

Craters of the Moon Explored In 1879

by: Bob Reynolds

"An area of about 60 miles in diameter, where nothing meets the eye but a desolate and awful waste, where no grass grows nor water runs, and where nothing is to be seen but lava" ... When Washington Irving wrote these words in 1868, he very likely was describing the area now known as Craters of the Moon. The reputation as a desolate waste kept people out of the interior of the area for years after the surrounding regions were settled. It was more than 50 years later before the uniqueness of the area caused it to be proclaimed a national monument. Present-day visitors still arrive expecting a barren rock desert and are amazed at the variety of features, plants, and animals they find.

W. Powell and Arthur Ferris of Arco, Idaho were probably the first white men to visit the interior of this expanse of lava. They had been offered a substantial reward for the discovery of sufficient water to supply several hundred head of cattle. In 1879 and the 1880's the two men explored far to the south in the lava beds in hopes of collecting the reward. Mr. Powell built a large stone marker near the water hole in Vermilion Chasm. The

modern hiker can still find the marker standing today. A shoulder bone of a cow was found in Buffalo Caves with the names of the two men and the date 1885 written on it.

Scientific exploration began in 1901 when I. C. Russell of the United States Geological Survey visited the area. He called it the Cinder Buttes region and was so interested he visited again in 1903. However, Russell visited only the northern part of what is now Craters of the Moon National Monument. The interior remained essentially unknown.

Beginning in about 1910, S. A. Paisley made several trips into the area and located many of the caves and natural

bridges. Years later Mr. Paisley became the area's first custodian. During the same period, a rancher, Era Martin, discovered and marked with monuments many of the caves and waterholes.

But outside of the surrounding area, this remarkable region remained almost unknown until 1924. In that year R. W. Limbert published in the National Geographic an account of a trip he made through the Craters in 1921. On May 2, 1924 President Coolidge proclaimed the area Craters of the Moon National

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Early visitors to Craters of the Moon overcame many problems the modern visitor never encounters. Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Park Service.



Monument.

In the fifty years following its establishment, many changes were made in Craters of the Moon. Roads and trails were built to many features. A campground was constructed and running water installed. Signs, exhibits and a visitor center explain the why and how of what's seen. Where only a few hardy individuals ventured in 1924, over 200,000 now visit annually. But over 4/5 of the monument remains undeveloped. Here the modern hiker can experience the same thrill of discovery felt by Limbert and his companions in 1921.

Exploring the many lava flows, the hiker might glance into a sink and notice a black opening with the appearance of a cave. Climbing down to investigate, the hiker is surprised at the rush of cold air from the entrance. "The cause was immediately apparant", wrote Limbert. "It was an ice cave and one of the finest examples, I believe, in existence. The floor was a conglomerate mass of huge lava blocks. These, and the walls, were incrustured with about two inches of ice as clear as glass, through which the structure of the rock could easily be seen".

Camping in the shade of the west wall of Echo Crater, the hiker might reflect for a moment on Limbert's words and attempt to seek the feeling he must have had when he ... "was awakened by the loud calls of a bird. I lay trying to place it, and finally got up to locate the source,

and found a robin singing in one of the pines at the foot of the west wall. We afterward took turns in the singing and yodeling from that side to hear the echoes break the voices up and fade away".

The unwary hiker might also share with Limbert a more unpleasant experience. "In passing through a pahoehoe flow ... I noticed a hole 15 feet wide and 10 feet deep, evidently caused by the cave-in of the roof of some underground passage. Happening to look down, I saw a mountain sheep's skeleton with the horns in a good state of preservation. Carelessly I laid aside my camera and canteen and jumped down, alighting on some wind-blown cinders which happened to be at one end. After looking the horns over, I started to climb out, and found that the farthest I could

reach lacked about four feet of the top. To be frank, I had some very queer thoughts, chief of which was, 'Will anybody ever find me or shall I, like the sheep, lie here for years?'"

Any hiker spending time in the wilderness of Craters of the Moon will discover, as did Limbert, "in reality the region has slight resemblance to its imagined aspect ... Its vegetation is mostly hidden in pockets, but when found consists of pines, cedars, junipers and sagebrush; its water is hidden deep in tanks or holes ... and is found by watching the flight of birds as they drop into these places to quench their thirst. The animal life consists principally of birds, rock rabbits ... and woodchucks; its scenery is impressive in its grandeur".

