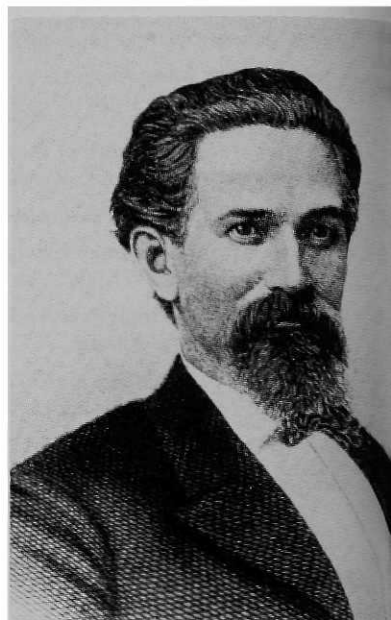
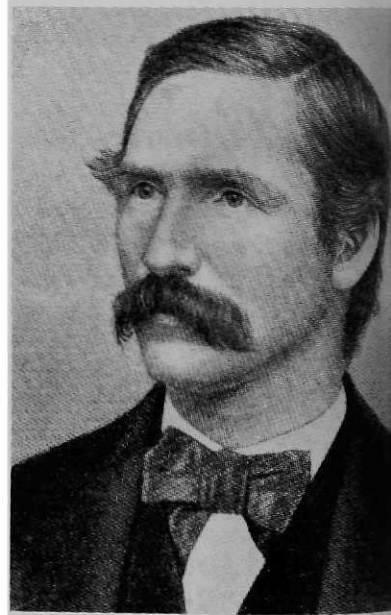


Nathaniel P. Langford, who become the first superintendent of Yellowstone National Park.

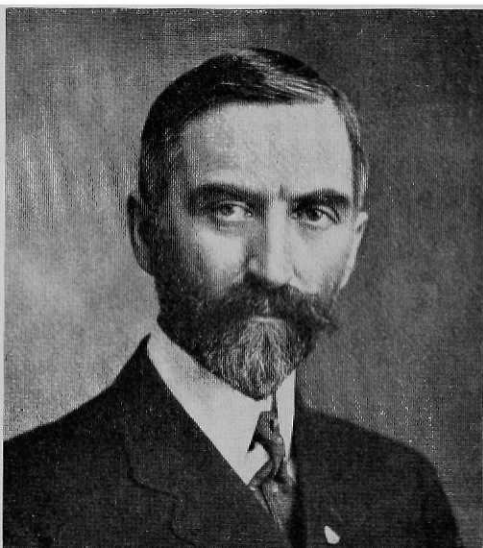


Henry D. Washburn, a leader in an early expedition to explore the Yellowstone country.

Cornelius Hedges, his vision and inspiration became the basis for the national park system.



Hiram M. Chittenden, whose written reports confirmed the wonders of the Yellowstone.



the creation of our first national park established the idea that the federal government is responsible for protecting American scenery in its natural state for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people.

THE YELLOWSTONE STORY GENESIS OF THE NATIONAL PARK IDEA

*By Weldon F. Heald **

On a September evening ninety years ago a group of men sat around a campfire in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains of northwestern Wyoming. They were full of enthusiasm and talked far into the night. For these were explorers who had seen during the past month wonders they never imagined existed — a big blue lake atop the continental divide; roaring waterfalls in a rainbow-tinted canyon; bubbling mud pots and steaming pools; giant boiling springs and colored terraces; and geysers that hurled tons of hot water two- and three-hundred feet into the air.

The men were members of the Yellowstone Expedition of 1870, and they knew that such a fabulous and unbelievable region was bound to become one of the nation's most celebrated show places. Here, they realized, was a fortune within their grasp, and they excitedly discussed taking up land around the various points of interest. But one of them, a lawyer named Cornelius Hedges, protested against this selfish view. Such a unique, natural wonderland, he argued, should be set aside by the government and forever held for the delight and inspiration of future generations of Americans. One by one the other men agreed and became fired by Hedges' vision. Thoughts of personal profit were forgotten, and they finally rolled up in their blankets under the pines, determined to see their utopian project through to the finish.

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So in 1872, a year and a half later, Yellowstone National Park was created by Congress, "dedicated and set apart as a public park and pleasuring ground for the benefit of the people." This action launched the National Park Idea, one of America's most successful ventures in cooperative democracy. Since the establishment of Yellowstone, our park system has grown to more than twenty-four million acres, and now consists of twenty-nine federally owned and administered parks and nearly one hundred fifty monuments, parkways, recreation areas, and historic shrines. To these came more than sixty million visitors in 1958. Furthermore, the national park concept has spread to almost every civilized country and represents one of our greatest single contributions to worldwide appreciation and preservation of natural beauty. Thus, this wilderness campfire of long ago comes within the grand sweep of history. It marks a dramatic step forward in national growth.

The event is too well attested to be challenged. Yet, in recent years several interpreters of the conservation movement in the United States have questioned its significance. With documented arguments, they maintain that Cornelius Hedges was not the "Father of the National Parks." Many men before him had suggested the idea, and they point to George Catlin in particular. As early as 1832 this pioneer artist and Indian authority advocated setting aside a large tract of land in the West to be preserved as "*a nation's park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty." Further, these critics attach prime importance to the fact that Yosemite, not Yellowstone, was the first outstanding example of our natural scenic heritage protected within a public park. So the present tendency is to demote the Yellowstone campfire to a place of secondary consequence.

Certainly it is true that sentiment for the preservation of some of our Western wonderlands had been growing for some time. In fact, without a strong conservation current running throughout the country, Congress could not have been persuaded to act. However, although many voices were raised, it was Cornelius Hedges' concrete proposal in the case of Yellowstone that was the basis of the national park system. And our first national park was the direct result of the publicity and efforts of Hedges and his companions. Yellowstone was the pioneer, the pilot, the prototype which all subsequent national parks followed. It also firmly established for the first time the proposition that the federal government has the responsibility of protecting the finest examples of American scenery in a natural state for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people.

Hot Springs, Arkansas, established in 1832, has always been a national park in name only, and Yosemite's story is quite different. Originally part of the public domain, that superb valley was deeded to California in 1864 as a state park. Strong regional pride was involved and a feeling that Yosemite was exclusively California's property. Yellowstone had been established for eighteen years before Yosemite National Park was created by Congress as the third unit in the system, and it was not until 1906 that the valley itself was returned to the federal government as a part of Yosemite National Park.

So it is difficult to minimize Yellowstone's overwhelming priority. The fact that it became the first national park simply because at the time the area was part of no state, detracts nothing from the importance of the event. Granted a fortuitous set of circumstances — history consists largely of these anyway — the creation of Yellowstone National Park was a happy accident, a momentous accident, and one that has had a profound and lasting effect on the American people.

Another accident, more difficult to explain, is why the Yellowstone remained for over sixty years a mysterious and almost mythical region. During this period all parts of the West were explored; the fur trade blossomed and died; gold was discovered in California, and scores of mining booms occurred; Oregon was settled, and thousands of pioneers trekked westward. Yet all this time Yellowstone was an almost unknown blank on the map — the subject of more wild rumors, exaggeration, and downright lies than has perhaps been given to any one place since the beginning of time. Rugged, mountainous terrain, remoteness from main transcontinental routes, hostile Indians, and a paucity of resources immediately convertible into cash, are the principal reasons given by historians for the region's long neglect. However, even these circumstances hardly explain why the Yellowstone was not thoroughly explored earlier. The Indians called the region "the burning mountains" and considered it accursed. Perhaps we should leave it at that.

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the headwaters of the east-flowing Yellowstone River became a part of the United States, although the area west of the continental divide was in dispute with England until 1846. Expansion-minded President Jefferson, anxious to justify American claims to this disputed territory, commissioned a government expedition to find a route through it to the Pacific Coast. So a party of about forty men, headed by captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, left St. Louis in May, 1804. They ascended the Missouri River in boats, crossed the divide in what is now Montana and Idaho, and followed down the Columbia to its mouth. Completely and brilliantly successful,

they ended their epic wilderness journey at St. Louis in September, 1806. The official reports of the Lewis and Clark Expedition immediately aroused widespread interest in our newly acquired western lands. In particular, the glowing descriptions of teeming wildlife stimulated the fur trade, which became the chief economic activity in the Far West for the next forty years.

Lewis and Clark passed north of the Yellowstone, and at no time came nearer than forty miles from its present borders. However, they did name the Yellowstone River, formerly called the *Roche Jaune* by French trappers, who were reputed to have reached its lower course as early as 1743. The name came originally from the Indians and refers to the vivid coloring of the upper canyon, a section white men had never seen. The region was then divided between the Crows on the east, the Bannocks west, the Shoshonis south, and the Blackfeet to the north. At the time these tribes were relatively friendly to the whites, but later the roving Blackfeet became relentless, implacable foes who fiercely fought the intruders until subdued and put on a Montana reservation in 1855. Yellowstone itself was inhabited by an obscure group of Wind River Shoshonis called "sheepstealers" by their Indian neighbors, because their staple food was bighorn sheep, which they snared in brush enclosures. But in general, most Indians had a superstitious fear of the geysers and roaring springs, and gave them a wide berth. In fact, early explorers tell that it was necessary to guide the natives through much of the Yellowstone, and that they were startled by the many wierd sights they had never seen before. As late as 1880 We-Saw, an old Shoshoni, declared that geysers were, "Heap, heap, bad medicine."

Although Lewis and Clark did not discover this amazing region they passed twice, one of their men did later. He was John Colter, a native of Virginia, who signed up as a private soldier with the expedition, but proved to be such a valuable addition that he became an official hunter for the party. In August, 1806, on the return trip, Colter met two trappers at the Mandan Indian villages, in present North Dakota, who were bound for the upper Missouri. They persuaded him to accompany them, and he received special permission to leave the expedition. Although he had planned to return to civilization in the spring, Colter spent four years in that rugged wilderness, the last three as a trusted lieutenant of the famed fur trader, Manuel Lisa, who built a fort in 1807 at the junction of the Yellowstone and Big Horn rivers.

As hunter, trapper, and Lisa's contact man with the Indians, the intrepid Colter roamed thousands of square miles of unexplored territory in what is now northwestern Wyoming and southwestern Mon-

tana. In courage, strength, and endurance he was unsurpassed, and his hair-raising adventures will forever be a part of our frontier history. On a remarkable five-hundred-mile solo trip through the wilds in 1807, he passed through the center of the present Yellowstone Park, from southwest to northeast, and was the first white man to see its wonders. Upon his return to St. Louis three years later, he told of steaming mountains, and the boiling, bubbling, spouting hot springs there. But nobody believed him, and the place became derisively known as "Colter's Hell." This name was even semiofficially used on maps for many years, with such accidental variations, as "Colter's Hill" and "Colter's Hall."

The report of this heroic journey came too late for Captain Clark to include it in the text of the expedition's published *Journals*, but he did mark it on the map, with the label, "Colter's Route of 1807." Although the map only vaguely depicts the actual topography of the Yellowstone region, historians have been able to trace Colter's extraordinary exploration circuit with reasonable accuracy. The result has been to class him among the great pathfinders who pioneered the opening of the Far West. But recognition was belated, and most maps until the 1870's continued to leave the Yellowstone country a featureless blank.

Colter never returned to the West and died in Missouri in 1813. But, due to his trapping activities and those of Lisa's other employees, the region roundabout became one of the centers of the fur trade. Three rival companies competed for pelts, and Jackson Hole and Pierre's Hole were two of the most popular rendezvous for trappers and Mountain Men. The former is only forty miles south of the Yellowstone, and the latter is across the lofty Teton Range, in Idaho. So it was inevitable that trappers would accidentally enter the "infernal regions" of Colter's Hell. However, they left no written accounts and, as with Colter, no one believed the stories about the strange sights they had seen.

An early visitor was Joseph Meek, employee of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, who saw the Upper Geyser Basin, probably in 1829. He reported "the whole country smoking like Pittsburgh, but more immense." The first written record of the Yellowstone appeared in the *Niles Register*, October 6, 1827, reprinted from the *Philadelphia Gazette*. The article, dated July 8 of that year, was entitled "From the Far West," but the author's name is unknown. In May, 1834, Warren Angus Ferris, clerk of the American Fur Company, made a detour through the Yellowstone country for the purpose of verifying the many wild rumors about it. An educated man, he kept a detailed journal in which he accurately described the geysers, hot springs, and Yellowstone Lake. The

account was published in the *Western Literary Messenger* of Buffalo, July, 1842, and was reprinted in the Mormon paper, the *Wasp*, Nauvoo, Illinois, August 13, 1842. For many years this last publication was thought to be the first written record of the Yellowstone.

But this twilight, predawn period was dominated by Jim Bridger. Although he could neither read nor write, his fantastic stories about the region gained nationwide fame, and his name and the Yellowstone became practically synonymous. Bridger, sometimes called the "Daniel Boone of the Rockies," was the most famous of the old Mountain Men; as trapper, guide, scout, and Indian fighter, he wandered the West for nearly fifty years. His exploits became an American legend, and his numerous explorations and discoveries prepared the way for sizeable sections of the Overland and Oregon trails.

Jim Bridger first saw the Yellowstone country about 1830 and visited it several times. He called it "a place where hell bubbled up" but, like his predecessors, his truthful descriptions were not generally believed. In fact, the editor of the *Kansas City Journal* admitted later that he suppressed an article based on Bridger's Yellowstone tales because it was so thoroughly ridiculed. Not in the least abashed, Jim apparently agreed with Josh Billings, who said, "Half the lies they tell about the West ain't true." So he opened up with both barrels and let go with some of the tallest stories ever invented.

One of Bridger's classics was of trying to shoot an elk through a glass mountain. When his shots took no effect he investigated and found the mountain was not only pure, transparent crystal, but a perfect telescope lens, and in reality the elk was miles distant. Another was an ice-cold stream that flowed down a slope with such velocity that friction made it boiling hot at the bottom. He also found a camping place with an alarm-clock echo from a far-off, bald-faced peak. Upon retiring, he would shout, "Time to get up!" and six hours later his voice would roll back to wake him. One story ascribed to Bridger was probably largely apocryphal. It told of a locality cursed by a Crow medicine man, where everything was petrified. Stone sagebrush, rabbits, bears, antelope, and deer stood about; flying stone birds were motionless in the air; and the bushes bore diamond, ruby, emerald, and sapphire fruit. Even gravity was petrified, and one could cross canyons in the air, as if supported by invisible bridges.

In spite of Jim Bridger being branded "a monumental liar," enough truth sifted through these monstrous fables to interest the government, and Captain W. F. Reynolds, of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, was ordered to explore the Yellowstone country and surroundings.

Guided by Bridger, the expedition was in the field in 1859 and 1860, but in June of the latter year was unable to penetrate to the headwaters of the Yellowstone River owing to the deep snow. Bridger declared that "even a bird would need a grub sack to fly over them mountains," and Captain Reynolds had not time to wait as he was due to observe an eclipse of the sun in Canada. However, he reported: "I regard the valley of the Upper Yellowstone as the most interesting unexplored district in our widely expanded country." But the Civil War brought a halt to further government expeditions.

So this fabulous wonderland remained a mystery for another decade. True, parties of prospectors did occasionally penetrate the Yellowstone country and make further discoveries, notably those led by captains Walter W. De Lacy and John Mullan in 1863, and George Huston in 1866. But these men had gold on their minds, and they added little to a general understanding of the region. The final discovery and fully detailed, accurate description was the work of three exploring parties in 1869, 1870, and 1871.

A large expedition had been planned in 1867 by citizens of Montana to check the truth regarding the remarkable volcanic phenomena on the headwaters of the Yellowstone River, but it never materialized. However, three of the original organizers made the first thorough examination of the region in September, 1869. They were David E. Folsom, C. W. Cook, and William Peterson. Yellowstone's ardent historian, Hiram Martin Chittenden, wrote: "These explorers were so astonished at the marvels they had seen that 'they were unwilling to risk their reputation for veracity by a full recital of them to a small company whom their friends had assembled to hear an account of their explorations.'" But an article by Folsom, describing their trip, appeared in the *Western Monthly* of Chicago, July, 1870. In his manuscript the author suggested that the Yellowstone be made a park, but this was cut from the published account. He also mentioned the idea to Henry D. Washburn, surveyor-general of Montana. Thus, Folsom's park proposal antedates that of Cornelius Hedges, but no direct result can be traced to it. This does show, though, that since Yosemite had been set aside as a state park, feeling for nature preservation had been growing throughout the country, and that the basic park idea was the invention of no one person.

In 1866 Nathaniel P. Langford had talked with Jim Bridger and believed some of his more sober stories. So it was natural that he would be prominent in organizing the first semiofficial party to explore the region. This was the Yellowstone Expedition of 1870, better known as

the Washburn-Langford or Washburn-Doane Expedition. Langford was collector of Internal Revenue in Montana and was appointed governor of the territory in 1868. But the Senate, bitterly opposed to President Johnson, failed to confirm his appointment. Besides Langford, the party consisted of General Washburn and seven other leading Montanans. The expedition had the approval of the federal government, which provided a military escort of five cavalymen under command of Lieutenant Gustavus C. Doane. Including packers, wranglers, cooks, and helpers, the total personnel numbered nineteen, and thirty-five horses and mules furnished the transportation. Cornelius Hedges said afterwards, "I think a more confirmed set of sceptics never went out into the wilderness than those who composed our party, and never was a party more completely surprised and captivated with the wonders of nature."

The expedition crossed the present north boundary of the park on August 26, and spent a month making a leisurely circuit of the area. Visited were Tower Falls, Yellowstone Canyon and Falls, several geyser basins and spectacular hot springs, and quite a few of the features were given the names they bear today. The trip was fully successful and marked by growing enthusiasm, but its luster was marred by one regrettable incident. Southwest of Yellowstone Lake Truman Everts, former U.S. assessor for Montana, became separated from the party and was hopelessly lost for more than a month. Although his companions made every effort to locate him, they were finally forced to go on, and Mr. Everts was found nearer dead than alive by a search party nearly two weeks after the expedition's return to Montana. Later he recovered and wrote his story detailing the harrowing experiences of a tenderfoot's struggle for survival in the wilds. Called "Thirty-Seven Days of Peril," it appeared in *Scribner's Monthly* for January, 1871. Written in the rather formal style of that period, it still equals many a modern adventure yarn for dangers, thrills, and suspense.

On September 19 the party camped at the junction of the Gibbon and Firehole rivers. There, around the campfire that evening, occurred the discussion which directly resulted in the creation of Yellowstone National Park. Unlike the former general suggestions, a definite proposal was formulated by men who unselfishly gave up possible financial gain for a democratic ideal. Furthermore, all of them were fired with such zeal that they debated how they themselves could best make their revolutionary idea a reality. It was, in truth, a momentous milestone in American conservation history, and only rank sophistry can relegate this epic campfire discussion to a place of secondary importance.

They decided that publicity was the first great need. After sixty years of vague rumors and farfetched legends, the grandeur and glory of the Yellowstone should be revealed to the world. So, upon their return to Helena, members of the expedition prepared numerous articles for local Montana newspapers. These were reprinted by other papers and caused widespread interest. In the *Helena Herald* for November 9, 1870, Cornelius Hedges urged the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, the first public mention of the project, so far as is known. These enthusiasts also wrote magazine articles, and Lieutenant Doane submitted a masterly government report. Nathaniel Langford was especially active and became known as "National Park" Langford. He was author of two articles on "The Wonders of Yellowstone" in *Scribner's* for May and June, 1871, and during the preceding winter gave lectures in principal cities throughout the country. After his New York address the *Tribune* recommended that the Yellowstone area be withdrawn from public entry and made a public park. The idea was catching on fast.

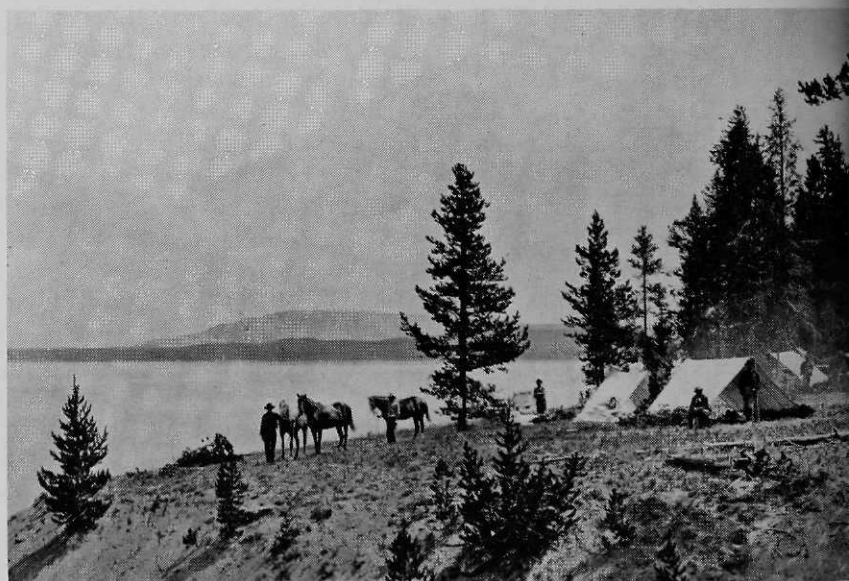
A vigorous new champion was recruited at Langford's Washington lecture. He was Ferdinand V. Hayden, who had been geologist with Captain Reynolds in 1860, and was now chief of the Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, usually called the Hayden Survey. He immediately decided to shift his base of operations from southern Wyoming to the Yellowstone. By doing so, Hayden felt that he would enhance the importance of his survey; make the first scientific report on the spectacular volcanic and thermal phenomena; and forward the campaign for a national park. For this he believed a pictorial record was necessary. As yet no photographs had been taken in the area and the only pictures were engravings which the promising young artist, Thomas Moran, had prepared for the forthcoming Langford *Scribner's* articles. As he had never been west of Chicago, these were drawn from descriptions. So Hayden invited Moran to accompany the expedition to augment the work of his staff artist and his accomplished cameraman, William Henry Jackson, later famed as "The Pioneer Photographer" of the West.

Actually, two government expeditions visited the Yellowstone in 1871. Besides Hayden's was an army corps of engineers party, commanded by captains J. W. Barlow and D. P. Heap. But they moved for the most part together and were accompanied by the same military escort. The Hayden contingent, consisting of thirty-four men, left Ogden, Utah, June 10 and entered the Yellowstone region from the north on July 20. There they spent forty days in exploration and mapping, and

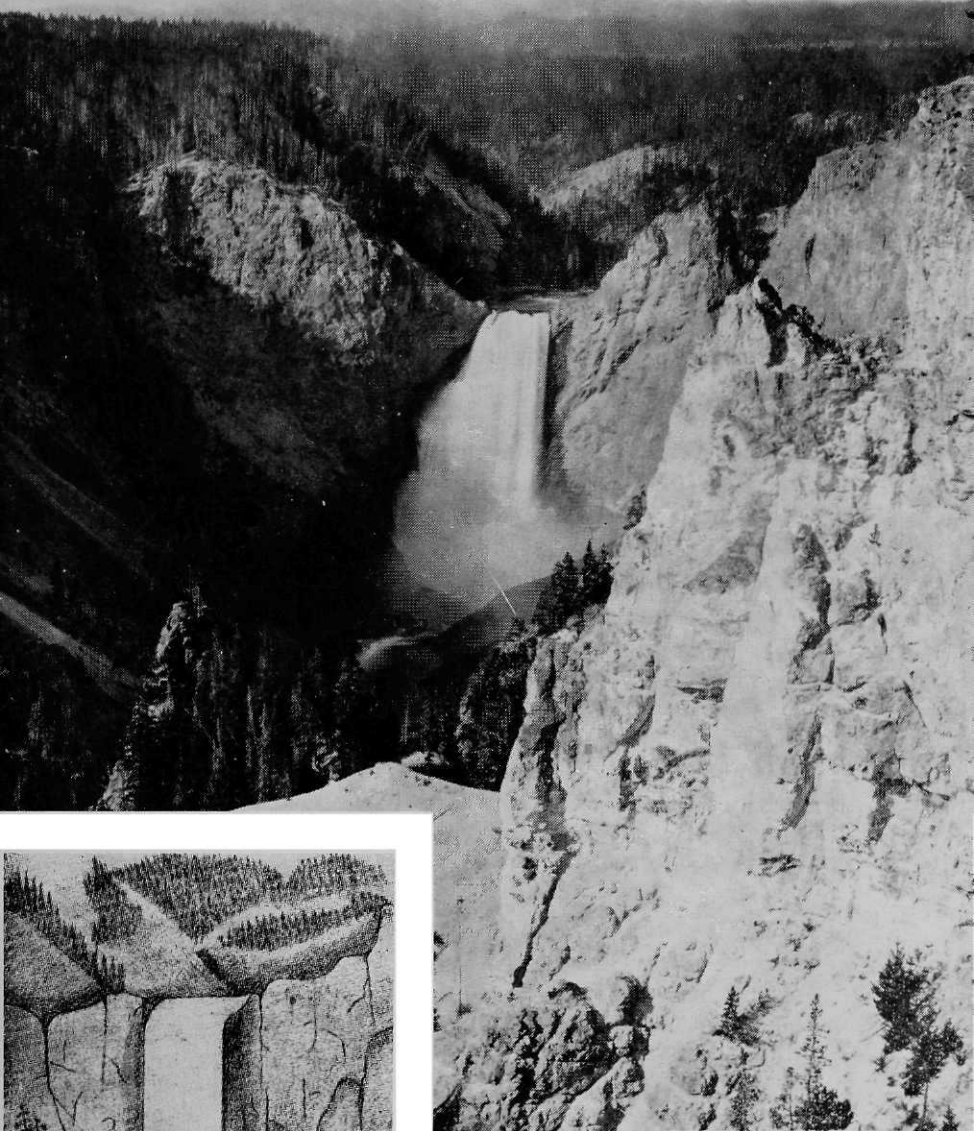


PHOTOS, COURTESY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

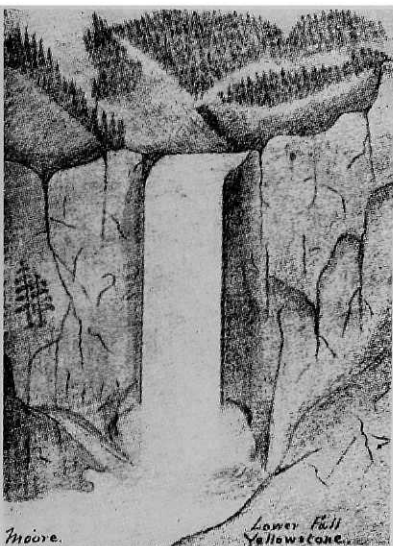
Camp scene of the Hayden Survey of 1870. Seated at the rear is Hayden, standing at the extreme right is W. H. Jackson, survey photographer.



The Hayden Survey camped on the southwest arm of Yellowstone Lake.



PHOTO, COURTESY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY



The perfection of the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone was captured by Jackson in his photograph. Inset is an early sketch of the same scene, reproduced from The Discovery of Yellowstone Park, 1870, by N. P. Langford (c1905).

made a complete pictorial record of the area. Most of the credit for this goes to Moran and Jackson. Hayden's other artist was undistinguished; a local photographer, picked up at Bozeman, Montana, lost his camera in Yellowstone Canyon; and the army party's man, upon his return east, had all his negatives destroyed in the Chicago Fire.

The outcome of the 1871 expedition exceeded Hayden's rosiest hopes. It was a major scoop of national importance and the results furnished the clinching arguments that persuaded Congress to enact a Yellowstone National Park bill. This bill was drawn up by Langford, Hedges, and William H. Claggett, Montana territorial delegate, assisted by Dr. Hayden, and was introduced in the House, December 18, 1871. It went to the Senate immediately afterwards. As a part of the final campaign four hundred copies of Langford's *Scribner's* articles were placed on congressmen's desks, while on exhibit were Jackson's photographs, together with Moran's water colors and sketches. That these were effective is shown by the bill passing the Senate, January 30, with only one dissenting vote, and the House on February 27 by 115 yeas to 65 nays, 60 not voting. With President Grant's signature on March 1, 1872, an area in northwestern Wyoming, measuring fifty-four by sixty-two miles, was "reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy and sale under the laws of the United States," and officially became Yellowstone National Park. It seems particularly fitting that Nathaniel P. Langford was appointed the first superintendent.

Of course, there is another story, as long again or longer, about the development of our first great national park from a remote wilderness to a show place of worldwide renown, visited by a million people annually. There is the conservation story, too, on the continuous battle to preserve the integrity of the Yellowstone against the invasion of commercial interests. Literally thousands of men and women made significant contributions. But what is held intact today in the Yellowstone and all the other national parks is basically due to the far vision and unselfish efforts of the pioneers. Theirs is the most important story.