

A BRIEF HISTORY OF YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

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In the truest sense, the history of this Park covers only a little more than 150 years, for our written record had its origin in the vague information Indians gave explorers as Lewis and Clark were toiling up the Missouri River on their journey across the continent.

And yet, men had lived on the Yellowstone Plateau for a very long time. A projectile point unearthed a few miles from Park headquarters indicates that Indians may have hunted where the town of Gardiner, Montana, now stands as much as 5,000 years ago. The finding of ancient campsites and stone articles at many points within the area of the Park, and in the mountains and valleys around it, hints strongly that men have lived here for most of the 8,500 years since the last ice age.

At the opening of the historic period, the only Indians making their home in the Park area were the "Sheepeaters" (whose name indicates their staple food, not their tribe). They were a mixed group of Shoshone and Bannock Indians who lacked the horses and guns necessary to compete with their neighbors, and had retreated into the mountains to live furtive, impoverished lives, even by Indian standards.

John Colter, a fur trapper, appears to have been the first white man to see this land of hot springs and geysers. He probably passed through it during the winter of 1807-08, while searching for Indian customers for a trading post established by Manuel Lisa, lower down on the Yellowstone River. The fur trade flourished briefly in the Rocky Mountains, bringing such men as Jim Bridger, Joe Meek, Daniel Potts, Osborne Russell and Warren Angus Ferris into the area which is now Yellowstone Park; but a growing scarcity of fine furs, coupled with changes in fashion, brought the fur trade to an end about 1840. The trapper disappeared from the Yellowstone Plateau, leaving it a nearly-forgotten wilderness.

The discovery of gold in neighboring Montana a little more than twenty years later, brought exploring parties of miners to the upper Yellowstone country in 1863. In the years that followed, mining activity established a chain of rude settlements and isolated claims up the Yellowstone and Lamar Rivers to the headwaters of the Clark's Fork River. Some of the knowledge which had been a common-place to the fur trappers was re-discovered and interest in the geyser regions was rekindled.

In 1869, a different type of exploration, based on curiosity rather than profit, was begun. The first group to come into the Yellowstone country for the sole purpose of seeing what it contained was the Folsom-Cook-Peterson party, and the information brought back led to a more thorough exploration by the Washburn-Langford-Doane party in the following year. The writing and lecturing done by members of this second expedition resulted in an official exploration by the United States Geological Survey of the Territories in 1871. From that came a recognition of the superlative nature of the Yellowstone "wonders", and the Congress of the

United States was persuaded to set aside a vast area of 2 1/3 million acres as The Yellowstone National Park, established March 1, 1872.

The new Park was placed in the care of a superintendent, who was left without funds for its maintenance and without laws for its protection; hence he could not accomplish what was expected of him. The four superintendents who followed him were likewise incapable of adequately developing and protecting the Park, so that the job of managing it for the nation was given, at last, to the United States Army.

From 1886 until 1917, that trust was ably handled. The necessary public works were completed by officers of the Corps of Engineers, while soldiers stationed at key points brought respect for law and order with the assistance of hardy scouts. Thirty-two years of brusque but fair administration had so far corrected the early abuses that civilian management could again be tried.

A new organization, the National Park Service, was authorized by Congress on August 26, 1916. Under it, the Park was administered by a superintendent, assisted by a corps of rangers, who had the powers of civilian policemen. The new form of management has proved satisfactory through the intervening years to the present, allowing the Yellowstone National Park to serve the people of this nation as an unrivalled vacation-land; a place where they may see some of nature's grandest works, do some wholesome, refreshing things, and go away with their spirits lifted and their viewpoints broadened. The proof that it has been a worthwhile venture lies in the marvelous growth of the National Park System in this country, and its influence throughout the World.

Suggested reading:

The Encyclopedia Britannica, or The Encyclopedia Americana.

H. M. Chittenden, The Yellowstone National Park (any edition).

N. P. Langford, Diary of the Washburn Expedition to the Yellowstone and Firehole Rivers in the Year 1870. (1905)

M. D. Beal, The Story of Man in Yellowstone (1956)

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