goats. But it is also a forgotten part of Canadian history. It was the way west in 1841.

Many years ago Cody Tegart, from the Tegart family that guided in the Palliser River areas for decades, told me a story about his older brother Larry coming into camp (when Cody was about 10 years old) and telling a story about finding the remains of wooden wheels high in one of the passes at the head of the Palliser River. Then Les Parsons, another guide from further south, chimed in with another story, about Art Hearn. Art was a logging supervisor, (gone now also, unfortunately) who laid out the logging plans for the north fork of the Palliser River, now called the Albert River in the 1960's. The Albert River is just south of Whiteman's Pass and the south end of Banff National Park. One fall, after the leaves had fallen off the alder on the slides, he was in a helicopter, looking around up in the pass between the Spray River on the Alberta side, and the Albert River, on the British Columbia side, when he saw what looked like a pile of wagon wheels, up high in the pass.

So, if these folks were not hallucinating, where on earth could these wheels have come from? Could these wheels date from the James Sinclair parties of 1841? Unlikely, but...

The Sinclair party was the first movement of Metis or European people over the Rocky Mountains. If these wheels could be found it would be a major historic find for Western Canada. And here is why. The migration of Europeans into western Canada and the Rockies was very different from what occurred in the better known covered wagon caravans that travelled the Oregon Trail in the US west. We had a much more formidable barrier to cross than they did. And the story is far more complex, and more interesting. But let us begin at the beginning.

In 1841, the Hudson Bay Company and the British Empire were well established in western Canada and down into Oregon west of the divide, with multiple trading forts through much of the interior plateau. In that year the only large permanent settlements in North America were far to the east except for the metis communities in the Red River valley in Manitoba, and far to the south, in St. Louis, New Orleans, Santa Fe and various settlements in Spanish California. About that time however, the lower Columbia River basin and the Willamette Valley, i.e. "the Oregon", as it was called, became the focus of attention, when it was realized there was a mild climate and good land there. And the land was free, if you didn't mind a wee bit of a walk to get there.



The major trade routes of the Hudson Bay Company are shown in purple above. The routes established on the US side, by boat to Ft. Benton in Montana and via the Platte to south pass and Oregon are shown in red. The pink line shows the route taken by the Sinclair party.

In **1841**, the senior management in the HBC convinced James Sinclair, a well-educated (Univ. of Glasgow, class of 1826), half native, half Scottish trader from Red River; that a group of Métis should move from Red River (Winnipeg today) to the Columbia River valley in Oregon, to establish a permanent British claim there. Sinclair was a fascinating character. He spent his life bouncing between allegiances to the Métis he lived with, with the company, and his Scottish/empire origins. He was the only half-breed person in that era with connections into the HBC and with an education, so he effectively became a respected “opinion leader” in that community.

Here was the deal.

“On their arrival at Puget Sound the company should furnish houses, barns and fenced fields, with fifteen cows, one bull, fifty ewes, one ram, and oxen or horses, with farming implements and seed. On the other part, it was agreed that the farmers should deliver to the company one-half the crops yearly for five year; and at the end of five years one-half of the increase of the flocks”.

Source

Thus, in **1841**, the first significant migration of settlers to the west in North America took place, with the 121 Métis people of the Sinclair expedition, who walked across Canada to

do so. They were way ahead of their time, at least for Canada. Similar migrations did not occur in western Canada until the late 1800's (cattle ranchers from the US and UK into southern Alberta) and homesteaders who came into Alberta and Saskatchewan after 1900.

It was quite a journey and one of the least known adventures in the settling of the west, either in the US or Canada.

Things got brewing a few years earlier in **1827**, when the first few US settlers showed up in the Willamette Valley. At that time it was "British" territory. In the following years, dozens of books and lectures proclaimed Oregon's agricultural potential, tweaking the interest of American farmers. The first overland immigrants to Oregon, intending primarily to farm, came in **1841** when a small band of 70 pioneers left Independence, Missouri. They arrived in Oregon at the same time that Sinclair's party arrived, in the fall of **1841**. These American settlers followed a route blazed by fur traders, which took them west along the Platte River through the Rocky Mountains via a low elevation pass called South Pass in Wyoming and then northwest to the Columbia River. In the years to come, pioneers came to call the route the Oregon Trail. They travelled by wagon all the way. Wagons were not an option on the route through Canada. In **1842**, a slightly larger group of 100 pioneers made the 2,000-mile journey from Missouri to Oregon. The next year, the number of emigrants skyrocketed to 1,000. The sudden increase was a product of a severe depression in the Midwest combined with a flood of propaganda from fur traders, missionaries, and government officials extolling the virtues of the land available in Oregon. Farmers dissatisfied with their prospects in Ohio, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee, hoped to find better lives in the supposed paradise of Oregon. The migration in **1843** effectively decided the issue. Some 1,000 men, women, and children climbed aboard their wagons and steered their horses west out of the small town of Elm Grove, Missouri. The train comprised more than 100 wagons with a herd of 5,000 oxen and cattle trailing behind. The migration of **1844** was smaller than that of the previous season, but in **1845** it jumped to nearly 3,000. Thereafter, migration on the Oregon Trail was an annual event, although the practice of traveling in giant convoys of wagons gave way to many smaller bands of one or two-dozen wagons. (source)



South Pass and the Oregon Trail today.



Whiteman's Pass trail, looking southwest into BC.



Covered wagons, the mode of transport on the US side.



Red River carts, the Canadian equivalent.

However, when George Simpson talked James Sinclair into his journey to Oregon, in **1841**, it was anyone's game. The Sinclair party, the British/HBC attempt to settle Oregon and retain control didn't work; they were a decade late and a dollar short. And we did not have a pass where wagons could use on the Canadian side.

And by the time they got there, on foot and horse, the politics had changed. John Flett was one of the members of the party. Below is John Flett's recollection of what confronted them when they arrived.

“There we met Sir George Simpson, Peter Skeen Ogden, John McLoughlin and James Douglas; and there Sir George informed us that the company could not keep its agreement. As I remember, this was the substance of his speech: 'Our agreement we cannot fulfill; we have neither horses nor barns nor fields for you, and you are at liberty to go where you please. You may go with the California trappers; and we will give you an outfit as we give others. If you go over the river to the American side we will help you none - very sickly. If you go to the Cowlitz we will help you some. To those who will go to the Nisqually we will fulfill our agreement.' Of course we were all surprised and hurt at this speech. After some discussion the party divided, some going to California, several families to the Cowlitz Prairie, some to the Willamette valley, and the rest to Nisqually, where we arrived November 8, 1841, having traveled nearly two thousand miles without the loss of a single person, while three children were born on the way”.

source

It was, of course, not the first, or the last time, that Canadian corporate interests screwed the Métis. However, they got a bit of payback a few years later when a referendum was carried out, asking settlers in Oregon if they wanted to be Americans or British. Most of the Métis settlers voted to join the US, not Canada and the British Empire.

But politics aside, it was one hell of a journey.

There are four sources of information on this journey. George Simpson, who came west in the same year, kept a journal and mentions meeting with these folks in the “Red Deer hills” in Alberta and again in Oregon. He described parts of their journey. John Flett, who was on the first journey, was interviewed late in his life in Oregon. John Campbell came over with the second expedition and also recorded his recollections late in life (source) And finally; the journals of the various members of the Palliser Expedition, 10 years later, recorded some elements of the story.

Here is what we know about their journey in **1841**. They skirted the Blackfoot lands on the plains by following the North Saskatchewan to Edmonton. In this first journey, they apparently left their red river carts at Edmonton and built pack saddles and proceeded south along the mountains to Devil's Peak (just north of the Ghost River) and went through the gap just to the south into the valley now occupied by Lake Minnewanka. They then went through Carrot Creek to present day Canmore and then climbed up through the gap south of town that leads to the Spray Lakes. Not simple with 121 people, kids and probably 250 head of horses and oxen. They then proceeded up the Spray Valley, along the edge of the old Spray Lakes (now flooded by the Spray Lakes reservoir) and up to the meadows on the Upper Spray River valley. It is assumed by most authors that they went up through what we now call Whiteman's Pass, one of the passes along the south edge of Banff National Park. But the records we have only describe their entrance into the mountains and

their arrival at Kootenai House (near Invermere) in the Columbia Valley. It is difficult to discern exactly which pass they used. There are strange anomalies in the record which leads to some head scratching if you know that country. All we really know is that they left Canmore area in July and got to Kootenai Fort at Invermere 9 days later.

However, historian Wendy Aitkens, pointed out to me that one of the advantages of a Red River cart was that everything but the wheels could be built from “country” materials (wood, buffalo hide). The wheel hubs were likely the most difficult to build, or rebuild on the trail. So they may have taken the carts apart and packed the wheels, or the wheel hubs, over the mountains, thinking they could rebuild the carts on the other side. Early travelers such as this party could get to the edge of the mountains at Morley, with Red River carts, without major problems, except at river crossings. And if they could get over the mountains and into the main valley of the Columbia and Kootenay, where the forest was more open, they could have travelled quite a way south and west with wagons. Good thinking, if they could have carried the wheels over the divide. However, red river cart wheels would have made for a tough packing job, one wheel on each side of a horse, since they were almost 5 feet/2 m. tall. They would have made a lousy load to pack but would have been doable. There is no historic evidence that they did so, but perhaps, just perhaps; they did load the wheels onto oxen or horses and hauled them as far as the divide, before realizing they had to abandon them.

So, exactly which passes did they use? There are actually several passes that one can use with horses, or on foot, in this portion of the continental divide. So why Whiteman’s Pass? It is the most direct route from Morley to Invermere. It may well have been cut out a few years earlier by HBC crews, trying to connect Kootenai Fort at Invermere, to Old Fort at Morley. Or more likely, it was the easiest route to use in terms of having to cut out the trail with an axe. Or maybe it was a foot trail that just got used over the years before 1700, and then was adapted to horse use, even with the downside of the lack of grass on the west side. On the map, Whiteman’s Pass is the most direct route, (see below) but the most direct route is not necessarily the best, the fastest or the most logical, when you are on a horse.

If one actually goes up into this country and looks around, as I did in August of 2016, one realizes that Whiteman’s Pass, though an option; may not have been the pass they used. Palliser Pass and Leman Lake/Albert River passes seem like better options. And this is where the wagon wheels were apparently found.

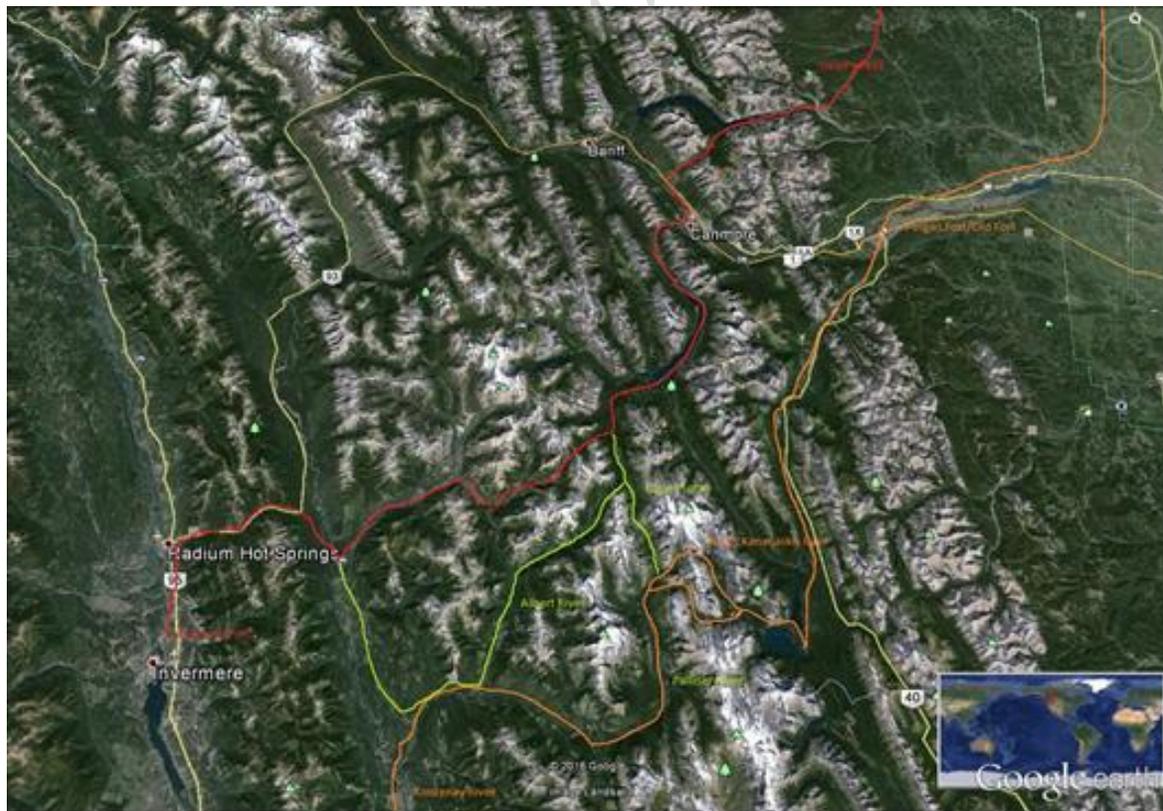
So there we have it. Two trips, with red river carts, that apparently were abandoned somewhere in Alberta. Or, did one party or the other attempt to carry the wheels of their wagons, on oxen, up to the passes they used, and then abandon them? If they did so, and we could find those wheels, 180 years later, it would be a major historic find for Canada.

Even if it is just a “outfitter story”, that is, in itself, a fascinating story. How would this legend have been passed down from across generations, at campfires high in the Rockies? Old outfitters reading the old journals and then passing the stories on, slightly revised, (well, ok, a whole bunch revised...) to young packers and cooks coming up in the business? If so, it is a great story in itself.

And finding the wheels might tell us which pass they actually used...

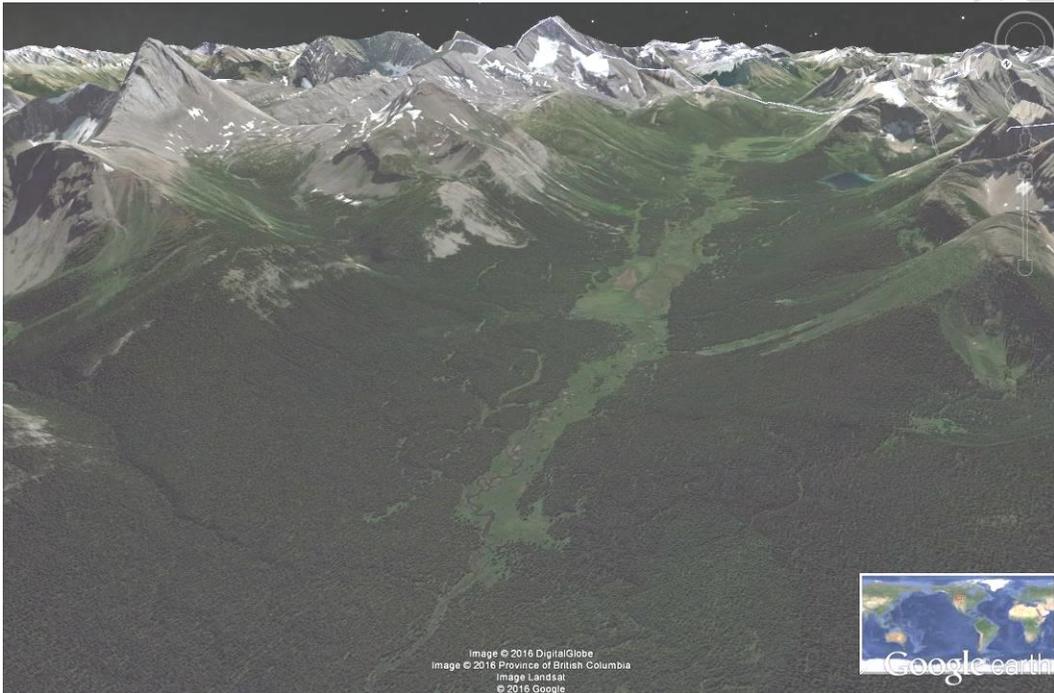
A few things jump out. One is that we need to remember that parties in that time had to cut their way with axes and maybe a cross cut saw. No chain saws. So the best routes were those with the least amount of down timber. The other is that the best pass would be the one that had good horse grass and water along the way, along with enough flat ground for 120 people to camp. From this perspective, the passes were not the problem. The problem was getting through the timber at lower elevations on either side of the divide. This was in the post little ice age era, so there would have been lots of timber. A few fires would have helped. One fire makes things worse, with down timber, but two or three fires in a valley over a decade or two would clean out the down timber, and reduce the number of tree seedlings growing. The main factor however, would have been the presence of grass for their stock. The Upper Spray River valley is a great place for horses, on the east side; the routes on the west side are more of a problem. Keeping their stock fed would have been a major problem, especially on the Cross River/Whiteman's Pass route. The Albert and Palliser routes are better, with slide paths and some valley bottom meadows.

So here are the options, and the passes they may have used. I have indicated in red (below) what we assume is the route taken in 1841, given what we know from the historic record. The green lines are the routes they could also have taken. The yellow line is the route taken by the second Sinclair party in 1853, but that is another story.



Map showing the possible routes used by the Sinclair party in crossing the divide.

So what would this country have looked like to Sinclair as they made their way up the Spray River valley? Apart from the Spray Lakes dam and lakes, most of this country in Banff NP and is pretty much unchanged since their time. When they got around the old Spray Lakes they were only a few miles in the timber before they came into one of the most beautiful high elevation meadow systems on earth. They would have stopped to let the oxen and horses graze, maybe killed a few elk for dinner and then likely sat by the creek and enjoyed the view. It would really have been something for this bunch of folks from the Red River valley. Think of this. Ahead of them lay a long open meadow, with a lovely little creek curling through it. And their oxen and horses grazing and sporting around in the meadow. They would have sat by their fire looking south toward an obvious pass far to the south, as in the photos below.



The Upper Spray River valley, from the north. Palliser Pass is at the end of the valley, the valley leading to Whiteman's Pass is the first valley on the right (barely discernable).



The meadows of the Upper Spray, looking south toward Palliser and Leman Lake Passes.

While the main party rested the horses and oxen, I would bet that Sinclair and Bras Croche/Broken Arm, their guide, jumped on their horses and rode ahead up the valley. The Whiteman's Pass valley and trail are up a side valley to the west. If the trail was well used, they would likely have found an obvious trail heading off into that side valley, just below the Spray Valley meadows. But then they would have headed further up the meadow system to what is now called Palliser Pass. It is an easy ride, through lovely meadows, to a group of 4 lakes right in the pass. But then they would have looked down the other side and went "Oh shit". (Or, more likely, the French or Cree equivalent). It is very steep going down the other side. Including one section lower down that is steep, short and real nasty with horses, even today. (We have never found a way around that steep pitch, despite a lot of looking, there is a steep creek on one side and cliffs on the other). But, they would have been able to see nice grassy avalanche paths just down the valley, with more grass for their stock. If they climbed the low hills on the east side of the pass, they might even have seen the gravel bars of the Palliser lower down. That would have looked like easy travelling. As they headed back to camp, they likely made a detour to look at another obvious pass to the west. They would have made their way around Lehman Lake and looked down into Cedar Creek/Albert River. The valley was going the right way, and had some slides, grass and a good camping spot a few km down the valley. There is not as steep a slope down into the Albert as there is in the Palliser Pass. However, the trail along the edge of Leman Lake crosses some very steep avalanche paths and is tricky with a horse. This is the most likely place for the wagon wheels to be, if Art Hearn's story is correct. However, there are problems. The slides are quite wet, with very dense vegetation, made up of subalpine fir thickets (called krumholz) and thick stands of grass, forbs and cow parsnip. All of these

species are indicators of very wet conditions at high elevations. So the chances of wood parts of any kind surviving over 180 years are slim. The vegetation is so thick that you would need to be a few feet from a wagon wheel before you would see it. Unless you were in a chopper, as Art was. The Sinclair party wouldn't have known, but downstream there were stands of big cedar. That section would have been a nasty proposition in the time of the steel axe. However, this pass definitely looks like the way to go west. This might be the actual "Whiteman's Pass". If they chose to go this way, and they had hauled their wagon wheels (or hubs) this far, what Art Hearn saw would make sense.

After looking at these passes, Sinclair and Broken Arm would have returned down the valley and looked up the narrow valley that leads to what we now call Whiteman's Pass. If they rode up that valley (assuming that there was a trail), they would have found a lovely set of avalanche paths and valley meadows just a few km up the valley. It would have been a perfect place to camp and rest, before climbing the pass.



Valley bottom meadows on Whiteman's Creek, looking southwest toward Whiteman's Pass. This is the last good grass on the Alberta side.

Then they need to tackle the actual pass. The pass doesn't look overly difficult from below. However there is a steep pitch, in thick timber, to get to the pass. It would have been interesting to see all of these folks making their way up that steep bit of trail. Today it is a series of short switch backs that likely haven't changed very much over the years. The trail is steep and dangerous enough that I and my horses were sucking wind and paying attention. My horse and I actually took a bit of fall on some ledge rock near the top.

Once you are above the steep portion of the trail, you break out onto a little plateau with a little meadow and two ponds just below the pass.



Small pond on the east side of Whiteman’s Pass, looking south.

Above the ponds it is just a short steep pitch up onto the pass itself. Then the trail starts down into BC. It is good trail down to a small meadow a km or so down on the BC side.

However, here is how Flett remembered it, many years later, at 85, when he was interviewed by a newspaper in Oregon.

“On the 5th of August we reached the summit, and found ourselves on a small plateau. here we saw a huge snow-drift whose melted waters formed three little rills, one running east through a deep cañon, and finding its way through the Saskawatchan into Hudson's Bay, another running southeast into the Missouri, and at last into the gulf, while the third sent its waters through those 'continuous woods were rolls the Oregon.'”

So a bit of artistic license was allowed, even back then. He was a couple of hundred km north of the actual 3 way divide. But this description simply does not fit Whiteman’s Pass. There is no avalanche path on the summit that would provide a “huge snow drift”. It does fit the Palliser/Albert River pass area. At that summit, the Spray River runs back north toward Hudson’s Bay, the Palliser runs south (toward the Missouri perhaps, in his mind) and the Albert runs south and west toward “the Oregon”. There are several avalanche paths in that area that could have provided the “hug snow drift” that he mentions. He does not

mention the lakes in the Palliser and Albert passes, which one would think he would remember.

Lent's description of the descent down the west side of the divide is as below.

As the Cree guide had said, the party followed one of the fine streams taking its rise near the great shining mountain pyramid,¹⁸ which could be seen in the distance to the right of the trail along which the party descended from the height-of-land. The trail then trended south west once more, following this river's northern bank and passing many fine waterfalls of small streams that poured in from the southeast. (Lent p139).

This description could describe both the trail down the Albert River, or the trail down the Cross River, from Whiteman's Pass. It is likely that the great shining mountain was Sharkfin Mountain, which can be seen from both routes, and not Mt Assiniboine, which is further to the north.



Shark Fin Peak, from the Cross river, below Whiteman's Pass.

From the benches of the Kootenay (a much drier and lower elevation valley), they headed north and then west toward what would be known as Sinclair Pass, to get over to David Thompson's fort (Kootenai House) at Invermere. He comments on seeing Olive Lake, the lovely little pond in the pass. It is beside the highway to Radium Hot Springs now. From Thompson's Fort, they then headed south along the Columbia and Kootenay Rivers and on down to Oregon, along trails well established at that point by the fur-traders.

So, which pass did they actually use to get over the divide? The jury is out, unless we find a pile of old wheels. Or more likely, just the wheel hubs. They were made out of oak that just might have survived the decades. It is most likely that they would be found on the toughest parts of the three trails they may have used. This is where serious problems with a heavily loaded horse would have been most likely to occur. These are:

- The steep pitch on the BC side of Palliser Pass.
- The steep slopes on the avalanche paths on the edge of Lemay Lake, in the pass to the Albert River.
- The steep pitch on the Alberta side of Whiteman's Pass. (It is unlikely that the folks that found the wheels got that far north, but one never knows).

In the years following the Sinclair expedition, the pass they used saw further use. A year later, in **1846**, Pierre-Jean De Smet apparently travelled this way, as did British army Lieutenants Henry James Warre and Mervin Vavasour. Again, we don't really know exactly which pass they used. Then in 1857, John Palliser and his crew showed up. They were looking for a route through the mountains for the Trans Canada railway. They travelled many of these passes. But then these lonely passes faded into history. Other passes came into use. So, is there any basis in fact for the wagon wheel story? It is very unlikely. But somewhere in the mountains there just may be some very old bits of wood that would tell us the real story behind one of Canada's great historic events.

Author

Bob Jamieson is a former African game warden, wildlife biologist, horse outfitter and rancher in southern BC. He has spent much of his life in canoes, on horseback and on shank's mare (the two sticks attached to your hips). He was part of the effort, many years ago, to create the Height of the Rockies Provincial Park, which protects part of the area talked about in this story.