

FINAL SEPT 14 2011
ROCKY MOUNTAIN EXPRESS NARRATION

01:00:13:01

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.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN EXPRESS

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

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

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

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

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They were explorers, engineers, surveyors, and guides. They traveled by boat and foot, pack-horse and raft.

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They passed through landscapes the likes of nothing else on earth.

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They fell through ice, slipped from cliffs, died in rockslides and were lost in rapids.

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They followed countless rivers and many a promising route that ended nowhere.

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For years they searched for an ideal passage across the vast mountain wilderness of western Canada.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 eighty years ago.

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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.

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Hard granite walls towering three thousand feet above the river brought construction to a painful crawl that would last over six years.

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Ten thousand men worked the Fraser Canyon in the early 1880s. Six thousand five hundred were Chinese.

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They blasted night and day, drilling tunnels into the granite rock, carving roadbeds on the sides of vertical cliffs.

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

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In these canyons, 6 men died for every mile of track laid, most of them Chinese.

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

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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.

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

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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.

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

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When construction crews arrived at these Lakes, they fully intended to bridge them and continue, but when they dropped weights attached to four hundred 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.

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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.

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They were Canadians Americans, British, Europeans, and Asians .

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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.

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

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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.

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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.

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Perhaps his greatest gamble, however, lay in the route chosen east of Revelstoke.

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Van Horne, the CPR and the government were anxious to keep powerful American railroads from moving into Southern Canada.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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When engineers and tracklayers arrived the following season at the foot of the Selkirks, they were appalled by what Rogers had declared a pass.

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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.

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The trestles were frail, and prone to fire in the summer and avalanches in winter.

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They were soon replaced with stone pillars and eventually those too were abandoned.

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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.”

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In the early years, this short stretch of track would threaten the very survival of the entire railway.

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Some thought Rogers had been more than eccentric; his ego had led him to promote a route of total madness.

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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.

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To lower the grade further would require tunnels at vastly greater expense.

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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.

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The nine-mile Mount McDonald tunnel followed in the nineteen eighties, further reducing grades. It would take the CPR a hundred years and 14 miles of tunnels to finally escape beneath the original line--the folly that was Rogers' Pass.

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The deep cliffs and valleys of the eastern face of the Selkirk Mountains were no easier for the builders.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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The locomotive engineer was the folk hero in the age of steam.

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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.

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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.

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But soon after this easier route was opened, the ultimate nightmare occurred on an April night in 1903.

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At 4:30am, a freight train had just passed through the mining town of Frank, Alberta, when much of Turtle Mountain collapsed.

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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.

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At the last possible moment, he stopped the Spokane Flyer bound for Washington, saving the lives of hundreds of passengers.

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He received an award from the railroad of twenty-five dollars.

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Roughly 90 souls on the edge of town were not so lucky. They remain buried under the slide to this day.

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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.

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The railroad town of Field is at the foot of the steepest stretch of track in the Rockies.

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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"—

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These "Consolidation" class engines were enormously

successful... except for number 314.

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Descending the Big Hill in 1899, 314 ran away and jumped the track, killing its crew.

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Re-built and re-numbered, but this time climbing the Big Hill, it blew itself to pieces, killing another crew.

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Repaired again, it worked up and down the Big Hill for thirty more years, all the time feared and despised by its crews.

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

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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.

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

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

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

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But soon after transcontinental trains began running from sea to sea, it was apparent the railway had profoundly miscalculated one significant detail: winter.

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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 sixty feet in a single season.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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The toughest route through the mountains was also the most spectacular. This simple irony would help save the railway and perhaps the country itself.

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A national park system followed the railway. Banff, Lake Louise, Jasper, Glacier, Yoho.

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News of a wilderness Shangri-La spread around the globe and the company had a thriving new business: Tourism.

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Van Horne built a series of great hotels, including the most famous at Lake Louise...

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...Followed by a fleet of legendary passenger trains to bring in the tourists..

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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.

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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.

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They took soldiers away to war... remembered by those left behind by the sound of a lonesome wail.

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Van Horne's railway grew into a vast network. The great express trains flowed day and night across 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.

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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.

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

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Their names are worn from wood and stone, and lost forever.

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They were young and strong--with bare hands they endured unimaginable hardship.

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

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We know them only by the railway and the extraordinary country they built: Canada.

THE END