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DEFACEMENT OF THERMAL AREAS BY VANDALS
by Frank R. Oberhansley, Junior Naturalist

Although there is no sales tax in Yellowstone Park, many of the Rangers have developed a definite dislike for those shiny tin tokens used in many of the states. During the season of 1937 some of the most appealing of the beautiful hot pools and springs were repeatedly marred by showers of the world's least important coin from perhaps equally important persons.

It is unfortunate that a few individuals choose to deface the remarkably sublime for countless thousands of appreciative visitors. The removal of foreign objects from the hot pools often leaves an ugly wound in the delicate formation that requires years to heal. Another seemingly harmless pastime is enjoyed by many of the same type of visitor, the practice of leaving pencilled names, dates, and addresses on the glazed margins of pools and geysers. These graphite marks have

been known to last in some instances for fifteen years before being obliterated by the slow deposition of geyserite.

The present generation of visitors to Yellowstone does not suffer by comparison in this regard. The published accounts of vandalism by early visitors are borne out by a comparison of early photographs with those of the present day. Such noteworthy features as the cone of Old Faithful Geyser are difficult to recognize from the earliest pictures and graphic descriptions. It is indeed fortunate that the plumbing system of this geyser has not been injured. Old Faithful has been subjected to the same indignities that have resulted in the destruction of some of the other geysers. The early visitors did not hesitate to throw logs and stones into the orifice in order that they might witness them being hurled high into the air at the next eruption. At various times this world famous geyser has been made to serve as a laundry, not only for the casual visitor but at least upon one occasion for a visiting contingent U. S. Army whose commanding officer stated that all types of clothing were excellently washed excepting woolen garments which were torn into shreds when shot high into the air from the rough throat of the geyser.

During the first five years of its existence as a National Park no money was appropriated by Congress for Yellowstone's protection. Fortunately, access to the Park was difficult. In the beginning, pack outfits alone were able to make the trip. When the time came for good roads, appropriations for protection also became available.

The early visitors did not lack energy in their attacks upon the hot spring and geyser formations. One marvels that they overlooked the effectiveness of dynamite as compared with the possibilities of ax and pick. In some instances complete cones in thermal areas, several feet in height as shown by sketches of the Hayden Survey, have vanished, and there is nothing to mark their former site.

In 1872 N. P. Langford was appointed first superintendent of Yellowstone Park, which position he held for five years without appropriation of money for salary or protection. As early as 1873 in a letter to the Secretary of the Interior he observed, "The parapets of sinter surrounding the 'Castle' and 'Old Faithful' and the symmetrical cone of the 'Bee-Hive' have been much defaced by visitors to the Park" (1) and stated that in a field of natural wonders so vast in extent that it would be impossible to

prevent spoilation without moneyed aid. He even suggested that it would be far better for the government to grant leases on the natural wonders and that the lessees to protect their own interests would be forced to afford protection to the features within their lease.

Observations of some of the early visitors are interesting. Captain William Ludlow of the U. S. Army engineers in a visit to the park observed....."The crater of Faithful is one of the most beautiful of all. The lips are molded and rounded into many artistic forms, beaded and pearled with opal, while closely adjoining are little terraced pools of the clearest azure hued water, with scalloped and highly ornamented borders. The wetted margins and floors of the pools were tinted with most delicate shades of cream, brown and gray, so soft and velvety it seemed as though a touch would spoil them.

"The only blemishes on this artistic handiwork had been occasioned by the rude hand of man. The ornamental work about the crater and pools had been broken and defaced in the most prominent places by visitors and pebbles were inscribed in pencil with the names of great numbers of the most undistinguished persons. Such practices should be stopped at once.....

"The geysers in the slow process of centuries probably, have built up miracles of art, of an enduring though brittle materiel that can be ruined in five minutes by a vandal armed with an ax and nearly all the craters show signs of the hopeless and unrestrained barbarity of many of their visitors. It cannot fail to fill the mind with indignation to see the utter ruthlessness of these sacrilegious invaders of nature's sanctuary..... To secure a specimen of perhaps a pound weight, a hundred pounds have been shattered and destroyed, and always in those places where the most cunning art has been displayed, and the ruin produced is correspondingly great.

"Upon our arrival in the basin we found several persons already encamped, and a whisky trader snugly ensconced in his 'paulin, spread in the shelter of a thick pine. The visitors prowled around with shovel and ax, chopping and backing and prying up great pieces of the most ornamental work they could find; women and men alike joining in the barbarous pastime." (2)

In describing the Turban Geyser, Ludlow states, "It is of singular form, highly ornamented, and I experienced a pang in becoming conscious of an apprehension that I

should meet it again somewhere on exhibition. Some visitor a little more enterprising than his predecessors, will be sure to detach it and carry it off. Shovel and ax had been busy with the geyser and large quantities had been removed.....While waiting (for an eruption of the Grand Geyser) we had additional evidence of the brutality of the average visitors, several of whom, of both sexes, were busily chopping and prying out the most characteristic and conspicuous ornamental work. An earnest remonstrance was followed by a sulky suspension of hostilities, which were, however, no doubt renewed as soon as we were out of sight.

"From every part of the Castle pieces had been chopped, loosening great quantities of the rock and threatening to ruin the construction. Two women with tucked up skirts and rubber shoes, armed, one with an ax, the other with a spade were climbing about. Should this continue for another year or two, the beauty of form and outline of the geyser would be destroyed. It should be remembered that these craters were constructed with the greatest slowness by almost imperceptible additions, which can only be made by a discharge from the geyser, while the material though hard, is very brittle and easily knocked to pieces.

"We got back to camp just in time to prevent the fall of an up lifted ax which a woman was evidently about to bring straight down on the summit of the Bee-Hive, whose modest crater forms so strong a contrast to the grandeur of its play." (2)

As Captain Ludlow was leaving the Upper Geyser Basin he describes meeting a new group of visitors entering the basin each of whom he estimated would carry off twenty pounds of geyser formation and destroy five hundred.

It required fourteen years to convince Congress that military protection was the answer to Yellowstone's needs. In his first year as Acting Superintendent (1886) Captain Mose Harris reported, "It may be said without exaggeration that not one of the notable geyser formations in the park has escaped mutilation or defacement in some form. A lead pencil mark seems to be a very harmless defacement, but names bearing the date 1880 are still discernible through the thin deposit of silica, and if this should go on unchecked, in a very few years these once beautiful formations will have become unsightly and unattractive objects.

"In the Upper Geyser Basin, names with the date of June, 1886 have been chiseled into the solid geyserite so deep that, in the slow

process of nature, many years must elapse before this mutilation will be obliterated. Not content with the defacement of the formations, efforts are constantly being made to destroy the geysers themselves by throwing into them, sticks, stones, logs of wood and all sorts of other obstructions. The eruptive force of several of the geysers has been totally destroyed by vandalism of this character." (3)



Old Faithful Vent and Cone from a photograph by W.H. Jackson taken in 1872.

Captain Harris promptly placed guards in important locations and completely revolutionized the set up in the Park. Since that day, the damage suffered by the formations has been negligible by comparison.

It is of interest to note that 52 years after, the chiseled names referred to by Captain Harris can still be read along with the date 1886 in the crater of the Turban Geyser.

Arnold Hague of the U. S. Geological Survey, who was a leader of sixteen scientific expeditions into Yellowstone from 1883 to 1915, deplored the great number of pencilled inscriptions on the geyserite. He remarked, "The vandals who delight to inscribe their names in public places have invaded the geyser basins in large numbers and left their addresses upon the geyserite in various places. It is interesting to note how quickly these inscriptions become indelible by the deposition of the merest film of silica upon the lead pencil marks and at the same time how slowly they build up. Names and dates known to be six and eight years old remain perfectly legible and still retain the color and lustre of the graphite." (4)

This practice of writing names seems to be a disease that is difficult to cure. It in no way represents the attitude of the average visitor. The experience of the National Park Service has proved that education is superior to force. The average visitor quite frequently takes things into his own hands in

reporting cases of vandalism, and occasionally forcibly intervenes on the spot when he encounters violations.

While one regrets the early wanton destruction of natural features in the Park, there is consolation in the fact that more natural wonders still exist here than in any similar area on the face of the earth, and that the people of America insist that they shall be protected forever.



Old Faithful Geyser Cone
from a photograph taken in 1904 and now - 1938!

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