

Yellowstone Lake as Seen by Artists

Eugene Lee Silliman

Abstract

The title of the Sixth Biennial Scientific Conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem rhetorically asks, “Yellowstone Lake: Hotbed of Chaos or Reservoir of Resilience?” Although geologists know that Yellowstone Lake was the focal point of an ancient cataclysmic volcanic eruption, the subsequent evolution of the caldera into a landscape of quiescent sublimity is the immediate reality apparent to human visitors. The igneous prehistory of the lake region, coupled with its guardian cordon of volcanic peaks even older, set the stage for a revelation. For here, out of nearly unimaginable chaos, nature has reconfigured itself into a land of resplendent harmony. From lake’s verge the human eye is allowed to encompass an inland sea set upon the apex of an immense plateau, and the universal response is a declaration of transformative beauty. Artists have long sought to distill the ethereal essence of Yellowstone Lake, and thereby have played a role in establishing it as one of the brighter jewels in the crown called Yellowstone.

This paper shall attempt to analyze the historical role played by key visual artists of Yellowstone Lake in the development of the park. Specifically, what influence was wielded by Yellowstone’s first two prominent artists, Thomas Moran and William Henry Jackson, in the park’s formative years? Secondly, a brief examination of the written record left by park visitors will demonstrate that their characteristic emotional response to the lake was the template for artists. As a species, we share in common a reverence for the grand vista of earth, water, and sky made so accessible from the environs of Yellowstone Lake. Lastly, this paper will record the personal impressions made by Yellowstone Lake upon this author during his numerous photographic forays about the periphery of this noble body of water. That Yellowstone Lake has always becalmed its viewers with the vast scale of its geographical expanse and frequently excited them with its intriguing interplay of water against land along its endless shoreline, are propositions that appear well-founded. That this array of natural forces should beckon and challenge the visual artist seems self-evident.

Influence of Moran, Jackson, and Other Artists

Thomas Moran. Yellowstone Lake, being the largest single feature on the plateau, was well known to the fur trappers and gold prospectors who penetrated this wilderness highland prior to the discovery expeditions which commenced in 1869. Since artistic talent was not a prerequisite for trapping and prospecting, however, these men left no artwork commemorating their peregrinations. The first attempts by Euroamericans to delineate artistic impressions of Yellowstone

onto paper were executed by Private Charles Moore and Henry Trumbull—military and civilian members, respectively, of the 1870 Washburn Expedition. Their primitive pencil sketches, while lacking textural finesse and depth perception, remain valuable primary documentation. Unfortunately, none of the extant Moore or Trumbull sketches housed in the Yellowstone National Park archives depict Yellowstone Lake. This gap in the pictorial record is as notable as it is regrettable, for surely these two men made sketches of the lake during their twelve-day near-circumlocution of it. Three diaries in the party lauded the beauty of the lake and noted that all members of the party were enthralled by the force of its character.

The first published image of Yellowstone Lake was, nonetheless, a derivative of the 1870 Washburn Expedition. A member of this party, Nathaniel P. Langford, wrote the first major article on Yellowstone to receive national distribution. Entitled “The Wonders of Yellowstone,” it was published in the May and June, 1871, issues of *Scribner’s Monthly*. Being an important illustrated periodical of its day, the magazine’s editors charged Thomas Moran, a talented and well-trained artist on their staff, to rework the Moore and Trumbull sketches into higher-quality images. Moran rendered the original pencil drawings into black and white washes on paper, and then skilled engravers transposed Moran’s pictures into reproducible engravings. Thus, the American public was given “On Guard on Yellowstone Lake,” a 7 x 9-cm image of a man on night guard reposing on the bank of Yellowstone Lake with a poorly constructed log raft plus sail in the background. Although this engraving does not bear Thomas Moran’s “T.M.” signature and does bear the engraver’s initials “F.S.,” circumstantial evidence points to the hand of Moran. While the title of this image bears the lake’s name, its subjugation to the background hardly does justice to the lake’s manifest importance. The world would have to wait eight months.

The task of improving upon the Moore and Trumbull Yellowstone sketches must have stimulated Moran, for a year later he readily accepted an invitation to accompany Ferdinand Hayden’s 1871 government-sponsored survey of Yellowstone as a guest artist; the official survey artist was Henry Wood Elliott. Moran’s expenses were paid by the railroad financier Jay Cooke in the form of a \$500 loan—to be paid back by Yellowstone artwork. Also accompanying the entourage was the survey’s official photographer, William Henry Jackson, a man whose medium and mentality were sufficiently compatible with those of Moran’s to make them mutually supportive artists. Their collaborative efforts in Yellowstone were symbiotic. Moran, using his well-honed sense of composition, assisted Jackson in the selection of camera positions. In return, Jackson gave Moran photographs that would serve as vital field sketches for later studio paintings (augmenting the painter’s own fieldwork). Indeed, Moran recounts in his diary that when the expedition was encamped upon Yellowstone Lake, he “sketched but little but worked hard with the photographer selecting points to be taken etc.” This professional and personal affinity between Yellowstone’s two primary artists was forged upon their coincidental union in 1871 and lasted until Moran’s death in 1926. Each benefited, as did the nation.

When Hayden returned to Washington, D.C., in the autumn of 1871, he petitioned Congress to pass a bill establishing the Yellowstone region as America's first national park. Not only did Hayden employ the oral and written word in this campaign, he adduced the powerful visual testimony of Moran's watercolors and Jackson's photographs as proof of Yellowstone's astounding reality. Enough circumstantial evidence exists to ascertain that the public presentation of Yellowstone art, as rendered by Moran and Jackson, was an important factor in the founding and early promotion of Yellowstone National Park, although modern scholars deplore the paucity of documentation for this assertion. Since the scope of this paper is limited to the art of Yellowstone Lake, scrutiny will be focused upon the images of the lake by Moran and Jackson.

Because the background appearance of Yellowstone Lake in Moran's 1871 engraving "On Guard on Yellowstone Lake" is so inconsequential and is an injustice to the lake's undeniable glory, the honor of the first published artworks to fairly portray Yellowstone Lake for a national audience belongs to the two Moran engravings in Ferdinand Hayden's article "The Wonders of the West II, More About the Yellowstone," which appeared in the February 1872 issue of *Scribner's Monthly* on pages 392 and 394. The first image, measuring 6x6 cm and entitled "The First Boat on Yellowstone Lake," depicts the Anna, a 12-ft dinghy which transported Elliot, the survey's official artist, to the newly christened Stevenson Island. The second image, measuring an elongated 5x12 cm and entitled "Yellowstone Lake," depicts a handsome view of the lake from a northerly shoreline toward the mountains which ring it to the south and east (Figure 1). Moran's mastery of compositional complexity, tonal contrast, and visual drama are amply displayed in all eleven expertly printed images in Hayden's article. This panoramic lake engraving begins with foreground vegetation, follows mounted riders down to an extending sand spit, conveys the viewer to an island, extends one's eye to distant mountain serrations, and concludes with a sunset sky punc-



Figure 1. This engraving by Thomas Moran was the first published image (*Scribner's Monthly*, February, 1872) to fairly depict Yellowstone Lake.

tuated by a formation of migrating waterfowl.

At last the public had an image to match Hayden's words, which he published soon thereafter in his 1872 *Preliminary Report of the United States Geological Survey of Montana and Adjacent Territories*:

On the 28th of July we arrived at the lake, and pitched our camp on the north-west shore, in a beautiful grassy meadow or opening among the dense pines. The lake lay before us, a vast sheet of quiet water, of a most delicate ultramarine hue, one of the most beautiful scenes I have ever beheld. The entire party were filled with enthusiasm. The great object of all our labors had been reached, and we were amply paid for all our toils. Such a vision is worth a lifetime, and only one of such marvelous beauty will ever greet human eyes.

The same two Moran engravings were reproduced in Hayden's 1872 report at a lesser technical quality and size.

Moran's talents for rendering Yellowstone Lake were again pressed into service for the art journal *Aldine*, a large folio magazine (29 x 42 cm) which was published between 1869 and 1879. The journal took pride in producing the finest wood engravings of the day, including a total of thirty-nine by Moran, and fervently stoked American enthusiasm for western landscape imagery. The April 1873 issue presented a laudatory piece entitled "The Yellowstone Region," and was illustrated with five outstanding Moran engravings. The author of the article states, "But we must not forget the brightest jewel of this wonderful park—the Yellowstone Lake," and praises Moran's illustrations for their ability to "open to us a world as wild as the one we see in dreams,—a strange and beautiful wonderland." The second view in the article, "Yellowstone Lake," is a masterful panorama measuring 9 x 23 cm; it improves upon his *Scribner's* image by being larger and with more contrast, including a forest fire plume "moved" to the Promontory for heightened dramatic effect (Figure 2). This latter stratagem illustrates Moran's admitted use of artistic license: he often united in one picture disparate but realistic elements not conjoined in nature.



Figure 2. Thomas Moran idealized and rearranged nature (like moving a forest fire to the lake's edge) in order to delineate greater truths about Yellowstone. Engraving appeared in *Aldine*, April, 1873.

A year after he returned from the 1871 Hayden expedition, Moran agreed to execute a series of sixteen watercolors for the British industrialist William Blackmoore, who had accompanied Hayden in 1872 on his second surveying expedition to Yellowstone. Among the set, now owned by the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of Tulsa, Oklahoma, is “Yellowstone Lake with Hot Springs.” This panoramic-proportioned watercolor primarily focuses upon the prismatic thermal features of Thumb Geyser Basin. The serene lake and the stately Absaroka Mountains which rim it are coolly rendered in sunset purple and mauve as an attractive complement to the brilliant yellows, whites, and oranges of the thermal formations. To those evening loiterers on the western shore of Yellowstone Lake, this sunset coloration upon the waters and peaks will ring true. These watercolors were displayed at Goupil’s Gallery in New York before their shipment to England.

For Moran’s finest delineation of Yellowstone Lake, however, we must turn to a tripartite project by Hayden, Louis Prang, and the artist himself. Within one year of Moran’s return to the East Coast, he accepted a commission to paint a set of watercolors for vibrant chromolithographic reproduction by Prang, America’s most skilled lithographer. In today’s world, saturated with color reproduction, it is hard to contemplate the enormous cultural change set loose in mid-nineteenth century by this technology that made color imagery available for wide audiences. Hayden was enlisted to write the supportive text. *The Yellowstone National Park, and the Mountain Regions of Portions of Idaho, Nevada, Colorado and Utah* (1876) presented fifteen vividly colored images of the American West. One thousand copies of the edition were produced, selling for \$60.00 each. At last a general audience could appreciate the artistic wonders of the Yellowstone region inclusive of its most crucial parameter—color. As Hayden opined in his preface:

All representations of landscape scenery must necessarily lose the greater part of their charm when deprived of color; but of any representation in black and white of the scenery of the Yellowstone it may truly be said that it is like Hamlet with the part of Hamlet omitted, for the wealth of color in which nature has clothed the mountains and the springs of that region constitute one of the most wonderful elements of their beauty.

The fifth plate of the Prang chromolithographs is entitled “Yellowstone Lake, Yellowstone National Park” (Figure 3). Into it Moran poured all of his classical, thematic artifices: depth perception by near, intermediate, and distant subject matter; opulent color contrast between ochre highlights and marine blue and burnt umber darks; a Turner-esque atmosphere convulsed by a thunderstorm whose virga intersects an arching rainbow; and the animation of flocks of birds on near waters and in distant sky. As a statement of Edenic wildness and spacious reach to near-infinity, this view looking far into the Southeast Arm of Yellowstone Lake could hardly be surpassed.

The foregoing chromolithograph of Yellowstone Lake illustrates Moran’s standard artistic practices. During his 1871 journey through Yellowstone, he executed quick watercolor field sketches, first employing pencil to establish con-



Figure 3. Perhaps the finest artistic depiction of Yellowstone Lake is this 1876, full-color chromolithograph by Thomas Moran.

tours, and then overlaying these outlines with broad, brilliant washes to record coloristic effects. Back in his studio in Newark, New Jersey, he would refer to Jackson's photographs for accuracy of detail when composing a more refined and elegant artwork. Moran, under the strong influence of the English critic John Ruskin and the famous British painter J.M.W. Turner, sought not an exact replication of the thing in nature, but a conveyance of its mood and impression upon the human spirit. Moran praised Turner when he wrote that Turner "sacrificed the literal truth of the parts to the higher truth of the whole." Speaking of himself, Moran wrote:

I place no value upon literal transcriptions of Nature. My general scope is not realistic; all my tendencies are toward idealization. Of course, all art must come through Nature: I do not mean to depreciate nature or naturalism, but I believe that a place as a place, has no value itself for the artist only so far as it furnished the material from which to construct a picture. Topography in art is valueless....[W]hile I desire to tell truly of Nature, I did not wish to realize the scene literally, but to preserve and to convey its true impression.

In Moran's lake painting the view seems to be from the northeast shore looking southward up the Southeast Arm, with Colter Peak in the left background, while incorporating foreground elements from a Jackson photograph. Yet, the Absaroka Mountains, which lie to the south of the lake in Moran's picture, actually reside to the east; nor can one look south and see a rainbow (because the sun must be at a low altitude behind the observer to the north, which does not happen in Yellowstone). Yet these are quibbles, for all adventurers familiar with Yellowstone Lake will recognize these natural elements, and accept with full

consent their synthesis by Moran into an organic, idealized whole.

William Henry Jackson. At Moran's side on the 1871 Hayden survey was the preeminent frontier photographer William Henry Jackson. As previously mentioned, these two men forged an informal partnership that abetted their goal of visually recording the Yellowstone region, each in his own medium. The Hayden party's route, encircling Yellowstone Lake counterclockwise from Thumb to the outlet, gave Jackson ample opportunity to photograph the lake from numerous points.

Unlike that which is produced with facile modern cameras, photography with the nineteenth-century view camera was a cumbersome and complex process. The bulk and weight of a wooden camera, a portable darkroom with chemicals, and fragile glass negative plates, required the services of a trusty mule (disposition not always guaranteed). After unpacking, the photographer would first erect his camera upon a tripod. The task of carefully focusing the inverted image upon the ground glass at the rear of the camera, while the operator hovered under a hot, opaque darkcloth as he wrestled with the upside-down image, was laborious. Because wet-plate technology was yet to be invented—and then superseded by dry-plate technology (not to mention flexible and unbreakable celluloid film)—the photographer had to set up a darkroom tent, prepare the chemicals, coat the glass plate, and then quickly repair to the camera before the plate dried. Furthermore, film speed was so slow—on the order of many seconds—that the motion of water, steam, smoke and animals would be registered as a blur. After exposure, the glass negative had to be developed in the portable darkroom, and thereafter carefully transported hundreds of miles back to a studio for the production of a positive print. A final impediment was the orthochromatic sensitivity of film emulsion in the 1870s, which caused atmospheric blue to overexpose and hence yield a blank white sky devoid of the fascinating interplay of cloud against sky so often visible above Yellowstone Lake. When the plethora of technical challenges are considered, Jackson's trove of three hundred images from the 1871 Yellowstone expedition is rightly seen as a monumental achievement.

This discussion of Jackson's photographs of Yellowstone Lake will be restricted to those readily available to the public. In Aubrey L. Haines' tome *The Yellowstone Story*, Volume 1 (1977), three 1871 Jackson photographs are reproduced on pages 143 and 147. The first, "A Camp of the Hayden Survey Party on Yellowstone Lake, 1871," is a well-composed view of their camp on the east side of the lake. Next, "The Anna, First Boat on Yellowstone Lake, 1871," is the source of the wood engraving of the same in *Scribner's Monthly*, February 1872. Lastly, "The Hayden Survey Camp on Mary Bay, August 19, 1871," is an artful overview of what they called "earthquake camp" in remembrance of a tremor that perceptibly shook them the night of August 22, 1871 (Figure 4). All these images typified the artistic convention of placing human beings in the scene to establish scale in an alien landscape, and to perhaps suggest that the human presence in this Eden was the natural progression of our destiny.

Other 1871 Jackson images of the lake country worthy of note include "Peale



Figure 4. This 1871 panoramic view of “Earthquake Camp” on Mary Bay is a fine example of photographer William Henry Jackson’s sense of composition.

Overlooking Yellowstone Lake and Promontory Point,” which is reproduced in *Yellowstone and the Great West*, edited by Marlene D. Merrill, 1999, page 160. “Yellowstone Lake, Looking South from Where the River Leaves It,” reproduced in *William Henry Jackson and the Transformation of the American West* by Peter B. Hales, 1988, page 107, is a panoramic view looking southeastward, with a conspicuously blank white sky. “Mary Bay, Yellowstone Lake,” reproduced in *Yellowstone Science*, Volume 8, Number 1, Winter 2000, page 8, presents the chastely beautiful, elongated curve of this northern indent. Lastly, a person may view, at the Horace Albright Visitor Center at Mammoth, Yellowstone National Park, an original 1871 Jackson albumen print of Yellowstone Lake from the northeast shore looking southward—which was Moran’s inspiration for his grand chromolithograph of the lake. Jackson’s albumen print amply demonstrates that a vintage print created by the hand of the photographer is immeasurably superior to a modern book reproduction—especially when the former is matted and framed. These Jackson photographs, while unquestionably imbued with a documentary component, may be classified as works of art when seen in the original. Jackson exhibited great skill in selecting views with compositional merit and textural detail, and demonstrated complete mastery of the technical aspects of his medium. Indeed, scores of Jackson images were copied by engravers of the 1870s and 1880s for wide distribution in popular magazines, illustrated newspapers, and scientific reports. For two decades significant numbers of mass-circulated Yellowstone images were derivatives of his outstanding photographs.

The paintings of Moran and the photographs of Jackson set the standard for all artists to follow. The work of each artist complemented the other, with the former emphasizing the resplendent colorations and mythic views to be found

throughout Yellowstone, while the latter utilized the pencil-sharp eye of the camera to etch a crystalline record of Yellowstone's truth that none could dispute. They each saw the lake and sought to return to civilization with their proof of what nature had wrought—one of the most sublime spectacles in the American West. Moran and Jackson would agree, however, that the reality always remained beyond transcription, and must be experienced for the fullest realization.

Other artists. As noted above, Henry Wood Elliott, a contemporary of Moran and Jackson, was the official artist of the 1871 Hayden Survey. This was Elliott's third summer as Hayden's paid artist, and his benefactor complimented him in his 1870 report: "[T]he artist, Elliott, worked with untiring zeal, and his sketches and sections have never been surpassed for clearness or beauty." Elliott made numerous pen-and-ink sketches, plus pencil sections, of the Yellowstone scenery through which the party traversed and many of these informative, if crude, sketches illustrated Hayden's 1871 report. Hayden informs us in his "Letter to the Secretary" that "Messrs. Elliott and [Campbell] Carrington surveyed and sketched its [Yellowstone Lake's] shore-lines from the water in a boat." However, when Hayden presented his report to the public, Moran's two engravings—not Elliott's—comprised the Yellowstone Lake illustrations. This subtle elbowing of Elliott to the side by the publication of Moran's lake images suggest that Hayden felt the latter's artwork was superior.

One fine watercolor image of the lake by Elliott has survived: "Yellowstone Lake," 25 x 50 cm, completed in 1871; it is reproduced in *The Rocky Mountains: A Vision for Artists in the Nineteenth Century* by Patricia Trenton and Peter Hassrick, 1983, p. 188. This finely detailed watercolor is claimed by Trenton and Hassrick to have been painted on the spot, but that is unlikely because of the exigencies of survey work. A more plausible scenario is that Elliott painted it later, with a copy of Jackson's photograph no. 268—which it closely resembles—and his own geographical sketches close at hand. One manipulation in this picture bears mentioning: the clouds are backwards. Because the Absaroka peaks, Southeast Arm, Flat Mountain, and Mount Sheridan are correctly rendered on the distant horizon, there is no doubt that the view is southward. Yet, the high-altitude cirrus "mares'tales" are drifting from the southeast, a full ninety degrees off their obligatory course from the southwest. If Moran can move rainbows, can Elliott move clouds? Elliott's lake painting is the quintessential classical view of untrammelled nature awaiting the appreciation of Western Man. This well-executed image of Yellowstone Lake demonstrates Elliott's finer talent, and contrasts markedly with the draughtsman style that he utilized when rendering topographic and geologic scenes.

Four other photographers of Yellowstone Lake deserve to be mentioned. The first one is actually a null set, for August F. Thrasher, a contemporary of Jackson, regrettably left no extant images. He actually photographed the lake in 1871, while participating in the first tourist excursion of Yellowstone. His cohort Rossiter Raymond recalled in his 1880 autobiography *Camp and Cabin* that "Thrasher was wild with enthusiasm about the views to be obtained from every point around the lake; and it took the whole company to tear him away from each

successive promontory. By judiciously indulging him on occasions of peculiar importance, however, we succeeded in bringing him to the outlet...”

The second and third photographers, the father and son dynasty of F. Jay Haynes and Jack E. Haynes, probably sold more images of Yellowstone Lake than anyone because of their long tenure as owners of the most popular photo concession in the park. They mass-marketed a number of lake images as color postcards, such as “Yellowstone Lake and Mt. Sheridan,” and “Yellowstone Lake and Colter Peak” (Figure 5), as well as larger, framable reproductions of the same. Not surprisingly, these views are “picture postcard perfect.” Is it too unkind to say that the artistic quality of their lake views bears no relationship to the number sold? The fourth artist worthy of mention is America’s foremost black-and-white landscape photographer, Ansel Adams. In 1941 and 1942 Adams was employed by the U.S. Department of Interior to photograph the western national parks for a mural project at the department’s new museum in Washington, D. C. His three Yellowstone Lake images, first reproduced in *The Mural Project* by Peter Wright and John Armor (1989), are the epic land, water, and sky photographs for which he is justly famous. Adams’ photograph “The Fishing Cone, Yellowstone Lake” illustrates a photographer’s need to incorporate other objects in a lake view (Figure 6).



Figure 5. “Yellowstone Lake and Colter Peak” was a 1934 black-and-white image by Jack E. Haynes that was colorized and reproduced endlessly as a postcard.



Figure 6. Ansel Adam's 1941 "The Fishing Cone, Yellowstone Lake" illustrates a photographer's need to incorporate other objects into the monotony of vast water scene.

Common Emotional Response

Artists who portray Yellowstone Lake in their chosen medium are responding to emotional tides which pull at the psyche of all human beings when confronted with sizeable bodies of water. Who among us is immune to wonder when first embracing the expansive view of an inland sea surrounded by soaring mountain peaks—especially after traversing a forest? Who among us cannot be mesmerized by the unceasing play of wave against sandy beach or rocky point? Who among us can ignore the intricately patterned and ever-changing motion of cloud against sky when the heavenly vault is presented so fully above water's horizon? Who among us is not enthralled when strong winds pour forth from unobstructed miles to whip water into frenzied, frightening motion? And who among us is incurious at the detritus, organic or inorganic, found afoot when walking along a shoreline? These emotional drivers common to all humanity are the motive forces to which artists respond, and not unreasonably so—for water is our lifeblood. If talent could be purchased for a halfpence, would not we all be artists of Yellowstone Lake?

Essayist Loren Eiseley once observed, "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water." Surely the waters of Yellowstone Lake possess this magic, for almost every diarist and travel writer who has submitted himself to the pleasures and vagaries of this inland sea speaks of its power in superlatives. The lake's allure draws visitors to its shores with irresistible magnetic force. Its many facets

elicit imaginative comparisons and analogies, in order to give those who have not experienced it some relative semblance of its character. Words dissolve into word paintings as writers tax their vocabulary. Yellowstone Lake becomes the largest, highest, most sublime mountain lake in America, with jeweled shores rimmed by gloried, snow-clad mountains, and beset by magnificent storms. With utmost regret pleasure seekers leave this locale, remember it dearly, and perhaps find it eclipsed only by the incomparable Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Indeed, tour operators during the first half-century of the park's existence carefully orchestrated the route of their clients from the geyser basins to the lake, and thence to the denouement, the Grand Canyon.

The enumeration and quotation of the many well-written and heartfelt descriptions of Yellowstone Lake penned by its legion of lovers would be too lengthy for this paper. Various authors have adulated Yellowstone Lake as “a great sapphire,” “a lake among lakes,” “a scene of transcendent beauty,” “the glory of the Park,” and “without doubt the most wonderful and beautiful body of water in the world,” to excerpt but a few of their key phrases. The one deemed this author's favorite will be reproduced, realizing that its grandiloquent literary style is out of vogue. Yet, its power of suasion remains. Wrote Calvin C. Clawson in his newspaper *The New North-West* on 27 January 1872:

Thus for the greater part of two days we watched anxiously from every point and through every opening for the first glimpse of the great and wonderful lake. We were at last rewarded for all the troubles and dangers of the journey, when, from a high hill, on which was an open space in the timber, we looked down upon and out over the grand and beautiful water, clear as glass of finest finish, lying calm and still as death in the evening sun. The like of

YELLOWSTONE LAKE

has not yet come under the eye or within the knowledge of civilized man. The curious and marvelous sights that encircle it; the wondrous beauty of the mighty peaks that overshadow it as they stand arrayed in gorgeously painted garments of red and purple and yellow, like gigantic sentinels guarding the precious treasure entrusted to their care and keeping; its romantic shores, fringed with forests of richest green, which the frosts of winter or the heats of summer cannot fade; the unequalled beauty of its outline—all unite to enveil it in an unnatural, indescribable appearance; unlike any other spot or place seen or heard of—as if not of this world—something spiritual, beyond the reach of pen or tongue. The eye must behold the glory thereof to believe;

And even then,
Doubting, looks again.

Personal Observations on Photographing the Lake

I have been photographing Yellowstone National Park with an 8 x 10-inch field view camera since 1990, exposing over 3,000 images. On numerous occasions, including a five-day circumnavigation by canoe of the Southeast Arm, I have brought my equipment and energies to bear upon the task of recording the multifaceted aspects of Yellowstone Lake.

With Yellowstone Lake's undeniable beauty apparent from every vantage point, one would think that successful photography of the lake's charms would be an easy process. However, the achievement of a high-quality, fine-art, black-

and-white photograph remains an elusive goal, one whose attainment requires substantial labor, constant experimentation, and a measure of luck. That rare print of brilliant excellence sits atop a pyramid of massive effort and countless failures of vision. Every image focused upon the ground glass contains the potential of being that great picture, yet victory is seldom attained.

What are the challenges that face a large-format photographer as he stalks the lake? Weather is one crucial and contentious factor which aids and bedevils the view camera photographer, whose craft requires a substantial investment of time for set-up, focusing, exposure, record-keeping, and packing up. Special qualities of light and cloud may vanish in the twenty-minute period needed to prepare the camera for the click of the shutter. Thus, optimum conditions must either be anticipated, or, more usually, waited for patiently. Clouds, shadows, and sunbeams are vital ingredients in a waterscape, but they are most capricious and uncontrollable. Furthermore, the atmospheric effects of violent rain storms over the lake are fascinating to witness, but a positive hindrance to the view camera operator, for wind shakes the camera unacceptably and blows dust into the film holders, while rain ruins sheet film and cannot be allowed to soak the camera's wooden body or leather bellows.

Another challenge facing the black-and-white landscape photographer as he or she contemplates the lake is the need for contrast. Since the vastness of water is often a featureless monotone, the photographer searches for tonal contrast by including textured clouds, pebbly beaches, rocky points, arching shorelines, contorted driftwood, treed headlands, and breaking waves. The skillful photographer attempts to unite some of these elements into a dynamic whole.

Because the lake is a panoramic phenomenon, the photographer is tempted to retreat from its shoreline to gain a broader perspective. As the photographer recedes from the lake to nearby elevated buttes or mountains (such as Lake Butte, Elephant Back Mountain, Jones Pass, Langford Cairn, or the Promontory), a greater breadth of view is obtained, but at a price. Such panoramic vistas excite the eye and mind, and are truly memorable, but attendant atmospheric haze borne of moisture or particulate matter can degrade the picture's detail and contrast. This attenuation can lead to unattractive muddy gray tones, as distant islands, shores, and ridges fade into semi-obscurity. The high and grand view challenges the photographer's skill and medium.

This photographer has engaged Yellowstone Lake at four locales: Pumice Point, Storm Point, the mouth of Cub Creek, and the Southeast Arm. Pumice Point (a road stop) was photographed on a chill, autumnal day, and remains vivid for its austere and dark ambience. Storm Point (a short day hike) is a dramatic lunge of rock against water, where the full force of southwesterly gales is spent. From its eminence I was able to photograph the white volcanic strata that wave action has so masterfully sculpted along Yellowstone Lake's north shore (Figure 7). Incidentally, the embankment of rocks shown in the background of this scene is marbled with the most striking swirls of blue, indigo, maroon, and violet colors I have ever witnessed in nature. At the mouth of Cub Creek (a short day hike), nature has strewn about a speckled, pebbly beach the refuse of its never-ceasing



Figure 7. Storm Point and the northeast shoreline offer needed contrast to the lake's transparent waters in this 1996 view camera photograph by the author.

war against the east bank—undercut and toppled trees, bleached driftwood, and detached boulders of all dimensions. Close-up views of this debris can be most artistic. Lastly, the Southeast Arm (a multi-day canoe adventure) afforded this photographer a lengthy opportunity to experience and record the lake in its many wilderness moods. Morning calms, afternoon thunderstorms, high-elevation overviews from Langford Cairn and the Promontory are a few of the photogenic scenes witnessed. Every place and every hour on Yellowstone Lake was a unique glimpse into a grand beauty and fierce power on a scale seldom realized in our mundane lives. Recording these images in my mind was easy; upon my film, harder.

Eugene Lee Silliman, 802 St. Marys Avenue, Deer Lodge, Montana 59722; silliman@imine.net

