



Y E L L O W S T O N E

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DISCOVERY

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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT:

Native Americans and Yellowstone, Past, Present and Future

"The Yellowstone Bannock Trail now belongs to history... We know that the Bannock, in the Yellowstone country, played an important role in a brilliant drama." – Wayne Replogle Photo: NPS

By APRIL CHRISTOFFERSON
Yellowstone Association

When Hiram Chittenden wrote the first history of Yellowstone in 1895, he dedicated it to "John Colter and James Bridger, Pioneers in the Wonderland of the Upper Yellowstone." While it's true that trappers like Colter and Bridger figured prominently in the history of the world's first national park, the full picture of mankind's history in Yellowstone has often been down-played or even ignored altogether.

What's Inside...

- PREMIERE OF EXPLORE YELLOWSTONE!
- ADVENTUROUS FALL LODGING AND LEARNING PROGRAMS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION INSTITUTE
- EXCITING EDUCATIONAL ITEMS OFFERED FROM THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION PARK STORE

Chittenden's *The Yellowstone National Park* acknowledges small bands of Sheep Eater Indians inside the park and occasional visits from "wandering bands from other tribes," but he goes on to state that their "acquaintance with it was extremely limited." In his words, "Evidence...clearly indicates that this country was *terra incognita* to the vast body of Indians who dwelt around it... There was nothing to induce the Indians to visit the Park country."

For many years, this was a view shared by much of the world—a fact that clearly disturbed long-time Yellowstone ranger

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and naturalist Wayne Replogle, who wrote of the eight years he spent “reading early documents, reports, maps and writings of people of long ago, few of which ever mentioned Indians.”

BLAME IT ON SUPERSTITION

The lack of an Indian presence in Yellowstone was invariably blamed on the Native Americans’ superstitious fear of the area’s geothermal features.

In *Fear or Reverence? Native Americans and the Geysers of Yellowstone*, Joseph Owen Weixelman chronicles the plentiful but sometimes dubious sources upon which such a myth was based. An example is the expedition journal entry by William Clark that states, “At the head of this river the Indians give an account that very frequently there is a loud noise [*sic*] heard like thunder which makes the earth

tremble—they state that they seldom go there because their children cannot sleep at night for this noise and conceive it possessed of spirits who are averse that men should be near them.” The Jesuit priest Pierre-Jean DeSmet, who never actually visited Yellowstone, nonetheless felt free to write, “The hunters and Indians speak of it with a superstitious fear, and consider it the abode of evil spirits, that is to say, a kind of hell.” Then there was this journal entry, penned by Nathaniel P. Langford, of the 1870 Washburn expedition, “The Indians approach (the Yellowstone region) under the fear of a superstition originating in the volcanic forces surrounding it.” And, according to Weixelman, as late as 1954 Ake Hultkrantz, a prominent Swedish historian remarked, “that the Indians’ fear of going to Yellowstone was so strong it constituted a religious-emotional taboo that could be overcome only in times of distress.” In fact, Weixelman notes mention of this

Indian fear continued to find its way into Yellowstone guidebooks into the 1980s (Weixelman 2001).

Perhaps the most notorious propagator of this myth was Yellowstone’s second superintendent, Philetus W. Norris. In his annual reports to the Secretary of the Interior, Norris consistently referred to the Indians’ “superstitious awe” of the park’s geothermal features. Ironically, Norris was a student of archeology and a great collector of Indian artifacts in Yellowstone, many of which he shipped to the Smithsonian Institution. One must wonder where those artifacts came from if there were no Native Americans in the park. According to Ann Johnson, Yellowstone National Park Archeologist, Norris even constructed a block house, complete with cannon, on a hilltop in Mammoth—to protect park headquarters from Indian attacks. Mammoth is home to some of Yellowstone’s most spectacular geothermal features. If Norris believed his own contention, that the Indians’ fear of Yellowstone’s geothermal features kept them away, why the block house?

Long before the first white trappers and explorers ventured into what became known as Yellowstone, it served as a home, hunting ground, and passageway for Native Americans. Indians have, in fact, traversed or lived in the region for over 10,000 years. Weixelman reports that over 400 Native American campsites have been found in Yellowstone, at least 40 of which were located in geothermal areas. In treaties, Congress recognized that almost three-fourths of what is now Yellowstone once belonged to the Crow and Shoshone. The Indian Claims Commission (whose job it was to adjudicate tribes’ claims against the federal government for compensation) recognized the Nez Perce, Blackfeet, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Coeur d’Alene, Gros Ventre and Assiniboine as “treaty tribes” having customary use of what is now the park. As Rosemary Sucec, Yellowstone National Park Cultural Anthropologist, put it, “In a nutshell, according to indigenous oral traditions, Yellowstone, before the National Park Service and the

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YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

THE MISSION OF THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

The Yellowstone Association, in partnership with the National Park Service, fosters the public’s understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding ecosystem

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