

# Celebrating the 45th Anniversary of Project: Great Divide Trail

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**T**he following article is based on the stories found in the collection ‘Tales from the Great Divide’ (2019) as well as Dr. Jenny Feick’s presentation at the 2019 Great Divide Trail Association annual general meeting (AGM). Thank you to Jenny, the Original Six, and the many others who have worked tirelessly for the Great Divide Trail and Great Divide Trail Association, for sharing your stories.

There’s something delightfully paradoxical about hiking with close friends in the backcountry. There’s a balance of good company and isolation, and a stillness that may be broken in a moment’s notice by the vibrant life around you.

My most recent trip was filled with those distinctive backcountry moments. I enjoyed a gruelling, winding switchback, saw my first pikas and westslope cutthroat trout, dipped my toes in a frigid tarn, and enjoyed the distinct satisfaction of dropping my pack at the end of the day. That backcountry trail offered a taste of our remaining wilderness; a trail that while winding through untamed country, offered me the reassurance that comes from regular trail markers.

This September, I attended the AGM of the Great Divide Trail Association (GDTA), a group well-known for maintaining, protecting, and promoting over 1,100 kilometres of trails along the Continental Divide on the Alberta-British Columbia border. The AGM featured a presentation by Dr. Jenny Feick, one of the “Original Six” from *Project: Great Divide Trail*. Jenny spent a summer as a young adult surveying potential trail routes between Waterton and Banff as a southern extension

to the Great Divide Trail. I admired Jenny and her account of that summer. She was one of six undergraduate students, all under the age of 21, who risked limb if not life, to spend a summer outdoors. They hiked, identified routes, and survived on what she called “Protein-ette.”

This year is a milestone one for *Project: Great Divide Trail*; 2019 marks 45 years since the Original Six conducted their feasibility study. While they weren’t the first to trail-blaze the Great Divide, their work helped pave, or rather map, the way for today’s well-established and internationally known long-distance trail.

In the 1960s, the Great Divide Trail (GDT) was only an idea. First proposed by the Girl

Scouts of Canada in 1966, it was brought to life in 1968 in the mountain national parks by Jim Thorsell, Lake Louise’s first Park Naturalist. After a season of assessing Waterton Lakes National Park’s trail system for his master’s degree, Jim proposed to his director at Parks Canada that similar surveys be conducted for the remaining mountain national parks. Jim’s inspiration for the Great Divide Trail came from the American academics that started the Appalachian Trail. He thought that Alberta and BC’s longitudinal geography gave rise to an excellent north-south hiking opportunity. With Parks Canada’s support, Jim spent two years surveying trails along the Great Divide in Banff, Jasper, Yoho, and Kootenay National Parks. To Jim’s surprise, Jean Chrétien was



Have you ever looked down at a backcountry trail and wondered how it got there? Today, the Great Divide Trail (GDT) is a world renowned long-distance trail along the Alberta-British Columbia Border. In 1974, six students were doing their part to make this possible. PHOTO © AWA FILES.

enthusiastic about his trail plans. Chrétien then was the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. But, Parks Canada scrapped the proposal over concerns that trail shelters would cause overcrowding in Banff's understaffed backcountry.

However, this wasn't the last word on establishing the Great Divide Trail through the national parks. While Jim Thorsell's trail plans weren't approved, Jim's route became popularized after being published in the *Canadian Rockies Trail Guide* by Brian Patton and Bart Robinson in 1971.

It wasn't until 1973 that a young Cliff White was inspired by Jim Thorsell to extend the Great Divide Trail south of Banff towards Waterton. Armed with enthusiasm, Cliff enlisted the help of his fellow University of Calgary Geography students, Jenny Feick and Mary Jane Kreisel (néé Cox). They applied for an Opportunities for Youth (OFY) grant from the federal government. Their ambitious goal, "survey every trail, seismic line and road" within their 2,000 square mile (5,180 km<sup>2</sup>) study area, reaching to either side of the Great Divide. Their plan was to document historic trails, inventory cultural and historic features, and map, by hand, a potential route for the Great Divide Trail. With the grant's approval in 1974, *Project: Great Divide Trail* could officially begin.

It didn't take long for Cliff, Jenny, and Mary Jane to convince others to spend a summer getting paid, in part, to hike in the Rockies. In the words of Dave Zevick, who could turn down "\$90 a week; all the bologna you can eat ." The final crew consisted of six: Cliff White, Jenny Feick, Mary Jane Kreisel, Dave Higgins, Chris Hart, and Dave Zevick – on the condition he would provide a car. Another student, Peter Kinnear, had initially planned to join the team, but was drawn away to a job that would better support his next year's tuition. However, through Peter the team found an incredibly important home base at Peter's parent's home in Coleman. That would be their recharge station, research base, and home sweet home for the southern extension of their work.

The team had been conservative in their proposed budget for the OFY grant. They

did this to better their chance of receiving it. The \$400 budget for three months of food afforded them very little in the way of luxuries. At the time, Cliff's father was the manager of Sunshine Ski Area and had an account with a local grocer. While the students weren't able to afford the nicer products sold to the ski chalet, they were able to acquire items like Hamburger Helper, canned mackerel, and peanut butter, not to forget the "Protein-Ette" textured soya. It came in the glamorous flavours chicken, beef, or ham. Much of their summer revolved around food, its limited supply and how to make the most of your last remaining package of Protein-Ette, dried gravy, dehydrated mashed potatoes, pepper, and a sulphur water spring (a dish lovingly named the *Cliff White Special* or *Midnight Gruel*).

With backpacks of dried goods, maps and equipment, the team was now equipped to start their long trek. They divided into three groups of two. Each group was assigned an area for the week to carry out their work. They would work five days a week, travel 15 miles a day (24 km), and get little rest on their weekends in the Kinnear's backyard. There they spent most of their time replenishing packs and planning the next week's hikes. In the end, each person had covered roughly 500 miles (805 km) resulting in 3,000 miles (4,828 km) hiked in total. Just thinking about that distance made my legs ache.

Where *Project: Great Divide Trail* converged with AWA's work in the 1970s was in the project's astute observations and ground-truthing of industrial activity on the Eastern Slopes; conservation just happened to be an unintended outcome of *Project: GDT*. The group had never set out to be outspoken wilderness advocates, but once they began to witness what they called "The Devastation", there was no way to separate the project from the overdevelopment that flanked their trails. Oil drums turned over in the riverbed, massive clearcuts, strip mining, and indiscriminate extraction were rampant on the Eastern Slopes at the time. All of this was inflicted on the land despite the area's designation within the Rocky Mountains Forest Reserve. Protec-

tion for these lands had been recommended as early as 1896 in order to safeguard Alberta's water supply, and was officially legislated for its management as a Forest Reserve under the *Forest Reserves Act* of 1964. It wouldn't be until later in the 1970s that management measures such as *A Policy for Resource Management on the Eastern Slopes* (1977) and *Kananaskis Country* (1979) would start to promote conservation in provincial lands amidst the Rockies.

*Project: Great Divide Trail* concluded with the submission of the group's final report in 1974. But, the work didn't end there. Cliff White continued to assess the data and information they had collected that summer; he used it for his thesis at the University of Montana. Jenny, Dave Higgins, and Mary Jane would go on to present their findings to various groups in 1974 and 1975. They raised awareness about the project and the need for further action, including establishing the GDT as a protected corridor. In 1976, the torch was passed to the Great Divide Trail Association. Incorporated in April 1976, the GDTA sought to bring the trail design to life.

One of the early members of the GDTA was Dianne Pachal, AWA's first Executive Director. For three seasons, Dianne was part of the initial trail crews that laid the groundwork for the actual establishment of the Great Divide Trail. In less than ten years, dedicated volunteers established 150 km of the trail network. Their work included bright orange trail blazes to mark the way and registration boxes. They even built bridges.

The GDTA has experienced its own challenges in keeping the trail maintained. In the 1980s the trail suffered collateral damage from industrial logging. Parts of it have been taken over by motorized trail users. Financial support has waxed and waned. And, there never seems to be enough hours for even the most dedicated to accomplish as much as they hope to. However, the GDT's resurgence in the late-1990s and early 2000s has helped ensure the GDTA remained an active force on the landscape!

So the next time you find yourself on the trails, whether in the front country, backcountry, or somewhere in between, take a

moment to think about how the trail came to be. The trail under your feet may well have been created by a dedicated group of people, whose love for the great outdoors led them to devote many hours of care and physical labour to open a doorway into the wilderness. This has been just a piece of the Great Di-

vide Trail's story. If you're interested in reading the history of the Great Divide Trail and GDTA, and finding out how Dave Zevick's blue Volkswagen was skewered on a lodgepole pine, I encourage you to pick up a copy of *Tales from the Great Divide: Vignettes on the Origins and Early History of Canada's Great*

*Divide Trail and Great Divide Trail Association.* To obtain a copy of one of the few remaining full-colour Collector's Editions and high-resolution PDF, contact the editor, Jenny Feick, at 250-882-5740 or [jennyfeick@gmail.com](mailto:jennyfeick@gmail.com) 📌

