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America Through the Looking Glass
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[NOTE: These are rough notes taken by the Project Manager during the Summer Institute]

The creation of Yellowstone Park and the meaning of it

Begin with a story: George and Emma Cowan

The two were Bozemanites, with a connection to Yellowstone Park and the Nez Perce War. In 1877 they experienced the “worst vacation in American history.” They were camping along the Firehole River, when the Nez Perce came through their camp. They were taken “captive/hostage.” The Indians did not want Howard to know where they were, so part of the reason they were taken was for intelligence reasons.

As they approached Yellowstone Lake, a group of younger warriors come and are really angry towards the whites. One young Indian shoots George in the face. Emma assumes he is dead. He gets up and a young Indian spots him and shoots him in the leg. They assume he is dead. He crawls 10 miles back to his original campsite. He lights a fire to get warm and awakes to finding his clothes on fire. He dips into the Firehole River. He met the front of Howard’s troops where they patched him up and left him to wait for the main column. The doctor treated him, but nobody really likes him and he is treated awfully. He is taken with the troops by wagon over a freshly cut rode through Yellowstone. They are lowering the wagons down a canyon, when the rope on the wagon he is in breaks. He is taken to Mammoth, where his wife meets him and he is taken back to Bozeman. The reins on his wagon break and his wagon rolls off a ravine. He survives because he is thrown clear of the wreckage. He finally gets back to Bozeman where he recovers and lives a long life.

The West is being radically and fundamentally remade. There are two realities clashing.

Yellowstone was a very old place used for centuries by indigenous peoples. Earliest records of humans in the region go back 10,000 years. Most peoples did not live there year around, but they had many uses for it. The region was used for passage, grazing, trading, and hunting. Yellowstone obsidian traded and circulated throughout North America. This included a 200 pound chunk of obsidian found in Ohio. Many groups used the region for these purposes.

The episode illustrates how the old meaning and idea of the park clashes with the new meaning of the region as this pristine, untouched, and uninhabited wilderness.

Henry D. Washburn (Washburn, Langford, Doane party) 1870
Published first well-received accounts of the region

Ferdinand Hayden: USGS survey of the region in 1871
Scientifically describe the region and see what can be done with the place. Hayden’s survey included William Henry Jackson and Thomas Moran.

Almost immediately the material found its way into the public domain. It attracted the attention of the U.S. government. The enduring “myth” was the national park myth out of the Washburn, Langford, Doane expedition and the campfire myth. The myth was kept up just to influence people to think about “public” spaces in such a way.

Alfred Runte argued that it was “worthless land.”

Jay Edward Cooke and Langford were trying to find ways to make money with the railroad other than just through transcontinental travel. Cooke sends Langford to work with Washburn and to hire Doane from Ft. Ellis in order to survey the region. When Hayden returned from his 1871 expedition, he has a letter waiting for him from Jay Cooke urging him to include in his official report a recommendation that the region be set aside. There was a serious push to sign it into law and in 1872 Yellowstone is set aside as a National Park. This is a classic Reconstruction Era partnership between the government and corporations.

This partnership depends on a different kind of product (it is not a railroad or a telegraph), but the creation of a mythic place. Who are “the people?” and what is their pleasure? The process of reconstruction was affecting different people in many different ways. The process of state building involved creating the nation to include and exclude certain elements. Yellowstone is a classic example of Reconstruction in a microcosm. The first thing that was done was the expulsion of native peoples. The Sheep eater Indians did live in Yellowstone year around. Norris, one of the first superintendents, wrote an extremely offensive article about the Sheep eaters that trivialized the culture. The Bannocks, Crows, and other Indians that used the region were also trivialized by Norris in another article in which he stated that the Indians avoided the region because they were scared of the geysers and natural phenomena. The Yellowstone being created is a Yellowstone free of human contact. It was important to establish the notion in white America’s head that they really could go back in time to touch Eden—before there were humans. Also, it established that Indians had no rights there because they never were in the region, or if they were, they did not benefit by it.

Almost all of the early tourism to the region was people from this area. These people were also the early entrepreneurs in the park. The first non-Indian occupiers were the locals. But, since that wasn’t the original “idea” of what the place would be, there was debate over how to control how the park was used. This leads to military patrol and control of the park. There had to be a new definition of which were the right kinds of “people” that had the best idea of how the region would be used.

The railroads formed dummy corporations to provide park infrastructure for “the people.” They build it to be a pleasuring ground for rich Americans from the east. \$250-\$400 packages per person, which would in present money, would be \$3500-\$4500 per person. This is well before the invention of the vacation. Only people with money and means were able to afford to take time off to go to Yellowstone.

From the beginning, it was Yellowstone National Park. The popular name was “Wonderland.” It came from a Montana editor (Helena). This was Yellowstone’s promotional name. The idea came from Alice in Wonderland and the “through the looking glass” idea. It was not just a land

of wonders, but it is a place that you could approach through the ordinary world and suddenly walk through the looking glass to find yourself in another world. Gast and “American Progress:” As the new nation was being remade, the meaning of the American West became this place to be conquered. It was a place of opportunity. It was a place in need of transformation. But, the West was not just a place in need of conquering; it was also a place where people could step out of history. People needed to be able to enter another reality, where they could touch a nature untouched by civilization.

The West set America apart from Europe. Europe had old history, but America had even older history—one that could be found in the West.

This was in absolute contradiction to “American Progress.” Lewis Carroll was being satirical of English society in *Alice in Wonderland*. The editor brought up that contradiction when talking of Yellowstone as Wonderland. People caught on the margins of these National Parks were caught in-between. How does one reconcile the two “ideas” of what the West was?

Superimpose reconstruction and the creation of YNP....