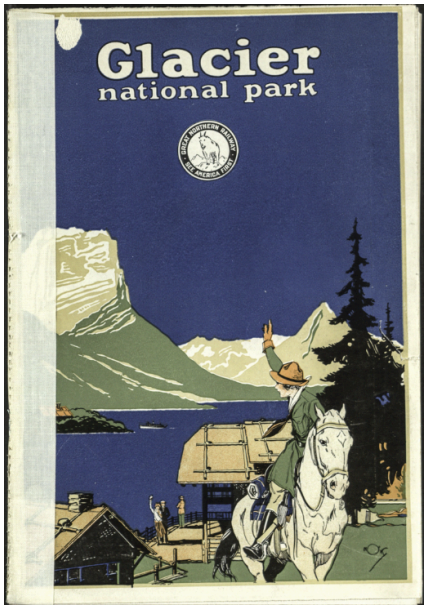
Great Northern Railway Chalet Era

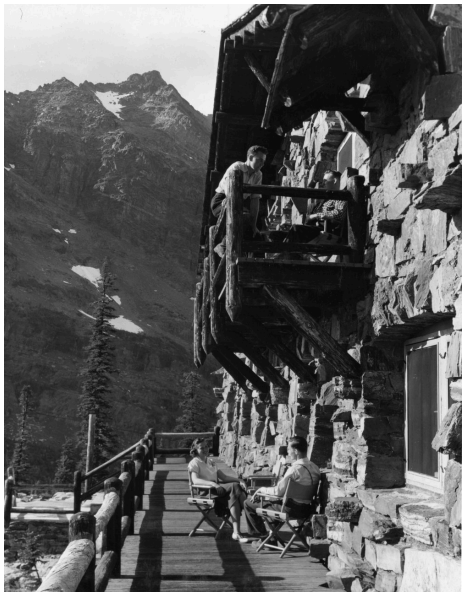
Created by: Zach Christiansen



Tourists arriving at the Sperry Glacier basin chalet camp, 1911. Retrieved from Montana History Portal



Tourist information pamphlet on Glacier National Park from Great Northern Railroad, Retrieved from Montana History Portal



Tourists enjoy the porch at Sperry Chalet, circa 1939 Retrieved from Montana History Portal

"The Department of the Interior and the park administration practically gave Great Northern a free hand in developing the east side of the park because the railroad's capital investment in hotels and chalets was a boon for Glacier National Park... granting exclusive operating privileges for transportation, chalets, and camps."
Department of the Interior and Corporate Concession Policy Retrieved from: Theodore Caton, University of Montana

Contextual Paragraph

Early national park administrators faced a major dilemma: how to make remote wilderness accessible without federal funding. To solve this, the Department of the Interior partnered with the Great Northern Railway, granting corporate monopolies "a free hand" to build and operate high-elevation chalets and supply networks. While this corporate sponsorship successfully promoted tourism and brought visitors deep into the alpine backcountry, it created a lasting paradox, where federally protected wilderness became dependent on corporate infrastructure and intensive commercial management.

Key Questions

1. According to Document 2, what primary promotional campaign and corporate entity drove early tourism into Glacier National Park?
2. How do the visual and architectural differences between the rugged pack-train arrival in Document 1 and the leisurely porch relaxation in Document 3 illustrate the dual nature of the Chalet Era?
3. Using Document 4, explain why the Department of the Interior granted the Great Northern Railway a "free hand" in developing the park's east side. What might have been the mutual benefits and potential drawbacks of this arrangement?

Assessment

1. Using evidence from the documents, evaluate how well the partnership between the federal government and corporate businesses balanced park preservation with public access during the early years of Glacier National Park.