

Karen Krieger

Women of Yellowstone

Yellowstone's diverse and spectacular land forms are rivaled only by its dynamic human history, a history rich in female participation.

Since humans began viewing its expansive vistas and steamy thermal features, women have worked, visited, given birth, and died in this country, often sharing their feelings about this unique landscape with family and friends. Their expressions of life in Yellowstone are set in and around the natural and human-made features that distinguish America's first national park. Found in published manuscripts, family scrapbooks, photos, park archeological sites, tourist literature, railroad advertisements, personal correspondence, oral histories, and on grave markers in and near the park, these stories reveal lives as colorful as the bluest hot pots, as adventurous as the Yellowstone River in springtime, and as varied as the landscape itself.

The circumstances of women's experiences in the park varied as well. Some women lived in the park; others were visitors traveling by horse, stage-coach, rail, and auto. Their social and economic status, age, education levels, ethnic backgrounds, time period represented, and previous wilderness encounters differed greatly. Comparing the prehistoric woman to the historic, the Victorian to the industrial, the young to the old, in the context of this environment reveals the many ways women lived and constructed their lives throughout time and invigorates our understanding of humans interacting with the western landscape.

Stereocard of two women descending into Devil's Kitchen, 1907. Courtesy Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY.



On a plateau near Specimen Ridge in the northeast portion of the park lies a ring of rocks, partially submerged in the soil, marking some of the first human experiences in Yellowstone. Tepee rings and lithic material found throughout the park provide evidence of the Paleo and Archaic big game hunters who both lived in and visited this area. Wikiups, weathered and teetering, as well as enduring oral traditions reveal the lives of the Shoshoni-Bannocks, Crow, Sioux, and Nez Perce families who hunted, prepared meals, told stories, and raised children in this area's rivers and forests through the 1870s.

The site also reminds us of Mrs. Marshall, who—with her husband—built and operated the park's first hotel and gave birth to Rosa Park Marshall there in 1881. Another kind of marker located near Nez Perce picnic area illuminates the stories of other park residents. A gravestone inscribed "Mattie S., wife of E.C. Culver, died March 2, 1889, Aged 30 yrs" commemorates the life of the wife of the Marshall's hotel winter keeper. She died of tuberculosis in a land so frozen that her body was put in halved whiskey barrels and stored in the snow until the ground thawed enough for her burial. Her 18-month-old daughter was sent to live with relatives.

The U.S. Army arrived in Yellowstone in 1886 as the park's official law enforcement and management presence. The thick, imposing walls of the married officers' quarters at Fort Yellowstone, now the park headquarters in Mammoth, once rang with the voices of military wives and children living in this outpost. The row of homes was nicknamed "soapsuds row" for the loads of laundry hung out to dry by the wives of military men who earned extra money for their families by taking in laundry. The military personnel also invigorated the economies of the nearby towns by hiring maids, laundresses, and cooks as well as by supporting local merchants and entertainment establishments.

In 1916, management of Yellowstone National Park was turned over to the newly established National Park Service, and families of rangers replaced those of officers at Fort Yellowstone. In addition, women in natural resource professions began participating in the park's management. In the summer of 1920, the park's first superintendent, Horace Albright, hired Isabel Wasson, a Columbia University graduate student in geology as an early woman naturalist/inter-

preter.¹ She was followed in 1928 by Ruby Anderson, the first woman to work the entrance gate, and ranger-naturalists, Marguerite Lindsley and Herma Albertson.

Park concessionaires and their employees lives' also offer another way to explore the everyday lives of female park residents. Their stories are of entrepreneurs working in and running businesses and participating in the development of the burgeoning western tourism industry. They are also the stories of seasonal employees working as waitresses, laundresses, cooks, maids, and interpreters who, when not hard at work, took advantage of their unique social circumstances and outdoor opportunities. Clara Green, a waitress stationed at Lake Hotel, wrote in her journal on August 6, 1892:

There was a dance here and some of the tourists danced too. At 10:15, 16 of the canyon surveyors arrived here. 5 girls and the rest boys danced till 12 o'clock and then we all went on the steamer to the Thumb. We all had a splendid time with music, dance and song. . . . come home at 4 o'clock after an enjoyable trip in the bright moonlight on the beautiful water."²

Many more of their stories wait to be revealed. Mary J. Foster's is locked up cold and hard in a grave on the hill just north of Mammoth Hotel. All that is known of her is inscribed on the windswept hill— "Mary J. Foster, died, June 10, 1883, Age 33 yrs, First to be laid to rest in Mammoth." Her date of death may reveal an association with the Mammoth Hotel constructed that same year, but her full story remains untold.

The letters, diaries, and reminiscences of tourists to the park offer some of the most diverse and insightful perspectives on the park and its history. They document food served, sleeping arrangements, accommodation and travel conditions, conversations and temperaments of other tourists,

clothing, and, of course, their feelings about the spectacular and seemingly bizarre landscape. "I shall never want to live in a house again" young Flora Chase Pierce wrote home to her mother during a camping trip through the park in July 1897.³ Many, like Hattie Shober in a letter to her aunt, September 4, 1877, reveal the often uncomfortable feelings associated with unusual natural features:

We passed the 'Devil's Kitchen,' an extinct spring. In order to enter it you must descend a 50 ft. ladder which is there for the benefit of those desirous of inspecting his Satanic majesty's cooking utensils. I was not. I prefer "terafirma" if I know before starting that I am on the way to his majesty's apartments. I've no desire to call on him.⁴

Women from around the world enjoying modern hotel accommodations, local ranch women traveling in buggies and wagons and camping alongside the trails, and American women of modest means staying in semi-permanent tourist camps—all contribute to our understanding of park visitors' experiences and to our knowledge of past women's lives.

In Yellowstone, residents and visitors alike mingled with others of different cultures, participated in—and were sometimes exploited by—the economic growth spawned by the tourist industry, and encountered and often created situations that challenged their society's norms of female behavior. Their stories help invigorate our understanding of the park's development, the regional economic consequences of military establishments and a developing tourist industry, and how it felt, smelled, and sounded to women living in and visiting Yellowstone throughout its human history. Listening to the stories women tell, studying their writings, and learning from their experiences enrich our own lives and our understanding of Yellowstone National Park's natural and cultural history.

Tourists descending into the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, 1904. Courtesy Yellowstone National Park.



Notes

- ¹ Wasson, Isabel. 1977. Typewritten account of summer working in Yellowstone. Vertical files, Yellowstone National Park Library.
- ² Green, Clara. 1892. Journal of employment at Lake Hotel, Yellowstone. Transcribed, typed. Vertical file, Yellowstone National Park Library.
- ³ Pierce, Flora Chase (Mrs. Charles E.). July 26, 1897. Letter to mother describing travels through Yellowstone. Transcribed, typed. Vertical files, Yellowstone National Park Library.
- ⁴ Shober, Hattie. September 4, 1877. Letter to aunt describing travels through Yellowstone. Transcribed, typed. Vertical files, Yellowstone National Park Library.

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