

THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE THE MONTANA MAGAZINE
COPIES CONCERNING THE WINTER CROSSING OF GLA-
CIER NATIONAL PARK AT AHERN PASS.
BY RICHARD LAYNE

ENDLESS ADVENTURE. TIMELESS TRADITION.

MONTANA

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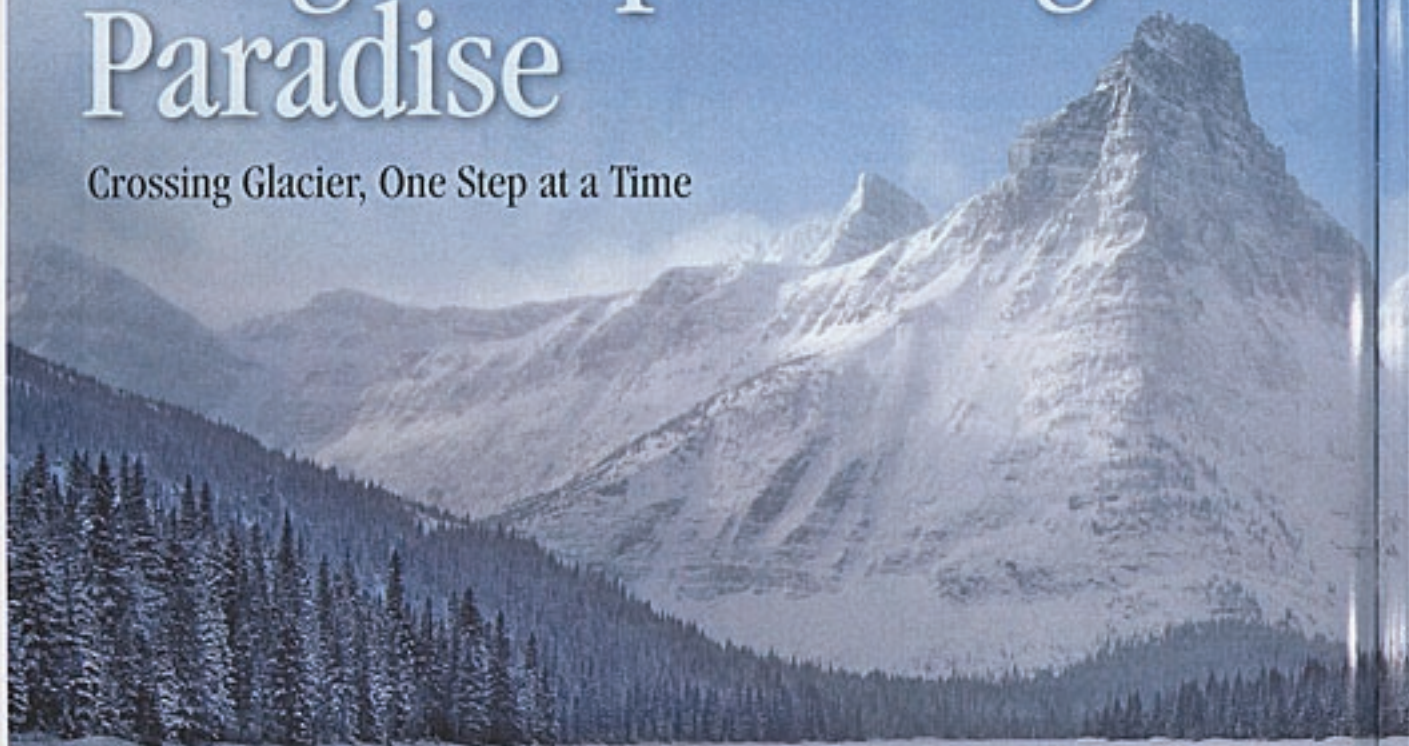
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Tough Trip through Paradise

Crossing Glacier, One Step at a Time



STUBBORNNESS, HUBRIS, CURIOSITY OR JUST PLAIN BOREDOM. WHAT INSPIRES US TO CHALLENGE OURSELVES in the backcountry is different for everyone. For Helena photographer and mountaineer Richard Layne, it was a short conversation with a magazine editor. At the time, neither Layne nor the editor, Beverly Magley, figured the following photo package and story would be the end result. But sometimes, a seed of an idea can grow into something incredible.

Layne made six trips to Glacier National Park between January and May of 2006. He traveled on foot more than 180 miles, over treacherous stream crossings, icy snow fields and powdery slopes. He kept an audio diary throughout his journeys and compiled his notes into a series of stories. The following is a condensed version of his last trip and the completion of his winter crossing of Glacier National Park. He concluded his adventure with the harrowing ascent of 7,800-foot Ahern Pass, which is at the north end of the park. The pass once served as a winter escape route for Joe Cosley, a Belly River ranger who gained notoriety for poaching park animals in the early 1900s.

Layne too had a run-in with Glacier officialdom. He was issued a citation by a park ranger on the last day of his last trip to Glacier. His transgression? Coming out of the park later than he planned.

Peggy O'Neill





story and photos by Richard Layne

IT WAS HAPPENING AGAIN. Only this time I had watched with my own eyes as I walked, then climbed right smack into the middle of hell. "What are you doing?" I asked aloud.

The last time I had felt this panic was in a tent two-and-a-half months before, in February. On my seventh and final night out in the Belly River area of Glacier National Park, the temperature unexpectedly dropped to about 36 below zero. The weather forecast failed to predict the frigid temperatures. My one warning was when my barometer went screeching

for the moon forty-eight hours before the frigid air arrived. I had lain in my damp sleeping bag convinced I wasn't going to be alive come dawn. Yet, I awoke the next morning.

Now, I was in a self-induced pickle in which there was a mounting chance that I was on my way to my death, again. Going forward was the direction I was going just as it had been for the

THESE PAGES: The Ahern Pass crossing began at the Chief Mountain entrance in Glacier's northeast corner. Snow was a constant camping companion, even inside Layne's tent.



last 100-plus days in this winterized park. I decided to pull my digital Nikon out and get some more shots. If today was to be the day, then any pictures I took were going to be real valuable. Too bad I wouldn't be around to enjoy the fruits of my efforts.

The challenge

Fourteen months earlier I had approached a magazine editor about doing a story with pictures on crossing the Bob Marshall Wilderness

during the dead of winter. Her lack of excitement was a blow to me. I erroneously had thought she would be impressed. But she was not done with me. She had put a bright and pretty smile on her face and said that a winter crossing of Glacier National Park would be admirable. My insides had flipped instantly. Of course, she added, anybody who attempted such a feat would be taking a huge risk. I stared at her for a few moments and then responded. "I'll have to think about that one."

I walked out of the building feeling totally rejected. It was crazy to even give a moment of consideration to a winter crossing of Glacier National Park. The park has grizzly bears and high peaks. In winter, there would be tons of snow and sub-zero temperatures to get around. I had told

her I would think about it and that was a lie. There was no way that I was going to consider any winter crossover of the park.

Except I did think about it. Through that spring and then into the summer I thought about winter in Glacier. No, I didn't think about it in any seriousness. When autumn finally hit I was still thinking about it. Then the first snow hit. With the snow came a slight change in my thoughts. So, what about a winter crossing? Could it actually be done?

So it was that for the next almost five months that the crossing of Glacier became my mission. And it wasn't long before Ahern was the absolute focus. It only took two trips up Belly River for me to get pointed toward the pass. Eventually, Ahern Pass took on near mystical

properties for me.

No way out but up

The fear and self-loathing were now hitting me in waves. I had done it again. I was right on the edge of getting myself killed. Reasonably, there was no going forward and there was no going back. But in the impossible position I was in, I was going to have to do something.

Rescue was ridiculous. I couldn't survive long enough. Exposure would have me dead days before others showed up. Besides, how would they get someone off a mountain like this? No matter, I had to keep going. The idea of being rescued from something I had deliberately put myself into was unacceptable.

But it occurred to me that just because I had never been at that



THESE PAGES: *The Belly River canyon offered Layne a wild mix of steepness and wind.*

Red dashed line below indicates Layne's climbing route up to Ahern Pass

steep of an angle did not mean I was finished. Maybe I was, but with only

my experience to rely on, I didn't know for sure. What I was certain about was going back down. That was over. There would be no retracing my steps.

Forward and upward was my direction. My rules of conduct had once again gotten simple. On that mountainside a mistake was something I possibly might not survive. So in desperation that would not be going away anytime soon, I started putting one foot in front of the other. Puncture the snowpack with the ice axe, put the ski pole in its lesser position, make sure the crampon was dug in, step up, and start over. One, two,

three. One, two, three.

Directly in front of me I could not see how high I needed to go before I would have a respite from

the terrible angle of the climb. It was approaching something akin to a cliff. Could it be 75 degrees? I didn't know. The horror and the not knowing how far it would go and what was on the other end was incredible. I wanted to go to my familiar haunt of paralysis in the worst way. Only I knew to stop was to die. It was upon me again; every move I made was taking me to my doom, or taking me to another day of life. One, two, three. One, two, three.

The one misstep

At 1,800 feet above Helen Lake, the strain came at my body in a different direction. The angle was punishing my right ankle in a big way. I was beginning to need to take breaks just to rest it and the other joints on my right side. As I continued on, my strength dwindling despite the breaks, the potential for making a mistake only got bigger. Finally, it happened.


In one of thousands of steps taken that day, I placed my crampon-secured right foot forward. There was the ritual of a small grind with the foot before taking the weight off my left foot. Tiredness and complacency took its toll. My grip with the right foot gave way. I went down.

The ski pole lost its grip in the snowpack as I headed suddenly down the

mountain with my eighty pound pack. The fall ended quickly. My grip on the properly installed ice axe was strong with my left hand. For an instant, I was grateful for the strength I had from years of resistance training and the fact that I am left-handed. But it was also clear that my right hand would have to come into play real quick. All that weight was ripping at my single grip on the T of the axe.

With my heart in my throat, and my mind racing at what was going to happen if I didn't get a hurried second grip, my right hand slashed through open space, ski pole hanging loosely on my wrist. There was a moment of relief and a temporary lull in the panic when my right hand joined my left in a grip on the axe.

In another moment, I realized I was not even



close to being out of danger. The ice axe might quit doing its job and break loose from the snowpack. If that happened there was a 1,000-foot fall waiting for me.

I was in a semi-hanging position on the steep slope, my crampon-booted feet, for all practical purposes, dead weight. With the fear bubbling in my throat, I started nibbling with my right crampon into the side of the slope. If I could get even a fraction of my weight placed into that leg, I could relieve my fast weakening arms enough to go to work on a good placement of my left leg.

It took less than two minutes to get the right leg semi-planted back into the snowpack. I slowly tested it and decided to go ahead with placing some weight on it. I slowly drew my left leg up the slope by maybe six inches and went to work on a stronger placement. In another minute or so, I placed most of my weight on a solid planting of the left crampon. While no longer in extreme danger, I wasn't standing up yet. That would take one more solid planting of my right crampon.

The final planting took less than a minute and I was back where I had been

when I fell. I replanted the ski pole and stood for a few minutes. It was now time to regroup and give some thought to what had just happened and what I was going to need to do to prevent myself from falling again.

Exhausted and feeling a little defeated, I set up my camp that evening less than 300 feet from the top of Ahern Pass. It wasn't the best place to spend the night and I kept looking upward at the cornices hanging eerily overhead. I couldn't help it. Somewhere up there a snowflake might be getting ready to drop on all the rest of the billions of flakes already there. This snowflake was very important because it was the one that could bring down hundreds of tons of bone breaking, body-smashing death to my camp. I was in the middle of a bowl of death. Only there wasn't anything left in me to do about it.

Atop Ahern

I was up the next morning by 5 A.M. I got prepared for the day with the gusting wind driving snow into my tent and through the mosquito netting. I was still tired

from the harshest day in the backcountry I had ever had. But I was doing a lot better. For starters I was now very interested in getting out of harm's way, since I was still alive and all.

At approximately 9 A.M., I started my final climb. I shot pictures as I climbed this "easy," 50-plus-degree slope of snowdrift.

Standing on the summit of Ahern Pass forty-five minutes later left me in shock. Its anticlimactic moment was noted. The horrendous traverse of the Ahern mile from the day before had done that for me. Combined with the five other trips starting at the end of January, the moment I made it across the Continental Divide was just another moment.

But even now, as I write this, the thrill of the phenomenal scenes of this park during winter will not leave my head. **M**

RICHARD LAYNE lives in Helena with his wife Carleen and their good friend Monte.



ABOVE: After crossing the pass, Layne headed southwest towards the Lake McDonald area.

LEFT: The view from the top of Ahern Pass, while commanding, was anticlimactic for Layne.

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