

Luxury in the Wilderness

Yellowstone's Grand Canyon Hotel, 1911–1960

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YNP PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL. #17

Through a blinding blizzard with the wind blowing a horizontal gale of thirty miles an hour, over thirty-seven miles of almost trackless snow four feet on the level, through mountain gorges where the drift lay packed from ten to twenty feet, across frozen creeks and rivers, I had come in a horse-drawn sleigh to the brink of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River in the National Park to witness the Titanic winter work of building a new half-million dollar hotel that was to be ready for the summer tourist by June.

—John H. Raftery, *The Story of the Yellowstone*¹

SO WROTE JOHN H. RAFTERY, editor of the Butte, Montana, *Treasure State*, recalling his January 1911 trip to the construction site of a hotel near the falls of the Yellowstone. Howard H. Hays, General Agent of the Wylie Camping Company, also journeyed to the site, on skis, in February 1911. In an article published later that summer, he wrote: “Hard by the canyon rim the vast substantial outlines of the new hotel dominate the northerly landscape. I believe I am safe in putting it down that this is the largest resort hotel between New Jersey and California.”² Other hostelries served the tourists near the falls between 1883 and 1911, but they left much to be desired.

The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, noted for its sublime beauty and majestic Lower Falls, has attracted visitors since its discovery by Euro-American explorers. Photographer William Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran provided some of the first images of this enchanting region following their tour with the Hayden Expedition. As early as August 1871, before the Hayden party exited the area, the first tourists to venture into the “Infernal Regions” visited the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone on their return to Virginia City, Montana. While Calvin Clawson, organizer of the tour, recorded little of his impressions of the canyon or the falls, he did note that his party left their guide, Gilman Sawtell, and photographer

Augustus F. Thrasher at the canyon to spend a couple of weeks photographing the area.³ With the establishment of Yellowstone as a national park in March 1872, interest in the region blossomed.

Early superintendents of Yellowstone commented on the need for accommodations within park boundaries. In 1874, Nathaniel Langford “urged Congress to award an immediate appropriation for the park’s protection.” He cited the need for “‘commodious public houses’ at the Falls, Yellowstone Lake, Mammoth Hot Springs, and in each of the geyser areas.”⁴ In 1877, Langford’s successor, Philetus W. Norris, “called upon... Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz to provide leases for hotel development at the falls of the Yellowstone River, Yellowstone Lake, [and] Firehole geyser basins.”⁵ Despite these recommendations, it would be several years before lodging would be available for the touring public.

Until 1883, travel to Yellowstone National Park was difficult. In that year, the Northern Pacific Railroad not only completed its transcontinental route, but also extended a branch line from Livingston to Cinnabar, Montana. With the rails extending close to the park entrance, it was even more necessary to address the need for accommodations. In December 1882, the Yellowstone National Park Improvement Company (YNPIC), a syndicate of wealthy men with connections to the Northern Pacific, received a lease for accommodations at various spots around the park.⁶ A tent hotel was erected at the Grand Canyon and began operating for the 1883 season. To advertise the availability of accommodations in the park, Rufus Hatch, an investor in the YNPIC, ran a promotional tour for newspaper reporters. A reporter from the *London Times*,

“The one terrible drawback to the enjoyment of life at the Yellowstone Falls (after the food, which was absolutely uneatable) was the enormous size and maddening persistence of the mosquitoes.”

describing the area of the Upper Falls, wrote: “A short distance above this fall is the camping-ground and ‘canvas-hotel,’ the tents being prettily situated on two sides of a street, with a large dining-tent as the central point. This is the best kept of all these stopping places, and is the most comfortably appointed for the ‘roughing’ process that the park tour requires.”⁷

Charles Gibson assumed the presidency of the Yellowstone Park Association (YPA, successor to the YNPIC) in 1886.⁸ Under his guidance the company focused its attention on building the much-needed tourist facilities. Acting Superintendent Moses Harris noted in his annual report that Gibson was granted permission “to erect a temporary building to be used for hotel purposes at the Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone, with the understanding that it should be removed on or before the 1st day of August, 1886. This building has not yet been removed, nor has the erection of the permanent building at that point been commenced.”⁹ Captain Harris again remarked on the YPA hotels in his 1887 report. He considered the accommodations around the park to be

adequate, but alluded to the temporary establishments, most likely the one at the Grand Canyon: “A domicile in tents at an altitude of 7,000 or 8,000 feet, where heavy frosts prevail every night, can, by no stretch of the imagination, be made to appear comfortable. It may, as a novelty, be endured for one or two nights, but at the end of that period the average summer visitor prefers to seek a lower altitude and the comforts of a good hotel.”¹⁰

One of the visitors to Yellowstone in 1886 was E. Catherine Bates. Her comments regarding the facilities in the Canyon area supported the concerns stated by Superintendent Harris: “We reached the Falls Inn, a most primitive little house, at four o’clock in the afternoon, very hot, very tired, and very dusty, and had much difficulty in getting rooms, as the accommodation is limited... The one terrible drawback to the enjoyment of life at the Yellowstone Falls (after the food, which was absolutely uneatable) was the enormous size and maddening persistence of the mosquitoes.”¹¹

By 1888, Superintendent Harris was completely frustrated with the hotel operation of the YPA, though Charles Gibson had followed through on a few of the terms outlined in the lease. Of particular note was the continued delay in constructing a permanent hotel at the Grand Canyon. Once again, Harris provided specific examples regarding the inadequacy of the facilities: “The building at the Norris Geyser Basin is a long and narrow one-story building built of 1 inch pine boards. It has some twenty small sleeping-rooms, is cold and open, with no appliance for heating beyond a sheet iron stove



YNP PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL #3776

H.F. “Uncle Tom” Richardson, guide at Canyon, with two private concessioner tour guides. Sign on tent reads “YNP Wylie Permanent Camp.” Photo circa 1890.

in the common hall. At the Grand Cañon there is a similar structure, heated in the same manner, but the roof, which is of some patent material, is leaky. The building is located in thick timber where the sun seldom penetrates, and is always cold and damp. Visitors who pass the night at this place are fortunate if they escape sickness from severe colds.”¹² F.A. Boutelle, Harris’s successor, commented in a supplemental report that the hotel at the Grand Canyon would be completed during the 1889 season.¹³

The *Superintendent’s Report* for 1890 contained an update on the condition of the facilities at Canyon: “The association has thrown enough money in the direction of the Grand Cañon to erect and complete a fine hotel building, but through very bad management it is still in an unfinished condition, and through bad taste will, when completed, be an unsightly affair. When a new foundation is placed under it, it will, however, be a very comfortable and commodious house.”¹⁴ A letter from Charles Gibson to Superintendent George S. Anderson dated July 10, 1893, revealed that the delay was related to the YPA’s desire to build the hotel at a site down the hill and to the east of the one that was ultimately chosen, so that tourists might



NPN PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL. #147588

The second Grand Canyon Hotel, circa 1890.

walk to the canyon. In fact, the company refused to build on the eventual site for three years, and by the time construction began, the building materials had started to decay.¹⁵

The YPA opened the permanent building, referred to as the second Cañon Hotel, in 1890. Several Haynes postcards depict this three-story frame hotel located on the hillside above the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone. In 1892, Jacob Frick described this hotel as “the largest and best appointed in the Park.”¹⁶ However, according to Aubrey Haines, the foundation for this 250-room structure was found to be insecure even before it was completed. By 1896, the interior of the hotel required replastering.

Due to complicated financing and dealings with the Department of the Interior, Charles Gibson turned over his shares of the YPA to the Northern Pacific Railroad on April 25, 1898. These shares were then purchased by Harry W. Child and his partners. Under Child’s oversight, the hotel concession grew prosperous. In 1901, an additional 24 rooms were added to the Canyon Hotel, and at the same time, extensive repairs were again made to the foundation.¹⁷

Even with an addition, the facility was too small to accommodate the increasing number of visitors to Geyserland—at least at the height of the season. In the early summer of 1908, Will Rogers sent a letter with this message: “...stayed the night at the big Canyon Hotel the first and only guest. I had the whole hotel to myself. They even had the orchestra to play while I was in a dining room. [That] night all kinds of big game were playing around out on a big level place.”¹⁸

The 1909 edition of *Campbell’s Complete Guide and Descriptive Book of the Yellowstone* provided this description of the second Canyon Hotel: “The Cañon Hotel...is set upon a hill...so high...that the red roof may be seen from ten miles up the road as you come down from the Lake, [with]...no intervening trees to obstruct the view. The Cañon [Hotel] can make no claims to architectural beauty but what it lacks in that is made up amply when you look from its windows or its veranda over the grandly beautiful landscape of mountains and meadows with only a white fleck of the foaming water of the Upper Falls dotted in. The comforts within are in keeping with the excellence of all the others of the Park, and who dines



NPN MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL. #13689

Haynes double oval postcard showing the second Grand Canyon Hotel.



A Robert Reamer drawing of the proposed Canyon Hotel, built in 1910.

at the Cañon dines well, and on the Cañons beds the sleep of the just come[s] with no troubled dreams.”¹⁹

Harry Child was committed to building new hotels that held appeal for wealthy travelers. In 1904, the Old Faithful Inn, financed by the Northern Pacific Railroad and designed by architect Robert C. Reamer, opened at the Upper Geyser Basin.²⁰ With the success of the Old Faithful Inn, Child turned his attention to the facility at the Grand Canyon. He asked Reamer to design yet another addition for the Canyon Hotel. In 1910, an article in the *Livingston (MT) Enterprise*



YNP PHOTO ARCHIVES, TELL #89281-48

Robert Reamer (left) with his foreman during the building of the Canyon Hotel.

“In the planning and building of the new Canyon Hotel, Architect Robert C. Reamer has surpassed even the triumph which he achieved in the famous Old Faithful Inn.”

described Child’s plan: “Mr. Child made announcement today of comprehensive plans which will make the hotels in the park among the very finest in the country. June 1 ground will be broken for the construction of the new Canyon Hotel at the Grand Canyon. Plans for the structure were prepared by R.C. Reamer...recognized as one of the foremost designers in the country, and one who has struck out boldly on original lines, evolving an architectural style which is strikingly effective, completely in harmony with the surroundings and withal is distinctly American.”²¹

The Department of the Interior approved Reamer’s plans for the Canyon Hotel addition on May 2, 1910.²² Construction commenced in the fall and continued through the winter. A scrapbook in the Yellowstone photo archives documents the progress of the construction. It is evident from the photos that Reamer’s addition was immense. Also evident is the way

Reamer incorporated the original structure into the design of the new building.

At the end of the 1910 tourist season, work on the new structure was well underway. Harry Child did not remain in the park to oversee the project. The Livingston, Montana, *Daily Enterprise* (the name of this newspaper alternated during the time period discussed in this article) reported on October 5 that Child had departed for Helena and, following several weeks at home, he and Mrs. Child would travel abroad. An additional note in the story suggested that part of the trip would be business: “In the east he will purchase the furnishings for the new Canyon hotel in the Park, which will be the most unique in the world when complete.”²³ One of the stops Harry and Adelaide Child may have made was to Joseph P. McHugh’s “Popular Shop” in New York City. McHugh prided himself on providing unique items for the upper class.

Everyone was interested in the new hotel at the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, and several individuals described the construction after witnessing it for themselves. One such person was Dan W. “Red” Gibson, who recorded the story of the construction in poetic form in his *Souvenir of Construction of the New Canyon Hotel*. Part of his work read:

*Let’s inspect this great, surprising
Edifice which is arising
Mid the somber solitudes
Of the Rocky Mountain Woods.
First, we note its outlines are
Broken and irregular.
There is endless variation.
There are walls that twist about
As though more or less in doubt
As to destination.*²⁴

As noted earlier, both John H. Raftery and Howard H. Hays ventured to the construction site in the heart of a Yellowstone winter to see for themselves the building of this hostelry. Citing a report from the *Treasure State*, (probably written by Raftery), the Livingston *Daily Enterprise* again apprised its readers of the progress of the new structure: “In the planning and building of the new Canyon Hotel, Architect Robert C. Reamer has surpassed even the triumph which he achieved in



Y.N.P. MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL. #50114

Tammen postcard of the completed Canyon Hotel, 1913.

the famous Old Faithful Inn. That gigantic rustic structure always looked to me as though it had grown out of the world-old ground where it stands an everlasting monument to the genius and ingenuity of Architect Reamer who contrived and created it.”

The article also complimented Harry Child on his improvements in Yellowstone: “Every improvement in the Park devised or authorized by Mr. Child has been in harmony with its surroundings, a visual adornment to the landscape, a new note of unobtrusive and yet contributory beauty to a region so nobly magnificent in itself that, as Architect Reamer puts it: ‘The grandest building that man could put in it almost seems like an impertinence.’ President Child feels and acts in the same way, and that is why every structure that is added to the Park equipment by the company must be a thing of beauty as well of utility.”²⁵ John H. Raftery went on to publish a pamphlet, *A Miracle in Hotel Building*, that described, in depth, the construction of the hotel through the winter of 1910–11, as well as the architectural details of the new building.²⁶

In 1904, the opening of the Old Faithful Inn had passed with little or no fanfare given to either its construction or its actual opening. Researchers have found few newspaper articles or brochures from 1904 announcing the opening of Reamer’s famed rustic inn. However, in 1911, Harry Child and others connected to park operations promoted the new Canyon Hotel and its architectural features.

The Northern Pacific Railway issued a broadside (a sheet printed on one or both sides and folded for mailing) in 1911, “When Summer Comes.”²⁷ Much of the information found in this publication formed the basis for the article, “A Monster New Hotel in Yellowstone, Vies With the Famous Hostleries of the Country,” printed in the *Livingston Enterprise*.²⁸ In addition, postcards with an architectural rendering of the new hotel were distributed. One card advertised the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company and the other was stamped with the trademark for the McHughwillow Furniture Company of New York, which produced willow furniture for use in the hotel. The reverse of the McHughwillow card read: “A leading trade journal tells of



Y.N.P. PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL. #89282-4

Construction of the Grand Canyon Hotel, fall 1910.



POSTCARD COURTESY WILLIAM W. ABBOTT



Promotional postcard distributed by the McHughwillow company, which produced the hotel's furnishings.

an order for 1,500 pieces of this famous furniture for the New Canyon Hotel Yellowstone Park, which opens June 15, 1911. Every piece is specially designed for the room and space it is to occupy and of course the 1,500 pieces are made to order. Three carloads have already gone forward, comprising only a part of what is probably the largest order of its kind ever booked.²⁹

In the October 1911 issue of *The Hotel Monthly*, the new Canyon Hotel was regarded as “an architectural creation that stamps it a veritable wonder in Wonderland.”³⁰ In the article, Reamer provided some insight into the design of his building: “We try to feature all our hotels with something to remember. The president of the company and myself traveled over America and Europe to get ideas adaptable to hotel conditions in the park. Here, as you know, we have unusual conditions; the arrivals coming all at once each day, and the departures the same, and our arrangements must be to accommodate this condition. Then we must have our hotels...at all times, and in particular of inclement weather, to be particularly attractive in the public rooms, as well as the bed rooms. We noticed in our travels that a very large proportion of the resort hotels had their public rooms divided, or segregated, special rooms for this or that purpose; and we noticed also that a majority of

these rooms were very little used, that one particular room was favored; and for this reason the lounge in the Grand Canyon Hotel was designed as the gathering place for all.”³¹

The new Grand Canyon Hotel, as it was known, while not entirely completed, opened for the season June 15, 1911. The formal opening was held August 2. Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Child presided over a reception and ball held there, and the lounge was opened for the first time for the occasion.³² John H. Raftery again supplied a detailed description of all the features of this remarkable building. His words, as well as those of countless other visitors, coupled with the Haynes 100 Series postcards, provided the interior details of this magnificent building.

The stop at the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone was usually the final one for visitors making the Grand Loop tour. William Myall gave this description of his arrival at the hotel: “The approach to it from the driveway is quite picturesque and adds much to the general beauty of the building. The hotel is on the hill. The driveway is down the hill some hundreds of feet away. A beautiful covered way fully twenty-five feet wide runs down the hill from the hotel to the road, ending in a picturesque porte-cochere.”³³ Travelers arriving at the hotel would



YNP PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL #108237

Monida & Yellowstone-Western Stage Company stagecoaches arriving at the Canyon Hotel porte-cochere in 1914.



Y.N.P. PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL. #114981

An aerial view of the Grand Canyon Hotel, said to be one mile around, circa 1940.

by a “generous sprinkling” of wicker. Upon entering, guests found the registration desk straight ahead from the main entrance doors. To the right, a short set of stairs led to the dining room. Just past the registration desk was a spiral stairway leading to the guest rooms on the upper floors. Also in the lobby were “two hydraulic passenger elevators, a freight elevator, telegraph and livery offices, cigar and news stand, and a profusion of writing desks.”³⁵

The lounge was the hotel’s dominant feature. It was 175 feet long × 80 feet wide × 45 feet high, “without pillar or post to mar the view.” The floor was of polished oak and the walls and ceiling were of red birch, matching the lobby. Massive alternating pillars around the perimeter sustained the broad, high roof. French plate glass windows surrounded the room

disembark from their stages at the porte-cochere, and ascend through the covered walkway to the hotel lobby on foot.

Myall continued with details of the entrance incline: “The ascent to the hotel is made by a series of short stairways from one level to another, and the roof following the contour of the floor also rises in the same broken levels supported on entablatures which rest on handsome columns on either side. Along each side a heavy balustrade follows the contour of the floor and steps, and throughout the whole length on each side are seats along the balustrades which are much used by the guests.”³⁴ After strolling up the entrance, tourists entered the lobby. As they made their way up the incline, their luggage was wheeled away, up an out-of-sight ingress located beneath the incline they followed, to be delivered to the hotel office.

The lobby, 118 × 65 feet, was finished in red birch and furnished with leather-upholstered red oak, accompanied

“so that from every side, except toward the lobby, there is [an] unobstructed view of the park and surrounding forest.” The *Hotel Monthly* again quoted Reamer on the description of this gathering place: “You will observe that the furniture is mostly high backed so that patrons who may be sensitive or self-conscious can move about the room without being conspicuous.



Y.N.P. MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL. #13713

Visitors waiting at the hotel’s entrance incline.

Then there are ingle-nooks and galleries, the hearth fire in the big hall fireplace, writing tables, tea rooms, card tables, sun parlor, window seats, choice places for every one. Then we made the room as attractive as we could, with the red birch finish, with music gallery, with rich carpet and luxurious seats, with screen; with the scheme of illumination by mammoth art glass lanterns thru which 2,000 lights are filtered.”³⁶

Many guests commented on this impressive architectural achievement. Sarah Blanche Wrenn of Salem, Oregon, toured the park in 1911, and in a letter recalled that her favorite part of the trip was the Grand Canyon: “Grand, indeed it is, and

everything about it is grand, even the hotel, which is very wonderful, very beautiful and very luxurious. It cost a million dollars and was built within a year...The great lounge, of noble dimensions, with gothic pillars and rafters, mellowed lights, [and] artistic furnishings, is a thing of beauty and joy forever. We were there from Sunday morning until Tuesday morning, and so had the pleasure of hearing from a far corner of this wonderful room a most excellent Sunday evening concert. The entrance from the lobby to the lounge is by a grand stairway, occupying the entire end, which halfway down separates, allowing space for the orchestra, and again unites,



POSTCARDS THIS SPREAD COURTESY RUTH QUINN

Canyon Hotel lobby.



Canyon Hotel dining room.



Canyon Hotel lounge staircase, circa 1911.



Lounge from the lobby at the top of the staircase.



Lounge facing toward the staircase and lobby.



The lounge hearth fire was a cozy gathering place.

creating a most imposing effect. The wearer of hobble³⁷ skirts feels anything but comfortable during her conspicuous entering and exiting.”³⁸

In a 1998 conversation, Marion Sanger and Betty Pomeroy, granddaughters of Harry W. Child, each recalled that they always dreamed of being married in the Grand Canyon Hotel and making their entrance down the grand stairway to the lounge, but neither was married there.³⁹ In addition to the features described by the architect, there were two spiral staircases about midway in the lounge. These led to balconies overlooking the central portion of the room.

The dining room was equally impressive. It measured 175 × 60 feet, and had a bay annex 50 feet in diameter. Also finished in red birch, the columns were uniquely designed with branches at their tops, resembling pine trees with tangled limbs. The windows were decorated with an artistic design thought to resemble pine needles. The *Hotel Monthly* stated: “The lighting is by indirect method, the lights shielded from view in hanging baskets, and reflected from the ceiling furnishing a delightfully soft and pleasing illumination.” Limbert supplied the dining

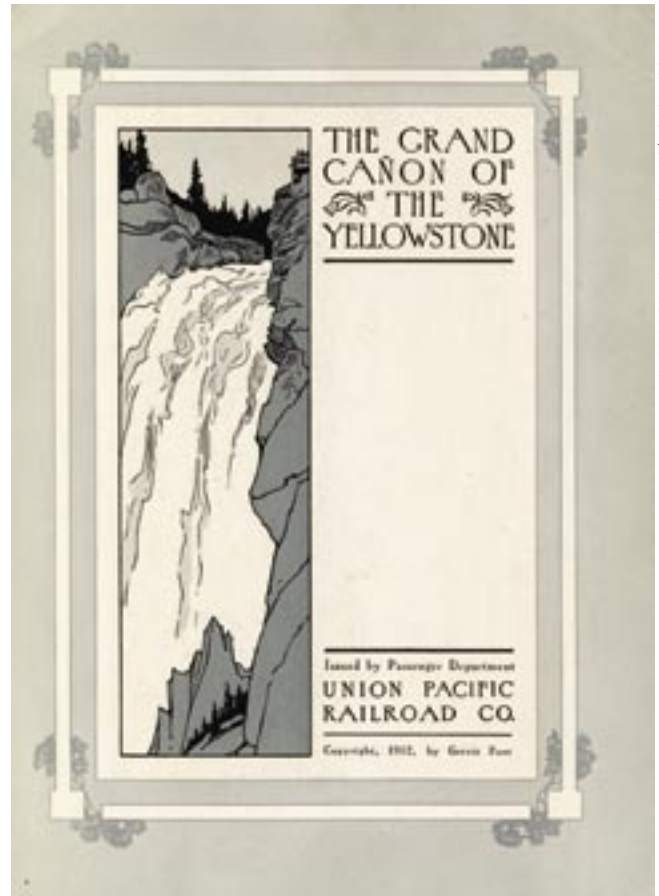
room furniture. Today, some of these pieces can be found in the back of the Old Faithful Inn dining room.⁴⁰

Promotion of the new hotel continued in 1912 and 1913. The Union Pacific Railroad, which had a terminus in West Yellowstone, Montana, issued a brochure, “The Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone” for the 1912 season. In addition to describing the grandeur of the canyon itself, the authors wrote: “If the Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone is one of the crowning works of Nature, so is the Grand Cañon Hotel, set out here many long miles from railway transportation, one of the crowning works of man. For here, where bear and elk and deer roam at will, where the face of Nature has not been changed by human hands, where the wild noises of the forest are heard at night, has been built one of the magnificent public houses of the world.”⁴¹

John H. Raftery’s *The Story of the Yellowstone* was also published that year. In October 1912, *Western Architect* published an article on the Grand Canyon Hotel that included its floor plans. Popular magazines ran full-page ads for the Northern Pacific Railroad’s Yellowstone Park Line, touting the new hotel. In December 1912, such an ad appeared in *Country Life in America*.⁴² The caption read: “Five up-to-date hotels, including the rustic Old Faithful Inn, and for this season the magnificent new Grand Canyon Hotel, outdoing the most famous resort



A postcard depicting a spiral staircase in the Grand Canyon Hotel.



Title page of the Union Pacific Railroad’s booklet, *The Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone*, 1912.

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places in its superb location, complete appointments and service.”

Transportation to the Grand Canyon Hotel was by stagecoach until 1915. That year, personal “pleasure vehicles” were admitted to the park beginning August 1. This was due, in part, to the increased use of personal automobiles and the improvement of the nation’s road system.⁴³ Harry Child was known to drive his personal vehicle from his winter home in Helena, Montana, to his summer home in the park, leaving the car at the garage located at the North Entrance arch. Additional pressure came from the push to create a park-to-park highway between Yellowstone and Glacier. When Glacier National Park was established in 1911, automobiles were permitted entry.⁴⁴ During 1916 *only*, both stages and touring buses were allowed to make the Grand Loop Tour. By 1917 it was apparent that this joint operation was not working. The transportation companies, including Harry Child’s Yellowstone Park Transportation Company, shifted from stagecoaches to touring buses. Purchased from the White Motor Company, these “buses” were specially designed for Yellowstone.⁴⁵ “Automobile camps” were established in several areas of the park to accommodate

those who wished to “rough it.”

A variety of activities were available for the guests. Visitors could hire transportation to take them to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone or to Mount Washburn, or they could drive their own vehicles along the canyon and walk to the brinks of the Upper and Lower Falls. Musical entertainment was a long tradition in both the second and “new” hotels. In the 1930s, Gene Quaw and his Canyon Hotel Orchestra provided entertainment in the lounge. A program from 1938 listed a variety of music from DeKoven, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Tchaikovsky. Gene Quaw would end the evening playing his own piece, *Yellowstone*. Other options included visiting the Canyon Art Shop, writing postcards, or viewing a performance of the Canyon Hotel Follies.

Dancing was listed in a number of park brochures as a nightly activity. In August 1921, former Wyoming Senator Jacob M. Schwoob escorted a group through the park. One member of the group prepared a trip log that described an evening at the Grand Canyon Hotel: “We had a very lovely dinner and we thoroughly enjoyed it...After dinner we sat around in the hotel lounge writing the inevitable post cards and watching

the crowds. Meantime the orchestra were tuning up and J.M. [Schwoob] beg[an] scouting around for dance partners...Governor [Robert D.] Carey and his party were registered...J.M. had several dances with both Mrs. Carey and Mrs. Cunningham.”⁴⁶

On only a few occasions were the park’s hotels closed. Both world wars resulted in all hotels being closed in 1918, and again from 1943 to 1944. During World War II, many park facilities fell into disrepair. With no money coming in, it was difficult to justify expenditures on improvements. When the war ended, there was an explosion in tourism across the country. The park began to see the result of years of promotion, only to be unprepared for the onslaught of visitors. Yellowstone’s facilities no longer met the needs of the traveling public; campgrounds, lodges, and hotels all required improvements by the 1950s.

The 1950s represented a decade of transition for the



A Northern Pacific Railroad brochure promoting the Canyon area, 1913.

National Park Service (NPS) and its concessioners. In 1951, Conrad Wirth was appointed NPS director. In January 1956, responding to concerns about park facilities, he proposed a multi-million dollar program, Mission 66, intended to improve visitor services in all national parks by 1966. Congress approved and funded the program, and Yellowstone was the first park to begin implementing his vision. The plan was to increase overnight accommodations from 8,500 to 14,500. The construction of Canyon Village was the first step in this program.⁴⁷

Through the years, the Yellowstone Park Company (YPC) had borrowed heavily from the Northern Pacific Railway.⁴⁸ By 1955, this loan was finally paid off. This left the YPC in a poor spot to respond to Wirth's Mission 66 program, which required an investment of \$15 million from the company. The YPC "was simply in no position to support the planned Canyon Village development, not to mention the upgrading of existing buildings."⁴⁹ Despite the company's concerns, plans for Canyon Village continued.

Groundbreaking for the new area was held June 25, 1956. While the Canyon Hotel remained open, the plan for the new "Village" required the dismantling of the Canyon Lodge and cabins across the Yellowstone River from the hotel. This, coupled with the remodeling of both the Old Faithful Inn and the Old Faithful Lodge, caused a severe shortage of accommodations. On top of that, portions of the Canyon Hotel were closed—a result of structural failure due to the instability of the foundation.⁵⁰

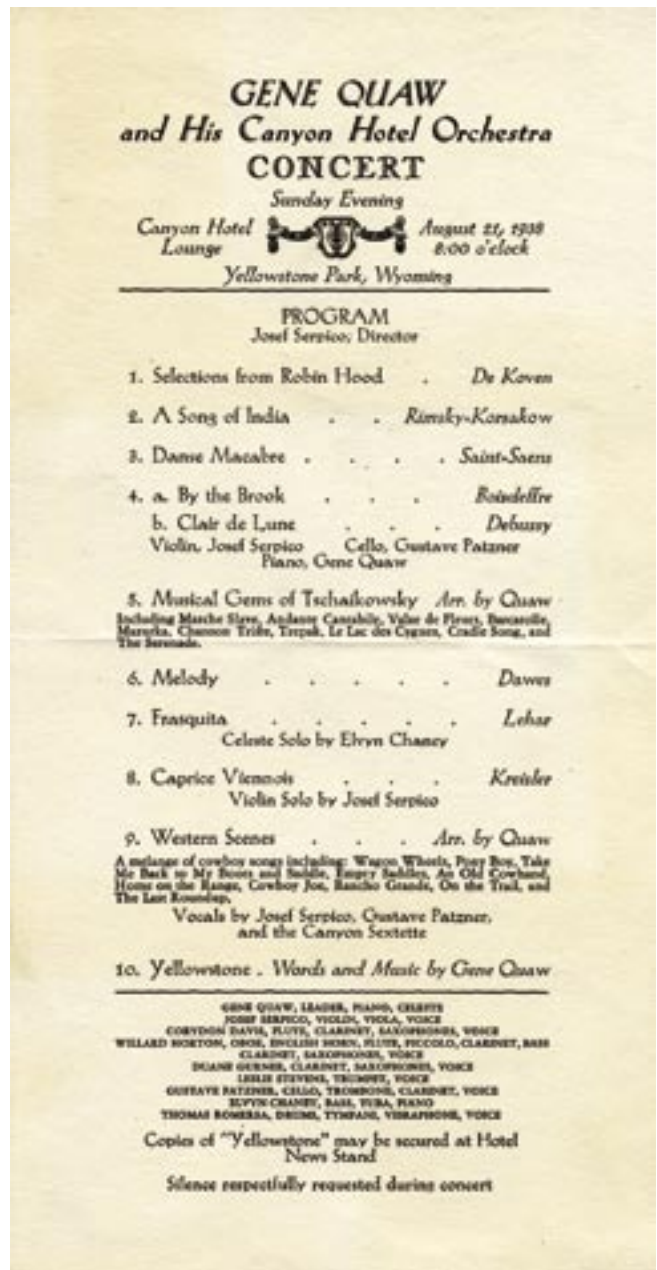
The new Canyon Village was scheduled to open July 1, 1957, but only 117 of the planned 500 cabins were completed. Betty Jane Child, widow of Huntley Child, Jr. (Executive Vice President of the YPC and son of Harry Child), recalled that some of the difficulties with the construction of the new "village" were related to NPS requirements designed to protect the park's environmental integrity. One morning at Mammoth Hot Springs in July 1998, the sound of trash trucks gearing down as they headed up into the park made her recall that



NPS PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL #133905

Orchestras at the Canyon Hotel delighted dancers in the hotel lounge.

the YPC had not been allowed to haul gravel from the Sylvan Pass area to Canyon Village. Rather, the company had to bring gravel from Livingston, Montana—a farther distance. When Huntley Child heard the gravel trucks heading up the Mammoth-to-Norris road, he would say, "Fifty dollars, there goes another fifty dollars."⁵¹ Despite the delays, the new Canyon Lodge was ready, but according to historian Mark Barringer: "Instead of being greeted by the familiar, elegant, but rough-hewn visage of the old Canyon Hotel, visitors discovered a concrete-block-and-glass edifice boasting orange Formica tables. Upon seeing the new facilities, many preferred to stay in the more expensive hotel, whose occupancy rate rose for the first time in years."⁵²



YPC MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL #1592

Canyon Hotel concert program for Gene Quaw and his orchestra.



A dining room menu from 1925.

On September 12, 1957, Thomas Hallin, manager of the Construction Department, sent a letter to Yellowstone Superintendent Lemuel A. Garrison stating that reconstruction of the foundation beneath the porch on the east side of the Canyon Hotel Lounge had commenced. He described the damage: "Due to the frost susceptibility of the soil surrounding this portion of the Canyon Hotel Lounge, the existing foundations have been badly broken by frost action. The front of the porch has raised approximately 1 foot, and the north wall has been displaced inward approximately 10 inches. As a result of this pressure, the main structure of the lounge has been put under severe strain and a number of the supporting columns and trusses have been distorted. This condition has been observed for several years, but it has now reached a point where repairs

are absolutely necessary."⁵³ Despite the damage, the Canyon Hotel opened on June 16, 1958.⁵⁴ Little did anyone know that this would be the final season for the grand old lady.

An inspection of the hotel conducted September 13, 1958, included NPS engineers, Huntley Child, Jr., and construction department manager Thomas Hallin representing the Yellowstone Park Company. The purpose of this inspection was to "ascertain the feasibility of continued use of this structure." A memo dated January 16, 1959, from Park Engineer Gerald Rowe to Superintendent Garrison related the findings of the inspection. It was apparent that the structure had been wracked for nearly 50 years by heavy snow loads coupled with frost upheaval and ice pressures. The YPC had "hired an architectural firm to make a structural analysis of the building to determine the relative merits of continuing to operate" the hotel, "with the increasing maintenance costs plus a large rehabilitation cost necessary to prevent possible complete collapse of certain walls." Rowe continued, "It has been determined by the architectural firm of Orr Pickering and Associates that as a result of their study of the structure, they were of the opinion that it was not economically feasible to rehabilitate the building and that it should be abandoned."⁵⁵

Early in 1959, Superintendent Garrison issued a press release announcing the closing of the Canyon Hotel. On April 11 the *Livingston Enterprise* printed a story in which Huntley Child, Jr., announced the YPC's plans for the hotel: "Child told the group it will be around August 1 before the company can give definite answers as to when the Canyon Hotel will be torn down and when a contract for the new building to replace the structure can be let...Child said the loss of accommodations caused by the elimination of Canyon Hotel will be offset this season with the opening of 87 additional rooms and the new dining room at Lake Lodge and completion of all facilities at new Canyon Village."⁵⁶

In May 1959, park officials and Huntley Child, Jr., met with members of the Cody Club. The *Cody (WY) Enterprise*



The structural failure in the roof trusses of the Canyon Hotel lobby was caused by foundation problems.

story on this meeting contained just a small line about the Canyon Hotel. Child told the group of the recent activity at Canyon Village and then stated, “bids will soon be taken on tearing down the old Canyon Hotel which is on shifting ground and has been ruled unsafe.”⁵⁷ On July 23, 1959, it was officially announced that the Canyon Hotel would be razed. As reported in the *Cody Enterprise*: “The Yellowstone Park Company announced today that the world-renowned Grand Canyon Hotel which the Company has operated for some fifty years, is to be razed. The remarkable old building, possibly the largest frame structure in the West, was for many years the most spectacular of all resort hotels. It is particularly famous for its beautiful lounge which was designed by Robert C. Reamer in 1910...John Q. Nichols, president of the Yellowstone Park Co., has indicated that an impartial survey of the building reports a considerable amount of salvage value. The Yellowstone Park Company is opening the building for all parties who will be interested in presenting a bid for the demolition and salvage of the building and associated structures from August 3 through August 8. Sealed bids will be asked for on August 15 in the office of the president at Mammoth, Yellowstone Park, Wyo.”⁵⁸

The Carlos Construction Company of Cody, Wyoming, bid \$25 and was awarded the contract. Bill Henry, the company’s owner, estimated that razing the hotel would take approximately 2½ years. When word was released that Henry had won the bid, his phone began to ring. He received calls from all over with requests for doors, bridge timbers, and other hotel items.⁵⁹ The YPC retained some of the furnishings, many of which can be found in other locations around the park today.

Shortly after its closure, fixtures, equipment, and prized birch paneling were sold. Even former Wyoming Governor Milward Simpson wanted a piece of the Canyon Hotel for posterity. On April 22, 1959, he wrote to the superintendent, “Dear Friend Garrison: When I saw the piece in the paper with respect to the demolishment of Canyon Hotel, I was filled with nostalgia. As a child, while I worked in Yellowstone Park, I used to

go up there occasionally. I even hopped bell there one time. There’s some beautiful wood and other things in that lovely old place, and I was wondering if there is any prospect of Lorna and me getting some of it for use in our ranch above Cody.”⁶⁰

There is no evidence in the Yellowstone Park Archives that the Simpsons obtained any Canyon Hotel fixtures. However, many individuals recall visiting the park in 1959, stopping at the hotel, and purchasing items laid out in the lounge. Quinn Blair and his wife Ruth, of Cody, Wyoming, have Canyon Hotel light fixtures adorning their Frank Lloyd Wright home (the only Wright building in Wyoming), as does the Holiday Inn in Cody. The Blairs also purchased a set of Limbert chairs from the president of the YPC for \$5 apiece at Mammoth Hot Springs. Mark Simpers of Cody worked in Yellowstone in 1959; he obtained a brass balustrade and brass door handles from a set of French doors—probably from one of



A room key from the Canyon Hotel.

YNP MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL #5399



Canyon Hotel plate, circa 1915.

YNP, MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL #21975.

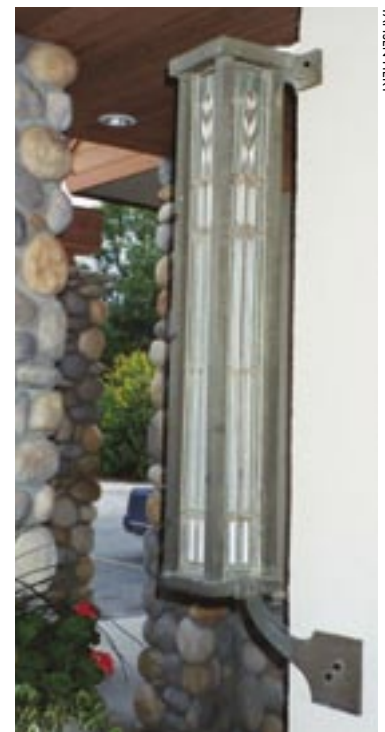


Plaque from Canyon Hotel elevator.

YNP MUSEUM COLLECTION, YELL #51375

the porches—and one of the older windows, which he used in his garage.⁶¹

In July 1960, the *Riverton (WY) Ranger* printed a lengthy article on the razing of the Canyon Hotel: “Visitors to scenic Yellowstone National Park this summer will be dismayed that the gorgeous and historical Canyon Hotel gracing the area near the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River stands as gutted as a herring, awaiting the steel tentacles on boom



A light fixture from the Canyon Hotel is now affixed to the Holiday Inn in Cody, Wyoming.

TAMMSEN HERT



The Canyon Hotel, just before the fire.

trucks that shall fell it to the ground...In its place, and only a few miles away, is the newly constructed and lavish Canyon Village, which offers to the tourists motel units, shopping centers, cafeteria service or café, and bar. Yet the charming and more leisurely way of life is gone with the old hotel which served half a century as one of the most cherished resorts in the world...Much of the interior furnishings of Canyon Hotel have been sold by Mr. Henry. Especially in demand were the 2,000 brass beds and comfortable old fashioned, long bath tubs that served the rooms. One of these Mr. Henry even installed in his own home.”⁶²

On the night of August 17, 1959, the strongest earthquake in recent memory occurred in the Yellowstone region. The razing of the Canyon Hotel was lost amid news stories of survivors and devastation. It has incorrectly been assumed by some that the Canyon Hotel was closed because of structural damage caused by the earthquake; however, the hotel’s closure was the result of its foundation problems caused by its hillside placement. Had the YPC not been in financial straits due to the construction of Canyon Village, perhaps the hotel could have been saved. We will never know.

While the building was still being demolished, a fire of unknown origin occurred on August 8, 1960. The entire structure was destroyed. Michael Turner worked at the

Haynes Photo Shop at Canyon in 1960, and recalls watching the Canyon Hotel burn. He and the postmaster from Canyon were returning from Lake when they saw the fire. Earlier in the season, he had taken some photographs of the demolition of the hotel. That night, he again had his camera handy and documented the fire.⁶³ Even though a park fire truck was dispatched to the scene, all the firemen could do was prevent the fire from spreading to other buildings. The next morning, only the ruins of the once-glorious lounge remained. Newspapers

from around the region reported on the conflagration. The headlines varied: “Old Canyon Hotel Destroyed by Fire;”⁶⁴ “Monument in Park Burns Down;”⁶⁵ “Fire Destroys Abandoned Historic Yellowstone Hotel;”⁶⁶ “Colorful History to Hotel Lost in Fire August 8.”⁶⁷

According to several accounts, the fire started around 9:30 PM in one of the hotel’s wings. “Within 15 minutes, the entire wing was in flames and then the entire building, eaten away like tinder...By 4 a.m. all walls had crashed within the foundation.”⁶⁸ A touching story appeared in the *Wyoming State Tri-*

There is considerable speculation about how this fire started.



Canyon Hotel fire, 1960.

Rodd Wheaton, the NPS's former assistant intermountain regional director for cultural resources, believes that the loss of this hotel was "one of the great architectural losses in Yellowstone National Park."

bune: "The Great Lady Chose Sudden Death: The Great Lady was outraged. She could not, she would not, accept the indignity of laborious, prolonged, and piecemeal destruction. She chose sudden death. And so Canyon Hotel, the once grand edifice of Yellowstone National Park, a 950-room and superb example of luxurious living in another era, burned to the ground."⁶⁹

There is considerable speculation about how this fire started. Rumors abound. While various newspaper accounts indicated that an investigation would be conducted, no evidence of such an investigation has surfaced. By August 1960, most of the materials inside the hotel were removed, including radiators, elevators, and miles of pipes. The wooden structure remained, a shell of the formerly grand structure. According to Jack Ellis Haynes, "This 1911 structure was only partly razed, when by accident it caught fire and burned to the ground on August 8, 1960. Unfortunately the contractor had cancelled the fire insurance only a few days before the fire which destroyed a large amount of salvaged material he was in the process of removing."⁷⁰ Some residents of Cody, Wyoming, say that they knew so-and-so "who was there when the match was dropped." And so, the mystery of the Canyon Hotel fire continues.

By 1962, the site was leveled and returned to its natural state. Today, if you look closely, you can still see where the lounge stood. The site is accessible from the horse corrals; there is evidence of the old circle drive that delivered tourists to the porte cochere. Just west of that area, and south of the winter keeper's home, there is a slight rise with a group of pine trees growing there, which is very close to where the lounge was.

For nearly 50 years, the Grand Canyon Hotel housed governors, presidents, dignitaries, and thousands of guests. Most who had the opportunity to stay there enjoyed it and recalled their experiences fondly. Many consider it to be Reamer's most monumental work.⁷¹ Rodd Wheaton, the NPS's former assistant intermountain regional director for cultural resources, believes that the loss of this hotel was "one of the great architectural losses in Yellowstone National Park."⁷² It is regrettable that it was impractical to save this architectural landmark, for today it would once again be filled nightly with travelers. But those fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to stay there owe their thanks to Robert C. Reamer, who had the vision to design such a remarkable place, and Harry W. Child, whose "heart lay in the great hotels."⁷³



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hotels, lodges, and camps that she is co-authoring with Lee Whittlesey, Yellowstone's historian. If you have any recollections about this hotel or other park hostelrys that you would like to share, please contact Tamsen Hert at the University of Wyoming Libraries, Dept. 3334, 1000 East University Avenue, Laramie, WY 82071; (307) 766-6245; thert@uwyo.edu.

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