

## Cinnabar, Montana

# RESOURCE BRIEF

### Significance

In 1932, Yellowstone National Park increased in size by 7,609 acres to the north, on the west side of the Yellowstone River. Most of what are called the “boundary lands” was purchased from willing owners; the rest was taken by eminent domain. But the town of Cinnabar had been abandoned long before, the railroad having brought it to life and then finished it off. Construction of the branch line from Livingston in 1883 made Cinnabar a hub for passengers and freight until the last three miles to the park entrance were built 20 years later. Nothing remains of the town today except archeological evidence from which can be learned something about the use of the area by prehistoric people as well as its 19th century residents.

### History

At least one ranch was present in the boundary lands area when Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, and three years later, there were at least two: one owned by James Henderson and the other by George and Helen Reese, who left their name on the creek that now lies along the park’s north boundary. The Northern Pacific Railroad, which created the town of Livingston by reaching that far west in 1882, purchased a right of way across the Reeses’ land, intending to build a branch line to Gardiner on the park boundary. But “Buckskin Jim” Cutler, who had built guest shacks outside Gardiner and claimed that he owned the land, refused to sell a right of way. So the train came to a stop in a place called Cinnabar after the nearby Cinnabar Mountain, which had been named in the mistaken belief that its streaks of red came from the ore of mercury known as cinnabar instead of from iron oxide.

During the 19th century, the easiest route into the park was from the north and the main road was along the west side of the river. Cinnabar was where visitors were outfitted for their excursions and boarded stagecoaches for multi-



Cinnabar Mountain

day tours or negotiated more humble means of transport. It was also where the troops stationed in the park starting in 1886 disembarked from the train and were issued horses.

On September 1, 1883, the first official day of service, the train brought cars to take home President Chester Arthur, the first U.S. president to visit Yellowstone. He had left the Union Pacific train at Green River, Wyoming, on August 5 for an expedition through the park by horse and wagon with an entourage that included Lieutenant General Phillip Sheridan and 75 troopers. The Cinnabar that eagerly awaited President Arthur had a hotel, a saloon, a general store, and a sawmill, all built by Hugo John Hoppe, a sometime miner, rancher, freighter, and the first sheriff of Miles City. Earlier that year Hoppe had been convicted of killing a man in a Bozeman saloon over a \$6.25 bet, but the charges would later be dismissed.

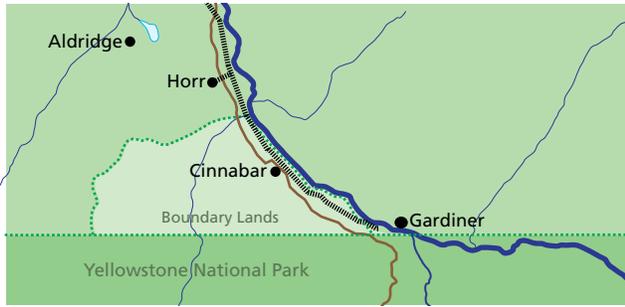
Unlike most people, Hoppe did not believe the railroad would eventually be extended to Gardiner, stifling Cinnabar’s growth. With the prospect of coal mining at what would become the nearby towns of Horr and Aldridge, and gold and silver mining at Jardine and Cooke City, Hoppe expected Cinnabar to prosper. The tracks that had been laid for three-fifths of a mile beyond Cinnabar were taken out in 1885, and it remained the terminus for the train from Livingston. But its growth was slow. In 1885, a traveler described Cinnabar as “a few ranches, a hotel, two or three stores, twice as many saloons, a few



Train heading north from Cinnabar, 1896.



Cinnabar, 1901.



Cinnabar by the Yellowstone Road and the railroad tracks.

private houses, and the railroad depot.” After his visit to Yellowstone National Park in 1885, John Muir wrote that Cinnabar was “a terrible place... a singularly motley crowd of old hunters, trappers, traders and grizzled old pioneers, to say nothing of gamblers, roughs, and desperadoes.” Hoppe’s rodeo ground was used to hold auditions for riders and ropers for Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show. Among the motley street vendors exhorting visitors to buy souvenirs, was “Specimen Schmidt” selling petrified wood, sometimes in the company of Calamity Jane (Martha Jane Cannary), who appeared in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show as a horse rider and a trick shooter.

The financial interests of the NPRR lay in increasing park visitation, which seemed stuck at about 5,000 a year after the branch line reached Cinnabar. The railroad lobbied Congress for the next decade to allow extension of the branch line across Yellowstone but was thwarted by a few determined park preservationists like Senator Henry Vest of Illinois. The closest the NPRR got to the park was the right of way to Gardiner, obtained in 1902.

In March 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt arrived for a vacation in Yellowstone, Cinnabar was where he left his train on a siding. That was the town’s moment of greatest fame, but one of its last. The tracks to Gardiner were soon completed, and on May 24 the Cinnabar station was loaded onto flat cars and sent to Gardiner to be used as a freight depot. The Cinnabar hotel closed on May 27 and the post office on June 15; other businesses relocated to Gardiner bringing their buildings with them. The Horr brothers, Henry and Joseph, had negotiated with the railroad to put in a side track north of Cinnabar in 1887, but the mines and coke ovens ceased operations there and in Aldridge in 1910 because of labor problems and low coal prices. After Hugo John Hoppe’s death in 1895, his children kept the ranch going until 1925.

By the 1920s, the National Park Service was concerned that without additional protected winter range, the northern elk herd would be at the mercy of severe winters and hunters who waited beyond the park boundary. In 1922

Superintendent Horace Albright persuaded two New York businessmen to found the Game Preservation Company, which eventually purchased thousands of acres and donated them to Yellowstone and Gallatin National Forest. This included the Hoppe ranch, today known as the Stephens Creek Ranch. Subsequent legislation enabled the Secretary of the Interior to accept funds donated for the acquisition of lands north of Yellowstone and provided matching funds from the government for such purchases.

In 1932, the park boundary was officially redrawn, though some private inholdings were not acquired until 1940 and the NPRR lands were not conveyed to the federal government until 1972. Although rail passenger service to Gardiner ended in 1948, freight service continued until 1975; the tracks from Livingston to Gardiner were removed the following year.

### Archeological Survey

To prevent impacts to archeological resources during a native plant restoration project planned for the boundary lands area, it was necessary to document where such resources were located. The Montana-Yellowstone Archeological Project, a collaboration between the University of Montana and the NPS, surveyed about 3,000 acres in 2007 and 2008 for that purpose. The MYAP field school confirmed the location of the Cinnabar depot, excavated the blacksmith shop, and discovered a mortared river cobble foundation five feet underground, most likely for the hotel. Historical artifacts found during the excavations included a railroad sign, revolver bullets, newspaper fragments, and the sole of a boot.

The MYAP team also documented sites with prehistoric components, including a tipi ring cluster more than 4,000 years old, one of the oldest known in the Northern Plains. At two sites, they identified a total of 18 stone circles, data from which will be used to determine their age and possible function. Some stone circles in Montana are believed to be more than 5,000 years old. Five prehistoric fire pits that were eroding out of the banks of the Yellowstone River downstream from Cinnabar were salvaged, probably last used by the Pelican Lake culture that lived there 2,000 years ago.



Historical artifacts found at the Henderson ranch site.