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DISCOVERY

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CELEBRATING THE NEW— AND THE OLD



Built in 1903, the inn at Old Faithful represented a bold new vision for architecture in the national parks. Photo: Scott Morrison

By April Christofferson
Yellowstone Association

August 2010 marked the grand opening of the new Old Faithful Visitor Education Center. The much-anticipated building is expected to serve 2.6 million visitors each year, people from all over the world who are drawn to one of the most recognizable and beloved symbols of the world's first national park—Old Faithful Geyser. The new visitor center features many of today's high-tech advances (including state-of-the-art exhibits and a unique architectural plan taking into account the basin's geysers and geothermal heat). The building is also meticulously designed to be compatible with another Yellowstone landmark—the 107-year-old Old Faithful Inn.

Old Faithful Inn is almost as recognizable throughout the world as the geyser for which it was named. It also symbolizes a dramatic change in the way visitors perceived and experienced the national parks—a change that likely impacted the course of history for Yellowstone and

other national parks. Built in 1903, the inn at Old Faithful represented a bold new vision for architecture in the national parks, a vision that became known as “parkitecture.” It also represented the creative genius of the man who designed it: Robert C. Reamer.

Early in Yellowstone's history, in response to poaching and political scandal, the U.S. Army was called in to protect and bring order to the park. The military presence lasted from 1886 through 1916. Fort Yellowstone, constructed in the Mammoth Hot Springs area of the park to house the troops and provide facilities, reflects the prevailing style of military buildings of the day. Many of these buildings still stand and serve the park today.

Early housing for tourists was another story entirely. Oftentimes makeshift (including tents), haphazard, and lacking in aesthetic

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appeal, the tourist accommodations were anything but luxurious.

Role of the Railroads

Things began to change when the northern transcontinental railroads reached the parks. The role railroads played in making Yellowstone and other western parks the success they are today often goes unrecognized. Railroads typically became the first concessioners in and around national parks. In 1890, seven years after laying tracks to the town of Cinnabar, which became the gateway to Yellowstone, the Northern Pacific Railroad constructed the Lake Hotel at Yellowstone Lake. A vast improvement over the cheaply constructed and meager accommodations tourists had contended with, the Lake Hotel's classical style reflected the mainstream architecture of the day, but it did nothing to reflect its setting.

Before long, the railroads came upon a new—and enormously successful—strategy for selling tickets. They had invested fortunes in laying tracks across

the nation. In the case of Yellowstone, the Northern Pacific had extended the railway three miles closer to the park—from Cinnabar to Gardiner. Now they needed a way to lure more passengers to scenic wonders like Yellowstone, Glacier, and the Grand Canyon. In the effort to attract more visitors, money flowed freely. The railroads gave architects greater latitude and larger budgets to design destinations so unique and irresistible that people would flock to them. The assignment: create buildings with images that left a lasting impression.

It was in this spirit that, in 1902, the Northern Pacific Railroad hired Robert C. Reamer to design an inn at Old Faithful.

Reamer's Vision

If the Northern Pacific asked for a hotel that would fuel excitement and leave a lasting impression, Reamer delivered. Reamer's vision for Old Faithful Inn (which was enthusiastically reviewed by President Theodore Roosevelt during his April 1903 visit to Yellowstone) signaled



Railroads were typically the first concessioners. The Northern Pacific Railroad built the Lake Hotel in 1890. Photo: Stephanie Ripley

a dramatic break in architectural design in the national parks. The inn's site was carefully selected to offer visitors approaching the hotel an unobstructed view of the geyser. Still, unless Old Faithful was actually going off, eyes were glued to the inn.

Built on a massive scale with an imposing pitched roof, Old Faithful Inn could rival the spectacle of the geyser itself. Reamer's extravagant use of stone and round logs on the exterior, coupled with the building's proportions and a gabled, asymmetrical roof, mirrored and celebrated the surrounding landscape.

But the inn's interior perhaps elicited the strongest reaction. Inside the seven-story lobby, over-hanging balconies featured gnarled railings, and stairways zig-zagged past tiers of lodgepole columns to a ceiling that soared 92 feet high—all around a 40-foot-tall fireplace made of 500 tons of lava rock. Visitors were spellbound from the start as they gazed slowly upward at the spectacle. That has not changed, observes park historian Lee Whittlesey: "You can always spot the visitors. They're the ones looking up."

It was the first time anyone had designed a building in the national parks that reflected the magnificence of the nature

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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 by funding and providing educational products and services.

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surrounding it. Reamer's design for Old Faithful Inn started a metamorphosis in National Park Service architecture by creating a design style that celebrated nature, blending man-made structures with their natural surroundings.

Old Faithful Inn was a turning point not only for Reamer's life and career, but also for Yellowstone and the national parks as a

whole. As Laura Soulliere Harrison writes in her introductory essay in *Architecture in the Parks: A National Historic Landmark Theme Study*: "The concept that the land could shape the architecture was taking hold."

"Who could have imagined this?"

In *Weaver of Dreams: The Life and*

Architecture of Robert C. Reamer, author Ruth Quinn writes of Old Faithful Inn's lobby: "As eyes are carried upward, one gapes and wonders, 'Who could have imagined this?'"

Who indeed? Who was Reamer, and how was he chosen to design the inn at Old Faithful? After all, he was only 29 at the time he was hired, and virtually unknown in Yellowstone.

The answers were not always easy to come by. Oddly, while Reamer's work in Yellowstone is renowned, the world knew very little about Reamer. Quinn set about to reveal the man behind the work and his place in architectural history.

Robert Reamer grew up in Oberlin, Ohio. Plagued by headaches, he quit school at age 12. He had no formal training as an architect, but at that young age he went to work in a Detroit architect's office. According to Quinn's biography, Reamer was probably employed as a draftsman. He drifted over the years, moving from state to state and firm to firm, and even working for a time designing furniture. But from his early first exposure to it, Reamer always seemed rooted in his love of architecture.

By 1902 in Yellowstone, Harry Child, head of the park concessioner Yellowstone Park Association, was already planning to build a grand hotel in the Upper Geyser Basin. The Northern Pacific Railroad had committed to financing the project when Child and his wife took a vacation at the famous Hotel Del Coronado in California. This was Child's first exposure to Robert C. Reamer's work, which included designing the Coronado Golf Club House. Child was duly impressed. He hired Reamer to build the new inn, and it is believed that Reamer began designing the structure on the train as the two traveled to Yellowstone.

By all accounts, Reamer was a reserved, quiet man who did little to promote himself. It is said he was always looking down. His only child, a daughter named Jane, describes Reamer as passionate about his work. In a pamphlet citing stories about Reamer during the period he was building the Old Faithful Inn, Charles Francis Adams writes: "The architect forgot to shave, forgot to undress at night, or breakfast in the morning, he was so



The inn's seven-story lobby soars to 92 feet and its fireplace is made of 500 tons of lava rock.
Photo: Pam Cahill