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Yellowstone's Creation Myth

According to a still-popular tradition presented in literally thousands of publications and public speeches during the past 90 years, the idea for Yellowstone National Park originated with one man on a specific day. As this tradition has come down to us, on September 19, 1870, members of the Washburn exploring party, during a discussion around a campfire at the junction of the Gibbon and Firehole rivers, developed the idea of setting aside the geyser basins and surrounding country as a national park. According to Nathaniel Langford, who published his edited "diary" of this expedition in 1905, party member Cornelius Hedges proposed the idea and his companions heartily embraced it. This "campfire story," promoted and celebrated by several generations of conservation writers and historians, became well established in the popular mind as the way Yellowstone and national parks in general originated.[1]

But as early as the 1940s, historians doubted the tale. Its belief required ignoring known pre-1870 proposals that Yellowstone should be set aside as a public park, as well as ignoring that the process by which the park was established seemed to spring from a number of sources, and denying that the public-spirited sentiments attributed to the park's founders were only one of the impulses driving their actions. In the 1960s and 1970s, Yellowstone National Park's staff historian, Aubrey Haines, and an academic historian, Richard Bartlett, cast further doubt on the story by suggesting, among other things, that even the campfire conversation itself was a historically doubtful episode.[2]

These revelations set off a round of debate and reconsideration in the National Park Service over the validity of the story and its usefulness to park staff as an educational device. In both the National Park Service and among the larger community of managers, scholars, and the public, the credibility of the campfire story has since gradually declined, though it is still often invoked, especially by public speakers and in informal publications and other media about Yellowstone. On August 17, 1997, during his speech at Mammoth Hot Springs as part of the 125th anniversary celebrations, Vice President Al Gore referred to the campfire story, and, though acknowledging that there was some debate over it, invoked its symbolic power. We can't let it go.

The persistence of the campfire story as a part of the culture of conservation should not be surprising. For one thing, though the story has been shown to be simplistic and not at all fair to the complexities of history, it has not, and probably cannot, be conclusively proven untrue in *some* of its specifics. For another, stories this deeply embedded in the thinking and self-perception of so many people, true or not, do not yield themselves to easy disregard. Their existence depends upon much more than mere provability: the Madison campfire story has become a part of the historic and even the spiritual fabric of the National Park Service and of the conservation community. And, like any good story, it reveals greater complexities the harder we look at it.

As Aubrey Haines has pointed out, not only were ideas of preserving natural areas a part of the regional consciousness, but also Yellowstone itself had been considered as a possible candidate for such action well before the Washburn party set out. As early as 1865, Cornelius Hedges himself had heard another Montana citizen propose the idea of setting Yellowstone aside.[3]

We have reviewed the 20 or so first-hand contemporary accounts left by members of the Washburn party: a wealth of unpublished diaries and letters, as well as numerous articles and reports published shortly after the expedition returned to the settlements. As Aubrey Haines has showed and we confirm, none even mention the conversation or the idea of creating a national park, a term that Langford, many years later, claimed the group used that night.

In his diary, the following morning, Cornelius Hedges himself said only, "Didnt sleep well last night. got thinking of home & business."[4] But in 1904, when Hedges' diary was finally published in an edited version, he added the following critical passage as part of a larger footnote:

> It was at the first camp after leaving the lower Geyser basin when all were speculating which point in the region we had been through, would become most notable that I first suggested the uniting all our efforts to get it made a National Park, little dreaming that such a thing were possible.[5]

Langford's own account appeared the next year, reinforcing Hedges in several paragraphs that contained actual dialogue of the conversation. Langford's diary, now available in a paperback edition from the University of Nebraska, has long been one of the most popular early accounts of Yellowstone, and his account of the campfire story has served as the primary source for almost all later renditions of the tale. But what actually happened that night?

Only four party members left diary entries covering that night, and none mentioned any such conversation. This might seem odd, but is not in itself persuasive proof no conversation occurred; presumably these men talked around the fire on many evenings without feeling compelled to leave an account of it. These diaries, unlike Langford's, were quite brief, generally limited to distance traveled and a few outstanding sights seen; they were not ruminative or conversational. On the other hand, according to Langford, this must have been one of the most, if not the most, energizing, far-reaching conversations of the entire trip, so we might have hoped for some diarist to comment on it. In any case, by June of 1871, members of the Washburn Party had published at least fifteen articles, letters, and extended episodes in newspapers and magazines. None of these publications said a word about this great idea that, according to Langford, had them all so excited, and, also according to Langford, filled them with a sense of mission to spread the word about the national park idea. This is hardly the sort of ardent advocacy that Langford would later claim existed among these men as a result of their September 19 campfire conversation. These publications were their foremost opportunity to convince the public of the importance of protecting Yellowstone, and they completely missed their chance.

Besides this curious lack of talk about the national park idea, there are a host of other minor circumstantial and contextual problems with the story, most discovered and outlined by Haines in his official correspondence as Yellowstone historian in the 1960s and summarized in his book *The Yellowstone Story*. This book was published in 1977 after a several-year delay that seems primarily have been due to the discomfort his challenge to the campfire story caused among powerful National Park Service officials and alumni. These other problems include irregularities in Langford's later behavior relative to the campfire story. For example, in the extensive Langford collections in the Minnesota Historical Society, among the conspicuously missing items is the one diary covering his 1871 Yellowstone trip; it is thus impossible to check to see if he actually wrote his very long diary on the trip, or if some of it, including the discussion of the campfire conversation, wasn't added later. Haines suspected that this was an all-too-convenient gap in the record, and so do we.

But besides this and other irregularities, we must also assert that Langford's discussion of the campfire conversation in his published "diary" of 1905 (which we prefer to think of as a reconstructed account) simply does not ring true. It has a contrived, hindsighted tone about it, as if manufactured later with a thematic tidiness that probably would not have characterized an authentic diary entry.

The repeated use of the term "National Park" by participants in the conversation is suspect. No members of the party (including Langford) were to use the term even once in the spate of articles and letters they produced over the course of the next year. It all seems too perfect.

Though historians and other observers are perhaps too blithe and ready to call historical figures liars; such accusations should be made no more lightly than they would be made against living persons fully able to look you in the eye and defend themselves. And yet, we simply do not believe Langford in this case. Perhaps the years between 1870 and 1905 magnified the conversation in his mind until it was more than it had been, and he elaborated on it in his diary. Or, perhaps, to put the most cynical cast on it, Langford was what some have suspected him of being: a dishonest self-promoter. It is impossible to know at this point. But it is also impossible for us to believe his tale.

The evidence that the campfire conversation did *not* occur is all negative. That is, we may lack convincing evidence that it happened as Langford claimed, but we have no proof that it did *not* occur. For support of the existence of the conversation, we are entirely dependent on reminiscences from many years later by two people: one of whom, Cornelius Hedges, stood to gain great glory for originating such an important idea, and the other, Nathaniel Langford, who stood to bask in the considerable reflection of that glory. But while no early Yellowstone booster ultimately proved more energetic at promoting his own heroic image than did Langford, none of the others was more retiring in the face of promotion of his name than was Hedges. Thanks to Haines' sleuthing, we know Langford to have been a fairly slippery and self-promotional character otherwise, and know Hedges to have been a remarkably trustworthy man.

Based on our review, not only of the sources and of Haines' analysis but also of the sometimes bitter debate over this issue in the National Park Service in the 1960s and 1970s, it seems most likely to us (as it did to Haines) that there may well have been some kind of conversation that evening that dealt with the question of the fate of the wonders of Yellowstone, but that it was not perceived as momentous by the participants.

What matters historically is the impact of that conversation. Did it lead to the establishment of Yellowstone National Park? It is in answering this question that Langford's self-promotion is most revealed and the campfire story most clearly transformed into a myth, or at least a legend:

> Langford and the generations who believed him portrayed the Washburn Party that night as public-spirited altruists, forgoing personal profit in favor of public service. The story portrayed the park idea as having such intuitive force of rightness that it was immediately embraced by all who heard it. For park defenders seeking to justify or enlarge their meager budgets, the campfire story provided a rhetorical position of moral unassailability. It also provided the park movement with perfect heroes: altruists who were so committed to protecting wonder and beauty that they would forgo all thought of personal gain. And it put the creation of the park movement in the hands of the people whose possession of it would have the most symbolic power: regular citizens.[6]

In fact, by the time of the campfire, Langford himself was already at least a part-time employee of the Northern Pacific Railroad, specifically hired to speak publicly on behalf of railroad promotion in his region. His Yellowstone talks in the East the following winter were funded by the Northern Pacific, and said nothing about the park idea; they described and thereby promoted the wonder, not the protection.[7] Hedges did not even vaguely refer in print to setting aside a reservation until early 1872, when he wrote about it in a similarly economically oriented vein, as part of a territorial resolution designed to convince Congress to transfer the Yellowstone region from Wyoming Territory to Montana Territory.[8]

A spirited defense of the campfire story by an assortment of National Park Service staff in the late 1960s and early 1970s emphasized that it was the publicity given Yellowstone by the Washburn party that led to the creation of the park: that, for example and most importantly, federal geologist Ferdinand Hayden only decided to explore Yellowstone in 1871 because he heard Langford speak in Washington, D.C.[9] Hayden's report on Yellowstone, including William Henry Jackson's stunning photography of features that were only rumored or verbally described before, is regarded as an important factor in persuading Congress to create the park the year after his 1871 survey. But a variety of historical evidence now suggests that Hayden had known about the rumored wonders of Yellowstone for several years, and was already well along in planning the Yellowstone survey by the time he heard Langford speak.[10]

Again and again, the simplistic traditional tale faces complications like these. These were real people, leading lives as complicated as our own, full of conflicting and sometimes complementary impulses:

> The only hope for a reasonable understanding of the origin of Yellowstone National Park is in admitting

that none of this was simple. Human nature was not on holiday. The people who created Yellowstone were not exempt from greed, any more than they were immune to wonder. Some cared more for the money, some for the beauty. Some were scoundrels, some may have been saints.[11]

All of this is to say that they sound a lot like us.

The Madison Campfire story is a kind of creation myth, which is to say that though it is not true in any strict historical sense, it is still very important, and in its way a valid and even essential part of the life of its adherents. According to one definition, "a creation myth conveys a society's sense of its particular identity.... It becomes, in effect, a symbolic model for the society's way of life, its world view—a model that is reflected in such other areas of experience as ritual, culture heroes, ethics, and even art and architecture."[12] In the nearly venerable subculture of the National Park Service, and even in the greater society of the conservation movement, the Madison Campfire story is such a model. Like many seminal events seen through romantic filters, it has in it a kind of truth, a loftier vision of human nature than those who admire it would ever expect themselves to sustain, and thus it offers us ideals that are no less admirable for being unattainable.

But even the best myths can wear out. We do not for a minute blame all those loyal, sincere people who happily believed the campfire story and made such good use of it in generating public support and affection for the national parks. They had no reason to believe otherwise. Today we do. Like the famous environmentalist speech attributed to Chief Seattle, the myth of the Kaibab deer population irruption and collapse, and other environmental fables, the Madison campfire story does not do justice to the complex realities we now know to characterize historical, ecological, or political process.[13]

The strongest criticism we received of earlier drafts of this manuscript, and of the more detailed analysis in a much longer paper we are also preparing, was that we are much too easy on the people who knowingly perpetuated the campfire story's inaccuracies. The greatest blame here goes to Langford, of course, who gets the lion's share of blame for the whole mess, but others contributed, especially those who persisted in pretending the story was true long after Haines' work should have convinced anyone to be more cautious. Indeed, Langford's version of the campfire story is alive and well today, in many public pronouncements in the conservation community, often from well-intentioned people who do not

know any better. We do not know how to alert the ignorant that they are parroting bad history, any more than we know how to convince the people who simply prefer the story to historical truth that they are doing a disservice to their audiences and to the park. We hope, however, that the saga of the campfire myth will serve as a cautionary tale when all of us encounter similar situations and are tempted to fall back on simplistic views.

Just as national parks struggle constantly to reconcile the realities of scientific findings with the even more pressing realities of social preference, so do they face similar conflicts between historical scholarship, agency folklore, and popular understanding. The Madison campfire story promises to be with us, in one form or another—as historical fact for some people, as heroic metaphor for others—for many years to come.

The appearance of the long-lost 1870 expedition diary of Henry Washburn, unveiled at the humanities conference in Yellowstone National Park in October 1997, should warn us that there may yet be more evidence out there.[14] And whether or not new evidence ever surfaces, some day new analytical techniques may appear and existing evidence may yield new insights. But just as the evidence may grow or become more cooperative, so too will change the cultural temperament of the society that embraced and now doubts the campfire story. In the dynamic state of such things, the campfire story will be replaced or supplemented by other tales, some perhaps no more trustworthy but more appealing to the modern ear and sensibilities.

Endnotes

1. Hiram Chittenden, *The Yellowstone National Park, Historical and Descriptive* (Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd Company, 1915), 74, provides a stereotype of most later accounts of the campfire story, though quite often the tale was fancifully embellished and given extensive dialogue. Nathaniel Langford, *The Discovery of Yellowstone Park* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 117-118, provides the published version of Langford's account.
2. Hans Huth, "Yosemite: The Story of an Idea," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 33 (March 1948), 72. Carl P. Russell, "Madison Junction Museum Prospectus," typescript dated June 3, 1960, at Orinda, California, p. 19, cited in Aubrey Haines, letter to Robert Utley, stamped January 8, 1972, p. 2, authors' collection, courtesy of Aubrey Haines and Richard Sellars. Richard Bartlett, *Nature's Yellowstone* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 198-208. Among the many documents relating to this subject and produced by Haines in his role as park historian in the 1960s, one of the first was his memo to the Assistant Superintendent, June 5, 1963, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Box H-3, "Madison Jct. Pageant." This was his first critique of the then-popular annual theatrical pageant held at Madison Junction ever year to celebrate the campfire story. Haines' more complete telling of the real story of the campfire and how it fit in the creation of the park is in the first volume of his book *The Yellowstone Story* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press and the Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1977), 1:129-130, 1:163-173.
3. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story,* 1:90.
4. Cornelius Hedges, "Excerpts from the Diary of Cornelius Hedges (July 6, 1870 to January 29, 1871), with a verbatim transcript of that portion concerned with the 'Yellowstone Expedition' from the time it left Helena, Montana Territory on August 17 until the return of the pack train to that city on September 27, Transcribed from the original diary in the Montana State Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana, by Aubrey Haines, Park Historian, November 5, 1962." Yellowstone National Park Research Library, manuscript file, 12.

5. Cornelius Hedges, "Journal of Judge Cornelius Hedges," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 5 (1904), 372.
6. Paul Schullery, *Searching for Yellowstone: Ecology and Wonder in the Last Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 56.
7. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story,* 1:105, 1:165; *Yellowstone National Park: Its Exploration and Establishment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 59.
8. Louis Cramton, *Early History of Yellowstone National Park and its Relationship to National Park Policies* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932), 107.
9. E.T. Scoyen, letter to Superintendent Jack Anderson, March 23, 1971, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Box H-1, File 196.1.
10. Aubrey Haines, ed., *The Valley of the Upper Yellowstone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), xxix. Mike Foster, *Strange Genius: The Life of Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart, 1994), 202-204.
11. Schullery, *Searching for Yellowstone*, 61.
12. David Leeming and Margaret Leeming, *A Dictonary of Creation Myths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii.
13. Randy Adams, "Chief Seattle & The Puget Sound Buffalo Wallow," *Borealis* 5(1), Spring 1994, 50-54. C. John Burk, "The Kaibab Deer Incident: A Long-persisting Myth," *BioScience* 23(2), February 1973, 113-114.
14. Lee Parsons, "The Diary of Henry Dana Washburn for the 1870 Exploration of the Yellowstone Wilderness," paper presented at "People and Place: The Human Experience in Greater Yellowstone," the Fourth Biennial Conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, October 12-15, 1997, Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. Proceedings in press.

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