

IN HONOR OF
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK'S
125TH ANNIVERSARY



125 YEARS OF THE BEST IDEA AMERICA EVER HAD
AUGUST 25, 1997
10 A.M.
OLD FAITHFUL



EVENT PROGRAM

WELCOME

Michael V. Finley
Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park

NATIVE AMERICAN BLESSING
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Elder

REMARKS BY

Honorable James Geringer
Governor of the State of Wyoming

REMARKS BY

Honorable Philip E. Batt
Governor of the State of Idaho

A SPECIAL GUEST
(Portrayed by Mark Klemetsrud)

THE NATION'S PARK: AN ENDURING IDEA

Dr. Susan Rhoades Neel
Montana State University

REMARKS BY

Honorable Craig Thomas
United States Senator from Wyoming

REMARKS BY

John E. Cook
Director, Intermountain Region
National Park Service

BENEDICTION AND MOMENT OF SILENCE

Rev. Dr. William R. Young
Yellowstone National Park



The Nation's Park: An Enduring Idea

Susan Rhoades Neel

August 25, 1997

Thank you, Superintendent Finley. And thank you, Mr. Roosevelt. It's always good to hear a voice from the past, especially a wise one. In fact, there is a lot we can learn from the past. You see, telling stories of our past is one way in which we can plot our course into the future. Understanding where we came from is really the best way to figure out where we ought to go next.

That is why I think it might be of some value for us to pause for reflection at this particular moment in time—a moment that not only marks an anniversary but that sits on the cusp of a new millennium. As we look back on 125 years of the national park idea we are compelled to contemplate what will become of that idea in the 21st century.

It has often been said that national parks are one of the best ideas America has contributed to civilization. And I think it is. But what does that really mean? We need to move beyond banal platitudes, easy assumptions, and reassuring myths to take a clear-eyed look at the national park idea.

What is it about this idea that has allowed it to endure for more than a century? Let me suggest to you that there are three essential qualities to the national park idea, qualities that make it vibrant and vital.

First, the national park idea endures because it changes. National parks are creations of the human imagination. Nature does not value or set apart geysers over, say, my backyard thistles—each has its place within nature's complex systems. No, the geysers make it to the cover of National Geographic because we choose to value them over what we call weeds. Because parks are human constructions, they change over time just as society's beliefs, desires, and fears change. Each age recreates Yellowstone, revalues it. We know nature changes, indeed we revel in such change. Yet somehow we are reticent to accept the fact that culture changes, too, and in doing so the way in which we per-

ceive nature is continually altered. Failing to accept this can lead to poor policies or, more ominously, encourages lazy thinking—“this is how it has always been so we don’t really need to think hard about why it should continue to be that way.”

So often I hear people say, “oh, that isn’t why Yellowstone was created” or it was meant to be such and such. Just last week, I read in the news that someone opposed the “mining” of geothermal microorganisms because “Yellowstone was not created for corporate purposes.” Well, actually, that is precisely why Yellowstone was created. The nation’s first national park came into existence because of the interest of railroads—the Northern Pacific, to be precise—in making money from tourism. This shouldn’t shock us nor does it tarnish the treasure—the federal government gave huge amounts of money and millions of acres to railroads in the nineteenth century. Indeed, America is a nation built through the symbiotic efforts of the state and private enterprise. To image Yellowstone apart from this symbiosis is silliness.

As times changed our society began to think that protecting and preserving were as important to a democratic, capitalist system as encouraging growth in giant corporations. It makes no difference if Yellowstone was or was not created for corporate purposes. The only relevant question is whether or not that is the purpose which our society wishes Yellowstone to serve today, in our own time.

The national park idea is not monolithic—it did not arrive in our midst fully formed and cast in stone. Indeed, it is precisely this malleability that keeps the ideal alive because new relevance and purpose and meaning is invested in it by each generation.

The national park idea endures because it is part of American culture—this is the second essential quality that has made and, I believe will continue to make, parks survive. National parks are not apart from society. People have often liked to think of Yellowstone as being separate—a peaceable kingdom where greed, aggression, all the foibles of humanity are banished. But this is just a fantasy—a very nice one to be sure, but nonetheless a dream. For all of its wonder, Yellowstone is not Shangri-la. In its history are to be found all of America’s pride and shame.

In the nineteenth century, for example, when Euro-Americans convinced themselves that it was their destiny to have all the land between the great oceans, they murdered, robbed, and generally trampled over Native Americans in order to build railroads, farms, towns, and national parks. Yes, Indians were forcibly excluded from some national parks. Here in Yellowstone, in an insidious act of cultural annihilation, Indians were simply banished from the park's history. For a long time, park histories said that Indians were afraid of Yellowstone and didn't come here. This, of course, is a lie—an untruth that obscures tens of thousands of years of human interaction with this remarkable place.

In the 1920s, the nativism and paranoia that infected much of America stretched its ugly visage to the very gates of Yellowstone. Anti-immigration sentiment and fear of radicalism fueled a rise of right-wing extremism and membership in the Ku Klux Klan swelled by the tens of thousands. Even here, in nature's paradise, the Klan was active and one night the dark sky was lit by a cross burning next to the Roosevelt Arch.

And if today we live in a society marked by self-indulgence and selfishness, then, that, too, is to be found in the national parks. There is no sadder comment on the contemporary American temper than that a nation rich beyond dreams, filled with well-fed, healthy, long-lived people awash in a degree of wealth and leisure that is the envy of the world, that such a people cannot find the generosity of spirit to adequately fund the national parks is appalling. What will future historians make of such stinginess? If one of them stands before an audience at the park's two-hundredth anniversary, what will she say about our generation?

Our celebration today will be the better if tempered by an acknowledgement that Yellowstone is no better than we are. All of our nation's struggles—for justice, dignity, decency—are played out on this stage, too.

Finally, I'd like to suggest that the national park idea endures because it challenges us, as a democratic society, to continually consider both natural and human relationships. We give a great deal of attention to nature in our national parks. Parks, it has been said,

are laboratories where we can learn how nature works. Much money and talent is expended on the experiments conducted in these open-air laboratories. We give less attention, unfortunately, to understanding how national parks influence society.

Parks play an important role in defining and maintaining our sense of nationhood, especially that brilliant yet often elusive idea at the nation's heart—democracy. We have made national parks a symbol of our nation. They serve as places to experience nationhood, places which force us to practice democracy. Sometimes I think Americans don't fully appreciate how lucky we are to have a system that fosters nationalism through institutions such as national parks. As recent events in Bosnia and elsewhere have illustrated, nationalism can be a very bloody thing. Here it can be as benign as gathering a family around a campfire. Those who would "privatize" the national parks would do well to keep in mind the value to our society of having places that are both federal and fun.

It's not all fun, of course. Our encounter with national parks can be painful, as many of you who have been in the heat of the many controversies that continually surround managing the parks can testify. We tend to yell at each other a lot when it comes to setting policies for the national parks. Tempers flare, guts fly. As unpleasant as these debates can be—and believe me, Yellowstone's history is rife with some bitter feuds—they are actually good for us. To my mind this is one reason why national parks are so precious. They incite our passion; they refuse to let us be passive. You see, democracy has to be lived, not merely thought about and to do so requires struggle. Thomas Jefferson said that the tree of liberty must be renewed by the blood of patriots. He was speaking metaphorically, of course; he meant that democracy requires the clash of interests, debate, struggle. Because we love them, the national park forces us to do just that. Over and over again we must decide what is of value, what is the right thing to do.

At the same time, places like Yellowstone stimulate the exercise of democracy, they also serve to check one of the great dangers of the American system—hubris. The line between pride and arrogance is a thin one. Optimism can too easily devolve into self-righteousness and enthusiasm become aggression. Henry David Thoreau understood

this danger and he saw an antidote—nature. We need a place where our limits are transgressed, he said. We need places, wild and beautiful, that remind us we don't know everything and that there is much beyond the reach of our genius for engineering people, institutions, and gadgets.

This may be the most important and enduring value in the national park idea. It at once inspires and humbles us. In Yellowstone, the babble of society is silenced, if only for a moment. And in that silence we are forced to recognize our own imperfections.

My hope for Yellowstone's future is that it will, in some fundamental way, continue to defy us. Try as we might, it just will not succumb to our efforts to describe, analyze, and manage it. For every "problem" solved another emerges. For every piece of data we collect, new questions must be asked. Perhaps this is Yellowstone's greatest gift to us—the gift of nature's enduring mystery.

Yellowstone doesn't need us—the sun will rise and set without human witness. The earth will abide in our absence. No, Yellowstone doesn't need us, but, oh how we need it. In Yellowstone and other places like it lays our preservation, as a society and as a nation.