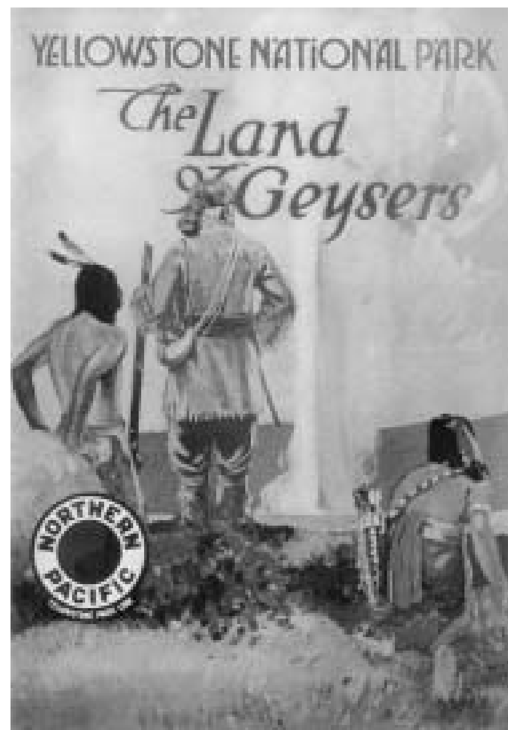
Fear or Reverence?

Native Americans and the Geysers of Yellowstone



Historical representation of Indians' timidity at an erupting geyser. Note the confident stance and lead position of the fur trapper juxtaposed with that of his native companions. Possibly portraying the Warren Ferris account (see below). From a park guide entitled "Yellowstone National Park: The Land of Geysers" published in 1917 by the Northern Pacific Railway. Yellowstone museum collection.

By Joseph Owen Weixelman

When two Pend d'Oreille Indians guided trapper Warren Ferris along Yellowstone's Firehole River in 1834, he wanted to see the geysers and hot springs he'd heard about at the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous, an annual gathering of mountain men held under the auspices of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He later wrote in his journal:

> I ventured near enough to put my hand into the water of its basin, but withdrew it instantly, for the heat of the water in this immense cauldron, was altogether too great for comfort, and the agitation of the water, the disagreeable effluvium continually exuding, and the hollow unearthly rumbling under the rock on which I stood, so ill accorded with my notions of personal safety, that I retreated back precipitately to a respectful distance. The Indians who were with me, were quite appalled, and could not by any means be induced to approach them. They seemed astonished at my presumption in advancing up to the large one, and when I safely returned, congratulated me on my "narrow escape."— They believed them to be supernatural, and supposed them to be the production of the Evil Spirit. One of them remarked that hell, of which he had heard from the whites, must be in the vicinity.

Ferris's report has often been adduced as evidence that Indians feared Yellowstone's geysers, an assumption that was relayed to early visitors to Yellowstone and became the prevailing view among social scientists. However, hundreds of years before the first Euro-Americans gazed on the Firehole valley, many American Indians went to the geyser basins to pray, meditate, and bathe. Most native peoples revered the land of Yellowstone and many treated it as sacred in their cosmology. While a sense of fear may have been linked with the geysers and hot springs, the belief that this was the predominant emotion or indicated a primitive intellect is mistaken. Instead, it is more accurate to say that American Indians understood the area to be linked to the powers of their Creator, powers that were difficult to understand and could be dangerous. Such a place had to be properly respected and one could not take a journey there lightly. A different impression of native attitudes toward Yellowstone can be arrived at by deconstructing trapper accounts like those of Ferris and supplementing them with oral histories, archeological evidence, and other sources.

A common problem in Euro-American perceptions of American Indians is a tendency to regard them as a single culture. Native North America can be divided into a dozen cultural regions, each with distinctive economic, political, social, and religious systems. Yellowstone National Park lies near the junction of three of these cultural regions—the Great Basin, the Plateau, and the Great Plains—where wide variations in native perceptions of Yellowstone could occur. Cultural differences may also be found even between bands of the same tribe. If it is misleading to speak of Indian culture as a monolithic entity, it is equally deceptive to speak of an Indian fear of Yellowstone. Different tribes and bands responded to the geysers differently, just as they responded to Euro-Americans differently.

Native Americans in Yellowstone

People have inhabited the Yellowstone region for at least the past 7,500 years. Although archeological evidence

has been found of Paleo-Indian presence in the thermal basins, the first written historical record indicates that the native peoples who resided closest to the Yellowstone region at the start of the nineteenth century included the Blackfeet, Crow, Shoshone, and Bannock. The territorial boundary for these tribes was formed by the high mountain ranges that come together there.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 recognized Blackfeet lands as those to the north and west of the Yellowstone River. As fur trappers ventured into this area, the Blackfeet were possessive of their territory and battled Euro-Americans over the game found there. The same treaty recognized Crow title to lands to the south and east of the Yellowstone River. Fur trapper Edwin Denig identified their lands as including some "boiling springs" in the vicinity of the upper Yellowstone and the Crow warrior, Two Leggings, spoke of a trip there in his youth. As European diseases took their toll on tribal numbers, the Blackfeet slowly departed from the region and ceded their claims to the Yellowstone valley in the Treaty of 1855. However, when Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, the extreme northern portion of the park (east of the Yellowstone River in Montana) was actually part of Crow territory until a Council in 1883 agreed to cede this mountainous land and move the tribal agency eastward.

The claims of the Shoshone and Bannock, who lived west of the Continental Divide where the terrain was poorly understood by the treaty-makers, were not formally recognized by the Treaty of 1851, but their presence in the region is well-documented. On good terms with each other, the Shoshone and Bannock hunted from central Wyoming to eastern California, entering the Yellowstone region through the forks of the Snake River. The Tukudeka, who became known as the Sheep Eater Indians, lived in the mountainous regions of central and eastern Idaho and northwestern Wyoming. Once regarded as a distinct tribe, most anthropologists now consider them a band of the Shoshone. Other Shoshone bands also named themselves by what they ate: Salmon Eaters (Agaidika), Fish Eaters (Pengwidika), Dove Eaters (Haivodika), and Buffalo Eaters (Kucundika). Although some early writers depicted the Tukudeka as superstitious, poor, and even squalid, Richard Bartlett used Osborne Russell's trapper narrative as evidence that they lived well by aboriginal standards despite their lack of horses. They hunted bighorn sheep, deer, elk, pronghorn, and bear, and their clothing, hides, and bows were in high demand among other Shoshone bands. The Tukudeka left Yellowstone when, under pressure from Superintendent Philetus Norris, the agent at Fort Washakie sent a party of Shoshone "to escort the Tukudeka to new homes on the Wind River Reservation" in 1879.

The Nez Perce, Flathead, Kalispel, Pend d'Oreille, and Coeur d'Alene were also known to travel to the Yellowstone region regularly. According to Yellow Wolf, one of Chief Joseph's scouts in the Nez Perce War, they were familiar with the Yellowstone country and the "hot smoking springs and the high-shooting water were nothing new" to them. The Assiniboine have traditions of journeying from the plains of northeastern Montana as far as the geyser basins of Yellowstone. There is one mention of the Arapaho and a few that also place Lakota in the region.

Moses Harris, the park's first acting superintendent during the period of army administration, tried to prevent Bannock hunting parties from entering the region during the 1880s, but they continued to hunt in areas around the park into the 1890s. In 1896, in the case of *Ward v. Race Horse*, the Supreme Court found that native hunting rights no longer existed in the region. By the end of the nineteenth century, native peoples were seldom seen in Yellowstone.

Origins of the Frightened Indians Story

The Euro-American belief that Indians were frightened by Yellowstone's geysers fit in with the stereotype of Indians as "savages" who were scared of natural phenomena such as lightning, thunder, volcanoes, or even spouting waters. The explorers and trappers who heard of Yellowstone's wonders from Indians or entered the region with Indian guides generally did so without any appreciation for native religious beliefs; as

Map of approximate tribal territories in and around the Yellowstone plateau, circa 1850. Map courtesy Peter Nabokov and Larry Loendorf from Restoring a Presence: A Documentary Overview of Native Americans and Yellowstone National Park, *forthcoming from the University of Oklahoma Press.*

was the accepted view among Euro-Americans at the time, Indians were regarded as pagans and heathens. According to George Horse Capture, deputy assistant director of the National Museum of the American Indian, mountain men wandered through the region "carrying few possessions, but a lot of cultural baggage."

Therefore, it is necessary to question the primary sources on which historians rely. Euro-American chroniclers seldom named their sources or the tribal affiliations of the Indians mentioned, or indicated how they obtained their information. George Horse Capture told me that although trappers depicted Indians as wild and without rules, it was the trappers who often came West to live away from the rules of their society, while native tribes lived in complex cultures with well-developed, albeit unwritten, laws. Anthropologists have also demonstrated the ordered nature of American Indian life in numerous studies.

The first reference to the possibility that Indians feared the Yellowstone region appears in the expedition journals of William Clark. Under the heading, "Notes of information I believe correct," Clark included information he received in 1808 from George Drouillard, another fur trader. It contains the following text:

> [A]t the head of this river the Indians give an account that very frequently there is a loud nois [*sic*] heard like thunder which makes the earth tremble—they state that they seldom go there because their children cannot sleep at night for this nois and conceive it possessed of spirits who are averse that men should be near them.

Frontispiece for the book entitled, The Story of Man in Yellowstone *by Merrill D. Beal, published in 1949 by Caxton Printers, Ltd. Depicting an unknown fur trapper taken aback by an erupting geyser. His particular emotional reaction—fear? awe? surprise?–can't be known with certainty either.*

Although Drouillard's report indicates that these Indians avoided the area, he explained that they did so because of their belief that Yellowstone was home to spirits they did not wish to upset. He does not directly state that they were frightened by these spirits, but implies that they respected them.

Daniel Potts, Joe Meek, and Osborne Russell, who were among the first trappers to enter the Yellowstone area, all left written accounts of the thermal basins, and Russell stayed with a Tukudeka encampment, but none of them commented on native beliefs about Yellowstone. The most renowned trapper associated with Yellowstone, Jim Bridger, repeated the story that the geysers frightened the Indians, but he was notorious for embellishing his tales with artful fabrications of petrified forests containing petrified birds singing petrified songs and rivers that ran so fast the friction heated them. The Jesuit missionary, Pierre-Jean DeSmet, never visited the Yellowstone region, but he drew a map for the Fort Laramie Treaty Council with Bridger's help, and that may explain why he wrote, shortly after attending the treaty conference:

> The hunters and Indians speak of it with a superstitious fear, and consider it the abode of evil spirits, that is to say, a kind of hell. Indians seldom approach it without offering some sacrifice, or at least without presenting the calumet of peace to the turbulent spirits, that they may be

> propitious. They declare that the subterranean noises proceed from the forging of warlike weapons: each eruption of earth is in their eyes, the result of a combat between the infernal spirits.

This anecdotal myth seems to derive more from the pagan Greeks than with American Indians. Although the Indians DeSmet was referring to had no indigenous knowledge of metallurgy or weapons forging, Bridger had once worked as an apprentice to a blacksmith in St. Louis, and would have heard such stories from other smiths. He received no other education, was reputed to have an excellent memory, and was said to be superstitious himself.

Subsequent exploring parties readily accepted the idea that Indians feared the geysers, but their sources were nameless mountain men. David Folsom, in the Folsom-Cook-Peterson exploring party of 1869, heard from trappers that Indians believed the region to be the abode of evil spirits. Nathaniel P. Langford, who helped organize the 1870 Washburn expedition, met Bridger in 1866 and believed some of his tales of spouting geysers might be true. He makes no note of talking with Indians, but later wrote in his expedition journal, "The Indians approach [the Yellowstone region] under the fear of a superstition originating in the volcanic forces surrounding it." Likewise, Lt. Gustavus Doane, who accompanied the Washburn expedition, doesn't mention his source, but noted in his journal that "[t]he larger tribes never enter this basin, restrained by superstitious ideas in connection with the thermal springs."

After Norris became park superintendent in 1877, he repeatedly referred to the Indians' "superstitious awe of the hissing springs, sulphur basins, and spouting geysers" in his annual reports to the Secretary of the Interior. When the Nez Perce retreated through Yellowstone during the War of 1877, Norris believed they chose this route out of desperation and because they had "acquired sufficient civilization and Christianity to at least overpower their pagan superstitious fear of *earthly* fire-hole basins and brimstone pits." However, the Indians who fled from Oregon and Idaho under Chief Joseph, Little Bird, and Looking Glass were the most traditional Nez Perce bands in following native religious practices.

Harry Norton's 1873 guidebook on Yellowstone stated that "there exists among [Indians] an unconquerable superstition that the great Manitou here displays his anger towards his red children." Thirteen years later, in *Through the Yellowstone Park on Horseback*, George Wingate repeated Norris's description of the Indian fear of geysers almost verbatim. Hiram Chittenden, who wrote the first history of Yellowstone in 1895, found it strange that "no knowledge of that country seems to have been derived from the Indians." However, he believed that Indians avoided the region for practical reasons, because if they had superstitions about it, there would have been "well authenticated Indian traditions of so marvelous a country."

Twentieth Century Views of Indians in Yellowstone

An assumption that Indians were frightened of Yellowstone had become prevalent by the 1930s. A 1929 book written by Superintendent Horace Albright with Frank Taylor suggested that Indians both feared the geysers and found the land to be inaccessible and of little utility. The most recent validation for the idea that the Indians feared the geysers appears in the work of Ake Hultkrantz, the Swedish historian who is largely responsible for its widespread acceptance among anthropologists. In a 1954 article in *Ethnos*, Hultkrantz maintained that the Indians' fear of going to Yellowstone was so strong it constituted a religious-emotional taboo that could be overcome only in times of distress. He regarded their reticence in providing information about the region as evidence of an Indian belief that even mentioning the names of the places where geysers existed was dangerous. The *Ethnos* article later became a chapter in Hultkrantz's 1981 book, *Belief and Worship in Native North America*.

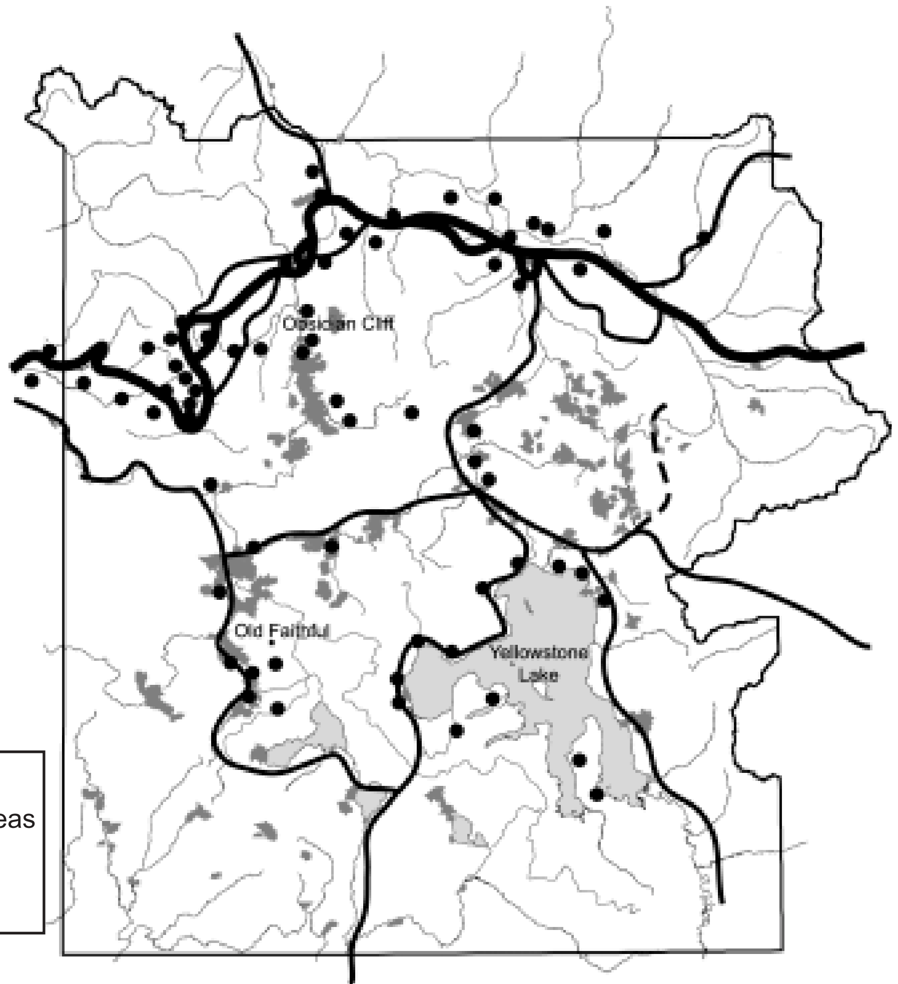
Hultkrantz based his research on sources which, by his own admission, are not rich, being mostly Shoshone. These sources include: 1) the accounts of early trappers and explorers, primarily DeSmet and Ferris; 2) official reports regarding the exploration and establishment of the park, particularly those of Lt. Doane, Superintendent Norris, and General Phillip Sheridan; 3) later non-official documents, including books on the "Sheepeaters" and a letter from the superintendent of Wind River Agency; and 4) notes from his fieldwork among Shoshone on the Wind River Reservation between 1948 and 1958.

While Indian fear of the Yellowstone region continued to be mentioned in guidebooks into the 1980s, some historians following Chittenden doubted this interpretation. Since the late 1940s archeologists have located lithic scatters, timbered lodges (or wickiups), and other debris indicating aboriginal campsites throughout Yellowstone, including thermal areas at the Norris, Midway, and Lower geyser basins. (In the early years of the park, many arrowheads and artifacts were removed or purchased by visitors as souvenirs.) Of the more than 400 former Indian campsites that have been located in the park, more than 40 are near areas of thermal activity. Archeologist Carling Malouf, who identified occupation sites around Mammoth, along the Firehole River, and behind the Old Faithful Inn, rejected the "Indian fear" hypothesis in 1958. Writing in 1974, historian Aubrey Haines believed that the Indians who possessed a fear of geysers were only those "whose contact with whites had developed a conception of an underworld."

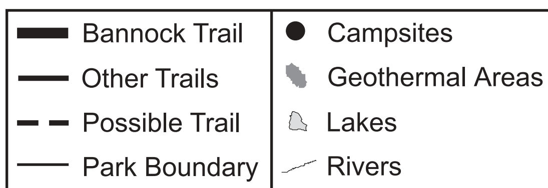
Hultkrantz did revise his argument in 1979, taking into account archeological evidence that seemed to contradict his belief that the geysers were taboo to the Indians, but he maintained his original thesis while downplaying native fear of "the less dramatic hot springs." Though somewhat skeptical, anthropologist Joel Janetski repeated most of Hultkrantz's thesis in his 1987 book on the Indians of Yellowstone.

What the Indians Knew

Chittenden and Hultkrantz were among those who based their conclusions about Indians in Yellowstone on a perception that while the Indians gave geographical information to explorers,



Yellowstone map depicts Native American trails and campsites, and their proximities to the park's geothermal areas. Map courtesy J. Weixelman, geothermal data provided by Yellowstone's Spatial Analysis Center, and digital treatment by Tami Blackford.



they did not mention Yellowstone's wonders. More recently, however, historians have found evidence of how Indians shared their knowledge with Euro-Americans that suggests otherwise. In 1805, the Governor of Louisiana Territory, James Wilkinson, learned about the Yellowstone headwaters and a "volcano" nearby from a map drawn on a buffalo hide by an unidentified Indian. Sometime after his return to St. Louis in 1806, Meriwether Lewis wrote that, according to Indian sources, the Yellowstone River had "a considerable fall . . . within the mountains but at what distance from it's source we never could learn." While reconnoitering the route for a road from Fort Walla Walla to Fort Benton in 1863, Capt. John Mullan learned from Indians of the existence of "an infinite number of hot springs at the headwaters of the Missouri, Columbia, and Yellowstone rivers, and that hot geysers, similar to those in California, existed at the head of the Yellowstone." George Harvey Bacon, a Montana prospector, went to the Upper Geyser Basin with "a friendly band of Indians" in 1865. That same year, Father Francis Kuppens visited the sights of Yellowstone, including its geysers, in the company of Blackfeet.

Hultkrantz claimed that Indians avoided the thermal basins and few Indian trails went there, but despite its relatively severe climate and demanding topography, the Yellowstone region actually had more trails than other parts of Wyoming. Like Indian trails elsewhere, they followed the river valleys and therefore came close to the geysers and hot springs at West Thumb, Mud Volcano, and in the Firehole valley. Many of these English names associated with Yellowstone today are not exactly enticing, yet Hultkrantz regarded Indian names for Yellowstone as evidence of their fear, stating that such names were "soberly descriptive" and did not reveal their emotional attitude toward the region.

The Shoshone referred to the Yellowstone region as the place where "Water-keeps-on-coming-out." According to legend, the Blackfeet name for the area, "Many Smokes," comes from the fact that when they first saw the steam from the geysers, they thought it was smoke from an enemy camp. Other recorded Indian names for Yellowstone include "Burning Mountain" and "Summit of the World." But these names for the Yellowstone region are not noticeably different from those used by American Indians elsewhere. The Wyandot name for the Missouri River translates as "muddy water" and their name for the Kansas City, Missouri, site translates as "the point where rock projects into the Muddy Water." The Cheyenne called the Smoky Hill the "Bunch of Trees River" and the Solomon River, "Turkey Creek." Closer to Yellowstone, the Crow called the Stillwater River, "Buffalo Jumps Over the Bank River" and the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone, "Rotten Sun Dance Lodge River." The National Park Service uses Blackfeet names for places within Glacier National Park including "Chief Mountain" and "Two Medicine Lake."

The Bannock Trail

Heavy snowfall kept the Yellowstone area inaccessible much of the year, game was more plentiful at lower elevations, and the mountains made travel difficult. Yet in the 1840s, after the buffalo were exterminated from the Snake River plains, the Bannock developed an old trail adjacent to hot springs at Mammoth and near the Yellowstone River crossing into a major thoroughfare to reach the buffalo ranges of Montana and Wyoming. By crossing over the mountains perpendicular to the river valleys, the trail avoided war parties of Blackfeet and Lakota on the plains, providing greater safety than other routes to the Bighorn Basin and Powder River country. Scouting and hunting parties could access the plains and the valleys to check on the position of both the buffalo and their enemies while the rest of the tribe stayed secure in the mountains. Estimated by Haines to be 200 miles long, it came to be known as the Bannock Trail, but it was also used by the Northern Shoshone, Nez Perce, Kootenai, Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Crow, and is still visible in places today. The fact that tribes used the Bannock Trail to avoid contact with enemies would suggest that the Yellowstone region was to be feared less than their enemies.

Wayne Replogle, a Yellowstone naturalist who explored the Bannock Trail more than anyone else in the twentieth century, referred to it as a "great aboriginal highway." He saw the frequent splitting and rejoining of alternative trail routes as evidence that the trail was used by a variety of groups of people for a variety of reasons under varying weather conditions. The Euro-American explorers who entered Yellowstone always used Indian trails. Both the Folsom and Washburn parties used the Bannock Trail. As described by Lt. Doane:

> Passing over this high rolling prairie for several miles, we struck at length a heavy Indian trail leading up the river, and finding a small colt abandoned on the range, we knew that they [a party of Crow Indians] were but a short distance ahead of us.... Descending from the plateau through a steep ravine into the valley, and skirting for a distance of two miles a swampy flat, we came to the first warm spring found on the route...

What the Indians Say

Elders from several tribes have preserved the history and traditions of their people concerning the Yellowstone region. Because more than a hundred years have passed since these tribes were forced to move to lands far from Yellowstone, there are discontinuities in the record. The army had to order some tribes, like the Bannock, to stay out of Yellowstone, creating an enmity that has persisted. I found that my efforts to obtain oral histories were hampered by previous research conducted by anthropologists and historians who did not respect tribal customs and did not receive approval from the elders for what they wrote. As a result, many tribal cultural committees were no longer willing to cooperate with researchers.

Joseph Weixelman on the Bannock Trail in 1998. The trail is still visible in places today. Photo courtesy J. Weixelman.

Although the accuracy of oral histories may be questioned, especially when three generations separate the sources from the attitudes under investigation, there are good reasons to give them as much credence as has been accorded the reports of early nineteenth century fur trappers. First, the information collected pertains to overall attitudes and values surrounding Yellowstone rather than specific dates or places. One is likely to remember the impressions one's grandparents leave more accurately than specific events. Second, these tribal elders are familiar with the culture in question and with using oral traditions. In some cases, they could infer attitudes from their knowledge of what their ancestors believed. For example, Oliver Archdale could explain that if the Assiniboine had feared Yellowstone, they would have gone there to test themselves, given his understanding of the culture of which he is a part. Although it is possible that their closeness to their culture might make them want to present it in the most flattering way, the same is equally true when using accounts written by non-Indians.

Finally, information gathered through an oral history may be considered particularly reliable when it is corroborated by another, independently given interview. For example, George Kicking Woman, a respected elder and religious leader of the Blackfeet nation, reported in 1992 that the Yellowstone region was sacred to the Shoshones without knowing that Haman Wise, who was a descendant of both the Wind River Shoshone and the Bannock, had made the same point in 1991. The fact that the Shoshone and Blackfeet are traditional enemies and Kicking Woman had nothing to gain by his statement added to the credibility of Wise's claim.

What we can learn from these oral histories is that different tribes used Yellowstone in different ways. Like Hultkrantz's sources, Wise spoke of both the sacred nature of the geyser basins for the Shoshone and Bannock, and the practical use of the hot springs for bathing. However, unlike Hultkrantz, Wise claimed that the park's thermal wonders did not frighten the Shoshone or the Bannock. "The Indians wasn't scared of it. This was a valuable place for them. This was more of a spiritual [place]. It was something cherished by them…" Wise understood the connotation that "fear" has for Euro-Americans and felt certain that such fear was not a part of his people's response to the region. Yet, stressing the sacred nature of the region, he insinuated that there were practices that had to be followed to demonstrate the proper respect. Without such practices, one would be in danger of showing disrespect and paying the consequences.

The Indian use of hot springs for bathing and their construction of tubs to hold the water has been documented elsewhere in the West. According to geologist George Marler, Indians were responsible for diverting Tangled Creek to create a reservoir at Tank Spring (also called Ranger Pool or Old Bath Lake) in the Lower Geyser Basin. In 1973 he reported that "the degree of mineral deposition [and] the fact that the pond was used for bathing in the 1880s, strongly suggests that it had its origin prior to 1870." Although other archeologists have disputed his claim, Marler considered this basin, which has a diameter of 60 feet, one of Yellowstone's "most important archeological sites."

One of Hultkrantz's sources told the story of Nakok, a Shoshone who went to Yellowstone to hunt; when "they arrived at the steaming waters...undressed and bathed, and came back clean." Wise, who was appointed by the Wind River Reservation Tribal Council "to represent the Eastern Shoshone Tribe concerning all Traditional, Cultur[al], Spiritual, Ceremonial & Sacred sites, etc," explained, "This is a natural Jacuzzi for us.... It's healthy.... There is a lot of value to these springs." He mentioned that the Shoshone and Bannock used mud from the mudpots to clean and purify the skin much as mud packs are used in health resorts today. The Shoshone at Coso Hot Springs in California were also known to use hot mud for baths. Chief White Hawk, who had fled with Chief Joseph across the park in 1877, told park naturalist William Kearns in 1935 that the Nez Perce were not scared of the geysers. According to Kearns, White Hawk "implied that the Indians used them for cooking." Stories among the Crow suggest that they did the same, and might have drunk geyser water to promote good health.

Some tribes may have gathered pigments for paints from the minerals in the thermal areas. One Yellowstone guide remembered the Indians of the region "got most of their colors from the Mammoth Paint Pots." Walter McClintock, who wrote extensively on the Blackfeet, recorded that they obtained pigment for yellow paint from "a place on the Yellowstone River near some warm springs." The Shoshone soaked the horns of bighorn sheep in the hot water until they were malleable enough to be shaped. This was perhaps the technique used by the Tukudeka to make horn bows. James Beckwourth related that the Crow used the hot springs in a similar way to straighten buffalo and elk horns.

Yellowstone as Sacred Land

Many tribes regarded the lands that became Yellowstone National Park as sacred. A Nez Perce historian, Adeline Fredin, recalled her grandparents telling about a long trip to Yellowstone to pray, bathe, and sweat. According to Fredin's letter, "it was one place where the Great Spirit existed and we could bathe the body and spirit directly." She said that the "geysers/hot springs sites were a ceremonial and religious part in our history" and the Nez Perce went to Yellowstone to purify their bodies and souls.

One of Hultkrantz's sources told him that "the Indians prayed to the geysers because there were spirits inside them." Another said that his grandfather, Tavonasia, and his band "raised their tents close to the Firehole Geyser Basin... The men themselves bathed in the geysers whilst they directed their prayers to the spirits." They approached the geysers, hot springs, and thermal features with an attitude of reverence and prayed to the spirits present for assistance on vision quests.

According to ethnographic accounts, a vision quest is a special rite for many tribes in which the Indians go alone to the

Max Big Man and his daughter, Myrtle, of the Crow Tribe, in front of Giant Geyser, 1933. In the 1920s and 30s, Max made presentations to park visitors about how the Crow lived "in the old days." NPS photo.

Unidentified Native American family at the Upper Geyser Basin, circa 1930. NPS photo.

wilderness to pray and fast, asking assistance from the Spirit World. They believe that if the petitioner is sincere and respectful, the Spirit World may bestow a vision or dream carrying the power of the spirit benefactor. Referred to as one's "medicine," this may include the power to heal or to foresee future events, or strength in war. Like Hultkrantz's sources, Wise identified Yellowstone as an area the Shoshone and Bannock used for vision questing; he said that Yellowstone's thermal basins contained especially powerful spirits in Shoshone cosmology. These spirits were revered, and one would be careful not to insult them. They were powerful, but also potentially helpful. Deference and respect were important.

For example, even when just passing through the region, the Shoshone and Bannock offered their pipes in prayer, and they left gifts when petitioning or thanking the spirit world. Wise explained that these gifts were objects of value such as tobacco that was left on the ground or smoked. This information clarifies the passage in DeSmet's letter that refers to "the calumet of peace to the turbulent spirits" presented by the Indians. Arrowheads were left beside or in a hot spring, Wise noted, "to receive the value of this spring." This is a possible explanation for an arrowhead that Marler found while cleaning a hot spring in the Firehole Geyser Basin in 1959. (The spring is now known as Arrowhead Spring.)

The Blackfeet did not come to Yellowstone to vision quest or fast because they preferred the region surrounding Glacier National Park and the Two Medicine wilderness. However, George Kicking Woman maintained that "the Blackfeet don't bother things like that, if they think they're sacred to them people, they won't bother them." Knowing it was sacred to others, the Blackfeet respected Yellowstone, and when traveling through the region, they stopped to offer their pipes in prayer or leave tobacco. Kicking Woman noted that prayers were especially said for a safe journey on the dangerous trip.

Chief Plenty-Coups of the Crow told of a medicine man, The Fringe, who received his power from a hot spring. Located in the Bighorn Basin, this was probably the large spring at Thermopolis. On the third day of a vision quest, The Fringe disappeared on an island in the spring; later he related that his spirit guide took him to his home below where he received instruction. After that, when the Crow passed this spring, they dropped in beads or something pretty for "the dream father" of The Fringe, and they may have approached Yellowstone in a similar spirit in the nineteenth century. During his ethnographic overview of Yellowstone National Park, Peter Nabokov uncovered evidence that The Fringe also came to Yellowstone to fast.

More distant tribes shared the perception of Yellowstone as a sacred place. Stories that place the Assiniboine in the Yellowstone region also mention prayer and the offering of the pipe. According to legend, Walking Bull, a noted Assiniboine chief, was mystified by the geysers when he came upon them during a personal trek. In a 1991 interview, Otto Cantrell, also known as Chief Bluebird, said that he believed Walking Bull would have sought the geysers' meaning with prayer, because the Assiniboine believe all things to have meaning, but only the Creator can reveal it.

There are stories relating how native peoples set aside their animosities around hot springs in Apache and Ute territory, as well as in Yellowstone. Although this practice may have been more honored in the breach, the belief that intertribal warfare was not supposed to be brought to regions containing hot springs supports the idea that Yellowstone was sacred land to Native Americans. Fredin asserted that at Yellowstone hostilities were left outside the area. Wise spoke of Yellowstone as a neutral ground and contended that as they came for purposes other than warfare, tribes never fought each other here. The Haynes 1890 guidebook mentions the legend that Obsidian Cliff was neutral ground to all Rocky Mountain Indians. Although Native Americans and trappers did fight in the park, only one account exists of a battle between tribes. It is supposed to have taken place on Three Rivers Peak, away from the geyser basins, and the account cannot be verified.

In Mircea Eliade's book, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion,* the French historian of religions observed that "for religious man, nature is never only 'natural': it is always fraught with a religious value...it spontaneously reveals the many aspects of the sacred." According to Kevin Locke, a Lakota Baha'i well-versed in the oral traditions of his people, "the pre-eminence of the Yellowstone basin as a site of particular spiritual potency invoking awe, wonderment and spiritual upliftment for thousands of years is indisputable." Although his claim might trouble historians demanding documentation in the European tradition, knowing the ways of his people, Locke could see no other explanation. And this sense of awe and inspiration has also been found among Euro-Americans who have vis-

ited Yellowstone. Thomas Moran, the landscape painter who accompanied the Hayden expedition, captured this wonderment in paintings and sketches that many find inspiring today.

Keeping these insights in mind, the reaction of the Pend d'Oreille to the geysers in 1834 reported by Warren Ferris may be interpreted as a spiritual response, not fear. When he arrived there with the Indians, Ferris was reckless in his enthusiasm to explore, given the dangers posed by the thin crust covering the geyser basins. Thus, historians should construe the attitude of the Pend d'Oreille as wisdom and reverence. Ferris did not say that they were afraid of the geysers, but that they found his actions "appalling." Because geysers and hot springs were sacred, they may have considered Ferris's wantonly approaching them offensive. Many see Ferris's account, according to which one of the Indians "remarked that hell, of which he had heard from the whites, must be in the vicinity," as evidence that Indians believed geysers were the abode of evil spirits. A careful reading of his quote, however, reveals that this was not a native belief. It shows that the Pend d'Oreille had learned the term "hell" from Euro-Americans and applied it here as a way to communicate their thoughts to a non-Indian.

What emerges concerning Indian attitudes toward Yellowstone's geysers is a complex world view. What is clear is that the thermal wonders of Yellowstone did not terrify all, or even most, American Indians. At least some, and perhaps many, American Indians revered the region and treated it as they did other sacred lands. Euro-Americans originated the idea that Indians "feared" Yellowstone and it must be dispelled to understand the true nature of Yellowstone's Indian past. First and foremost, many Native Americans treated Yellowstone as a special region, a sacred land. They approached the geysers with reverence and respect, but this did not preclude them from using the hot waters for utilitarian purposes. They came to pray and to seek inspiration to guide them through life. As an area of profound mystery and inspiration, Yellowstone was a special place to its first visitors—as it is to thousands of visitors today.

Photo courtesy J. Weixelman.

Joseph Owen Weixelman earned a B.A. in anthropology from the University of Colorado and an M.A. in history from Montana State University. This article is drawn from a paper by the author, "The Power to Evoke Wonder: Native Americans and the Geysers of Yellowstone National Park," that is on file in the Department of History and Philosophy, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana, and in the Yellowstone National Park Research Library in Mammoth, Wyoming. It also draws on a more recent version of the paper that was presented by the author at the Fourth Biennial Conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, "People and Place: The Human Experience in Greater Yellowstone," *Mammoth Hot Springs, October 14, 1997. Weixelman has worked as a ranger at Mesa Verde National Park, Petroglyph National Monument, and Yellowstone. During the summer of 1998, he researched the Bannock Trail and worked on tribal issues related to the park. He is currently a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, where his dissertation is a history of Pueblo Indians and their relationship to the Pueblo heritage parks of the Southwest.*

Yellowstone Science would like to thank Rosemary Sucec, cultural anthropologist, and Jon Dahlheim, museum technician, for their assistance in locating photos and writing captions for this article.

Bibliographic Essay - For Further Reading

The sources consulted for this study were numerous. Unfortunately, space constraints did not allow for comprehensive footnotes. The following sources were consulted in general and the editors of *Yellowstone Science* can be contacted for the citation to any specific reference.

Of course, any study of Yellowstone's history must begin with Aubrey L. Haines' classic two volume history entitled *The Yellowstone Story: A History of Our First National Park* (Yellowstone National Park: Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1977). His earlier study, *Yellowstone National Park, Its Exploration and Establishment* (Washington D.C.: National Park Service, 1974), was also extremely useful. A historiography of Yellowstone history must include Hiram Martin Chittenden's *The Yellowstone National Park*, edited by Richard A. Bartlett (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1964) and other histories consulted included Eugene Sayre Topping, *The Chronicles of the Yellowstone: An Accurate, Comprehensive History* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1888), James M. Hamilton, *History of Yellowstone National Park* (Previous to 1895) (Yellowstone Park: Typed by Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, c. 1933), William Turrentine Jackson, *The Early Exploration and Founding of Yellowstone National Park* (Austin: University of Texas, June 1940), and Merrill D. Beal, *The Story of Man in Yellowstone* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1949). Most of these historians repeated the assertion that Indians feared Yellowstone's thermal wonders, but the more recent ones, including Aubrey Haines, questioned its accuracy.

The interpretation that Indians feared the geysers was championed by Ake Hultkrantz in "The Indians and the Wonders of Yellowstone: A Study of the Interrelations of Reli-

gion, Nature and Culture" *Ethnos 1* (1954). This article later became a chapter in *Belief and Worship in Native North America*, edited by Christopher Vecsey (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981). He divided the Indians who utilized the resources of the Yellowstone region into three major cultural types and this analysis can be found in "The Indians in Yellowstone Park," *Annals of Wyoming*, 29: 3 (Oct. 1957). Hultkrantz based his research on sources which, by his own admission, are not rich or diverse, coming mostly from the Shoshone. His analysis of the sources appears in "The Fear of Geysers Among Indians of the Yellowstone Park Area," in *Lifeways of Intermountain and Plains Montana Indians*, ed. Leslie B. Davis, (Bozeman: Montana State University, 1979).

Other writers who have written on Indians in Yellowstone include Joel C. Janetski, with his popular book *Indians of Yellowstone Park* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987) and the comprehensive report by Peter Nabokov and Larry Loendorf. This last study took four years to complete and this article's author assisted them where he could. The study took place in the mid-1990s and their report will go a long way in correcting what is known about the use of Yellowstone National Park by native peoples. Their results were reported by Nabokov in "Reintroducing the Indian: Observations of a Yellowstone Amateur," *The Aubrey L. Haines Lecture* at the Fourth Biennial Conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, *People and Place: The Human Experience in Greater Yellowstone*, Mammoth Hot Springs, on Oct. 13, 1997. In addition, the draft of their report, *American Indians and Yellowstone National Park: A Documentary Overview*, has been accepted for publication by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Sources consulted for the Tukudeka included Hultkrantz, "The Indians in Yellowstone Park" and "The Shoshoni in the Rocky Mountain Area," *Annals of Wyoming* 33 (April 1961), David Dominick, "The Sheepeaters," *Annals of Wyoming* 36 (1964), and Sven Liljeblad, "Indian Peoples in Idaho," (manuscript on file, Pocatello: Idaho State University, Aug. 1957). Information on the Shoshone came from Brigham D. Madsen, *The Northern Shoshoni* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1980) and Virginia Cole Trenholm and Maurine Carley, *The Shoshonis: Sentinels of the Rockies*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964). Information on the Crow came from Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, edited by John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), Rodney Frey, *The World of the Crow Indians: As Driftwood Lodges* (Norman.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading Through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967). Information on the Blackfeet came from Walter McClintock, *The Old North Trail or Life, Legends and Religion on the Blackfeet Indians* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1910) and from Malcholm McFee, *Modern Blackfeet: Montanans on a Reservation. Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972). Knowledge of the Nez Perce came from Lucullus V. McWhorter, *Yellow Wolf: His Own Story* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1940), Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) and William E. Kearns, "A Nez Perce Chief Revisits Yellowstone," *Yellowstone Nature Notes 12* (June-July, 1935). Information on other tribes came from Robert Spencer, et al. *The Native Americans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

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Archaeological and geological reports consulted include J. Jacob Hoffman's "The Yellowstone Park Survey," *Archaeology in Montana* (Summer 1958) and "A Preliminary Archaeological Survey of Yellowstone National Park" (Master's Thesis, Montana State University, Bozeman, 1961), Carling Malouf's two articles in *Archeology in Montana*, "The Old Indian Trail" (March, 1962) and "Historic Tribes and Archaeology" (January-March, 1967) and his "Preliminary Report, Yellowstone National Park Archeological Survey" (Unpublished Paper, University of Montana, Missoula, Summer, 1958), and George Marler's *Inventory of Thermal Features of the Firehole River Geyser Basins and Other Selected Areas of Yellowstone National Park* (Report for the U.S. Geological Survey, 1973, Unpublished manuscript, Yellowstone Research Library, Mammoth).

And most importantly, oral histories were collected from the Shoshone, the Blackfeet, and the Assiniboine between September 1991 and January 1992. Copies of these oral histories have been deposited with the Yellowstone Research Library in Mammoth. Other tribal cultural preservation officers, historians, and archivists assisted me through letters and phone interviews. Copies of these letters and notes have also been donated to the Yellowstone Research Library.