

Bryce Canyon

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Bryce Canyon National Park



Humans at Bryce – A Brief History



A raven's call filters down from the deep blue sky of southern Utah's high plateau country. The air is fresh and cool, but the sun warms your skin. The trail beneath your boots winds through a maze of rock walls, columns, and spires in colors hard to believe: red, orange, yellow, violet, and white. Gnarled pine trees, some thousands of years old, grow from secret places among the rocks. You may be following in the footsteps of a hunter who walked this trail thousands of years ago. . .

Prehistory

Located on the eastern edge of the Paunsaugunt Plateau, Bryce Canyon National Park rises from about 6,600 feet above sea level to more than 9,100 feet at Rainbow Point. The plateau's climate features short, mild summers and long, cold winters. The growing season is brief and water is scarce, making it difficult to live on top of the plateau. The earliest inhabitants in the area were *Paleoindians*, who used the area primarily for hunting grounds. Evidence of these people has been found near the park in the form of dart and spear points reliably dated to the end of the last Ice Age (between 9,000 and 12,000 years ago). While it is known from these finds that hunters were in the area, to date no archaeological evidence has been found to indicate that there were any permanent settlements on the plateau.

Following the end of the Ice Age - and the extinction of the "megafauna" such as the mammoths - we enter the period known to archaeologists as the *Archaic Period*. This period ranges from 9,000 to 1,500 years before present, and numerous sites have yielded evidence of habitation both in Bryce

Canyon National Park and the surrounding area. Within the park this evidence is generally limited to dart and spear points, however, cave and rockshelter sites, as well as ruins of storage facilities of this age, are known in the region.

The *Formative Period* began approximately 2,000 years ago and ended at around 1000 C.E. with the arrival of the Paiute in the area. This period saw the rise of two different cultures: the Fremont and Pueblo Cultures (aka Ancestral Puebloan or Anasazi). The aspects of their lifestyles separating them from their ancestors are the development of agriculture and evidence of a more sedentary lifestyle. While no Fremont Culture sites are known within park boundaries, there are sites just outside the park near the East Fork of the Sevier River in the Dixie National Forest which contain projectile points, Fremont pottery, and possible small structures. The Virgin Anasazi were neighbors to the south of the Fremont people, and within the park there are a few sites which contain ceramics. Other Virgin Anasazi sites have been found on the Skutumpah Terrace south of the park.

The Southern Paiute

About 1,000 years ago the Fremont and Puebloan Cultures seem to disappear and evidence of new human habitation appears with the arrival of Numic-speaking peoples from the southwest - the Southern Paiute. They were nomadic hunter-gatherers who also practiced limited agriculture, primarily maize (corn), and occupied the general area for over 800 years. Within the park and on the plateau there are numerous archaeological sites associated with the Southern Paiute, however these sites



are limited to what were probably seasonal hunting camps as opposed to long term settlements. Arrow and spear points, pottery shards, stripped bark on pines, and fire pits are the types of evidence found here.

Many place names within the park and the surrounding region can be attributed to the Southern Paiute: *Paunsaugunt* means "home of the beavers"; *Paria* means "muddy water" or "elk water"; *Yovimpa* is a derivative of a word meaning "pine tree ridge"; *Panguitch* means "water" or "fish"; Podunk Creek was named after a Paiute, *Po Dunk*, who was lost in the area; and *Skutumpah* is a combination of two words which mean, respectively, "creek where the squirrels live" and "creek where the rabbitbrush grows".

Exploration & Settlement

The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition of 1776 was the earliest presence of Euro-Americans in southwestern Utah, though their route took them some 50 miles (80 kilometers) south of Bryce Canyon. The purpose of this journey, which ultimately failed, was to find a route to connect Santa Fe with the missions of California. Later, a trail established by Mexican traders in the 1820's passed within 44 miles (70 kilometers) of the park. This same trail would later be used by frontiersmen and explorers such as Jedediah Smith (late 1820's) and Captain John C. Fremont (1840's). The first Mormon scouts entered the area along this trail during the late 1840's, their travels taking them near the site of present day Panguitch, from where they almost certainly had views of the western escarpment, known as the Sunset Cliffs, of the Paunsaugunt Plateau.

Settlement of the region began in the 1850's but was initially restricted to the area west of the plateau along the Sevier River valley. Among these was the town of Panguitch, established in 1864. Many of the new communities were abandoned with the onset of hostilities during the Black Hawk War



John C. Fremont (left) and Jedediah Smith, early explorers of Utah and the west.

beginning in 1865, a conflict brought about due to strained relations between the settlers and the area's Native Americans (including Navajo, Ute, and Southern Paiute nations). Most of these communities were resettled following the conclusion of fighting in 1868 and exploration of the eastern side of the Paunsaugunt Plateau took place early in the decade of the '70's. Lt. George C. Wheeler led a team which explored the plateau in 1872 and two members of this expedition, Edwin Howell and Grover Karl Gilbert, provided the first written descriptions of the magnificent pinnacles and spires found on the plateau's eastern escarpment.

The Pioneers

Settlement to the east of the plateau did not begin until the mid 1870's and among those first pioneers were Ebenezer and Mary Bryce with their 10 children. The family only lived in the area from 1875 until 1880 but, among his contributions to the community, Ebenezer built a road up to the base of the Pink Cliffs for hauling timber and firewood. The other settlers soon began to call the valley at the end of the road "Bryce's Canyon" and, with a little modification, the name they gave to the large amphitheater on the plateau's edge is still with us today.

Life was not easy in the valley to the east of the Paunsaugunt Plateau and, while the land was more arable than that in the Sevier River Valley to the west, the availability of water was a problem. To solve this, the pioneers living in Tropic dug a ditch - 15 miles long! - from the East Fork of the Sevier River atop the plateau to the townsite. Now, more than a century later, the "Tropic Ditch" still brings life-giving water to the valley below. While most of the original ditch is carried underground in pipes and culverts today, park visitors are still drawn to the waterfall in Water Canyon at the

end of the Mossy Cave Trail. If not for the efforts of these pioneers, the fall would only run following a summer storm and not be the attraction it is today.



Mormon pioneers Ebenezer and Mary Bryce.



The Tropic Ditch, dug in 1891, is the source for the waterfall at Water Canyon.

The Word Gets Out

"You can perhaps imagine my surprise at the indescribable beauty that greeted us, and it was sundown before I could be dragged from the canyon view. You may be sure that I went back the next morning to see the canyon once more, and to plan in my mind how this attraction could be made accessible to the public."

– J.W. Humphrey, 1915

For some 40 years after the time Mormon pioneers arrived in the area, *Bryce's Canyon* remained little more than a curiosity to them. In the summer of 1915 J.W. Humphrey, a U.S. Forest Supervisor, was transferred to

Panguitch and, not long after his arrival, an employee suggested he visit the eastern edge of the plateau. Soon after his visit Humphrey arranged for still photographs and movies to be made of the canyon. These were then sent to Washington D.C., as well as to officials of the Union Pacific Railroad. In 1916 he secured funding to improve the road to the rim and, by 1919, tourists were making their way from Salt Lake City. That same year Reuben "Ruby" Syrett and his wife Minnie erected tents and were supplying meals to guests not far from Sunset Point. By the early 1920s, the first steps toward the creation of a new National Park were underway. And the rest, as they say, is history . . .