



Exploring the History of Yellowstone with John Colter

My name is John Colter. As one of the first white men ever to see the area that is now Yellowstone Park, my stories played a critical role in sparking the interest of other explorers to go into the area and see it for themselves. In October of 1803, I joined up with the Lewis and Clark Expedition near Maysville, Kentucky. After a three year exploration which carried us all the way to the Pacific Ocean, I left the party to try my hand at fur trading. Over the next three years I roamed the West, but it was in the winter of 1807-08 that I traversed and discovered what is now the Yellowstone region.

COLTER'S HELL

When I relayed my stories about the "hidden fires, smoking pits, noxious steams, and smell of brimstone," many thought I had grossly exaggerated my observations of the phenomenon in this region. However, my descriptions were to be soon recognized as reality and my fellow trappers began to refer to the region near the present day town of Cody, Wyoming as "Colter's Hell." What we would later realize is that even greater demonstrations of nature lay beyond my route of that epic winter journey through the Yellowstone area.

This is clearly shown by the account of Father Pierre-Jean Desmet: "Near the source of the [Shoshone River]...is a place called Colter's Hell—from a beaver hunter of that name. The sulfurous gases which escape in great volumes from the burning soil infect the atmosphere for several miles and render the earth so barren that even the wild wormwood cannot grow on it. However, I think that the most extraordinary spot in this respect...is in the very heart of the Rocky Mountains...between the sources of the Madison and Yellowstone [Rivers]. It reaches for more than a hundred miles. Sulfurous and boiling springs are very numerous in it. Gas, vapor, and smoke are continually escaping by a thousand openings; the noise at times resembles the steam let off by a boat. The hunters and the Indians speak of it with a superstitious fear, and consider it the abode of evil spirits, that is to say, a kind of hell."

H. M. Chittenden summed up the early disbelief well when he wrote: "[Colter] gave Clark important data for his forthcoming map of the Lewis and Clark expedition. He succeeded in making himself accounted a confirmed [liar]. No author or map maker would jeopardize the success of his work by incorporating in it such incredible material as Colter furnished. His stories were not believed; their author became the subject of jest and ridicule; and the region of his adventures was long derisively known as "Colter's Hell."

JIM BRIDGER

About 20 years after I had ventured through the region, another Virginian by the name of Jim Bridger trapped and explored in the Yellowstone area. Bridger was known as the greatest and most respected mountain man ever, a natural at trapping and exploring. In 1824 Bridger became the first white man to see the Great Salt Lake Valley, and his travels also took him through Yellowstone. Over the next 20 years, Bridger became known for his knowledge of the land, his ability to trade with Indians, and his remarkable tales of the Yellowstone Country.

BRIDGER'S STORIES

While Bridger's stories are enjoyable, even I wonder why he told such preposterous tales. Did he really expect anyone to believe him? Actually, no. Bridger got so upset when people didn't believe the truth that he told the fantastic stories on purpose. He said it didn't hurt to fool people who begged for information and then didn't even say "thank ye." He also said he "didn't think it proper to spoil a good story just for the sake of the truth."

One of Bridger's favorite stories evolved from the Obsidian Cliff found in Yellowstone. To understand this story it is important to know that obsidian is a natural glass formed when lava cools quickly. He told stories of an "invisible mountain" he discovered while hunting. He claimed that one day he saw and fired at a magnificent elk (or in some versions, a rabbit). To his surprise, the shot not only missed completely, but the animal didn't even seem frightened. He tried again and again with the same result. Finally he ran forward to investigate, but was suddenly stopped by a mountain of perfectly clear glass. Bridger claimed that the mountain had acted like a magnifying glass, making the elk seem only a few hundred yards away when really it was 25 miles in the distance.

Bridger was indeed a seasoned mountain man. Once when he was with another explorer, he pointed to a tall, flat mountain and said, "Son, when I first came here, that was merely an anthill." He called this mountain his alarm clock, and claimed that every night before he went to bed he would yell, "Wake up Jim Bridger, you frost-bit, no account rascal!" and exactly 7 hours and 56 minutes later the mountain would echo the message back and wake him up.

Another of Bridger's favorite stories was of a lake where the surface of the water was boiling, but the water underneath was cool. He professed that he would catch a fish in the cool water below the surface, and as he brought it up through the hot water, it was all cooked and ready to eat.

Trappers and explorers like Jim Bridger and I told stories of our experiences in Yellowstone, but for several years there wasn't any written documentation of the park. As the fame of Yellowstone spread by word of mouth, other explorers went into the region and actually documented what they saw. The writings of these explorers triggered the interest of people in government and eventually helped establish Yellowstone as a national park.

FIRST WRITTEN IMPRESSIONS OF YELLOWSTONE

While several literate trappers kept journals and wrote down their observations of the Yellowstone, the first published account appeared in the *Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertiser* on September 27, 1827. This was an account by a trapper named Daniel T. Potts:

"The Yellow Stone has a large fresh water lake near its head on the very top of the mountain, which is...as clear as crystal. On the south border of this lake is a number of hot and boiling springs. One of our men visited one of these whilst taking his recreation—there at an instant the earth began a tremendous trembling, and he with difficulty made his escape, when an explosion took place resembling that of thunder. During our stay in that quarter I heard it every day."

Other observations ultimately found their way to publication. In *The River of the West*, Francis Fuller Victor, writes about the trapper Joe Meek and his first impression of Yellowstone:

"For some minutes Joe gazed and wondered. Curious thoughts came into his head about hell and the day of doom. On descending the plain, the earth was found to have a hollow sound, and seemed threatening to break through. Joe found the warmth of the place most delightful, after the freezing cold of the mountains, and remarked to himself that 'if it war hell, it war a more agreeable climate' that he had been in for some time."

Perhaps some of the best accounts of experiences in the park come from Warren A. Ferris:

"When I arose in the morning (May 20, 1834), clouds of vapor seemed like a dense fog to overhang the springs, from which frequent... explosions of different loudness constantly assailed our ears. From the surface of a rocky plain or table burst forth columns of water, of various dimensions, projected high in the air, accompanied by loud explosions and sulphurous vapors, which were highly disagreeable to the smell. I ventured near enough to put my hand into the water of the basin, but withdrew it instantly for the heat of the water in this immense cauldron was altogether too great for my comfort; and the agitation of the water, the disagreeable [vapor] continually exuding, and the hollow unearthly rumbling under the rock on which I stood, so ill accorded with my notions of personal safety, that I retreated back [quickly] to a respectful distance. The Indians who were with me were quite appalled, and could not by any means be induced to approach [the water]. They seemed astonished at my presump-

tion in advancing up to the large one, and when I safely returned, [they] congratulated me on my "narrow escape."

BECOMING A NATIONAL PARK

Because of the reports from early trappers and later gold prospectors which ventured into the area, organized exploration of the area began in 1869 with a party consisting of David E. Folsom, Charles W. Cook and William Peterson. Their report sparked the interest of another group, and on August 22, 1870, the Washburne party set off on a survey of the Yellowstone area. Accompanying this party was Nathaniel Pitt Langford. Langford was instrumental in securing funds for the exploration and subsequently gave a series of lectures concerning the experience. In 1871, Dr. Ferdinand V. Hayden, head of the U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories, attended one of Langford's lectures and quickly lobbied for appropriations for an organized government expedition. Hayden knew the best way to prove the reality of the area once and for all would be the gathering of evidence by a team of scientists and photographer William Henry Jackson. Northern Pacific Railroad, who had funded the Washburn Expedition, also sent artist Thomas Moran.

When Hayden returned to Washington with his findings, he joined Nathaniel P. Langford, a member of the Washburn-Doane expedition, and William H. Clagett, a delegate to Congress from the Montana territory, in campaigning to preserve Yellowstone as a national park. These three constructed plans for submitting the "National Park Project" to Congress. With the help of Jackson's and Moran's works, Congress was convinced, and on March 1, 1872, a bill establishing Yellowstone as the world's first national park was passed. The act read in part:

"Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America...That the tract of land in the territories of Montana and Wyoming, lying under the headwaters of the Yellowstone River...is hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people..." This was the beginning of a legacy that millions have enjoyed and will enjoy for generations.

SUGGESTED READING

A Fur Trade History of Yellowstone by Fred R. Gowans

Jim Bridger by Cecil J. Alder

The Story of Man in Yellowstone by Merrill D. Beal

The Yellowstone National Park by H. M. Chittenden

(edited by Richard Bartlett)

The River of the West by Francis Fuller Victor

Journal of a Trapper by Osborne Russell

Western Literary Messenger by Warren A Ferris

The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, USA in the Rocky

Mountains and the Far West by Washington Irving

The Yellowstone Story by Aubrey Haines