

# Integrating Preservation and Development at Yellowstone's Upper Geyser Basin, 1915–1940

*Karl Byrand*

## Introduction

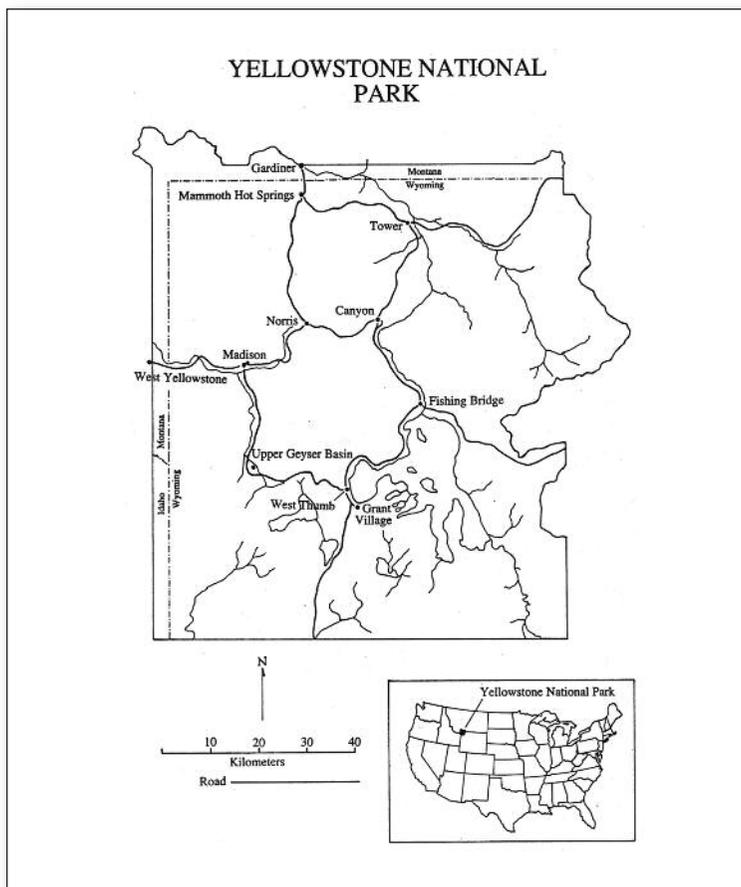
National parks provide rich landscapes to study not only nature, but also culture. Because of their natural wonders, these landscapes have attracted visitors who in turn have been sold, and at times demanded, cultural amenities to accompany the natural ones they came to encounter. As a result, the clustering of facilities such as museums, hotels, and souvenir shops has created unique cultural landscapes unto themselves in some of the most scenic areas within national parks. These cultural landscapes, however, are dynamic, evolving to cater to the changing requests of national park visitors. As such, national park landscapes serve as barometers of change in that they reflect at least a segment of American society, as well as the policies and goals of the parks' assigned protectors, the National Park Service.

“Since its establishment in 1916, the National Park Service has persevered in the impossibly difficult challenge of balancing the preservation of Yellowstone's environment with the needs and desires of human visitors.”<sup>1</sup> To accommodate visitors' needs, the park service has had to strike a sometimes tenuous balance between development and preservation, facilitating cultural adaptations while minimizing their impact on the physical landscape. Through careful siting of visitor facilities and by blending such structures in with the natural landscape, the National Park Service has for the most part reduced their visual imprint. In some instances, however, it has been less successful.

Yellowstone—the first and largest of the national parks, as well as one of the most popular—provides an appropriate setting for examining the integration of preservation and development. Its Upper Geyser Basin has the Earth's greatest concentration of geysers. Indeed, centered in this area of about one square mile are more than 150 geysers—accounting not only for twenty-five percent of the world's total but also some of the largest and most powerful (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> For instance, the intermittent geothermal fountains of Daisy, Giantess, and Beehive all spout to heights well over a hundred feet.

---

Karl Byrand is an Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Sheboygan. *Historical Geography* Volume 35 (2007): 136-159. ©2007 Geoscience Publications.



**Figure 1.** Also known as wonderland, wasteland, wilderness preserve, and world-famous resort, Yellowstone National Park encompasses 3,458 square miles, mostly situated in the northwest corner of Wyoming. The Upper Geyser Basin lies within the southwest quadrant of the park.

The best known and most popular geysers in this area is undoubtedly Old Faithful. About three million people visit Yellowstone annually; a stop at Old Faithful is certain to be on their itinerary.<sup>3</sup>

This unique natural wonderland has witnessed a substantial amount of cultural development since the park's inception in 1872. Amid numerous manmade features, Old Faithful Geyser no longer stands out as an inimitable feature in a wild setting; it has become the centerpiece of an ever-evolving cultural landscape including numerous gift shops, gas stations, and hotels. Besides these facilities, numerous roads, parking lots, boardwalks, trails, wheelchair-accessible ramps, and bicycle paths have also been constructed—thus paving the way for easier access to the basin's geological marvels and visitor facilities. The area's structures and pathways have changed over time, with a plethora

of facilities coming and going. These alterations shaped not only the landscape but also the way people have explored the basin: As the pace and form of development changed, so did the visitor experience.

The study of the evolution of the Upper Geyser Basin's cultural landscape can illuminate more than visitors' needs and decisions made by park administrators and concessionaires. According to Peirce Lewis, studying cultural landscapes is important because they have "a great deal to say about the United States as a country and Americans as people." Landscapes reflect our tastes, our values, and our aspirations; they can be used as mirrors to reflect the cultures that have occupied and changed them.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the landscape can be treated as a palimpsest that contains a written record of the cultural forces generating cultural change. Because of the complex interaction of nature and culture that has occurred on Yellowstone National Park's landscape, it has become deeply humanized, or to use Judith Meyer's term, a "human artifact."<sup>5</sup> Of particular interest are those landscapes like the Upper Geyser Basin that fall within the realm of the symbolic and sacred. "Tourist attractions" could be considered "sacred places of a nation or people," places that "speak to humanity."<sup>6</sup> Parks, normally viewed as secular landscapes, could be considered sacred space "given the force of our sentiment toward them."<sup>7</sup> Owned by the public, held in trust for the future, national parks deserve an attention different from tourist attractions in the Disneyland-vein.

The notion of sacred space is closely linked to that of symbolic landscapes, which also possess great meaning to people. According to Meinig,

[a] mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which binds people together.<sup>8</sup>

Studying the cultural landscape of the Upper Geyser Basin affords us an opportunity to determine those various binding ideas and feelings that visitors, park administrators, and even concessionaires had toward this sacred and symbolic landscape over time, and how they influenced the evolution of the basin's cultural landscape.

Focusing on the years from 1915 to 1940, this paper highlights some key events and decisions that shaped how the Upper Geyser Basin was used and spatially organized. Providing representative examples, it examines a few successes and failures of the National Park Service in siting, driving architectural form, and determining appropriate visitor activities as it sought how to best integrate preservation and development.

The years from 1915 to 1940 provide an excellent timeframe to examine such phenomena, as they represent a threshold period in development in terms of the quantity of structures and visible human impact. This devel-

opment was a direct result of a philosophy of use adopted and promoted by the nascent National Park Service, which sought to generate support for these natural landscapes by making them more accessible to a greater number and variety of visitors.

This philosophy of use did bring more visitors, who in turn wanted more diverse experiences. The subsequent course of development generated not only quantitative, but also qualitative changes to the cultural landscape that some saw as detrimental to the natural one.

Four major events between 1915 and 1940 helped drive these changes within the national parks: The inception of the National Park Service, the admission of automobiles to the parks, World War I, and the Great Depression. Yellowstone's Upper Geyser Basin saw its most intensive period of cultural development during this period. While a few structures were razed or burned, nearly a thousand went up. As a result the Upper Geyser Basin, considered by many to be one of our most highly valued parcels of public land—both sacred and symbolic—took on the look of a small town in the middle of a vast wilderness.

### **A New Park Protector and a More Formalized Interpretive Landscape**

In its most general sense, the National Park Service came as a response to utilitarians who sought to use, on a sustainable basis, the resources of lands set aside for preservation. “[I]heir ‘gospel of efficiency,’ as [Samuel] Hays calls it, subordinated aesthetic values and discounted any persons who were concerned with nature preservation.”<sup>9</sup> Those who opposed utilitarianism wanted consolidation of the federal departments in charge of public lands, such as the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, and the War Department. Believing that a single bureau would offer a unified front to safeguard these landscapes, preservationists helped establish the National Park Service in August 1916, with the support of the railroads, the media, and individuals such as Stephen T. Mather.<sup>10</sup> The latter became the park service's first director, although his influence on park administration began a year before the agency's actual formation. Mather could be considered solely responsible for the morphology of the national park system in its first decades. Believing that the parks should cater to a greater number and variety of visitors, he implemented a successful program of promotion to gain public and financial support for them.

Promotion and funding were further helped by World War I and the Great Depression. The war helped draw attention to America's national parks. “Since the traveling public could not vacation in Europe after 1914,” the park service urged them “to see America first.”<sup>11</sup> Many heeded the marketing cam-

paign: whereas 20,250 visited Yellowstone in 1914, the following year, that figure more than doubled, to almost 52,000. In the next two years, the number decreased somewhat, until 1918, when it dropped off drastically to 21,000, perhaps reflecting tensions from America entering the war. Nevertheless, the number of tourists still exceeded that of the prewar years. When the war ended in 1919, Yellowstone visitation swelled to 62,000.<sup>12</sup>

Park promotion on an even more massive scale occurred with the Great Depression, to stimulate the economy of the concessionaires and businesses in bordering towns. At Yellowstone, Depression-era visitor statistics showed a steady increase each year. While in 1929, visitation totaled 260,000, by 1940 it was more than double that, at 526,000.

The parks also saw increases in funding and employees during the Depression. Between 1933 and 1940, the number of employees increased by more than 5,000, and the park service received about \$218 million—in addition to its usual \$10 million to \$13 million per year.<sup>13</sup> Most of the additional funds were in the form of emergency conservation projects, such as through the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration.

Well before the Depression, however—in its very first year—the National Park Service initiated a proposal that would have a profound effect on the Upper Geyser Basin's cultural landscape. Specifically, prior to 1916, although numerous structures had been built in the basin, a formalized interpretive landscape in Yellowstone (and in the national parks in general) was nonexistent. For example, in the years preceding the formation of the National Park Service, park overseers had placed a soldier station within the oxbow of the Firehole River, but it functioned as a barracks and headquarters for the Army, not as an interpretive facility. Although numerous concession structures served visitors, the most notable being Old Faithful Inn, none offered formal interpretation of the natural features. With no other source to turn to, visitors had to rely on concession company employees and park troops for information. Unfortunately, these personnel often were not trained woodsmen and lacked knowledge about the natural features, so sometimes fabricated information to get better tips. Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, Yellowstone's superintendent, realized that previous interpretive attempts "left a great deal to be desired," while being "well aware of the importance of visitor understanding and appreciation of the significant park features."<sup>14</sup>

The newly formed park service initiated structured interpretation with a new and improved overseer. In July 1918, Congress approved funding for a civilian ranger force, which cost less to maintain than the soldier force based there the previous 30 years. The rangers became "more than protectors": they lectured, led tours, and aided in educational development.<sup>15</sup> They played a pivotal role in gaining support for the parks by accurately portraying their offerings.

The next step involved creating museums as centers for the incipient interpretive landscape. “The need for park museums was first recognized in 1920, but it was several years before the park service found sources to fund construction.”<sup>16</sup> The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation donated \$118,000 for educational work in Yellowstone, with a portion going toward the Museum of Thermal Activity in the Upper Geyser Basin.<sup>17</sup>

Architect Herbert Maier designed and supervised its construction, along with three other museums in the park. Opening in June 1929 as the forerunner for Yellowstone’s first four museums, the one in the Upper Geyser Basin gave Maier the opportunity to try his techniques that would become widely used for national park structures. He strove to make his designs as inconspicuous as possible, using natural materials such as stone or wood and often specifying they be shaped with primitive tools for a rustic look. He also used screening—placing buildings behind natural features such as trees and rocks, or within alcoves. When screeners were unavailable, he planted indigenous vegetation.

The first museum at the Upper Geyser Basin was a primitive-looking, L-shaped, log and stone building located approximately 200 feet east of Old Faithful Inn (Figures 2 and 3). Its main entrance faced Old Faithful to give a direct view of its geyser. The museum “proved to be one of the main points of interest in the park.”<sup>18</sup> It contained a study for ranger naturalists, an infor-

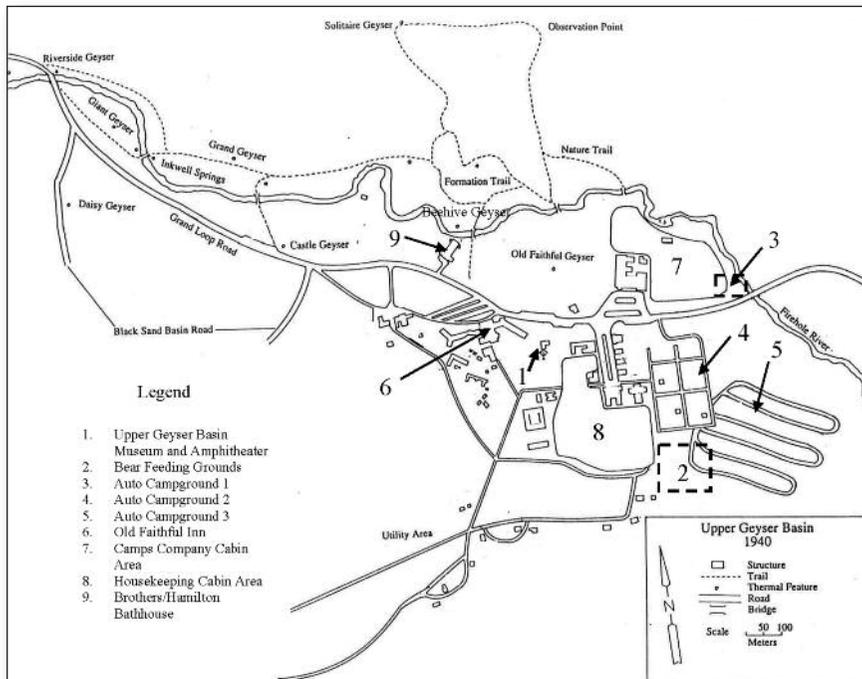


Figure 2. The Upper Geyser Basin, 1940.



**Figure 3.** The Upper Geyser Basin Museum (Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives [circa 1929]).

mation office for visitors to consult with one, and an open courtyard at the rear. The museum also held exhibits on thermal activity, including a model of a working geyser, as well as historical, botanical, and zoological displays. An easel posted the “educational program for the immediate vicinity,” and two blackboards announced the eruption times of various geysers.<sup>19</sup>

Later, in 1932, an amphitheater was added to the museum to “provide ample room for the large crowds that...taxed the capacity of the [museum’s] court[yard] almost since its construction.”<sup>20</sup> Maier also designed and supervised its construction, locating the amphitheater behind the courtyard and planting several trees for natural screening. He arranged its seating into a semi-circle, with the visitors facing away from the museum. The seats were long benches of rough, hewn logs. A low, log stage with a large projection screen stood front and center of the lecture area (Figure 4). This semicircular design, seating 800, “was better suited to the intimate woodland surroundings and use for evening lectures and slide shows” than the courtyard.<sup>21</sup>

The museum helped satisfy some of the needs of visitors, who like today’s tourists expected to see and learn about geysers. However, unlike today, they also expected to see a bear. Because the park service established facilities to show off bears, visitors during this period could have their “bear sighting” experience on a set schedule.

Evening bear feedings were an extension of the days when the ho-



**Figure 4.** The amphitheater at the Upper Geyser Basin, designed by Herbert Maier, seated 800 (Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives [circa 1933]).

tels discarded garbage behind them. The visitors had discovered they could watch the bears congregate and thus gathered there themselves. With the number of bears so large, and the visitors so near, this activity “soon matured into a bear problem.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, when concessionaires moved their trash, the bears followed the garbage and the visitors invariably followed the bears.

During the formative years of the National Park Service, Director Mather and Superintendent Albright wanted park visitors to have predictable wildlife viewing opportunities, not only to garner greater support for the parks by catering to a wider array of visitors’ wants and needs, but also to generate better control over visitor and bear interactions, thus making them safer. They decided to formalize this congregation of bears and humans at the garbage dumps by establishing “canned” bear viewings and providing at least a rudimentary form of wildlife interpretation.

In 1919, the park service established an official dump/bear feeding ground in a wooded area southeast, and within walking distance, of Old Faithful Geyser. It nonetheless was further from the basin’s center than the previous dumps, reflecting new guidelines that required structures to give visitors easy access without interfering with the basin’s thermal features.

The feeding ground at the Upper Geyser Basin consisted of wooden benches for the visitors, a wire barricade strung between trees and posts, a



**Figure 5.** The popular “bear dumps” thrilled visitors and became another major reason to visit Yellowstone (Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives [date unknown]).

shallow ditch so as “to keep people from going beyond the danger line,” and an armed ranger in case things got out of hand.<sup>23</sup> A special feeding platform held a sign proclaiming that this was a “LUNCH COUNTER FOR BEARS ONLY” (Figure 5). Various rangers provided bear lectures; one was Walter P. Martindale, who delivered his talk while on horseback; he became somewhat famous for his “Sermon on a Mount.”<sup>24</sup> This feeding area became “one of the most interesting features of the park to the majority of tourists.” It also required “careful regulation.”<sup>25</sup>

Although popular with visitors, the basin’s bear feeding facility was reevaluated in the 1930s. The park service slated it for removal because it produced a “very bad odor” and was drawing bears to the campground, where they had become “troublesome.”<sup>26</sup> A 1934 Public Works Administration project proposed a better feeding facility at a site a mile or more from the Upper Geyser Basin. Before it could be built, however, the park service formally recognized that bear feeding grounds “enticed grizzly bears into the crowded utility area, which condition was considered as hazardous because of the nature of this species of bear.”<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, formalized bear feedings did not serve to control interactions between visitors and bears, but more likely encouraged the activity. Impromptu roadside and campground bear feedings continued, and as time passed, more injuries occurred from these visitor–bear interactions. Consequently, the National Park Service had to reevaluate the provision of certain wildlife experiences to park visitors. In short, the park service had to redefine

what was and was not acceptable bear behavior, and how this wildlife would be presented to the public.<sup>28</sup> In 1936, it discontinued all bear feeding grounds except at a new facility near the Canyon area. However, by 1940, the park service stopped bear feedings even at that last site, as “an attempt to placate some of the ‘purists’” who had been placing pressure on it during the 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

### **Driving Development on the Upper Geyser Basin: The Impact of the Automobile**

The automobile played a part in how the park service used its rangers, and not only for public safety when it came to driving through Yellowstone. Specifically, it implemented an Upper Geyser Basin program in which visitors accessed a series of interpretive lectures by automobile. With this “Chasing Geysers” program, begun in 1931, daily auto caravans would take visitors from the basin’s museum to areas such as Black Sand and Biscuit Basins, on the edge of the Upper Geyser Basin. During the popular program’s first year, the trips took place in the morning. However, during the second year and thereafter the park scheduled the trips in the afternoon to encourage “more people to participate in walking trips during the morning” and to “hold more parties over for another day at these points.”<sup>30</sup>

Although discontinued in the late 1930s because of traffic and parking congestion, the caravans help reveal some of the impact the automobile had on development in the Upper Geyser Basin. These vehicles were admitted in Yellowstone in August 1915 despite the reluctance of the Army and transportation companies, which wanted no part of auto tourism given their investments in horses and carriages. Instead of focusing on such financial concerns, park administrators concentrated on the Army’s assertion that automobiles and horses could never safely share the park’s narrow roads. This rationale did not work for long, for Congress appropriated funds to widen them.

The pressure for autos in the parks came from the public and Stephen Mather, who feared that support for the parks would wane and put them in the hands of non-preservation interests. Thus he sought to attract the growing lobby of those switching to automobiles. The switch from horses and wagons to automobiles required an upgrade in the park’s transportation infrastructure, immediately effecting what Aubrey L. Haines termed “the motorization of the Park’s [sic] public transportation and a reorientation of all development....” The landscape needed to encompass auto campgrounds, wider roads, new bridges, service stations, and redesigned concessionaire facilities “to meet the needs of the new era.”<sup>31</sup>

This new travel mode brought a new type of tourist, which in turn brought additional cultural changes to Yellowstone. A visit to the parks, once

subjected to train schedules and expensive hotels, became a cheaper and more convenient venture. Auto tourists, with camp gear stowed in trunks, could sightsee at their own pace. Soon, they expressed a desire for camping facilities separate from those offered by private companies. Park administrators responded, realizing that areas with “a few conveniences” for the automobile camper “would be appreciated” and that their development could be financed through automobile entrance fees.<sup>32</sup>

In 1916, automobile camps, available at no extra charge, opened throughout the park, including at the Upper Geyser Basin, just east of Old Faithful Geyser, along the Firehole River behind a camp owned by Shaw and Powell Camping Company. Site choice probably related to the existing road system: there was no need to develop another driveway through the thick trees. The site also offered easy access to the thermal features. Initially offering a modest facility with a wood-framed shed roofed with corrugated steel, the basin would eventually see the auto camp become one of its most extensive infrastructural developments during this period.

The first campground structure, an auto shed built in 1916 for \$292.81, was 60 feet long by 32 feet wide (and 8 feet high—large enough for 12 vehicles.<sup>33</sup> Also offering cooking grates at each campsite and toilet facilities, this auto camp and others in Yellowstone all grew very popular: By 1919, about two-thirds of the park’s visitors stayed overnight at these facilities.<sup>34</sup> Overcrowding resulted, especially in the Upper Geyser Basin. Moreover, a park landscape architect advised against building more shelters, for he believed they “are not attractive structures at best,” and they could make the camps appear “more or less ugly” by overdoing them.<sup>35</sup>

To effectively deal with both the congestion and the unsightly nature of the camp shed, Yellowstone’s landscape engineer proposed to relocate the auto camp “across the Thumb road in a grove of trees.”<sup>36</sup> According to Albright’s annual report, the auto camp moved to “the thick timber on the opposite side of the road from Old Faithful.” They had to remove many trees to create new sites and roadways, but the new camp was otherwise said to be superior. It stood on “level sandy soil,” “screened by trees from the road,” and was “convenient to the objects of interest.”<sup>37</sup>

In laying out the new auto camp, the designers created a six-road grid that started some 250 feet south of the basin’s main road. At 360 feet wide, it provided four rectangular plots for camping. Its capacity greatly surpassed its forerunner, by accommodating 350 vehicles when it opened in 1920. Its popularity demanded an increase in the number of comfort stations, with only two in 1921 but ten by 1928. The builders used rough boards and batons and shingled the roofs to make the comfort stations appear “well in the woods where they are located.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite attempts to create a rustic atmosphere, urbanization made

its mark on the campground. For instance, the park service added street lights in 1928, and then in 1929 doubled in width the camp's roads, from 20 to 40 feet so as "to accommodate the traffic that is attracted to the bear feeding grounds."<sup>39</sup> As the 1930 season saw a surge in visitation, with 33,524 campers using this facility, the auto campground soon proved inadequate.<sup>40</sup> In 1939, the Civilian Conservation Corps began work on another camp southeast of it. However, Corps staff built only three sites before being called away to another park project, so it would not be completed until 1949. Both of these facilities accommodated visitors until removed in 1969.

### **For the Wants and Needs of the New Visitor: Concession Development**

Of all of the development in the national parks, concession expansion has certainly been the most difficult for the National Park Service to regulate. This difficulty arose not only because concessionaires are not park service employees, but also because concessionaire goals—selling goods and services in order to profit—are different from those of the park overseers. Concessionaires sought to change natural landscapes of national parks into commodities that could be marketed to the traveling public. As such, parks like Yellowstone became sites of intensive commercial activity.<sup>41</sup> Equating closer proximity with increased profit, concessionaires, early in Yellowstone's history, ignored park regulations and attempted to construct their facilities in close to the Upper Geyser Basin's natural features.

When the National Park Service took control of Yellowstone in 1916, Director Mather was determined to preserve both the natural integrity of the parks themselves and the visitor experience. To accomplish this, he sought more careful and consistent regulation of park concessions. He did not choose to place the concessions under public control, but to put the private enterprises "under stringent government regulation to ensure that the commercial operators fulfilled their responsibility to the traveling public."<sup>42</sup> To implement this policy, Mather consolidated the enterprises that had been running the transportation, hotel, and camp operations in Yellowstone into three large corporations. The park service treated the concessionaires as a regulated monopoly and closely monitored their performance. If a concession failed to provide what was deemed to be adequate service, its lease could be revoked.

Along with regulating the concessionaires, Mather believed that regulating their structures could help preserve the visitor experience. In 1919, he created a landscape engineering division responsible for assessing all proposed structures: "Service engineers and architects had to study every change, every proposed 'improvement,' weighing its benefits against its potential for disrupting the landscape."<sup>43</sup> Post-1916 construction decisions within the Upper

Geyser Basin clearly reflected these new regulations. For instance, most new concession structures incorporated natural materials that created a rustic look. The National Park Service also required that structures be less obtrusive and located away from the basin's thermal features, to prevent damage.

The second wing to the Old Faithful Inn, added to its west side in 1927, at first offered some consternation. While its first wing, a three-story structure added in 1913, was set on the Inn's southeast end to keep it out of the view of visitors entering the basin from the north, the second was far more conspicuous. Moreover, its architectural design was more incongruous with the rest of the building, generating friction between Superintendent Albright, the Yellowstone Park Hotel Company, and the wing's architect Robert C. Reamer (also the Inn's original architect) (Figure 6). However, eventually Albright changed his opinion, believing that the wing grew "more harmonious with the surroundings" every time he went to Old Faithful."<sup>44</sup>

Although the Inn's additions were monumental, still seen by the park visitor today, other accommodations added during this period generated a greater visual imprint on the Upper Geyser Basin's landscape. Tourist cabins, although the smallest individual structures, had the most significant impact. Established at the site of the Shaw and Powell Camping Company and near the first automobile campground, these wooden buildings ultimately would



**Figure 6.** Like some other previous Upper Geyser Basin structures, the west wing to the Old Faithful Inn initially inspired controversy and criticism, but came to be appreciated after its completion (Author's collection [1995]).

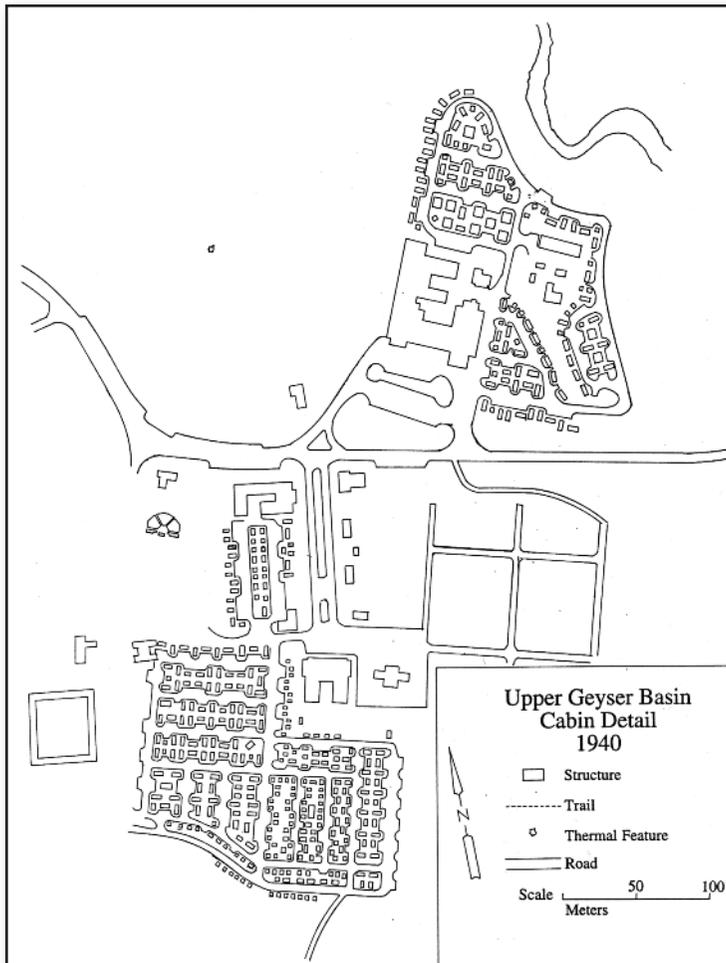


**Figure 7.** Permanent cabins (upper right) accommodated visitors looking for simple lodging that was just a few steps removed from camping out (Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives [circa 1930]).

replace the tent camps built by concession companies during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Superintendent Albright had wanted to replace most of the old tent facilities with “more than one hundred cabins dispersed as needed....”<sup>45</sup> These buildings—being more weatherproof and private—offered an improvement over the tent facilities, but they were poorly constructed and unattractive. They first appeared at Old Faithful in 1921 when the Yellowstone Lodge and Camps Company (YLCC) built 50 cabins (also known as lodges), but by 1935 the total had reached 315 and nearly another 100 were added in the lodge area by 1940.<sup>46</sup>

The YLCC also built cabins across the road, next to the auto camp, in the late 1920s. Known as the Housekeeping Cabins, these structures allowed visitors to “prepare their own meals, furnish their own bedding if desired, and have their automobile adjacent to the cabin.”<sup>47</sup> These facilities were for those who did not wish “to sleep on the ground or cook over an open fire.”<sup>48</sup> They gave park visitors the convenience and economy of camping without the burden of packing a tent. In 1929, the YLCC began constructing these permanent cabins, with 405 of them in this area by 1936. In addition, the Housekeeping area also had 256 tent cabins. In 1939, the YLCC moved 14 cabins from the Lodge to the Housekeeping area, giving it an even more congested feel.<sup>49</sup>

Although these cabins and tents were small structures, their sheer volume reveals a limitation of the National Park Service for muting cultural development during this period. Although the permanent cabins were painted



**Figure 8.** Between 1915 and 1940, hundreds of “camper” and “housekeeping” cabins were constructed in the Upper Geyser Basin, giving its landscape the appearance of a small village in the wilderness.

brown, the angular nature of the flat wood boards from which they were constructed made it difficult for them to blend in with the natural landscape (Figure 7). Even more incongruous were the Housekeeping Cabins, constructed of an eye-catching white, and in some instances white- and red-striped, canvas. Moreover, the vast numbers of all these cabins generated an undeniably negative visual imprint. By 1940, more than 600 of these structures crowded and subdued the once-wild area (Figure 8).

The private lodging companies made many other modifications during this period, including dormitories, machine shops, and laundry facilities, to name a few. Most of these were screened from visitors, being placed behind Old Faithful Inn and Old Faithful Lodge and thus meeting the National

Park Service's desire to segregate employee facilities from visitor facilities and so keep less attractive structures (e.g., tool caches and incinerators) out of sight.<sup>50</sup> Arranged thus, most visitors did not notice their presence.

One concession facility developed during this period, however, ended up being completely conspicuous. It is perhaps the most intriguing modification to the basin's cultural landscape given its purpose and its siting. Specifically, in 1912 (before the inception of the National Park Service), a Salt Lake City attorney, Henry P. Brothers, wrote to the Department of the Interior to obtain information on how to "establish and conduct public baths at one of the hot springs in the Yellowstone National Park."<sup>51</sup> This inquiry was passed to Acting Superintendent Lloyd M. Brett who responded, "...there is little if any demand for this kind of accommodations on the part of the public, and I doubt if such a venture would be a success."<sup>52</sup> Brothers then forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior positive opinions of several acquaintances who were annual park visitors. He argued it was unfair that he had been denied at such an early stage of the application process, especially solely on the opinion of Brett. He asked to examine a parcel of land in the presence of Brett so the selection he made "would not interfere in any way with the proper protection and administration of the park."<sup>53</sup>

Assistant Secretary of the Interior Lewis C. Laylin honored Brothers's request but specified that the acting superintendent or another park official file a report on the selected site. Brothers made arrangements to meet with Brett at the Old Faithful Inn on 20 June 1913. One can only speculate what happened, but one thing is certain: something was said or done that drastically changed Brett's opinion of a bathhouse in the Upper Geyser Basin. Brothers selected a site on low ground near the Firehole River across the road from the Haynes Studio. He proposed a rustic log structure that would fit in with the Inn's motif. He also planned several small baths that would use hot water from nearby springs and cold water from the river, as well as a large plunge. The latter apparently helped sell Brett on the idea: in his report, he said of the plunge, "...this method of bathing would appeal to the traveling public and would be enjoyed."<sup>54</sup>

Despite Brett's support, the proposed bathhouse still met several obstacles. Foremost, a chemist for the U.S. Geological Survey, R.B. Dole, objected, arguing that the potential damage to Old Faithful was unknown. He suggested another location "opposite the soldier station or slightly below it."<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Laylin was concerned that the proposed site violated the Hayes Act of 1894, which specified that park buildings could be no nearer than one-eighth of a mile from an area of interest. Only "285 feet from Beehive Geyser," it was indeed in violation.<sup>56</sup> Brett nonetheless continued to support granting Brothers the lease, saying that though the site was "rather close in a straight line to Beehive Geyser, it is across the river from it, and on lower



**Figure 9.** The bathhouse at Upper Geyser Basin opened in 1914 (Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives [circa 1915]).

ground.” Furthermore, the bathhouse “would not interfere in any way with the formations, or obstruct the view from any hotel, camp or surrounding country,”<sup>57</sup> and the extraction of “hot water from the pools near the Firehole River” would not affect Old Faithful Geyser.<sup>58</sup>

Secretary Laylin gave Brett the final say, so Brothers received a 10-year concession in 1914. He created an open plunge 50 by 100 feet plus five private plunges, each 5 by 10 feet.<sup>59</sup> Constructed of rough-hewn logs, the bathhouse blended in with Old Faithful Inn’s motif and the basin’s natural landscape (Figure 9). Opening on July 1, 1915, it proved “popular with travelers as well as with employees.”<sup>60</sup> Over the next decade, the facility drew more than 11,000 bathers a year, but the placement close to the thermal features guaranteed its sighting by nearly every visitor. Those approaching the Upper Geyser Basin from the north often got their first view of Old Faithful’s eruption from over its roof.<sup>61</sup> Given the visual impact, the park service soon sought to move the bathhouse farther away from the thermal features as part of its policy to closely regulate the siting and appearance of park structures. An opportunity arose in 1933, when Henry Brothers decided to retire. Charles Ashworth Hamilton, another concessionaire who ran two stores in the basin, saw the popular bathhouse as an opportunity to expand his Upper Geyser Basin concessions empire and so requested permission to take it over. Director Albright telegraphed Hamilton permission under the condition that “within a year” the bathhouse be moved “to another location.”<sup>62</sup>



**Figure 10.** Charles A. Hamilton reconstructed the original bathhouse to one of a more monumental scale (Yellowstone National Park Photo Archives [date unknown]).

Contrary to Albright's order, Hamilton commenced improvements on the bathhouse. Cutting trees from nearby woods, he converted it into an enormous log structure on a stone base. As well as the original large plunge, it now contained an employee dorm, showers, and a public laundry facility. He consolidated the five smaller pools into two and redid the roof with skylights made of two-inch-thick glass. There was also a 25-foot lifeguard tower with a rescue rope swing; even so, three youths drowned in the bathhouse over the course of the next thirteen years.<sup>63</sup> Although considerably more monumental in scale than its predecessor, the materials chosen for the new bathhouse allowed it to blend in with the Inn's architectural motif and match the basin's natural resources (Figure 10). Completing renovations in the spring of 1934, Hamilton used the work as an excuse "for retaining the bathhouse/pool at its original location."<sup>64</sup> Yellowstone superintendent Roger Toll wrote in his 1934 annual report that the new and improved Hamilton bathhouse was "quite popular during the warm summer days," and afforded "comfortable bathing both day and night."<sup>65</sup>

Although Toll may have appreciated the bathhouse for its popularity, the park service did not and still aimed to remove the bathhouse. Nonetheless, this facility would not be razed until 1951. Moreover, siting issues played no role in its removal from the cultural landscape, nor was it the power of the National Park Service that brought it down. Instead, the bathhouse was eliminated because the U.S. Public Health Service found health code violations

and closed it for the 1950 season. His facility demolished in spring of 1951, Hamilton made no attempts to build a new bathhouse, not only because he would have to spend between \$30,000 and \$35,000 to meet health codes, but also because by the 1950s, the National Park Service was heading in a new direction in regard to park development.<sup>66</sup>

### Conclusion

Under the direction of the park service and its philosophy of use, the Upper Geyser Basin's cultural landscape expanded, with specific adaptations occurring because of the introduction of the automobile, the appeal for visitors inspired by World War One, and the needs raised because of the Great Depression. Once containing only several small clusters of development, the basin now needed to have these areas filled in with roads and structures that catered to auto tourism and structures that provided interpretive and recreational services for the increasing numbers of diverse visitors.

Rooted in the reality of increased visitation facilitated by the automobile and driven by marketing campaigns like See America First, the National Park Service had to provide for more visitors than ever before. As a consequence, they ultimately changed the visitor experience even as they increased the footprint of the Upper Geyser Basin's cultural landscape. In the first instance, a greater variety of visitors required more numerous choices in lodging. To cater to the lodging needs of the hotel-going visitors, a second wing was added to the Inn, and to accommodate the increasing number of visitors that the automobile would bring, a campground, service-oriented facilities, and hundreds of camper cabins were peppered throughout the basin. The end result was a small town in this wilderness.

Likewise, as visitation increased, the park service provided visitors with a more formalized recreational and interpretive landscape, introducing interpretive rangers and constructing visitor amenities such as a new museum and amphitheater. These facilities served as vehicles for the interpretation of the Upper Geyser Basin's landscape, providing visitors a potentially greater understanding of the basin's natural features. In addition, the impromptu bear feedings were formalized to make them safer and offer visitors a slightly better understanding of Yellowstone's wildlife. By redirecting and concentrating these feedings to a more out of the way location in the basin, placing them on a set schedule, and having an interpretive ranger discuss bear behavior, the park service attempted to reinvent a popular but dangerous wildlife experience at the Upper Geyser Basin.

However, even though bear feedings became increasingly interpretive in nature, their format—that of a spectator event—ultimately turned them into a formalized entertainment experience, reflective of the park ser-

vice's desire to provide more diverse recreational opportunities to the Upper Geyser Basin's visitors during this period. The addition and endurance of geyser baths were indicative of the same trend.

As the park service increasingly provided for the visitors' wants and needs through the establishment of a wider array of lodging and recreation options, the Upper Geyser Basin's landscape became more populated and humanized. In order to preserve at least a portion of the visual integrity of the basin's landscape, the National Park Service had to be creative in visually blending the area's natural and cultural worlds. It attempted to do this through architectural design, including local rustic construction materials, and careful siting, including the relocation of certain structures and activities so that they would be less visually intrusive. Specifically, by managing interpretive, camping, and recreational features and activities in the basin, the park service proved that in many instances it could be successful in muting development.

In the case of the Museum of Thermal Activity and its accompanying amphitheater, using local, rustic materials and the careful placement of vegetation, Herbert Meier was able to provide these facilities with a façade that would better harmonize them with their surrounding physical landscape. There were, however, cases—such as with the bathhouse and the permanent cabins—that the park service proved less capable of this task. Failing to properly regulate the siting of the bathhouse and allowing concession companies to construct an enormous volume of cabins, the park service allowed these structures to generate a dominant presence in the basin.

The dominance and overt appearance of the cabins and the bathhouse on this cultural landscape ultimately serve as a barometer for what was happening in Yellowstone and other national parks in general between 1915 and 1940. It was during this period that an ever-growing number of visitors, who demanded a greater variety of services, increasingly came to recognize the concessionaire landscape as a necessary and essential part of their national park experience. Constantly conscious of the financial and political support that visitors could bring to the parks, the National Park Service supported the concessionaires' attempt to cater to the more reasonable of visitors' consumptive desires while struggling with those it increasingly saw as unreasonable. Thus the Brothers bathhouse—established shortly before the inception of the National Park Service—remained at the Upper Geyser Basin for nearly 40 years. Generating controversy from its outset, the bathhouse was judged inappropriate for the area, with Superintendent Albright calling for relocation. Nevertheless, the pursuit of that goal was half-hearted at best, given the facility's popularity with the visitors and perhaps the considerable investment that Hamilton had placed into remodeling it. Although the latter occurred in direct defiance of Superintendent Albright, the park service did not follow through on its conviction that the bathhouse was a visually intrusive

and unsuitable concession for the geyser basin.

Investigating cultural development on the landscape of Yellowstone's Upper Geyser Basin between 1915 and 1940 shows an unsure, nascent National Park Service trying to develop effective strategies for a diametric challenge: integrating preservation and development in a landscape increasingly sought out as a sacred and symbolic icon of the American experience. While the natural wonders of this wilderness setting led to a considerable veneration on the part of the visitors and the park overseers, including thoughtful and careful regulation not seen on ordinary landscapes, a changing American culture posed particular obstacles that the park service actions failed to overcome. The findings elucidate the greater topic of how park infrastructural and concessionaire development, as well as the inclusion of a greater number and wider array of recreational activities on national park landscapes during this period, serves as mirrors to reflect the evolving National Park Service policies and the desires of the larger public.

### Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Sherri Byrand, Lary Dilsaver, Geoff Buckley, Terence Young, and the journal's anonymous reviewers for comments and advice on improving earlier drafts of this work.

### Notes

1. Chris J. Magoc, *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape, 1870-1903* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1999): 170.
2. T. Scott Bryan, *The Geysers of Yellowstone* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991).
3. Thomas R. Vale and Geraldine R. Vale, *Western Images, Western Landscapes: Travels Along U.S. 89* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989).
4. Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," in Donald W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 12.
5. Judith L. Meyer, *The Spirit of Yellowstone: The Cultural Evolution of a National Park* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996): 2.
6. John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 7; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977): 164.
7. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Sacred Space: Explorations of an Idea," in Karl W. Butzer, ed., *Dimensions of Human Geography: Essays on Some Familiar and Neglected Themes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, Department of Geography, Research Paper 186, 1978): 84.
8. Donald W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," in Donald W. Meinig (Ed.), *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 164.
9. Ben W. Twight, *Organizational Values and Political Power: The Forest Service Versus the Olympic National Park* (University Park: The Penn State University Press, 1983): 6.
10. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska

- Press, 1987).
11. Marcella. M. Sherfy, "The National Park Service and the First World War." *Journal of Forest History* 22:4 (1978): 204.
  12. For a detailed analysis of national park promotion, see: Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian, 2001).
  13. Donald C. Swain, "The National Park Service and the New Deal, 1933-1940," *Pacific Historical Review* 41:3 (1972): 323-324.
  14. C. Frank Brockman, "Park Naturalists and the Evolution of National Park Service Interpretation Through World War II," *Journal of Forest History* 22:1 (1978): 26-30.
  15. Aubrey L. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story: Volume II* (Yellowstone National Park: Yellowstone Library and Museum Association in cooperation with Colorado Associated University Press, 1977): 303.
  16. Linda F. McClelland, *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service, 1916 to 1942* (Washington: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Cultural Resources, Interagency Resources Division National Register of Historic Places, 1993): 99.
  17. Horace M. Albright, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1928): 1-2.
  18. Roger W. Toll, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1929): 3.
  19. *Report of the Educational Department. Yellowstone National Park* (Bound Files, Yellowstone National Park Archives, August 1930–25 July 1931): 3.
  20. *Reports of the Naturalist Division. Yellowstone National Park, Volume I* (Bound Files: Yellowstone National Park Archives, 25 July 1931–31 July 1932): 6.
  21. McClelland, *Presenting Nature*, 148.
  22. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 117.
  23. Horace M. Albright, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1919): 60-61.
  24. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 304.
  25. Albright, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park*, 1919, 60-61.
  26. G. D. Edwards, "Justification for Additional Public Works Projects," letter to the Director of the National Park Service (Civilian Conservation Corps and Progress Works Administration Files: Box A-12: Yellowstone National Park Archives), 10 February 1934.
  27. Edmund B. Rogers, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1936): 20.
  28. For a more thorough analysis of the National Park Service's bear-feeding policy, see: Alice Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears: The Fitful History of Wildlife and Tourists in Yellowstone* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).
  29. Swain, "The National Park Service and the New Deal," 329.
  30. *Reports of the Naturalist Division. Yellowstone National Park, Volume I* (Bound Files, Yellowstone National Park Archives, June 1931).
  31. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 273.
  32. Lloyd. M. Brett, *Report of the Acting Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Secretary of the Interior* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Archives, 1915): 24-25.
  33. Lloyd. M. Brett, *Report of the Acting Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Secretary of the Interior* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1916): 42.
  34. Albright, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park*, 1919, 21-22.
  35. Charles P. Punchard, *Report on the Available Auto Camp Sites in Yellowstone National Park by the Landscape Engineer* (Box D-29: Yellowstone National Park Archives, 1919): 8.

36. *Ibid.*
37. Albright, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park*, 1919, 21-22.
38. Horace M. Albright, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1921): 19-20.
39. Toll, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park*, 1929, 20-21.
40. Roger W. Toll, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1930): 9.
41. For an in-depth analysis of commercial activities in Yellowstone, see: Mark Daniel Barringer, *Selling Yellowstone: Capitalism and the Construction of Nature* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).
42. Peter J. Blodgett, "Striking a Balance: Managing Concessions in the National Parks, 1916-33," *Forest and Conservation History* 32:2 (1990): 61.
43. Blodgett, "Striking a Balance," 62.
44. Horace M. Albright, Letter to the Director of the National Park Service (Concessionaire Files, Box C-14: Yellowstone National Park Archives), 17 September 1927.
45. Richard A. Bartlett, *Yellowstone: A Wilderness Besieged* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985): 96.
46. Roger W. Toll, Letter to the Director of the National Park Service (Concessionaire Files, Box C-1: Yellowstone National Park Archives), 21 October 1935; Edmund B. Rogers, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1937): 42; Rogers, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1940): 27.
47. Toll, Letter to the Director of the National Park Service, 21 October 1935.
48. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 361.
49. Edmund B. Rogers, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1939): 32.
50. For a more thorough discussion of the National Park Service's efforts to blend and screen structures, see: Craig E. Colten and Larry M. Dilsaver, "The Hidden Landscape of Yosemite National Park," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 22:2. (2005): 27-50; Robert C. Pavlik, "In Harmony with the Landscape: Yosemite's Built Environment, 1913-1940," *California History* 69:2 (1990): 182-195.
51. Henry P. Brothers, Letter to the Acting Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 14 October 1912.
52. Lloyd M. Brett, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 24 October 1912.
53. Henry P. Brothers, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 8 May 1913.
54. Lloyd M. Brett, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 25 June 1913.
55. R. B. Dole, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 6 November 1913.
56. Lloyd M. Brett, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 18 October 1913.
57. Brett, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior, 18 October 1913.
58. Lloyd M. Brett, Letter to the Secretary of the Interior (Yellowstone National Park Archives), 24 November 1913.
59. Lloyd M. Brett, *Report of the Acting Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Secretary of the Interior* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1914): 7.
60. Lloyd M. Brett, *Report of the Acting Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Secretary*

- of the Interior* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Archives, 1915): 8.
61. Bartlett, *Yellowstone: A Wilderness Besieged*, 197.
  62. *Ibid.*
  63. Lee H. Whittlesey, *Death in Yellowstone* (Boulder: Roberts Rinehart Publisher, 1995).
  64. Bartlett, *Yellowstone: A Wilderness Besieged*, 198.
  65. Roger W. Toll, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park to the Director of the National Park Service* (Bound File: Yellowstone National Park Library, 1934): 4, 22.
  66. Bartlett, *Yellowstone: A Wilderness Besieged*, 199.