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THE LEGEND OF COLTER'S HELL by Merrill J. Mattes

Yellowstone National Park was created on March 1, 1872, when President Ulysses S. Grant signed his name to "a Bill to set apart a certain tract of land lying near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River as a public park... and as a pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." The 75 years which have elapsed since that date have witnessed the steady development of that park as the greatest tourist attraction in the world, culminating with the prospect of nearly one million visitors in 1947 alone. It is a historical paradox that this region was visited by white men and its strange phenomena was described over 60 years before the first bona fide tourist arrived on the scene. Geography and politics both conspired to delay him but an even greater obstacle was interposed. Such a region, as reported matter-of-factly by a few obscure trappers and prospectors, could not exist because there were no geysers or glass mountains east of the Mississippi. It was "Colter's Hell," a myth, a legend only, until the period 1869-71 when a series of private and official expeditions conclusively established the authenticity of the geological wonders, the simple description of which sounded like a description of Dante's Inferno.¹

¹Merrill Mattes has been the very successful custodian of the Scotts Bluff National Monument in Nebraska and has recently been delegated to make surveys of historical sites in the Missouri Valley water shed which would be effected by the proposed development of the Missouri River.

Behind the legend of Colter's Hell is the documentary evidence of actual Yellowstone Park "visitors" during the several decades preceding the official "discovery." It may be fitting, at a time when record auto-borne crowds are gaping at the marvellous show of which Old Faithful is the star performer, to call the roll of those privileged mortals who attended the preview.²

In 1797 David Thompson, a British fur trader and explorer, arrived at the Mandan villages on the Missouri River, and began to press the natives for information relating to the unknown territory to the west. In Thompson's notes appears the earliest written reference to the "Yellow Stone." French-Canadian employees of the North west Fur Company, who ranged far and wide in their quest for beaver hides, may have been the first white men to reach Yellowstone River, for "Roche Jaune" or "Yellow Rock" was part of their working vocabulary before Thompson reached the Mandans. They didn't invent the name, however, but translated it from the Indian equivalent, the Minnetaree version of which is "Mi Tsi a da si," or "Rock Yellow River." General Hiram M. Chittenden, who wrote the first standard history of Yellowstone Park, holds that the ultimate origin of the name could only come from the brilliant and infinite varieties of yellow which dominate the color scheme of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone.³

During the winter of 1804-05 the Lewis and Clark expedition wintered at the Mandan villages near the mouth of Knife River, where Thompson had stopped in 1797. While there Captain Lewis improved his time by compiling a report and drawing a map of the western country, based largely on data provided by his friendly hosts. Although this map was understandably inaccurate in many respects, it indicated a previous knowledge of the Yellowstone River, as well as its sulphurous tributary, the "Stinking Water," which is now more decorously known as the Shoshone. The expedition continued on up the Missouri River to Three Forks, and thence over the Continental Divide via Jefferson Fork and its tributaries.

Upon the return trip in 1806, after wintering at Fort Clatsop at the mouth of the Columbia, the Lewis and Clark expedition divided in order to explore the country more thoroughly. Clark undertook to determine the source of the mysterious Yellowstone. On July 15 with eleven white men, the Indian woman Sakakawea and her baby, the cavalcade crossed Bozeman Pass, which marks the divide between the Yellowstone and the Gallatin Fork, and reached the site of present Livingston, Montana. There is no indication that Clark suspected what wonders lay concealed behind the snowy mountain wall to the south, and being in a hurry, he passed on down the Yellowstone, with glory enough for one expedition. After rejoining Lewis below the mouth of the Yellowstone, the expedition paddled swiftly down the Missouri to reach St. Louis, and report the success of the enterprise.

In this same year Lt. Zebulon M. Pike explored up the Arkansas River, and discovered the Colorado Peak which immortalizes his name. The official map which he prepared purported to locate the headwaters of the Yellowstone, which he claims to have seen from the summit of an unidentified mountain. Certain maps put out by the early Spaniards, operating out of Mexico, seemed to support the Pike story, but it soon developed that he missed the mark by at least two hundred miles.⁴ It was fated that the actual discovery of the Upper Yellowstone was to be made, not by any official expedition, but by an obscure fur trapper, who was looking for Indians.

John Colter, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, was the first white man to enter the confines of the present Yellowstone National Park. This is a theory only but it is a plausible one. We know little about Colter beyond the meagre testimony of his contemporaries that he was sturdy, honest, and energetic, born in Virginia and raised in Kentucky, a frontiersman in the true tradition of Daniel Boone. He was about thirty years of age when the homeward-bound expedition reached the Mandan villages, and he was granted permission to

take his leave and join two hunters who were headed upstream for beaver hides. In the summer of 1807 Manuel Lisa's fur trading expedition intercepted Colter, who was again paddling downstream, at the mouth of the Platte River, and for the third time he was persuaded to set his face to the setting sun. At the mouth of the Bighorn River, Lisa built a trading post, from which Colter was dispatched to drum up some business among the Crows. The course of his subsequent wanderings in the autumn and winter of 1807-08 has been determined solely on the basis of data which Captain William Clark, presumably after conversation with Colter, superimposed on his map of 1810, first published in 1814.⁵ Inevitably Colter's precise route has been subject to wide differences of scholarly opinion, largely hinging on the identification of "Lake Biddle" (or "Riddle") and "Lake Eustis" with Jackson Lake and Yellowstone Lake, respectively, and the true location of a certain "Boiling Spring" and a "Hot Spring Brimstone." A composite of theories offered by Chittenden, Stallo Vinton and W. J. Ghent, to name only three who have attempted the impossible, is that Colter followed up the Shoshone River to present Cody, went south along the foot of the Absarokas, up Wind River to Union Pass, into Jackson Hole (and possibly across the Tetons into Pierre's Hole), thence north along the west shore of Yellowstone Lake and northeast toward Mammoth Hot Springs and Tower Falls, crossing the Yellowstone near the mouth of the Lamar, thence up the Lamar and Soda Butte Creek, across the Absaroka Mountains, thence south to the Shoshone River, and back to Lisa's Fort by way of Clark's Fork and Pryor's Fork.⁶ This of course is entirely conjectural, but we have encountered no historian who seeks to deny that Colter did traverse, in some way, the Yellowstone Park area. It is a source of infinite regret that the Clark map is so vague, and that Colter's testimony was not written up in detail; but it must be remembered that he was only incidentally interested in natural curiosities, while Clark and others probably discounted the scenic embellishments. He was looking for Indians who knew where to trap beaver. That he was eminently successful in this main objective is

evident in the rich cargo of furs which Lisa transported to St. Louis in 1808. After further explorations in the neighborhood of the Three Forks of the Missouri, and several harrowing adventures with the hostile Blackfoot Indians, Colter finally concluded that he had seen everything, and so returned to St. Louis in May, 1810. He married and settled down in the little village of Charette, Missouri. With great reluctance he turned down an opportunity to join the Astorian expedition which passed by in 1811; and in 1813 he died, ironically enough, from "jaundice."

After Colter's swift journey several historically important expeditions passed close to the future park boundaries. In 1810 Andrew Henry, hotly pursued by Blackfeet, fled with a group of trappers southwest from Three Forks across the Divide to Henry's Fork of the Snake. Their winter encampment there was the first American establishment on the Pacific slope of the continent. Some writers have reasoned that Henry and his men probably explored the country within a wide radius of the Tetons, but any belief that they touched Yellowstone Park is, again, conjectural.⁷ In the spring of 1811 Henry returned down the Missouri, while three of his men, Hoback, Robinson and Reznor, went eastward via Teton Pass, Jackson Hole and Togwotee Pass. At the mouth of the Niobrara River, these men ran into the large expedition dispatched by John Jacob Astor, and led by Wilson Price Hunt, which was bound for the mouth of the Columbia. They were hired as guides and led the Astorians back across the Divide via Union Pass, the Upper Green River, Hoback Canyon and Jackson Hole. In 1812 Robert Stuart and a small party left the Astorian's stockade on the Columbia River to blaze the Oregon Trail from west to east, making one important detour via Teton Pass and Jackson Hole.⁸

After Colter, the first white man in the park area may have been Britishers and half-breeds in the employ of the Northwest Company, which was later consolidated with the monopolistic Hudson's Bay Company. On an exploratory trip in 1880 Colonel P.W. Norris, then Superintendent of the park,

discovered the following inscription carved dimly in a tree above the Upper Falls of the Yellowstone: "J.O.R. Aug. 29, 1819."⁹ No trace of the carved section has been found by present park personnel. Aside from the material evidence, however, the validity of this date is supported by the record of a trip made in this year by Donald McKenzie and a trapping brigade to the headwaters of the Snake River, in which reference is made, not only to the Teton Mountains, but to "boiling fountains" and other thermal phenomena.¹⁰ That there were other subsequent invasions of the park area by British interests seems a reasonable conclusion from our knowledge of the ubiquitous wanderings of the half-breed trappers, together with characteristic traps, pit, log hut ruins and other physical remains of considerable antiquity which came to light when the park was later explored in detail. However, documentary evidence of their movements is lacking, and the signal honor of writing the earliest known description of the Yellowstone marvels falls to an American.¹¹

The aggregation of trappers and traders known historically as the "Rocky Mountain Fur Company," which was founded at St. Louis in 1822 by William Ashley and Andrew Henry, has achieved a unique fame because the young men who became its leading spirits--James Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, William Sublette, Jedediah Smith and others--became the primary explorers and discoverers of the Rocky Mountain West. Due to the hostility of the Arickaras and the Blackfeet on the Upper Missouri River, the trappers soon diverted their attention to the Central Rocky Mountain region where, in 1824, they discovered South Pass, Great Salt Lake, and the Green River approach to Jackson Hole, perhaps coming within a few miles of the present South Park boundary.¹² In 1824 Ashley instituted the "rendezvous system" of fur trapping whereby the trappers, and their Indian allies, after their winter trapping seasons, would meet the traders in some pre-designated green mountain valley, where they would exchange their beaver hides and catch up on their roistering amid wild carnival scenes.¹³ There is a tradition, unsupported by tangible evidence that after the first rendezvous, which was held on Henry's

Fork of the Green, young Bridger and Fitzpatrick, both destined for an illustrious future, betook themselves northward through Jackson Hole into Yellowstone Park, "becoming fascinated with the wonders of that country."¹³ Alas, they wrote no diaries. Indeed, Bridger was illiterate, and we would not know even of his later undisputed visits to the park were it not for others who made note of his conversations.

The Wyoming historian, Coutant, who does not reveal the sources of his information, has it that after Bridger's alleged visit to the park in 1824, "he happened to be at the trading post of the American Fur Company on the Yellowstone and there met a young Kentuckian Robert Meldrum, who came out to be employed as a blacksmith at that post," Meldrum, "got the trapping bug, and soon after joined the Crows, and it was while living with these people that he found an opportunity to investigate the wonders about Yellowstone Lake. In later years he often talked to Army officers and others about geysers."¹⁴ Some Army officers indeed may have supplied Coutant with this story, but it must remain unverified in the field, particularly in view of the fact that no active trading post is known to have existed on Yellowstone River between 1823, when the Ashley-Henry post was abandoned; until 1828, when Fort Union was established. It is of course possible that Meldrum was only one of the many fur trappers who are known to have visited Yellowstone Park after 1829; but Coutant's inference is that he was an earlier and lone discoverer.

Daniel T. Potts has been recently identified as the long-mysterious author of a letter which first appeared in the Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertiser, September 29, 1827, which contains the earliest known definite description of the geological miracles in Yellowstone Park. This document, dated July 8, 1827 at the "Sweet Lake" or Bear Lake (Utah) rendezvous and carried eastward for mailing by William Sublette, describes how the Potts party, the other members of which are not identified, went north after the Salt Lake rendezvous of 1826 and, after a skirmish with the Blackfeet, went up Henry's Fork of Snake River, crossed the Teton Mountains into Jackson

Hole, ascended Snake River to the vicinity of Two Ocean Pass, and then descended Yellowstone River. There is a vivid description of "a large fresh-water lake which is about one hundred miles long and forty miles wide and as clear as crystal." ~~On the south border of the lake he found a number of hot and~~ boiling springs, mud pots and sundry sulphurous and earth trembling explosions. From here, probably the West Thumb thermal area, "by a circuitous route to the northwest" and after some more encounters with the Blackfeet, the Potts brigade proceeded to the Bear Lake rendezvous.¹⁵ The whole expedition which he so compactly describes probably consumed almost a year, for the purpose of the trip was the systematic collection of beaver hides. In the rich cargo which Sublette packed eastward in 1827 must have been many peltries taken from Yellowstone Park.

In 1826 Ashley sold his interests to Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and David E. Jackson, the namesake of Jackson Hole. Potts was in the employ of these partners. After 1826 there is no worthwhile evidence of their further operations in Yellowstone Park until 1829. In the summer of this year the three partners were reunited in the vicinity of the Teton, and then the entire outfit moved up Henry's Fork of the Snake and across the Divide to the valleys of the Madison and Gallatin, and then to the foot of Cinnabar Mountain, three miles above the present park North Entrance. Here the party was scattered by the Blackfeet. Joseph L. Meek, who later achieved fame as an Oregon pioneer, and whose biography, River of the West, is a valuable source of information on the mountain trappers, became lost for several days. In the course of his wanderings before rejoining his comrades he stumbled across a region east of Yellowstone River "smoking with vapor from boiling springs and burning with gases issuing from small craters and belching blue flames and molten brimstone," which is identifiable as the seldom-visited thermal area of the Mirror Plateau. After crossing the northeast corner of the park, the reorganized party, minus two men, crossed the Absarokas to spend the winter at Powder River.¹⁶

"Bridger's biographer contends that the redoubtable Jim led trapping brigades into the park in 1830 and 1831, on both occasions paying his respects to the geyser basins on the Firehole River. In 1832, after the famous Battle of Pierre's Hole west of the Tetons, he is reported to have made his first visit to Mammoth Hot Springs and the Grand Canyon.¹⁷ Whereas there is no reliable documentation to support these journeys, it is incontestable that during the early 1830's Bridger became thoroughly familiar with Yellowstone Park. We have not only the fact of his then growing reputation as a prevaricator among those who couldn't conceive of a geyser or an obsidian cliff, but the later published testimony of unimpeachable authorities who listened carefully to his stories, weighed his character, and gave at least provisional credence to them. Irrespective of the ubiquitous Bridger, clues supplied by Meek and the Hudson's Bay Company journalist John Work indicate the presence of American trappers on the "Upper Yellowstone" in the early 1830's, but the circumstances are too hazy to warrant any flat statements about Yellowstone Park visitors in 1830, 1831 and 1832.¹⁸

Captain Benjamin Bonneville led a well-organized trading and exploring expedition westward in 1832, taking the first wagon train across the Continental Divide, and remaining in the Rocky Mountain area until 1835. In Washington Irving's classic account of his adventures, first published in 1837, there is no evidence that Bonneville or his men penetrated the vastness of Colter's Hell, although they are frequently portrayed in Jackson Hole and other adjacent areas. Many years later, however, in a letter of 1875 published by the Montana Historical Society, Bonneville states that, while he did not personally see "the thermal springs and geysers," his men knew about them, calling their location the "Fire Hole."¹⁹ Baptiste Ducharme is one of Bonneville's men who is alleged to have visited the geyser region frequently.²⁰ He personally claimed to have trapped in the park in 1824 and 1826 which, if true, would have made him one of "Ashley's young men" originally, and an associate of Bridger, Jed Smith

and Daniel T. Potts. The assertion is open to question, however, since it lacks confirmation, and Ducherne was over 100 years old when he was interviewed.

Thus far until 1832, we know that only fragments of Yellowstone Park had been explored, notably Yellowstone Lake and its south and western approaches, and the Lamar River Basin. According to Warren Ferris, one of the great geyser basins was visited in the spring hunt of 1833 by a party of forty men under a Spaniard named Alvaris (or Alvarez), in the employ of the American Fur Company. They reached the area by going up Henry's Fork, later returning to Green River for the rendezvous. This is the first definite evidence of white men in the Fire Hole Basin. According to Dr. Paul Phillips, editor of the Ferris journal, this discoverer was "Manuel Alvarez, later prominent in the Southwest trade and United States consul at Santa Fe."²¹ He was not one of Bonneville's men, but some confusion has arisen on this point, as the Captain mentions him as an acquaintance in the above-mentioned letter of reminiscence.

Warren Angus Ferris, a native of New York who later resided in Texas, made his first mountain journey with the American Fur Company in 1830 at the age of 19. A rarity among the mountain men, he kept a journal of his travels, which appeared serially in 1842 and 1843 in the Western Literary Messenger, an obscure weekly published in Buffalo, New York. The piece containing an account of his visit to the geyser region in 1834, which appeared on July 13, 1842, did not attract much attention at the time, except to be plagiarized by the editors of The Wasp, of Nauvoo, Illinois, in their edition of August 13, 1842. It is probable that the few readers of the Ferris story regarded it all as a ridiculous fantasy. The true identity of the author and the historical importance of his account as the first written description of the geysers (and the second written description of any portion of Yellowstone Park) by an eye-witness was not disclosed until 1900, by Olin D. Wheeler of St. Paul, publicist for the Northern Pacific Railroad.

It was in May, 1834 that Ferris and two Indians set out from a camp west of the park, travelling almost due east forty miles to the upper reaches of the Madison. His object was to verify the rumors concerning "remarkable boiling springs on the sources of the Madison" which he got from Alvarez' men and he soon realized that "the half was not told me." His vivid description of "columns of water" and "beautiful fountains" projecting at intervals to heights up to 150 feet and accompanied by "loud explosions and sulphurous vapors" clearly describe one of the principal geyser basins, though just which one is of course not clear.²² It is ironical that this accurate eye-witness report and verification of Colter's Hell should be consigned to virtual oblivion for over half a century.

In August of 1834 a party of 55 men in Bonneville's employ led by Joseph H. Walker, ascended Pacific Creek from Jackson Hole and after some debate agreed to "move down onto Wind River," instead of descending the Yellowstone. Thus Walker, who had previously discovered Yosemite Valley, and Zenas Leonard, the journalist of the expedition, missed the big exploring opportunity which Ferris had grasped.²³

After the rendezvous of 1834 on Ham's Fork of the Green, the Yellowstone Park area may have been included in the territory trapped by Bridger and the brigade of about 60 men who circled northward before making winter camp at the forks of the Snake. In the spring of 1834 this group probably again traversed the park area, for in May they were found by a party of Nathaniel Wyeth's men at the mouth of Gardiner's Fork, and later on the Upper Madison.²⁴ This was the last hunt of the historic "Rocky Mountain Fur Company" for at the Green River rendezvous of that year Lucien Fontenelle practically arranged for its absorption by the American Fur Company.

With Ferris in the rare category of well-educated journal-keeping Rocky Mountain trappers is Osborne Russell, a native

of Maine who came west in 1834 with Nathaniel Wyeth and later achieved a reputation as a pioneer of Oregon and California. His several visits to the park beginning in 1835, as an employee of Wyeth and later of the American Fur Company, have been excitingly recorded in his Journal of a Trapper, which was first published in 1914 by his descendents. In June, 1835 his party of 24 men under the incompetent Joseph Gale, left Fort Hall, following up Snake River to Jackson Hole. After extricating themselves with much difficulty from the craggy wilderness of the Absarokas, losing two men in the process, the party reached an easterly fork of the Yellowstone, where they encountered some woebegone Sheepeaters. They travelled thence to "Gardner's Hole," which apparently was named earlier after Johnson Gardner, a free lance trapper. Passing over to Gallatin and Madison Forks in September the party fell in with another contingent under Bridger. The combined forces were attacked by 80 Blackfeet and the furious melee which ensued has also been described by Meek.²⁵ This apparently took place in the neighborhood of present West Yellowstone.

Before the battle above-mentioned it is apparent that the Bridger brigade, which included Meek and Kit Carson, likewise trapped the fringes of Yellowstone Park. The trappers accompanied the Rev. Samuel Parker and his flathead congregation from the rendezvous to Jackson Hole, where "Bridger detached a portion of his command to trap the stream." The main party, according to Parker, left the missionary in Pierre's Hole and "went north-east into the mountains to their hunt-ground."²⁶ The details of their route previous to joining forces with the Russell-Gale party, are not available.

After the summer rendezvous of 1836 on Green River, Russell was ordered by Bridger to proceed with 17 men to Yellowstone Lake and await the main party. Via Jackson Hole and Two Ocean Pass he reached the inlet of the lake where Bridger and the main party, including the co-leaders, Fontenelle and Andrew Drips, joined him as scheduled. They followed along the eastern shore of the lake to its outlet

at present Fishing Bridge, and camped again "in a beautiful plain which extended along the northern extremity of the lake." Russell describes the lake as "about 100 miles in circumference" and "rather in the shape of a crescent." His further description of boiling springs and hot steam vents in the neighborhood of Hayden Valley places him behind Potts and Ferris as the third journalist of the park phenomena. Going northeast of the lake, possibly in the Lamar Valley, he again ran into the harmless Sheepeaters, who traded some skins. He recrossed the Yellowstone "at the ford," apparently in the vicinity of Tower Falls, and travelled thence to Gardner's Fork and "Gardner's Hole". The party zig-zagged northward again over the mountains to the Yellowstone which they followed "out of the mountains into the great Yellowstone plain."²⁷

From the Green River rendezvous of 1837 Bridger and Fontenelle led over 100 men to "The Blackfoot country." At Jackson Hole Russell and three others were detached to hunt the headwaters of the Yellowstone. They followed the course of the previous season to the outlet of the lake, then went northeast over the mountains to gain the "Stinking Water" or Shoshone. Failing to meet Fontenelle's party as agreed upon, at the mouth of Clark's Fork, Russell and his companions were compelled to travel over the Wyoming plains to Fort William, which the company had erected in 1834 at the junction of the Platte and the Laramie.²⁸ His biographer holds, although without good evidence, that Jim Bridger led the main brigade twice through the park this year.²⁹ He may have approached the rendezvous in the spring by way of the Madison Fork or the Yellowstone fighting his way through a swarm of Blackfeet, as Meek suggests, but after the rendezvous it appears that he headed instead for the Three Forks country, by way of Teton Pass.

Several reliable eyewitnesses, including Russell, inform us that the summer rendezvous of 1838 was held on the

Popo Agie, the south fork of Wind River. Bridger and his cohorts may have assembled in and trapped the Yellowstone Park region in the spring; but there is nothing to substantiate the tradition, apparently originating with the untrustworthy Meek, that the trappers "finally rendezvoused on the north fork of the Yellowstone, near Yellowstone Lake."³⁰ The fact that Meek himself tells of the presence at the rendezvous of various parties known to be following the Oregon Trail that year, makes it obvious that the tale got tangled up somehow. Yellowstone was a great place to hunt and trap; but it was much too inaccessible to serve as a general meeting place.

An entry in Russell's journal for 1839 indicates that some unidentified trappers from Fort Hall reached Yellowstone Lake in 1838.³¹ Meek alleges that he went alone to Gardner's Hole after the rendezvous, later meeting Drips and Bridger in the "Burnt Hole."³² This agrees with Russell's story that the main band crossed to Jackson Hole and Pierre's Hole, then headed north.

By 1839 the golden era of the mountain fur trade was coming to its close. The record of two trapping expeditions in Yellowstone Park this year provides a stirring climax to the era of the beaver hunters. One party of 40 men, including Ducharme previously mentioned, and the apprentice trapper Jim Baker of later fame, followed up the Snake River to Two Ocean Pass, then descended the Yellowstone to the Lake, making a complete "loop road" tour of Mammoth Hot Springs, Sulphur Mountain, Mud Geyser, Yellowstone Falls and the dazzling displays in "Fire Hole Basin."³³ This is the first certain proof of trappers' visits to Mammoth and to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone although it seems probable that both these features were known earlier.

Another party of four, including our friend Osborne Russell, set out in June, 1839, from Fort Hall, following up the Snake and Lewis River to Lewis Lake and Shoshone Lake. The Shoshone geyser basin is described in detail, including

an "Hour Spring" which answers to the description of Union Geyser. From here they crossed over to Hayden Valley via the Midway Geyser Basin, there noing a "boiling lake," probably the Grand Prismatic Spring. After an extended camp at the outlet of Yellowstone Lake, they went east to the head of Clark's Fork, thence back to the Yellowstone at the ford near Tower Falls, thence to Gardner's Hole and back to the Lake outlet. En route they saw evidence of "a village of 300 or 400 lodges of Blackfeet" that had only recently been evacuated. In their camp on Pelican Creek, just east of the present Fishing Bridge camp ground, they were suddenly assailed by a horde of Blackfeet "who rent the air with their horrid yells," and inflicted severe arrow wounds on Russell and one other. They fought off the Indians with their rifles, but suffered great pain and hardship in making their way back to Fort Hall, leaving the park by way of West Thumb, Lewis Lake and Snake River.³⁴

The final rendezvous of the trappers in 1840, again held on Horse Creek of Green River, was a lugubrious affair, with few beaver hides in evidence, and little of the customary conviviality. Father Pierre J. DeSmet was the feature attraction with a kind of revival meeting among the assembled Flatheads. His subsequent passage through Jackson Hole by way of Teton Pass was as close as the famed missionary-explorer ever came to the park.³⁵

During the next 24 years Yellowstone Park was virtually left in primeval solitude. There is evidence of only three visits of white men during this period, and one attempted visit which failed. In 1844 according to Chittenden, a party of trappers, identity not disclosed, entered Upper Yellowstone Valley from the south, and "passed around the west shore of Yellowstone Lake to the outlet, where they had a severe battle with the Blackfoot Indians, in a broad open tract at that point. The remains of their old corral were still visible as late as 1870."³⁶ The other three expeditions were guided by Jim Bridger, who in 1843 had set up Fort Bridger on Black's Fork of Green River, to cater to the emigrants who were beginning to follow the Oregon Trail. In 1846 according to

James Commel, Bridger led a "trading expedition to the Crows and the Sioux" north up the Green River through Jackson Hole and into the Park, making a tour of the scenic features before continuing down the Yellowstone.³⁷ The historian, Topping, who does not indicate his sources of information, states that in 1850 Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and 22 others on a prospecting trip out of St. Louis, "crossed the mountains to the Yellowstone and down it to the lake and the falls; then across the divide to the Madison River. They saw the geysers of the lower basin and named the river that drains them the Fire Hole... The report of this party made quite a stir in St. Louis."³⁸

The "stir" made by Bridger's reports was mainly in the form of incredulity and scoffing. There were a few highly respected authorities, however, who took Bridger seriously. In 1853 Lt. J.W. Gunnison, who had been a member of the Stansbury exploring party which Bridger guided to Salt Lake in 1850, in his History of the Mormons, published an accurate description of the geyser region based on interviews with the famous trapper.³⁹ In a letter dated January 20, 1852, Father DeSmet located the park correctly by latitude and longitude and gives a very creditable description of its wonders. He writes, "I have these reports from Captain Bridger, who is familiar with every one of these mounds, having passed thirty years of his life near them."⁴⁰

In 1859, Captain W.F. Reynolds, Topographical Engineers, was ordered to explore the mountainous regions in which the Yellowstone, Gallatin and Madison Rivers have their source. The expedition was organized with Bridger as guide, and wintered on the Platte River. In May 1860, while a detachment under Lieutenant Maynadier went north along the Absaroka Range, the main party ascended Wind River, crossed Union Pass then turned north seeking a passage to the Yellowstone. Deep snow, however, blocked their efforts before they reached Two Ocean Pass, and they had to satisfy themselves with encircling the park via Jackson Hole, Teton Pass, Henry's Fork

and Raynold's Pass over the Divide. By way of the Madison, they rejoined Maynadier at the Three Forks. Raynold's report and map, which included accurate data provided by Jim Bridger, became the first official recognition in any form of the existence of unusual volcanic activity in the region of the Upper Yellowstone.⁴¹ Had it not been for the Civil War, which prevented publication of the report until 1868, final confirmation of the Yellowstone Park wonders might not have been postponed for another ten years.

It was the discovery of gold, first in California and later in Colorado, which started the population moving westward in great numbers, and diverted whatever attention might otherwise have become focused on the Yellowstone region. It was the discovery of gold in western Montana, in the early 1880's, which brought about the rediscovery and early creation as the world's first national park. Although there was desultory prospecting previous to 1862, it was in that year that the news of several major gold strikes was broadcast and a full scale stampede to the diggings began. In the spring of 1863 at least two prospecting parties entered the park. Although they were feverishly preoccupied with the search for gold, the unusual character of the country did not escape them entirely, and the leader of one party made something akin to the first scientific eyewitness report. This was Walter Washington DeLacy, an experienced engineer. Disappointed in his efforts to locate a claim at Alder Gulch, in August 1863 he fell in with an expedition of about 40 men bound for Snake River, and was elected captain. Their search being unrewarded, some of the party deserted at Jackson Lake, the others deciding to push north. From the junction of the Lewis and Snake they went over the Pitchstone Plateau to discover Shoshone Lake and Lewis Lake. From there they crossed over the Divide to the geyser basins of the Firehole. Although professing to be "delighted" with what they found there, they wasted no time in sightseeing, and left the park by way of the Gallatin. His findings in the western section of the park were incor-

porated in official maps which were prepared shortly after his return, but lack of opportunity to publish his journal until 1876 probably robbed DeLacy of the glory of being acknowledged the first scientific observer and discoverer of the park.⁴²

Montana newspaper accounts and reminiscences of old-timers have revealed that there were numerous prospecting expeditions which traversed Yellowstone Park during the next five years. To be sure, the many remarkable features of the area were observed, and speculated upon, and eulogized, but as far as the outside world was concerned the whole thing was still in the realm of mystery. The cumulative effect of the reports and rumors, however, was gradually to convince intelligent listeners that no wild tale could be so persistent, and that there must be something at the headwaters of the Yellowstone worth looking into. In September, 1869, David E. Folsom, Charles W. Cook and William Peterson packed south out of Diamond City, Montana, without distracting thoughts of beaver hides or gold, for the express purpose of seeing what they could see on the Upper Yellowstone, and reporting what they saw without adornment. The brief era of definitive discovery and vindication of Colter's Hell was dawning.

Footnotes

¹ The term "Colter's Hell" appears first in literature in Washington Irving's Adventures of Captain Bonneville, Philadelphia, 1837, I, p. 223.

² Hiram M. Chittenden's The Yellowstone National Park, Cincinnati, 1895, several times republished, has not yet been replaced as the standard history of the park. He devotes eight chapters to the "pre-discovery" phase, dedicating his book "to the memories of John Colter and James Bridger pioneers in the wonderland of the Upper Yellowstone. Several new sources have recently come to light.

- ³ Ibid., pp. 2-7.
- ⁴ Stephen N. Hart and Archer Butler Hulbert, eds., Zebulon
- ⁵ Charles G. Paullin, Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States, the Carnegie Institution, Baltimore, 1932, Plate 31A.
- ⁶ Hiram M. Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West, etc., New York, 1936, p.705. Stallo Vinton, John Colter the Discoverer of Yellowstone Park, New York, 1926, pp.57-65. W.J. Ghent, "A Sketch of John Colter," Annals of Wyoming, X, July, 1938, pp. 99-113.
- ⁷ B.W. Driggs, History of Teton Valley, Idaho, Caldwell, 1926 p.22. Donald McKay Frost, "Notes on General Ashley, the Overland Trail and South Pass," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, October, 1944, pp.16-18.
- ⁸ Phillip A. Rollins, ed., The Discovery of the Oregon Trail. Robert Stuart's Narrative, etc., New York, 1935.
- ¹⁰ Alexander Ross, The Fur Hunters of the Far West, London, 1855, pp.184, 201-203, 267-268.
- ¹¹ Herbert O. Brayer suggests that British sources as yet unexplored will undoubtedly enrich our knowledge of early Yellowstone history.
- ¹² Frost, op. cit. Harrison C. Dale, The Ashley-Smith Explorations, Glendale, 1941.
- ¹³ C.G. Coutant, History of Wyoming, Laramie, 1899, p.126 J.Cecil Alter, James Bridger, Salt Lake City, 1927, pp.66-67.
- *⁹ Chittenden, Yellowstone Park, p. 40.

- 14 Coutant, op. cit.
- 15 Frost, op. cit., pp. 63-65.
- 16 Frances F. Victor, River of the West, Hartford, 1871, pp. 64, 73-77, 78-91. Chittenden, Yellowstone Park, p. 27.
- 17 Alter, Op. cit., p. 106.
- 18 T.C. Elliott, "Journal of John Work, 1830-31," Oregon Historical Quarterly, XIII, pp. 368-370.
- 19 Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, III.
- 20 E.S. Topping, Chronicles of the Yellowstone; p. 24.
- 21 Paul C. Phillips, ed., Life in the Rocky Mountains; the Journal of Warren Angus Ferris, Denver, 1940, pp. 192-193, 257, 259.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 W.F. Wagner, ed., Adventures of Zenas Leonard, 1831-1836 Cleveland, 1904, pp. 248-252.
- 24 H.E. Tobie, "Joseph L. Meek, A Conspicuous Personality," Oregon Historical Quarterly, XXXIX, pp. 288-291.
- 25 Osborne Russell, Journal of a Trapper, 1834-1843, Boise, 1921, pp. 20-37.
- 26 Rev. Samuel Parker, Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains, New York, 1844, pp. 87-97.
- 27 Russell, op. cit., pp. 47-51.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 65-84.
- 29 Alter, op. cit., p. 158.

30 Victor, op. cit., p. 237.

31 Russell, op. cit., p. 98.

32 Tobie, op. cit., p. 305. The precise location of the "Burnt Hole" is not known but descriptions of it by Ferris and Russel would place it in the valley of Madison River to the west of Yellowstone Park. Chittenden and others have confused it with the "Fire Hole," which is unmistakably the geyser basins of Firehold River.

33 W.T. Hamilton, My Sixty Years on the Plains, etc., New York, 1905. p. 94.

34 Russell, op. cit., pp. 99-108.

35 Hiram M. Chittenden and Alfred T. Richardson, etc., Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre Jean De Smet, Cleveland, 1905, pp. 216-228.

36 Chittenden, Yellowstone Park, pp. 49-50.

37 Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, VII

38 Topping, op. cit., p. 25.

39 J.W. Gunnison, History of the Mormons, p. 77.

40 Chittenden and Richardson, op. cit.

41 War Department Records.

42 Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, I.