

RENDEZVOUS IN JACKSON HOLE

By MERRILL J. MATTES

At the June 22, 1960 meeting of the Denver Posse, Merrill J. Mattes gave an informal talk and discussion on "Rendezvous in Jackson Hole," which was not published in *The Round-Up*. The following paper has been submitted by Mr. Mattes about the Jackson Hole region.



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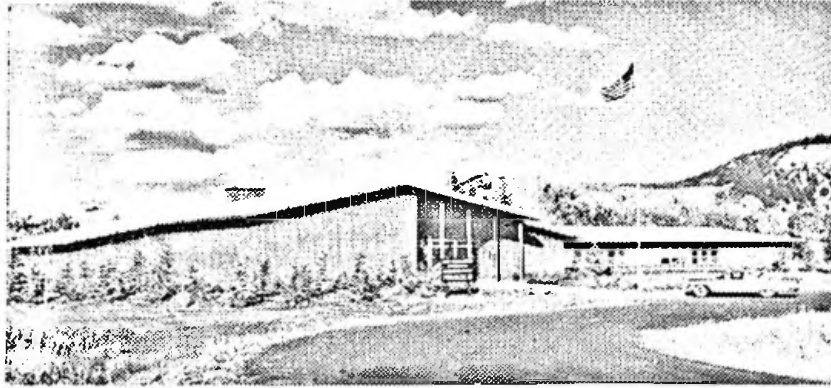
Merrill J. Mattes, a Corresponding Member of The Denver Posse, started out twenty-five years ago as a summer ranger in Yellowstone National Park. He has been Regional Historian (Region 2) of the National Park Service since 1950. He is assisting with the plans for development of Bent's Fort near Las Animas as a national historic shrine. An author of numerous articles on Western history, Mr. Mattes lives in Omaha, Nebraska.

On July 17, 1960, there was a "rendezvous" in Jackson Hole. This day Grand Teton National Park dedicated a new history museum, devoted largely to the era of Rocky Mountain discovery and the fur trade. The occasion also was in observance of

the 100th anniversary of "the rediscovery of Jackson Hole" by a Government exploring expedition led by Captain William F. Reynolds, Corps of Engineers, and guided by the famous frontiersman, Jim Bridger. This was "rediscovery," for Jackson Hole was well known to trappers and traders for over thirty years prior to 1840; but with the advent of the Oregon Trail over South Pass, the Jackson Hole country was virtually abandoned for the next twenty years. In 1869 Jim Bridger became the living link between old and new eras of discovery. Thus Jim Bridger was present in spirit, surely, when the National Park Service dedicated its new free historical museum in the "Moose Visitor Center," the new headquarters building, Grand Teton National Park, at the Snake River Crossing at Moose.

In 1958 the tiny village of Moose was lifted bodily just a hundred yards or so down the right bank of Snake River to a new bridge crossing. At the same time the park headquarters in the old log building at the edge of timber was moved three miles downstream to the new Moose, to adjoin the new park residential area. The new structure is a handsome elongated frame building, with one wing of nearly 2,000 square feet to shelter the historical exhibits.

Jackson Hole, bounded on the west by the jagged spires of the Teton Mountains, has always been famed for two qualities: its scenic beauty, and a lingering atmosphere of the old Wild West. This historical flavor has always been spiced with vague traditions of trappers, explorers, gold prospectors, outlaws, trophy hunters, and homesteaders. However, after



The new Museum of History at Moose, Grand Teton National Park. Dedication held July 17th, 1960, to observe 100th anniversary of discovery of Jackson Hole.

extensive research, the National Park Service has concluded that there was one period in the saga of Jackson Hole which was truly of exceptional significance, not only in the realm of local history, but also in the history of Western America. This was the era of Rocky Mountain fur trade and exploration, when Jackson Hole became a focal point in the continental wanderings of the beaver hunters

As summarized in the title of the official research report, Jackson Hole was truly "the crossroads of the western fur trade" from 1807 to 1840. In 1807 Colter first glimpsed the snow-crowned Tetons, glistening like shark's teeth against the blue sky; the year 1840 marked the demise of the great rendezvous period of the mountain fur trade. In between was one of the great climaxes of American history, which was not properly understood or appreciated until the National Park Service made its studies. The advent of the museum at Moose focuses national attention upon the fact that Grand Teton National Park not only conserves some magnificent scenery, but also was a focal point in the discovery and exploration of the Rocky Mountain West.

Between the time of the Lewis and

Clark expedition in 1804-1806 and the Oregon migration which began in 1841, the only travel routes through the mountains were trappers' trails, and most of these funneled through Jackson Hole. By geographical accident, this remarkable valley with its towering landmarks was near the headwaters of all the great river systems of the continent—the Columbia, fed by the Snake River; the Colorado, fed by the Upper Green; and the Missouri, with its fantailed array of Wind, Big Horn, Yellowstone, Gallatin, and Madison Rivers.

There were no traffic lights in Jackson Hole, but the trails were well worn, and these led to seven major mountain passes: Teton, Conant, Two Ocean, Togwotee, Union, Gros Ventre, and the Hoback-Green. These led variously to St. Louis, Fort Laramie, Fort Hall, many Hudson's Bay posts, the marvels of the Upper Yellowstone, summer rendezvous points in Pierre's Hole and the Upper Green, and rich beaver territory throughout the Northwest. The history museum at Moose tells the amazing story.

The research phase of the project was substantially completed in 1948 when the results were published in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*. The

museum project itself began in 1957 when the writer was assigned the further task of writing a museum prospectus, obtaining photographs of historic terrain, and searching for exhibit materials. He spent that summer on assignment in Jackson Hole and on tour of various state historical societies and state and private museum collections in the Northwest. The following winter an exhibit planning team from the Service's Western Museum Laboratory in San Francisco collaborated with the writer in developing the sequence of exhibits. The exhibits, prepared in the Laboratory, were installed in June 1960.

Exhibit materials include a closely integrated combination of colorful backgrounds, artists' sketches, photographs, models, a "rendezvous" diorama, historic manuscripts and maps, and a large number of rare material objects of the fur trade frontier—flintlock and percussion firearms and accessories, trade goods, traps and assorted hardware. Among the prize specimens are the enigmatic Colter Stone of 1808; an 1811 signature rock from Fort Henry; remains of gear lost by the Astorians on Snake River; Northwest trade guns, including one found recently in the Snake River; a trap from the Upper Hoback, and a trapper's letter penned in 1827.

Exhibit highlights include the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which laid the foundation of the fur trade; John Colter's discovery and adventures; the explorations of the Astorians under Wilson Price Hunt and Robert Stuart; the British invasion of Oregon Territory, which included Jackson Hole; the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, with Sublette, Jed Smith, Bridger and Fitzpatrick; the American Fur Company monopoly; the Battle of Pierre's Hole; the Green River rendezvous; how the "mountain men" lived, fought and died;

and the decline of the beaver trade.

Several exhibits tell the later history of Jackson Hole, to afford a comprehensive picture. These relate to the rediscovery of Jackson Hole mentioned at the introduction of this article; the Montana gold seekers; the official Government explorations of the 1870's; the 1880's, decade of rustlers and earliest homesteaders; the big game hunters; early settlement; and the creation of the National Park.

The era of geographical discovery which resulted from the search for beaver will remain the most significant phase of Grand Teton history. But there are many Jackson Hole enthusiasts, particularly residents, who understandably feel closer to the story of the pioneer settlers (who once had all that glorious scenery to themselves, to solace them for their years of hardship). The National Park Service will not neglect this intriguing aspect of park history. In addition to limited exhibits in the museum at Moose, it will continue to preserve the Cunningham Cabin near Spread Creek and the Menor's Ferry group near Moose. Further development of pioneer exhibits at the latter point is planned after "the dust has settled" at the dedication of the Moose Visitor Center.

