

BODIES, PUBLIC LAND, AND BELONGING: THE STORY OF DISABILITY IN YELLOWSTONE
NATIONAL PARK

by

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, with all my love and gratitude.

To the 61 million disabled Americans: “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE: EXHAUSTED AND EXCLUDED IN THE SHADOW OF MT. MORAN	1
1. INTRODUCTION: BRIDGING DISABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY	5
Theories of Disability	6
A Body of Thought: Approaches to Environmental History.....	12
Retelling the Story of Disability in Yellowstone.....	15
2. YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK: AMERICA’S BEST, ABLE-BODIED IDEA.....	20
Broken Country, Broken Ego	23
The Trouble with (an Able-Bodied) Wilderness	25
National Parks: A Remedy for the Country.....	28
The Disabled Founding Fathers.....	31
Lt. Gustavus Doane: The Perfect Soldier	32
Truman C. Everts: Creating a Sublime Epic	37
Henry D. Washburn: The Ideal Victorian Man	41
Philetus Norris: A Glimmer of Recognition.....	45
Mammoth Hot Springs: “Marring Nature’s Stately Drama”	49
3. UNTOUCHED AND INACCESSIBLE: TWO CONFLICTING ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATIONS	55
Imbeciles No More: Disability in the 1960s and 1970s	56
Frozen in Time: The Revival of Nineteenth-Century Wilderness.....	59
Creating an Untouched Yellowstone.....	64
“Join the ‘Out’ Group”	67
You Can Take the Stairs: Varied Accessibility in Yellowstone.....	70
Groundbreaking Access: New Dimensions on the Three Senses Trail.....	73
4. FROM PAVEMENT TO PRISTINE: DISABILITY ACTIVISM REACHES THE BACKCOUNTRY	78
Confluence: Disability and Environmental Advocacy Meet.....	80
The Nature of Aesthetics in the Backcountry.....	83
Crawling Towards Accessibility	91
Frontcountry Compliance and Codifying Nature	95
Backcountry Access: Reaching the Limits of Progress.....	98

TABLE OF CONTENTS CONTINUED

5. EPILOGUE: THE PROMISE OF TRUE ACCESS.....	103
REFERENCES CITED	110

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Philetus Norris	47
2. McCartney's Hotel	50
3. Closer View of McCartney's Hotel	50
4. Safety Poster	69
5. Three Senses Nature Trail Interpretive Sign	75

ABSTRACT

Even though disabled individuals constitute 26% of the United States' population, the reality and recognition of disability is mostly absent from dominant historical narratives, especially narratives about national parks. I seek to remedy this problem in this Master's thesis by retelling the story of Yellowstone National Park from a disability perspective. Broadly, I argue that able-bodied narratives of wilderness ruled and have continued to rule Park policy, often resulting in the exclusion of disabled individuals from these spaces. Yet, over the course of Yellowstone's 150-year existence, the Park began to slowly consider and integrate more holistic interpretations of disability and disability access. My thesis begins by considering the early years of the Park, the 1860s and 1870s. I argue that four of the "founding fathers" of Yellowstone were disabled themselves but distracted others from their disability by highlighting ableist narratives of wilderness. My second chapter picks up this theme and considers how these narratives impacted the debate between access and preservation in the 1960s and 1970s. I conclude that even though there were more instances of disability access present, nineteenth-century ideals of wilderness (preservation) controlled Yellowstone policy, making it difficult for disabled individuals to fully experience the Park. My third and final chapter highlights the late 1980s and 1990s to examine how an increase in federal accessibility legislation impacted Yellowstone. Although the Park initially continued to ground itself in exclusive management policies that valued an untouched wilderness – particularly as it pertained to the backcountry – after the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, the Park began to integrate a more holistic interpretation of access that allowed disabled individuals to fully experience Yellowstone's backcountry. Despite these much-needed strides towards more equitable policies and inclusion, the Park still fell short of incorporating true access in all spaces, an aspect that I consider in my conclusion.

PREFACE

EXHAUSTED AND EXCLUDED IN THE SHADOW OF MT. MORAN

The soft pitter-patter of rain on the tent awoke me from my desperately needed sleep. The smoky skies that normally accompanied an August trip to Grand Teton National Park were noticeably absent. This year, in 2015, my family and I seemed to have hit monsoon season as this was not the first day that rain had woken me up. I slowly turned over in my sleeping bag and checked the time: 8:30 AM. Good, another ten hours, I thought. I took a series of deep breaths, prepping myself for the shock of the cold air that would hit me as soon as I left my sleeping bag. I finally willed myself out of my warm cocoon and went to the duffel bag at the base of my camping pad. At the bottom of the bag, I first found my compression gloves, socks, and tights. I began putting these small and compressed bits of clothing on my arms and legs, an arduous task that I had been accustomed to doing for months now. I next grabbed my baseball cap and rain jacket that I had left out from the night before and exited the safe confines of the tent.

I quickly found refuge from the weather under the canopy covering the picnic table. I went over to my camping chair and sat down, making sure to elevate my legs while doing so. My sister, Hannah, began warming up some water on our stove to make me some oatmeal and black tea. As I ate my food, my mom went over to our camp kitchen and retrieved my pill box. As she had been doing for many months now, she sorted through the necessary pills and supplements that would help me get through my day: 16 milligrams prednisone, turmeric, vitamin D, fish oil, zinc, magnesium, and vitamin C. My dad handed me a huge flask of water, and I diligently, yet begrudgingly willed these pills down, hoping that the oatmeal in my stomach would help me metabolize these substances without too much nausea.

As I was taking my pills, my mom, brother, and sister were preparing lunches for their hike. They were thinking of going up to Yellowstone National Park that day to hopefully see some wildlife on the trail. Since it was raining, though, they were a little doubtful they would see anything, but they were excited nonetheless to get out of camp. After they left, my dad and I prepped for our adventure that day. Because of the weather, there were few outdoor and sedentary options left for us, so we instead decided to read in the Jackson Lake Lodge. We packed up the car and headed out. I went to my normal spot in the back of our minivan, once again making sure to elevate my legs.

What seemed like a fairly routine morning on a family trip to a national park had in fact been months in the making. In January of that year, I started experiencing some mysterious health issues. I came home from a busy day as a high school senior and found some red dots on both my legs. Initially brushing it off as some allergic reaction, I tried to go about my life as normally as I could, but the dots only continued to spread. I became only further concerned as more intense symptoms started to accompany these dots: stabbing kidney pain, joint pain, and perhaps most alarming, severe leg swelling. The next couple of weeks began to blur together. I started missing more school as I spent my days getting buffeted from doctor to doctor. No one knew what was wrong with me even as my symptoms progressed. Soon, it became difficult to walk as the swelling and joint pain in my legs was too prohibitive.

After six months and many terrible doctors' visits later, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. However, as anyone with an autoimmune disease knows, a diagnosis is just the beginning. Because little is known about why immune systems malfunction, treatments are rarely curative. Although the large amount of prednisone I was on helped to alleviate some of my

symptoms, I had to quickly come to terms with the fact that my life had fundamentally changed. I could no longer walk for long distances; I had to always wear compression tights to relieve the swelling; hell, I couldn't even drink coffee anymore because it overloaded my kidneys. At the age of seventeen, I was disabled.

However, as I learned during those months, life moves on whether I wanted it to or not. I was a senior in high school dealing with the things that everyone else deals with: college decisions, senioritis, differential equations, etc. When I graduated, my parents wanted to celebrate by embarking on a longer than normal Western trip to Yellowstone and Grand Teton. Ever since I was little, my parents drove me and my siblings out West, determined that our Midwestern roots wouldn't inhibit a love for being in the mountains. Sometimes these road trips would require us to travel through the night, squished between trekking poles and hefty tents in the back of our van. Despite these long and arduous hours in the car, I developed a deep, personal connection to the landscapes of the Rocky Mountain West, a connection I only got to nurture once a year. It was on these backpacking trips or long hiking trails through national forests or national parks that I felt a deep sense of peace and calm. It helped me press the reset button whenever life seemed too uncontrollable in a way that few things could.

Now more than I ever, I knew that I needed that feeling. Although I was excited and ready for this year's excursion, my family and I became nervous because we knew that the one go-to activity in any national park, hiking, was out of the question. What does a person with little tolerance for physical activity do in the mountains? Initially, that question stumped us all. For all our years of experience spending time outdoors and planning these elaborate trips, we struggled to come up with any enjoyable and accessible activities. Eventually, after spending countless

weeks scouring the internet for any information we could about accessibility in Yellowstone and Grand Teton, we compiled a quite short but satisfactory list.

Upon arrival, I was grateful to even just be there inhaling the crisp alpine air considering that only a few months prior I had been bedridden. However, throughout the trip, something began to irk me. As I was riding a boat on Jackson Lake or sitting on a bench waiting for Old Faithful to go off, I knew that I could not have been the first disabled person to visit these places. Certainly, I could not have been the first disabled *hiker* to visit these places. Yet, all the accessible options for disabled individuals were confined to these very specific and curated experiences that were far from the trails I so desperately loved. Disability and accessibility seemed to be invisible in the parks beyond the mandatory handicap parking spots and bathroom stalls. *I* felt invisible in the parks. The practical question that had guided my family's preparation for the trip then began to evolve into a more conceptual question for me: where does a disabled person fit into the story of America's best idea?

Ever since that trip, this question has plagued both my personal and professional life. I have answered it in many ways and with different methods over the past eight years. This Master's thesis is my scholarly attempt to grapple with the tension that I recognized within myself in 2015. It is by no means perfect, and at times it was difficult for me to plainly see one of my favorite places as a site for micro and macro-aggressions against disabled individuals. However, the process of writing this thesis has answered many of my own questions about my place as a disabled person in national parks. It helped me and my struggles feel visible. Ultimately, I hope that it will do the same for any disabled individual reading this.

INTRODUCTION

BRIDGING DISABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

In late August of 1983, Viola Campeau arrived at the Old Faithful Inn with her certified hearing dog to meet some friends for dinner. Campeau, who was resident nurse at the St. Labre Indian School, walked to the hostess to ask where her friends might be. Instead of answering Campeau's question, the hostess inquired about the dog. Campeau answered the hostess explaining that she was an individual with hearing loss, and her dog assisted her with needs arising from her disability. Recently, laws had been passed in both Montana and Wyoming that protected the use of hearing dogs in public spaces, a law that only strengthened the federal protections ensured by section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. The hostess did not press any further and allowed Campeau to pass into the dining room to meet her friends. As they were eating their meal, the hostess came over again to inquire about the dog. This time, Campeau offered the hostess her dog's certification documents. The hostess declined to look at the documents and promptly left. Then, as Campeau paid her check and was about to leave, the hostess returned for a third time but was now accompanied by the head chef. They both informed Campeau that she could not return to the dining room again with her dog. Even though Campeau challenged their reasoning, the staff of the restaurant would hear nothing of her arguments. In a letter she sent afterwards to complain to Yellowstone Park administrators, Campeau wrote that they "simply told me that they didn't want to see me there with the dog again."¹ After

¹ Letter from Viola Campeau to Senator Max Baucus, 13 September 1983, Series 2, Box 30, Complaints 1983-1985, 1995-1998, Public Correspondence, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

investigating the incident, Superintendent Bob Barbee wrote a reply to Campeau, apologizing on behalf of the chef and hostess for their behavior. He explained that “the concept of hearing dogs is new and has not been well publicized.”²

The experience of Ms. Campeau was not singular. At the time of the 1980 census, around twelve million Americans identified as disabled.³ This number has only grown; currently, sixty-one million Americans live with some sort of disability.⁴ The vast scope of disability makes it clear that many others have presumably experienced some type of accessibility issue in Yellowstone. What were their experiences like? What did it mean to be disabled in national park locations, in both the frontcountry’s built environments and the backcountry’s rugged trails? Even more broadly and importantly, is there evidence that the concept of disability can coexist with the aims of America’s national park system, the nation’s so-called “best idea”?

Theories of Disability

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to zoom out and address larger themes within my work, beginning with defining disability. As a term and concept, disability is difficult to pin down historically. This is partially because the modern notion of disability did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century. Up until that point, the meaning of disability varied significantly. For instance, in the eighteenth century, disability referred to someone’s incapacity to experience

² Letter from Robert Barbee to Viola Campeau, October 1983, Series 2, Box 30, Complaints 1983-1985, 1995-1998, Public Correspondence, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

³ Frank Bowe, “Disabled Adults in America: A Statistical Report Drawn from Census Bureau Data,” (Washington D.C., 1983), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282370.pdf>

⁴ “Disability Impacts All of Us,” *CDC* online, September 16, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>

kindness. In the nineteenth century, the term began to encompass bodily impairments. In addition to this variety of understanding, the word “disability” was rarely utilized. In fact, even though the term was reportedly used as early as 1547, other words such as invalid, cripple, or handicapped were more commonly adopted to describe what might be referred to as a disability today.⁵

Because of this variation in terminology and meaning, the definition of disability can be a source of confusion and disagreement.

Currently, disability is defined using two different models: the medical model and the social model. The medical model locates disability as something inherently within the body, a “physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities.”⁶ This definition is perhaps society’s most common understanding of disability: a condition that is self-contained. However, disabled activists in the 1960s and 1970s began to challenge this definition. They found that given proper accommodation they did not consider themselves disabled, at least not as the medical model presented it; their physical bodily makeup still differed from that of an able-bodied individual, but they did not see themselves as limited in their movements or activities. Thus, they defined disability as something that was more socially produced, a “result from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”⁷ In contrast with the medical model, the social model of disability contends that disability is *produced* by an interaction between body and environment.

⁵ Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, eds, *Keywords for Disability Studies*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.

⁶ Adams, Reiss, and Serlin, *Keywords*, 6.

⁷ Adam, Reiss, and Serlin, *Keywords*, 8.

As one can imagine, these two definitions are a source of tension among scholars today. Tom Shakespeare, a professor of disability research, argues that the social model of disability does not encompass the lived everyday realities and material vulnerabilities that disabled individuals, particularly those living with chronic pain, experience.⁸ Yet, Eli Clare, another disability studies scholar, fundamentally rejects the medical model because of its emphasis on “curing” the disabled body.⁹ There is much to be learned from this debate and the different perspectives its participants offer, but entering more deeply into it or resolving it is beyond the scope of this project. For my purposes, I will be operating out of the social model of disability, though my understanding of the social model places greater emphasis on the bodily manifestations of disability than others. The social model need not deny the physical root of disability; there are differences in the makeup of human beings that can create challenges within the body as the word “impairment” makes clear. At the same time, my research demonstrates how these “impairments” are significantly compounded by outside factors and physical environments. Thus, disability is a term that we can apply to a broad range of individuals: it can include anyone who, because of a physical hinderance and inaccessible environment, cannot fully participate in society.

The field of disability studies emerged from fruitful debates about the meaning and parameters of the term. The field seeks to highlight “the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability and identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and

⁸ Tom Shakespeare, “We Are All Frail,” Aeon, November 16, 2021, https://aeon.co/essays/i-hurt-therefore-i-am-a-new-approach-to-our-shared-vulnerability?utm_source=Aeon

⁹ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being.”¹⁰ The able-body in simplest terms is a “normal” body, a body without a disability.¹¹ Frequently, characteristics such as physical fitness and strength are *only* attributed to the able-body, characteristics that make the one possessing it socially accepted.¹² Disability studies fundamentally rejects the standardization of these characteristics while also challenging the able-body as a societal norm, an assumption some scholars refer to as the ideology of ability or ableism.¹³ Ableism is so deeply rooted within American society that it is often hard to unearth and examine disability. Nevertheless, disability scholars work hard to challenge these default assumptions by framing disability as a positive identity while also recognizing the challenges that disabled individuals have historically experienced.¹⁴ Disability scholars aim to expand the study of human-environment relationships to include differences in abilities.

Because the field of disability studies is so new, emerging only in the 1990s, much of the current scholarship tends to focus on these more theory-based conversations about disabled bodies and their interactions with the world around them. *Keywords for Disability Studies* is one of the books that aims to tease out more of the complexities that have continued to emerge from the discussion above. It offers a new scholar helpful definitions and background for key topics

¹⁰ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 3-4.

¹¹ This definition is not completely adequate, however, as many scholars have contended that there is no such thing as a “normal” body. For more, see: Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹² Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 12.

¹³ Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 8.

¹⁴ This framing does not try to glorify the hardships of the physical and social challenges that disabled individuals experience. Rather, it tries to reclaim the term disability as something positive to try to undo the negative connotations the term has historically had.

and buzzwords such as access, crip, and deformity. Ultimately, it gives students and scholars alike common ground with which to work through questions of disability.¹⁵ Robert McRuer's book, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, builds on this common framework. McRuer contends that crip theory combines disability studies and queer theory; whereas a more traditional disability studies approach prefers to point out able-bodied norms, crip theory aims to primarily reclaim and celebrate disability in popular culture. An example of this goal is in the very word "crip." Crip was historically used as a derogatory word to describe disabled individuals; now, scholars of crip theory use the term in a positive light to reclaim disabled spaces and terminology, very similar to the way in which LGBTQ+ activists reclaimed the word queer. Such a reclaiming ultimately invites more individuals to identify and include themselves in the crip community.¹⁶

Although these theories and perspectives are useful when examining disability from a bird's eye view, it raises the question about how theoretical perspectives play out on the ground, in the real world. Historians, through archival methods and attention to the specificity of place and time, have tried to answer the question of how disabled individuals lived their lives in a variety of geographical and temporal contexts. Kim Nielsen's book, *A Disability History of the United States*, is perhaps the most well-known attempt at looking at the lived experiences of disabled individuals in the past. Her work traces disability throughout the history of the United States, starting with disability before colonization and ending with disability in the 1990s. She crucially places disability in more recognizable moments of history like the Civil War while also

¹⁵ Adam, Reiss, and Serlin, *Keywords*.

¹⁶ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

highlighting important milestones for the disability community like accessibility legislation in the 1970s.¹⁷ Perhaps one of the few downfalls of the book is precisely its comprehensive nature. Nielsen covers quite a bit of history in less than 200 pages which sometimes results in generalizations. Lennard J. Davis aims to rectify this problem in his book *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights*. Unlike Nielsen, Davis takes a deep dive into one particular moment in history, the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, to add details to the story of this landmark civil rights bill. He shows how years of deep-seated activism and personal connection to disability on both sides of the political aisle made the ADA a reality.¹⁸ Davis's book is more narrow in scope, yet like Nielsen's book, it only highlights "obvious" turning points in disability awareness. Still missing from the historiography is an examination of how disability plays out in everyday life. How does disability shape the everyday experiences of Americans, including their trips to national parks?

A groundbreaking edited volume, *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, begins to answer that question. The volume is wide-ranging in its topics, examining everything from toxic chemicals in pregnancies to food justice movements. Perhaps the essay in this volume that most obviously combines disability with the study of the American wilderness is Sarah Jaquette Ray's "Risking Bodies in the Wild: The 'Corporeal Unconscious' of American Adventure Culture." Jaquette Ray argues that the "risk" of disability defines contemporary outdoor culture in the United States. By examining a whole host of

¹⁷ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Lennard J. Davis, *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

contemporary media (advertisements, tv shows, and books) Jaquette Ray shows that those moments of risk, where one almost becomes disabled, make experiences in nature meaningful and worthwhile.¹⁹

This edited volume is a necessary step towards a greater integration of disability into the larger field of the environmental humanities, but there are still many underexamined areas of study. Focusing primarily on cultural studies approaches, the contributors to this volume do not ground their analyses in specific environments like national parks, crucial places that helped construct the modern American identity and ideal. My work in this Master's thesis offers a historically rooted perspective on disability in America that fills in these key gaps. Ultimately, my approach, a full integration of disability in a grounded place, will help to move disability beyond "obvious" moments of inclusion to prove a point: disability has always existed, and it has always been a part of the story of American nature and America's national parks.

A Body of Thought: Approaches to Environmental History

Unlike disability history, environmental history, the second field of study in which I ground this thesis, has maintained a longstanding focus on wild spaces and national parks. Susan Schrepfer's work *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* most overtly touches on the connections between wild landscapes and American identity. Schrepfer delves into the world of mountaineering, frequently placing her analysis in the Sierra Nevada mountains, to argue how both the mountains and gendered experiences within the mountains

¹⁹ Sarah Jaquette Ray, "Risking Bodies in the Wild: The 'Corporeal Unconscious' of American Adventure Culture," in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, ed. Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

shaped ideas about wilderness and its regulation in nineteenth and twentieth-century America.²⁰ Her book provides an excellent analysis for anyone interested in exploring how gender played an overt role in defining wilderness. Alice Wondrak Biel's book *Do (Not) Feed the Bears: The Fitful History of Wildlife and Tourists in Yellowstone* similarly offers a critical analysis of wilderness, specifically animal management in Yellowstone National Park. Wondrak Biel traces the bear, a deep-seated symbol of Yellowstone, and the Park's evolution of bear related policies to understand how conceptions of wilderness in this national park have changed. Beyond this more obvious argument, her book provides us, the readers, with a cautionary tale about the need to carefully negotiate the relationship between tourists, animals, and place.²¹ Although these works provide critical tools for analyzing human interactions with natural spaces, they give little attention to disability or to the disabled body, even though the body is a popular subject matter in environmental history.

One of the most famous works that examines bodies in relation to the environment is Nancy Langston's *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES*. Langston's book provides context for the diethylstilbestrol (DES) crisis in the twentieth century that plagued humans, animals, and environment alike. She examines a variety of players – politicians, industry scientists, lobbyists, and DES itself – to explain how this form of synthetic estrogen remained on the market in spite of damaging health effects. Throughout her book, she shows time and time again the negative and often permanent impact that DES and the surrounding toxic

²⁰ Susan R. Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars: Mountains Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

²¹ Alice Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears: The Fitful History of Wildlife and Tourists in Yellowstone*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006).

environment had on women's bodies.²² However, she only examines the human body through a materialist lens, not going beyond DES's physical impacts on the body to consider how disability as an identity and a lived reality played a role in the hormone disruptor crisis. This omission is at times perplexing given the similarities between disability studies and environmental history. Both fields recognize the power of the environment in dictating how people live. Yet, Langston and other environmental historians ignore this fact, much to the field's detriment.

Another example of an absence of disability perspectives in well-known works of environmental history is Thomas Andrews's book *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*. Andrews's book seeks to reexamine the infamous Ludlow Massacre by centering coal and considering the ways in which its materiality shaped and contributed to the labor crisis. Central to his argument is the connection between coal and the miners' labor and bodies. He claims that the work of the bodies in the mine created an embodied knowledge and consciousness.²³ The collective culture produced by miners' bodies not only connected work and nature but also set the stage for the collective action that would eventually culminate in labor strikes. While Andrews's argument is quite innovative, it relies, perhaps unintentionally, on a generalization of the miners' bodies. He assumes that everyone's bodies are having the same experience in the mine which creates this common knowledge. A disability perspective would disrupt this assumption by recognizing the differences that become present when examining body *in situ*, in its environment. It would further push Andrews to think about contextualizing his argument to consider how the environment created varied bodies, disability, and different experiences in the

²² Langston, *Toxic Bodies*.

²³ Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

mine. Thus, disability studies challenges environmental historians to complexify their approach to the human body in history, encouraging them to stop tracing a simplistic and generic able-body in their study of human interactions with past landscapes.

Retelling the Story of Disability in Yellowstone

What is clear from the above examination is that both scholarly fields, disability studies and environmental history, have something the other needs. This thesis, then, aims to weave disability and the environment together to create a rich and illuminating examination of disabled individuals in Yellowstone National Park over the course of the last century and a half. Yellowstone is the perfect place in which to situate this new approach and story. With most of the Park nestled in the remote northwest corner of Wyoming, Yellowstone is home to countless natural wonders. Due to a super volcano beneath the Earth's crust, the Park has more than 10,000 hydrothermal features, including more than 500 geysers. These natural features, which also include abundant wildlife, waterfalls, and a spectacular canyon, make it one of the most popular national parks in the world. In 2020 alone, the Park had an annual visitation of 3,806,306, and that was in the middle of a worldwide pandemic.²⁴ Besides its popularity among tourists, Yellowstone has significant historical value. It became the United States' first national park in 1872, paving the way for the more than 60 national parks that have been added since then. Since it was the first, it offers a crucial perspective and view into the beginnings of US conservation

²⁴ "NPS Stats, Visitor Use Statistics," National Park Service, [https://irma.nps.gov/STATS/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/Annual%20Park%20Recreation%20Visitation%20\(1904%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year\)?Park=YELL_](https://irma.nps.gov/STATS/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/Annual%20Park%20Recreation%20Visitation%20(1904%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year)?Park=YELL_) accessed August 8, 2021.

and ecosystem management. The Park then is a model not just for other domestic national parks but also for national parks around the globe.²⁵

Yellowstone has been used as the standard when it comes to analyzing the more obvious aspects of the wilderness ideal in American culture.²⁶ I wish to extend the conversation about Yellowstone's iconic role in the wilderness movement to examine how park officials, rangers, and concessioners, as well as disabled individuals and their families, handled disability across time. Simply put, I will retell the story of Yellowstone National Park from a disability perspective. The following pages do not present a straightforward story of the Park's progressive transformation from exclusion to inclusion over time. If one thing is clear throughout this thesis, it is that disability and disability access was and still is a contested subject within Yellowstone and protected natural spaces more broadly. Yet, I argue that significant transformations to the Park's disability culture did occur over the course of Yellowstone's post-settler history. At its beginning, Yellowstone National Park was a place that was defined by an inherent rejection and denial of disability. By the 1990s, it was a place in which people began to slowly consider and learn about disability integration in touristed natural spaces.

I begin this story in the first chapter by examining the early years of the Park, the 1860s and 1870s. This era was defined by a general uncertainty and murkiness, particularly regarding disability. In a post-Civil War America, hundreds of veterans were disabled due to the horrific nature of the war which had inflicted both physical and mental wounds. Despite the prevalence

²⁵ Adrian Howkins, Jared Orsi, and Mark Fiege, eds. *National Parks Beyond the Nation: Global Perspectives on "America's Best Idea,"* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

²⁶ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996).

of disability in the everyday lives of some Americans, disability – at the time referred to as invalid or cripple – remained a tricky and hazy term, defined by all different parts of society (i.e., government, the American public, etc.). Broadly, though, disability was seen as a social taboo; disabled veterans themselves believed that their disability emasculated them. Untouched wilderness arose as a remedy for this perceived physical shortcoming. Wilderness was where men could prove themselves, show their physical prowess, and, in some cases, hide their disability. In Yellowstone, this attitude accompanied the region’s earliest white male explorers, some of whom were disabled. These men, though, did not mention their respective disabilities anywhere in their writings. I use this omission to ask fundamental questions which guide my analysis in this chapter. What does the absence of physical disability from the early Park explorers’ narratives signify? And what did the Park’s “founding fathers” decide to highlight instead? These questions illuminate the different ways that the able-bodied culture of nineteenth-century wilderness exploration affected men’s experiences in the Park when confronted with their disabilities. This chapter ultimately concludes that the dominant nineteenth-century narrative of a pristine American wilderness rejected and erased disability entirely.

In the next several decades, the fantasy of Yellowstone as an untouched wilderness became more difficult to maintain. The Park had to actively contend with the issue of *access* to allow visitors to come to this place. The second chapter focuses on access, specifically the inherent tension between the Park’s dual mandates of nature access and nature preservation, by highlighting the Park policies that took shape during the 1960s and 1970s. Although this tension is well-known throughout national park history and policies, no one has attempted to analyze this tension through the lens of disability. This era is the perfect time to directly investigate this

because of the prominence of various contradictory laws regarding both wilderness and disability access. In 1964, the wilderness movement achieved a massive milestone by securing passage of the Wilderness Act, a landmark conservation bill that dictated an extreme interpretation of nature. A few years later, the disability rights movement also experienced victory with the passage of the Architectural Barriers Act (1968) and the Rehabilitation Act (1973), laws that mandated access in federally funded places. This chapter examines how Park officials navigated the implementation of these laws and the subsequent tension they created by solidifying different protocols for frontcountry and backcountry access for disabled individuals. Even though there were glimmers of hope in practices that championed disability access at this time, nineteenth-century ideals of wilderness still ruled the Park and its management plans, making it difficult for disabled individuals to experience the Park in its entirety.

The tension between visitor access and wilderness preservation remained in Yellowstone for the next several decades. In the late 1980s, where my third and final chapter begins, the Park began to consider visitor accessibility more seriously than in years past. Yet, wilderness attitudes and policies that were put in place in the early 1970s still dictated Park policy regarding accessibility particularly in the backcountry. This wilderness culture in Yellowstone finally began to change, however, in 1990 when Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. The last half of the chapter tracks this evolution and the policy shift in visitor access that the ADA spurred. The Park began to implement dynamic solutions so that disabled individuals could *fully* experience its nature beyond curated boardwalks or cement roads. Yet, even within this story of success, there were still instances of exclusion that disabled individuals experienced well into the 1990s. While recognizing that these important steps forward have been made, I conclude

this thesis by considering the work that Yellowstone still needs to do to improve accessibility to all areas of the Park for the disability community.

This Master's thesis discusses and examines disability and Yellowstone. Yet, throughout my research and writing, I have come to believe that this story is more than just that. This thesis more broadly is about our shared humanity and our connections with one another. Stories about these disabled individuals extend far outside the scope of this thesis. Disability is a lived reality for 26% of Americans.²⁷ This percentage would certainly increase if it included the caregivers, family members, and friends who are active participants in a disabled individual's support system. There are also many public agencies – education, transportation, labor, and health and human services – in addition to countless non-profit organizations, that are invested in supporting all aspects of disabled individuals' lives. As such, the stories and arguments present within this body of work extend to the greater world today. This thesis asks all of us to consider our own biases, preconceptions, and attitudes towards disability and wild spaces such as Yellowstone. If each of us can examine our assumptions about bodies in nature, perhaps wilderness can one day be inclusive and accessible for disabled individuals. Ultimately, instead of these places representing division, they would bind us together.

²⁷ "Disability Impacts All of Us," *CDC* online.

CHAPTER ONE

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK: AMERICA'S BEST, ABLE-BODIED IDEA

On a humid summer day in 1863, a confederate soldier shot Colonel Philetus Norris's horse out from under him near Laurel Mountain, West Virginia. Norris fell violently backwards onto the ground, severely injuring his shoulder and spine. Fifteen years later as Yellowstone National Park's second superintendent, almost the exact same thing happened to him. While he explored the remote and unknown terrain of the newly created Park, Norris, alone, pushed rapidly towards present day Tower Falls in search of a route for a road between the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and Mount Washburn. When he approached Tower Falls, his horse became skittish as the roar of the falls became louder and louder. What ensued after was chaos. The horse reared up on its hind legs and the stirrup on the saddle broke with a definitive snap; its force hurled Norris headfirst down twenty feet onto jagged rocks, re-injuring his shoulder and back. The incident was so painful and impactful that he had to return to his family's home in Michigan to recover. Norris wrote many months later that he believed the trauma in his body to be permanent.²⁸ By today's standards, Norris, the man whose name is attached to the acclaimed Norris Geyser Basin, had a disability.

At this time, though, disability as a term remained an evolving concept, not yet set in stone. In the nineteenth century, multiple different social and intellectual processes, institutions, understandings, and beliefs were contributing to the fashioning of a disabled identity. As a result, both the felt experience and concept of disability was indeterminate and fluid. The term's

²⁸ Philetus Norris, "1877 Superintendent's Annual Report," <https://mtmemory.org/digital/collection/p16013coll95/id/235/>, 840.

murkiness was compounded by the fact that no one at this time would have identified as disabled. Disability was simply not invoked by Americans as a label of recognition and personal identification. However, throughout this chapter, I frequently decide to label individuals as having a disability and possessing a disabled identity, and this move is purposeful on my part. Kim Nielsen, a prominent disability historian, argued that since disability was hidden from view, historians must often “read between the lines of discussions of illness, social welfare, activism, vagrancy, and health.”²⁹ I have approached my research in the same way as Nielsen, employing the social model of disability to people in the nineteenth century. I have searched for language and signs that could connote an impairment (i.e., “permanent injury”) and then consider how the environment (both social and physical) at the time could have affected that. That is precisely why I choose to use the word “identity” instead of perhaps “body” when describing these disabled individuals. The word body enforces the medical model of disability, that disability is something that only exists within the physical, individual, body-delineated self. If anything is clear throughout this chapter it is that disability was not solely something contained within the confines of the physical body; it was, rather, both affected and characterized by a whole host of social processes, no matter how nebulous they were. In a related way, the individual body in its relationships with the social environment affects society and the way society understands its members and their interactions. The term identity recognizes that the power in a way that the physical body cannot which is why I have chosen to use this word.

This is by no means to say that disability was a cemented and determined term in the nineteenth century (nor that its definition even now is closed to further development). Even with

²⁹ Nielsen, *Disability History*, xxi.

my perspective, disability still was a messy, unclear, and constantly evolving identity. Instead of shying away from disability because of this murkiness, I wish to use it to frame this chapter by delving into the language and signs of that time, such as those that Nielsen has identified. In fact, more broadly for all Americans (not just the disabled), this time was defined by similar uncertainties. The country, still reeling from the four-year civil war, was undergoing its own identity crisis. With a newly unified nation, many did not know what it meant to be American. It was precisely because of this larger uncertainty that key identity markers, particularly about wilderness and disability, began to emerge, albeit in a preliminary fashion. This chapter fundamentally explores how interactions between these indeterminate, yet crucial concepts shaped Yellowstone during this hazy period.

To first understand this interaction in Yellowstone, it is necessary to zoom out and consider larger historical trends. As such, this chapter will begin by examining disability in the context of a post-Civil War America. Although disability became more visible in the United States, because of various different processes, it was still excluded and shunned from society and the social imagination as an inherently weak and feeble identity. Next, I will consider how that exclusion defined the rise of wilderness and natural spaces. Constructions of nature at the time precluded disabled individuals from participating in wilderness because of its emphasis on ideals of pristine environments and physicality. This chapter will then highlight how these two larger historical movements converged in the creation of Yellowstone National Park. I will examine key places – such as Mammoth Hot Springs – as well as figures like Norris who were disabled to see how their stories affected the creation of Yellowstone’s mission in the early years of the Park. I ultimately determine that even though disability was highly present in the Park’s early

years, it was often overshadowed by ableist expressions of nature ideals. Subsequently, these ableist expressions which had the effect of defining wild areas fundamentally rejected disability within the very meaning of Yellowstone.

Broken Country, Broken Ego

In 1865, the Civil War ended in the United States. Even though the bloodiest engagement in US history had concluded, there was still much more to be done to address the aftermath of the war. Simply put, the country was broken, but even more than that, many war veterans were disabled. Research suggests that 300,000 surviving soldiers from the Union Army alone were disabled from the war and within that group around 20,000 were amputees.³⁰ In centuries past, society had ignored and forgotten disabled people because disability was seen as evidence of a person's inherent sinfulness. This could not be the case anymore. With the end of the Civil War, the country had to address disability head on, particularly because many disabled men were out of work. Due to inaccessible environments, these men, typically the financial breadwinners for their families, could no longer provide for their wives and children. In response, the government decided to create a disability pension to assist those struggling. The first step towards its creation was to legally define disability. Instead of relying on past Puritan conceptions of the term, the government defined disability as an inability to labor.³¹ By establishing this pension, the US government constructed and, to a certain extent, enforced a new identity for the American public. This new identity, though, was not as all-encompassing as disability is defined today.

³⁰ Jessie Wright-Mendoza, "The Invisible Struggle of the Civil War's Veterans," *JSTOR Daily*, October 18, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-invisible-struggles-of-civil-war-veterans/>.

³¹ Nielsen, *Disability History*, 86.

Specifically, the term “labor” was a highly gendered, racial, and class-based definition. Many disabled men could still labor, but not in the ways that it was conceptualized by the pension law. Labor invoked traditional masculine ideals of physicality, strength, recognized competence, and bodily work.

When disabled men could not adhere to this nineteenth-century standard of labor, they were automatically conceptualized as its antithesis – that is, as weak and feeble. For men who had built their self-identities upon their own physical strength, this perceived reversal was jarring. Instead of understanding their disability with pride, many disabled men began to view their disability as some type of masculine deficiency. Masculinity as an identity, then, became even more intimately tied to the ability to labor and to the able-body, encouraging able-bodies to become the norm in society. Societal perceptions of disability did not help this issue either. Even though disability was becoming more visible because of the war, there was still tremendous resistance to understanding and accepting its prevalence.³² Cities across the United States began to pass what has been referred to as “ugly laws” which prohibited disabled people from being in public. For example, in 1867, San Francisco banned “any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object from the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places of the city.”³³ These laws were especially detrimental to those who were poor, since begging was often the only way for disabled men to provide for their families. These laws prevented men from doing so, furthering connections between disability and masculine deficiency.

³² Nielsen, *Disability History*, 83.

³³ Nielsen, *Disability History*, 89.

The Trouble with (an Able-Bodied) Wilderness

The idealization of American wilderness, in part, came out of this crisis of masculine identity, a crisis that was not just exclusive to disabled men. Before industrialization, able-bodied men worked primarily in agriculture to make a living. Undertaking work outside in the fresh air, men tilled the land or planted seed in order to put food on the table. They, too, based their worth as providers for their family on their physical ability in agriculture production. Industrialization and the rise of the factory destroyed this agrarian way of providing for these men. Many American men, no longer using their bodies in the ways to which they had been accustomed, found themselves thrust into a paradigm shift wherein they felt bereft of a key part of their masculinity.³⁴ Industrialization also prompted another change: the now common factory was destroying natural landscapes in the name of progress. In response to these changes, Euro-American Romantics, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, launched a movement focusing on the preservation of wilderness. For these writers, wilderness was incredibly specific: it was an untouched, virgin, and pristine landscape devoid of humans. This conception of wilderness, though, was exclusive and oppressive. As many Native scholars and environmental historians have rightfully pointed out, this idea of an uninhabited wilderness was premised on the removal of Native Americans. Mark David Spence, in his book *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks*, argues that the creation of national parks (spaces that nineteenth-century men would categorize as wilderness) obscured a long history of Native land dispossession and removal in the name of preservation and the

³⁴ Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 17.

pristine.³⁵ Thus, wilderness at its core was an intentional space of erasure.³⁶ I wish to build on and extend these existing arguments about wilderness and erasure to include discussions of disability. Namely, a pristine and untouched wilderness also excluded disabled individuals from participating more broadly in this narrative primarily through two key cornerstones of this nineteenth-century idea: the sublime and the frontier.

“Sublime wilderness,” an idea that spread among Romantic artists and thinkers, referred to the embodiment of God in nature. The divine’s embodiment in nature was not merely meant to be awe-inspiring; it required a personal transformation that had inherent connections to ideals of physical strength in the nineteenth century. In a sublime wilderness, a man underwent an evolution from a crisis of endurance, fear, and martyr-like suffering to victory, elation, and catharsis; when he finished a trek across an untouched, virgin land, he could claim a pure, manly strength.³⁷ One early example of the sublime experience can be found in poet Samuel Coleridge’s description of climbing in the Lake District of England, where he claimed a

...state of almost prophetic Trance and Delight--& blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason & the Will, which O God, I exclaimed aloud—how calm, how blessed am I now / I know not how to proceed, how to return / but I am calm & fearless & confident / if this Reality were a Dream, if I were asleep, what agonies had I suffered! What screams!³⁸

³⁵ Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁶ The summary of erasure and wilderness is only a brief overview of a rich and robust area of scholarship. For more, see: Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long History of Indigenous Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2019); William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness.”

³⁷ Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 41.

³⁸ Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 41.

This embodied experience in the wilderness, this fear-inducing adventure where he found God, reproduced and even elevated the rewards of labor that men were so desperately seeking: now more than ever, physicality was tied to virtue in the West.

These sublime experiences in a pristine wilderness excluded disabled men, but this was not to say that disabled people did not have physicality or athleticism; it is abundantly clear now in the twenty-first century that many disabled individuals are also accomplished athletes. The problem for disabled individuals at the time of Yellowstone's founding was how physicality was so narrowly defined. Disabled people could not access the sublime in nature because the type of physical strength that was deemed necessary to venture into the remote wilderness eluded them. As a result, many disabled individuals never had the opportunity both practically and conceptually to experience the Romantic ideal of the sublime; if they did, they had to hide their disability or create distractions from it when in wilderness.

The nineteenth-century concept of the frontier similarly held troubling implications for disabled individuals. The frontier, a geographic fantasy of an untouched and abundant Western landscape, stemmed from a popular settler yearning for a simpler, more primitive life that would infuse urban men with a vigor and an independence that they had lost in the emasculated industrial East. As a result, believers in the frontier mission rejected excessive development and everything it stood for in favor of the rugged individualism and open spaces that the West could provide. Similar to the physical struggle that the sublime wilderness demanded, men attained vigor on the frontier through the physical conquests of an untouched landscape.³⁹ Once again though, this idea based itself upon ableist principles. Although they would not have thought of it

³⁹ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 13-14.

in these terms, because of its rejection of modernity and technology, this frontier ideology prevented any changes to the landscape to make it more accessible for disabled people, rendering them invisible in such environments. Furthermore, disabled people could still not live up to this level and ideal of physicality required by the frontier because of society's view of disability as an inherent weakness. Disabled men could not labor in the way of a rugged individual.

These two elements – the sublime and the frontier – combined to create a pristine wilderness that is both devoid of human connection and replete with pure expressions of physicality, culturally erasing disabled individuals in such spaces. In addition to this nineteenth-century concept of wilderness being a highly gendered and racial construction, then, it also had undercurrents of ableism.

National Parks: A Remedy for the Country

These concepts and realities, both disability and wilderness, converged to generate the idea of a public park. Many believed that public parks could be a balm for the country in this moment of national crisis. Frederick Law Olmsted, a famous landscape architect, spearheaded this growing park's movement by writing "The Olmsted Report on the Yosemite" in 1865. In the beginning of this document, he provided justification for the creation of a public, national park for two specific reasons. First, Olmsted believed that Yosemite's landscape was distinctly American, superior in many ways to foreign natural landscapes, and could prove to be a successful tourist attraction for its citizens and travelers from abroad.⁴⁰ Composed especially at a

⁴⁰ Frederick Law Olmsted, "Olmsted Report on Management of Yosemite, 1865," in *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents*, ed. Lary M. Dilsaver (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/anps/anps_index.htm, chapter 1.

time when the country appeared vulnerable and weak in the eyes of the global community, this reasoning reinvigorated American exceptionalism.

Olmsted's second reason for the creation of national parks related specifically to disability:

It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character is favorable to the health and vigor of men...that it not only gives pleasure for the time being but increases subsequent capacity for happiness. The want of such occasional recreation where men and women are habitually pressed by their business or household cares results in a class of disorders the characteristics quality of which is disability.⁴¹

He concluded by stating that recreating outside would ultimately produce a “prolongation of vigor.”⁴² Many scholars have understood this second reason to be about social issues more broadly, but I would argue that such a justification has direct connections to disability and the able-body. On the one hand, such a justification incorporated disability into the broader discussion of national parks. On the other hand, his inclusion of disability in his description of parks is costly as it framed disability in a way that continued to uplift and glorify able-body norms. Throughout this report, Olmsted used wilderness ideals of vigor and strength as characteristics that Yosemite Park would recover in disabled bodies; these characteristics could make them whole. However, his focus on recovery elevated the able-body, and its characteristics of vigor and strength, as the norm in society. As such, his writings negated the responsibility of society to not only understand and accept disability, but also create accommodations within the environment.

⁴¹ Olmsted, “Olmsted Report on Management of Yosemite, 1865.”

⁴² Olmsted, “Olmsted Report on Management of Yosemite, 1865.”

As he continued, the prominence of able-bodied norms became clearer as he clarified his understanding of wilderness and public national parks. When discussing the parameters of these parks, he wrote,

The first point to be kept in mind then is the preservation and maintenance as exactly as is possible of the natural scenery; the restriction, that is to say, within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodations of visitors, of all artificial constructions and the prevention of all constructions markedly inharmonious with the scenery or which would unnecessarily obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery.⁴³

Olmsted, just like many other nineteenth-century white men, believed that wilderness was and should continue to be an untouched place, a refuge from human management and interference. Yet, as I argued above, the idea of a virgin wilderness erased disabled individuals from these spaces. This guiding philosophy at its core precluded the types of environments and accommodations that disabled individuals would need to access them. Furthermore, this pristine wilderness had direct connections to ideals of physicality. By invoking the pristine, Olmsted cemented his point about the need for vigor in these spaces, which only continued to exclude disabled individuals who could not live up to those standards.

The fact was, though, that Olmsted and many Americans did not see wilderness as a place that erased or excluded disability; they did not even accept disability. During the post-Civil War era, Americans tended to approve of Olmsted's diagnosis and prescription for repairing disability in their country. As the news of a wonderous wild space out West reached the East, many Americans hurriedly embraced this able-bodied remedy of wilderness as white explorers set out to create America's first national park.

⁴³ Olmsted, "Olmsted Report on Management of Yosemite, 1865."

The Disabled Founding Fathers

The territory of Yellowstone National Park was and still is the original territory of various tribal nations including the Shoshone, Bannock, Crow, and Nez Perce.⁴⁴ Rumors of the unique nature of the region had been replete for decades, but no one had ever taken them seriously. It wasn't until after the Civil War that the need for wilderness revived legitimized interest and intrigue for this area. In order to explore the region more, the federal government forcibly removed the Native nations that called this place home. In 1868, after Indian removal, the treaties of Fort Bridger and Fort Laramie ceded large tracks of the land in northwestern Wyoming to the US government and created separate reservations for those displaced nations. Soon after, the first white expedition, the Cook-Folsom-Peterson Expedition of 1869, began. The reports from this expedition validated the fantastical stories that many fur trappers, white explorers, and Native peoples had been telling for years.⁴⁵

Because of the public's strong interest in the Yellowstone region, numerous exploring parties formed in the following years, comprised of men who were hailed as the Park's "founding fathers." One of these expeditions, the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition (known colloquially as the Washburn Expedition) left Fort Ellis, near modern day Bozeman, Montana, on August 22, 1870. The expedition had nine white explorers in total with a few cooks and packers. It was at this time that disability began to quietly enter the story of Yellowstone National Park. Many of the Park's early disability stories were hidden, though, often couched within the ableist narratives that worked to reclaim and cement masculinity during the late

⁴⁴ Aubrey L. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, (Yellowstone National Park: Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1977), 1: 93.

⁴⁵ Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, chapter 5.

nineteenth century. These “anti-disability” travel stories in Yellowstone reflected desires to heal an individual’s masculinity and their wounded, rapidly changing country.

Lt. Gustavus Doane: The Perfect Soldier

Among the core nine members of the Washburn Expedition group was Lt. Gustavus Doane, the highest-ranking officer of the expedition’s military escort. For Doane, exploring the West started early in life. He had spent his childhood years traveling with his family around the West as his parents searched for fortune. As he moved from California to Oregon and beyond, Doane began to grow an appreciation for nature. That appreciation only blossomed more as an adult when he joined the military and continued to travel. Like most male explorers of this time, human connectivity with nature had obvious undercurrents of physicality and strength. He wrote in one of his journals that “one cannot explore the earth’s surface from an observatory, nor by mathematics nor by the power of logic; it must be done physically...Caution might prevent, but with caution no results will be obtained. Risks must be taken, and there is an element in human affairs as fortune, good or bad.”⁴⁶

Doane’s statement exemplified the normative able-bodied experience of nature in the nineteenth-century American West that excluded disabled persons who were perceived to be incapable of such strength. Of course, Doane wrote this statement long before critiques of ableism took shape in American society. It was quite probable that disability did not even cross Doane’s mind as he constructed his view of nature. However, what is so interesting about this

⁴⁶ Orrin H. and Lorraine Bonney, *Battle Drums and Geysers: The Life and Journals of Lt. Gustavus Cheyney Doane, Soldier and Explorer of the Yellowstone and Snake River Regions*, (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1970), i.

statement is that Doane's commitment to the physical experience of pristine Western landscapes would soon be upended when he was thrust into the world of disability.

After the Civil War, Doane moved to Fort Ellis for a military position. Because he had cultivated extensive knowledge of the surrounding area (specifically the Paradise Valley), the government picked him to be the military escort for the Washburn Expedition to Yellowstone. While on the expedition, he kept a journal about his travels as a way to report back to his superiors when he returned. Unlike some of his other companions who kept journals, Doane wanted to keep his narrative of the journey simple and factual. He wrote that an expedition report should be "a faithful delineation. Such a report one likes to travel by — truthful, plain, and unembellished; a simple narrative of facts observed. It gives evidence of a correct eye and a sound judgment; of capacity for the work undertaken."⁴⁷

Doane's commitment to objectivity was found not just in the scientific details of the trip but also in the descriptions of his hand injury and subsequent disability. He wrote, "Since leaving Fort Elis, I had suffered considerably with a pain in the thumb of my right hand, which has now increased to such an extent as to amount to absolute torture. I had lanced here three times to the bone with a very dull pocketknife, in the hope of relief, which, however did not come."⁴⁸ Over the course of the next week, Doane gave very few updates about his hand injury, diverting attention away from the pain in favor of a more impartial tone about his surroundings.

⁴⁷ Bonney, *Battle Drums and Geysers*, 203-204.

⁴⁸ Gustavus C. Doane, "The Report of Lieut. Gustavus C. Doane upon the So-Called Yellowstone Expedition of 1870 to the Secretary of War," in *Early History of Yellowstone National Park and Its Relation to National Park Policies*, ed. Louis Cramton (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), Appendix M.

Through additional accounts of the expedition, we now know the details about the eventual intervention for his hand. One night after supper, Nathaniel Langford, another member of the expedition, insisted that he perform a makeshift operation to relieve the now severe swelling in Doane's hand. After convincing Doane to comply, Langford enlisted the help of everyone in the camp. Some emptied a military cartage box to act as an operating table while others prepared a dull penknife, the only surgical instrument on hand sharp enough to slice through human flesh. At the last moment, Doane asked that Langford use some of the chloroform from the first aid kit to sedate him. Langford replied that he had no idea how to administer it safely, and so Doane let out a resigned sigh and allowed Langford to proceed. Of the operation, Doane wrote,

My hand was enormously swelled, and even ice water ceased to relieve the pain...A consultation was held, which resulted in having the thumb split open. Mr. Langford performed the operation in a masterly manner, dividing thumb bone and all. An explosion ensued, followed by immediate relief.⁴⁹

This narration about a particularly painful account was honest, yet it did not paint the most vivid picture of the whole event. When one digs into this story a bit deeper, there was quite a bit occurring behind the scenes that Doane excluded from this story. Most notably, Doane did not mention that even though the operation temporarily relieved the pain from the thumb injury, it also permanently injured his hand, presumably severing vital nerves required for hand use.⁵⁰ In the weeks to come on this expedition, he could not perform everyday camp tasks that he once

⁴⁹ Doane, "The Report of Lieut. Gustavus C. Doane upon the So-Called Yellowstone Expedition of 1870 to the Secretary of War," Appendix M.

⁵⁰ Historian Aubrey Haines supported this claim by writing in a footnote, "Dr. Merrill G. Burlingame had this information from Mrs. Doane, and a comparison of the lieutenant's handwriting before and after the operation does support that conclusion." Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 344.

could because the environment around him was not accommodating to this injury. For instance, Doane could not saddle his horse because of the loss of hand function the operation caused. Doane now had a disability.

A few days later, he enlisted help in writing his daily report, but he stubbornly took back control of the pencil before his thumb had healed. The experience of pain while writing would have been hard to ignore, but he did not reference it in any of his entries. He would not have wanted his supervisors (or us) to imagine him gritting his teeth while writing about the scenery of the day. What does this omission mean? On a practical level, it could simply indicate that Doane was trying to write a depersonalized and objective report. Perhaps he did not believe it appropriate to write about his individual pain and anguish. However, it is impossible to separate that desire from the larger historical and cultural movements afoot. Doane was a proud man who believed in the value of physical strength. He would not have wanted to draw attention to his disability because he did not want to seem weak, both to society and to himself. This type of self-censorship then went beyond just feeding into and reinforcing harmful cultural narratives about the body. It showed how these narratives not only justified the erasure of disabled individuals from society, but also discouraged and shamed those people from speaking up in the first place.

In addition to Doane, other members of the Washburn expedition kept journals to document their travels. Langford's journal in particular was the most in depth as it had a more subjective tone than Doane's, giving the reader more personal accounts of camp life. Along their journey, expedition members seemed committed to having an enjoyable time at camp, relaxing and trading stories from the day. Each night, Jake Smith, the youngest member, would challenge someone to a shooting contest or a game of cards, fantastically losing each time. Even though

these asides added some much-needed flavor to these rather stale expedition reports, these more detailed descriptions proved to distract from Doane's disability by uplifting the sublime narrative of wilderness.

For example, as soon as Langford finished describing Doane's initial pain, a fear-inducing encounter, he wrote, "we are all overwhelmed with astonishment and wonder at what we have seen, and we feel that we have been near the very presence of the Almighty...My own mind is so confused that I hardly know where to commence in making a clear record of what is at this moment floating past my mental vision."⁵¹ This type of sublime narrative became even more poignant and powerful when one examines the position of it: this description immediately followed a shorter section about Doane's disability. This order cannot be coincidental; in order to distract the reader from Doane's disability, a sign of frailty in the wilderness, he immediately succeeded it by reestablishing narratives of strength. As the journal continued, the same order repeated, constantly invoking the sublime following moments of pain and disability. This narrative, then, was no longer just about "weakness": it was rather an experience that transformed this weakness and pain into elation and strength. Thus, when read as a whole, Langford's journal subverted the disabled experience and continued to define the early travels of white explorers in Yellowstone in able-bodied ways.

Doane's and Langford's accounts both try to keep disability sequestered and hidden by distracting from it or ignoring it altogether. Their accounts help to explain why historians have

⁵¹ Nathaniel Pitt Langford, *Diary of the Washburn Expedition to the Yellowstone and Firehole Rivers in the Year 1870*, (Leopold Classic Library), 29.

overlooked Doane's disability in the larger story of Yellowstone's conquest: Doane himself erased it from the narrative, and he was not the only disabled individual on this trip to do so.

Truman C. Everts: Creating a Sublime Epic

Truman C. Everts was arguably one of the more memorable figures of the Washburn Expedition. His perilous separation from the party in Yellowstone for 37 days and subsequent rescue provided intrigue and interest into the expedition at a time when little was known about the region. Despite his fame, though, there are few details about his life before his time in Yellowstone. In 1864, as an adult, he moved to the Yellowstone region when President Lincoln appointed him as the Assessor of Internal Revenue for Montana. Soon after, though, his polarizing personality and a change in the political tides got him dismissed from his job. By some stroke of luck or misfortune, depending how one looks at it, he decided to stay in Montana long enough to accompany the Washburn Expedition on a "vacation" before he moved back east.⁵² This expedition was far from a vacation for Everts, though, as he got lost and had to spend weeks trying to survive the often unforgiving Yellowstone climate. When two hunters eventually found him in Yellowstone, his condition had deteriorated significantly. He was severely underweight and malnourished from living off of thistle roots and the occasional fish. He had severe burns on his thigh from the geysers and fires alike, and his extremities were frostbitten. As a result, he had also begun to experience hallucinations. Although Everts' story has been told many times today by historians and documentarians alike, a disability lens has been noticeably missing.

⁵² Aubrey Haines, *Yellowstone National Park: Its Exploration and Establishment* (Washington: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1974), Appendix, https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/haines1/iee4.htm#everts.

Perhaps one of the most obvious reasons why history forgot disability in relation to Everts and this incident was that Everts himself distracted the American public from it. His book *37 Days of Peril*, the only firsthand account about the incident, was the most obvious example of this. The book not only showed how Everts viewed his body and the landscape, during these 37 days, but also how he relied on able-bodied narratives and cultural norms to construct the ultimate sublime wilderness chronicle. The only time that he mentioned a disability was when he narrated his initial separation from the party. As they traversed a forest of downed trees, Everts on horseback saw a better pathway through this confusing maze and headed forward without any of his companions. He soon became lost, though, and wrote, "...and my eyesight being defective, I spurred forward, intending to return with assistance from the party."⁵³ This statement although slight was incredibly powerful from a disability perspective. Everts admitted to having a disability, although he never used this word explicitly to describe his eyesight. This admission was also the only place where he mentioned it. Very similar to Doane, he likely excluded it from his momentous story because of the impact that disability could have on his life; Everts did not want to seem weak or somehow lesser because of his eyesight. Especially as a *man* who just survived a near-death experience, Everts would want to paint a picture of strength and resiliency through hardship; an existing disability would make that goal very difficult to achieve in society.

What did Everts focus on then to paint that picture of resiliency? He instead decided to vividly frame his bodily suffering through the lens of the sublime. In the following days, it became clear that his situation was dire. As he examined the ground to find traces of the

⁵³ Truman C. Everts, "37 Days of Peril," *Scribner's Monthly*, November 1871, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30924/30924-h/30924-h.htm>, 2.

expedition, he foolishly decided to leave his horse untied. The horse became scared after a crack of thunder and ran off with all of Everts' provisions. That night, he managed to make a fire out of an old opera-glass but ended up falling into the fire, writing, "Whenever, by fatigue and weakness, my terror yielded to drowsiness, the least noise roused me to a sense of the hideousness of my condition. Once, in a fitful slumber, I fell forward into the fire, and inflicted a wretched burn on my hand. Oh! With what agony I long for day!"⁵⁴ He immediately followed this passage by writing, "I doubt if distress and suffering can ever entirely obliterate all sense of natural grandeur and magnificence."⁵⁵ This type of juxtaposition embodied the sublime in Yellowstone, thus constructing his experience as a grand epic. The suffering of his burned hand and the fear he felt was transformed into utter elation at the sight of the landscape that he was looking at. Instead of focusing on his "weakness," he used the contrast as a way to further the illusion of strength; the painful incident seemed inconsequential when the injury itself made him stop and wonder at the scenery.

This type of "necessary" suffering continued as Everts wandered through the mountains, hoping to find rescue. Because of the extreme conditions his body was under, he began to hallucinate, a fact that continues for the remainder of his time in Yellowstone. He wrote that, "my mind, though unimpaired to those perceptions needful to self-preservation, was in a condition to receive impressions akin to insanity...Nevertheless, I was perfectly conscious of the tendency of these morbid influences, and often tried to shake them off, but they would ever

⁵⁴ Everts, "37 Days of Peril," 10.

⁵⁵ Everts, "37 Days of Peril," 11.

return with increased force.”⁵⁶ He went on to say that these hallucinations that others have misnamed as insanity were actually God Himself speaking to Everts.

Such a characterization of physical and mental suffering rhetorically distanced Everts from disability even as his disability became clearer and more evident the longer he was lost. Everts’ framing was not uncommon for individuals at the time, especially those who experienced mental illness. As the medicalization of disability grew in the post-Civil War era, mental institutions also became more prominent and common. These types of institutions were similar in spirit to ugly laws: they locked up people with mental illnesses because the public deemed them unacceptable and, even more, disordered. Everts reframed and, to a certain extent, fought back against this stereotype: by invoking God, Everts was blessed, not insane. This act of reframing not only made his hallucinations socially acceptable, but further emphasized Everts’ pure masculinity. It was his suffering that allowed him to see and find God in nature. His disability was no longer the focus; instead, the focus of his writing was the sublime.

If Everts’ rhetorical move was not enough for readers to experience the power of the sublime, then Everts’ ending hammered home this point. He spent the majority of his final paragraphs not describing his rescue or his recovery process but highlighting the grand scenery of Yellowstone, writing, “In the course of events the time is not far distant when the wonders of the Yellowstone will be made accessible to all lovers of sublimity, grandeur, and novelty in natural scenery...”⁵⁷ Such an ending made it clear: Everts’ tale in its entirety is a wilderness epic. He began his story by describing the levels of martyr-like suffering and panic he experienced

⁵⁶ Everts, “37 Days of Peril,” 9.

⁵⁷ Everts, “37 Days of Peril,” 15.

while braving the wild environment. He ended by emphasizing the beauty and elation he found in Yellowstone. The arc of the sublime was complete. For his masculine identity, threatened by changing times, this experience of suffering in the wilderness would be healing.

Like many narratives that alluded to disability at this time, questions remained. Did Everts, with all of his injuries, fully recover? Did his eyesight continue to affect his life? These questions were only complicated by Everts' general disregard for disability. For Everts, all that obviously remained was his extraordinary escape from death in Yellowstone, a story that framed him as an idealized frontiersman. Again, it made sense why this disability story was not remembered; Everts himself made it this way. Yet, the story of disability still remained, even if one has to dig beneath the surface to find it.

Henry D. Washburn: The Ideal Victorian Man

Even though Henry D. Washburn was the leader of the expedition, he was perhaps its most elusive character. Very few of his personal documents have survived to this day; in fact, most of what is known about him today is just basic biographical information. Washburn was born in Vermont in 1832 to a modest family. As an adult, he became a lawyer by trade in Indiana and served as county auditor from 1854-1861. Soon after, the Civil War put that career path on hold. As a soldier, he first rose to the rank of captain for the 18th Regiments of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry for the Union Army. Of their most notable battles, Washburn and the 18th Regiments were a part of the bloody Siege of Vicksburg. While there, Washburn spent countless weeks in the humid and swampy trenches that the Union Army had dug around the city of Vicksburg, Mississippi. No doubt, Washburn struggled with the extreme heat as the siege went into early July. The Union Army eventually won the battle, a decisive and altering victory for the

North, but Washburn did not share in this triumph. Because of the constant extreme conditions, Washburn, now a colonel, developed consumption (tuberculosis), a disease that would be with him until he died. Soon after, Washburn was honorably discharged with the rank of major general and sent home to Indiana. He returned a changed man, though, as he was now a disabled war veteran. Even though his disability is known to scholars there is little else out there; the only bit of information we have about his disability after the war was from his wife, Serena, who wrote in her autobiography, “His health was sadly broken by exposure, but he had the same energetic, loving spirit that made friends for him everywhere.”⁵⁸

After the war, Washburn decided to move to Montana, like so many others, in hopes that the climate of the West might heal him from his tuberculosis. He put his skills from the military to use while there, eventually becoming the general surveyor for the region. Because his job demanded that he develop expertise and knowledge of the land, he was handpicked to be the leader of the expedition to Yellowstone.

If Washburn moved West to experience its healing environment, how would Yellowstone, an often unforgiving and unknown environment, affect his disability? Just like Doane and Everts, Washburn’s time in the region proved to be challenging, especially once Everts was lost during the expedition. In hopes of finding him, the party took the risk of spending an extra week in the region, a decision that proved perilous for Washburn. As the team trudged up and down mountains, they were caught in an unfortunate autumnal snowstorm. As a result, Washburn developed a severe cold which compounded his tuberculosis. But, like the other

⁵⁸ Autobiography of Serena J. Washburn, 1904, Rare Books Collection, Manuscripts(Washburn2), Yellowstone National Park Library, Gardiner, MT, 21.

disabled members of the expedition, he did not disclose this new element of his disability, even in his personal journal. The account, which was eventually be published in *The New York Times* upon his return from Yellowstone, was largely plain and scientific. He described the height of the canyons, made simple remarks about the beauty of the area, and even briefly mentioned the snowstorm; but there was nothing there to suggest that his tuberculosis was flaring up at this time.⁵⁹

This act of self-censorship had been seen before, but Washburn's suppression was different from that of Doane and Everts because Washburn's disability had been the result of an illness sustained from his experience as a soldier in the Civil War. The erasure of his disability from his expedition narrative demonstrated that Washburn did not want to be stereotyped as the weak war veteran. Even further, he did not want to admit this perceived weakness to himself. After spending years in the military, the bodily strength that allowed him to quickly rise from rank to rank was, in his eyes, diminished. The omission of his disability from his writings allowed him to present himself as strong and pass as an able-bodied individual. For any disabled war veteran at this time, passing meant everything: it represented both societal and self-acceptance during a time when disability was anything but that.

Even though Washburn could pass as able-bodied, the realities of his disability could not be ignored. In fact, the cold affected his existing tuberculosis so severely that as soon as he returned home from the expedition, he died. Even though Washburn could no longer cover up his disability, others took up the mantle to preserve Washburn's able-bodied identity and reputation

⁵⁹ Henry D Washburn, "The Yellowstone Expedition," *The New York Times*, October 14, 1870, Vertical Files, Explorers & Trappers(Washburn), Yellowstone National Park Library, Gardiner, MT, 4.

as a resilient and strong leader. At his funeral, Cornelius Hedges, a member of the Washburn Expedition, gave a eulogy for his friend that did just that by writing, "...by the lights of his manly virtue, resume our faith and reanimate our fainting courage to love as nobly and so as hopefully as he has done."⁶⁰ These attributes of manly virtue and courage went beyond just merely ignoring his disability; Hedges memorialized him as the idealized Victorian man, the very opposite of what a disabled man was considered to be at this time.

Hedge's idealization of Victorian masculinity continued further in his eulogy when he made more explicit references to Washburn's strength and physicality. He said, "Danger and difficulty were neither overlooked nor defused, but with resources expanding with the emergency, he preserved a confidence unshaken and temper unruffled through trials of immense difficulty and delicacy...his cool prompt readiness to take the foremost and hardest part of danger or labor."⁶¹ Hedges made a clear connection between virtue and labor. Such a connection would make it challenging for the listener to think of Washburn as disabled since disabled individuals could not labor. As such, Hedges continued to cement Washburn as a competent and able-bodied leader.

Although Washburn and his expedition partners did not acknowledge his disability, he did mention disability more generally in his journal, especially in relation to the healing properties of the Yellowstone region. As Washburn described the various thermal hot springs as favorable aspect to the Park, he wrote, "The lake...will in time be a great summer resort, for its various inlets, surrounded by the finest mountain scenery, cannot fail to be very popular to the

⁶⁰ Cornelius Hedges Eulogy of Hon. Henry D. Washburn, January 29, 1871, Maps Collection, Maps B10-H, Yellowstone National Park Library, Gardiner, MT.

⁶¹ Cornelius Hedges Eulogy of Hon. Henry D. Washburn.

seeker of pleasure, while its high elevation and numerous medicinal springs will attract the invalid.”⁶² For the first time in this region’s known history, Washburn was not just mentioning the disability community⁶³ but was including them as stakeholders when considering the feasibility of Yellowstone as a park. However, just because Washburn included them, it did not mean that this attention was entirely positive. He did not find value in the disabled community because of their inherent worth and dignity; he found value in the sense that they would provide profit to the Park. For Washburn, disabled individuals became a commodity.

Thus, even though disability became more present in popular discourse during the late nineteenth century, the inferiority of the identity continued and was often perpetuated by those with disabilities themselves. The intersection of disability and healing in Yellowstone did not go away after the Washburn Expedition; in fact, it emerged more forcefully when Yellowstone officially became a national park.

Philetus Norris: A Glimmer of Recognition

After the Washburn Expedition, the Yellowstone region grew in acclaim. Following one more expedition, the Hayden Expedition, Yellowstone became the country’s first proper national park in 1872. Because this was the country’s first national park, there were many questions that came with its new classification, namely about its management. How was the government going to manage this national park in a way that would both preserve the scenery and also provide

⁶² “The Yellowstone Expedition,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 1870, Vertical File Collection, Explorers(Washburn), Yellowstone National Park Library.

⁶³ It is important to note that those at this time would not use the phrase “disability community” to describe themselves. I, however, have chosen to label it as such here and elsewhere because a group of disabled individuals did gather *because* of their respective disabilities. I believe that such a motive constitutes some type of community.

enjoyment for the people? To answer this question, the federal government appointed the Park's first superintendent, Nathaniel Langford. But this position was not as prestigious and glorified as it perhaps is today. Not only was the job unpaid, but its occupant was also responsible for upkeeping the Park with little to no funds. These challenging factors eventually led to Langford leaving the position in 1877. With this position open, Philetus Norris applied and was picked to replace Langford as the Park's second superintendent.

Norris's experiences before coming to Yellowstone prepared him to take on this uncharted and challenging role. Many historians describe him as both whimsical and pragmatic in the ways he approached nature. Indications of his adventuresome spirit appeared soon after he was born in New York in 1821. At the age of eight, he guided tourists to the falls of the Genesee River for ten cents; he often referenced this experience as responsible for developing his love of nature.⁶⁴ Like many of the other prominent individuals of the early years in the Park, the Civil War took him away from pursuing his passion and instead placed him on the battlefield as a captain. It was during one of those battles that he severely injured his spine and shoulder when his horse was shot out from under him. He was honorably discharged from the army after this incident and spent the following months recovering to the extent that he could.

As the years went on, this war injury did not seem to play an overt role in Norris's life. After establishing a prosperous real estate company and newspaper in his self-named town of Norris, Michigan, Norris used the financial success to travel West more. In 1875, he visited Yellowstone for the first time and kept a journal, like he had always done, to document his

⁶⁴ Lee H. Whittlesey, *Storytelling in Yellowstone: Horse and Buggy Tour Guides*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 108.

journey. This account, which he later published as *The Great West: A Journal of Rambles over Mountains and Plains*, resembled a style similar to Doane and Washburn's respective accounts of the Yellowstone. He methodically described the geysers and mud pots while also sprinkling in subtle elements of the sublime into his overall narrative.⁶⁵ He omitted any reflections or experiences about his war injury in this account. Perhaps it did not yet play an overt role in his life, or perhaps like so many others he knew the societal consequences associated with disability. However, after he became superintendent of Yellowstone, an often harsh and revealing environment, events occurred that made his thoughts and reflections about disability clearer.



Figure 1. Philetus Norris. "Portrait of Philetus Norris," National Park Service, updated October 15, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/people/philetus-norris.htm>

⁶⁵ Philetus Norris, *The Great West: Introductory to a Journal of Rambles Over Mountains and Plains* (San Marina, CA, Huntington Library, 1960), Rare Book Collection, Yellowstone National Park Library, 3-5.

Unlike Langford, who spent very little of his time in Yellowstone, Norris reveled in this opportunity and embraced his superintendent position fully. One historian wrote that he, “certainly looked the part: with long hair, flowing white/gray beard, buckskins, and an aristocratic yet rustic aura.”⁶⁶ This look of a classic frontiersman was only amplified by his activities within the Park. He spent his first few months as superintendent familiarizing himself with the landscape, often spending countless weeks on horseback. It was on one of these trips, though, that disability came to the forefront of Norris’s mind. In one of his reports, he wrote:

There the roar of waters, with fumes of sulphur from the Grand Canon, frightened my horse to backing and the breaking of a stirrup-strap, hurling me headlong through a clump of service-bushes many feet down a precipice upon the jagged lava-rocks below, breaking compass, watch, and field-glass, and rendering me temporarily insensible. Though partially recovered before arrival of the General and party, the injury to my nearly broken neck and back, my arm, and an old shoulder-wound, was so severe as to compel my most reluctant return to the Mammoth Hot Springs. [I] greatly benefited by two days’ bathing there...I am still suffering, I fear, a permanent injury to my shoulder and spine.⁶⁷

Even though Norris fit the image of a rugged frontiersman, this statement defied and challenged the norms associated with this type of man. Unlike the men from the Washburn Expedition, Norris was very upfront about his disability and did not shy away from discussing it. He not just openly discussed his disability without embellishment, but he also associated himself with the larger disability community. Mammoth Hot Springs, like many of the springs in the Park, was a popular place for disabled individuals to visit as a way to “cure” themselves of their disabilities. Norris identified with this group in his narrative by stating that his permanent injury, his

⁶⁶ Whittlesey, *Storytelling in Yellowstone*, 109.

⁶⁷ Norris, “1877 Superintendent's Annual Report,” 840.

disability, greatly improved from the springs also. While Norris's statement was subtle, it showed that he perhaps resisted judgments of weakness by making his disability public record.

Norris's upfront comments about disability did not just end here in his annual report. He went on to praise the healing powers of Mammoth Hot Springs, writing,

This is especially evident at the Mammoth Hot Springs, the crumbling and all-eroding effects of the elements, adding the halo of ceaseless contrast and change to the other weird wonders of the "fairy land." This assures constant interest in new view and description of and anxiety to revisit it, especially by those benefited by bathing in any of the countless medicinal springs.⁶⁸

Norris therefore placed disabled individuals in the dominant narrative of Yellowstone, but at a cost. Like Washburn, it was clear that his attention to disabled individuals came from commercial motives rather than from any deliberate attempt to include them into an iconic national space.

Mammoth Hot Springs: "Marring Nature's Stately Drama"

Nowhere was the emerging narrative of Yellowstone's healing properties more evident than in the development of Mammoth Hot Springs and its first hotel. In 1871, J.C. McCartney and H.R. Horr, two hunters, were exploring the region to see if the rumors of this wonderland were true. As they finished the 1,000 foot climb from modern day Gardiner up to the Park, breathless from the change in altitude, they took a break to marvel at the terraces of Mammoth Hot Springs. That night as they sat beside the campfire, they thought about the possibility of opening up a hotel in this unclaimed region. A few weeks later, they had laid claim to an area in the lower terrace near present day Liberty Cap and built the Park's first hotel. The structure they

⁶⁸ Norris, "1877 Superintendent's Annual Report," 841-842.



Figure 2. McCartney's Hotel. "McCartney's Hotel, Long-View," YELL 941, Army Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

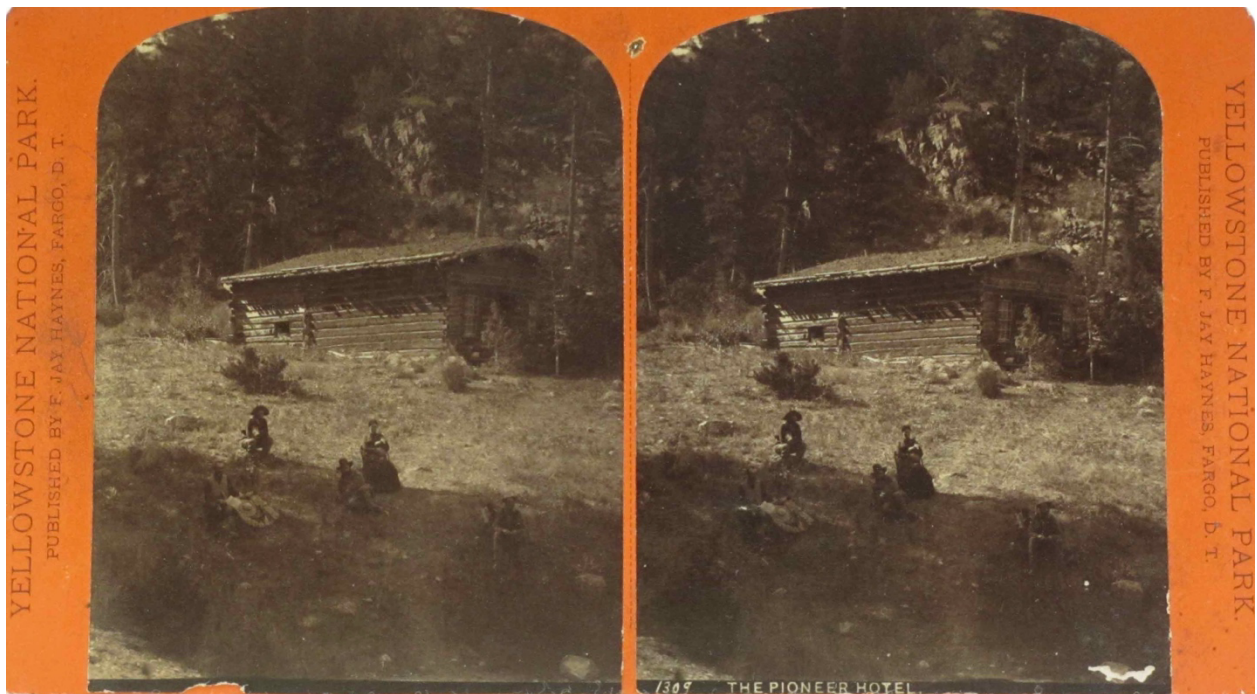


Figure 3. Closer View of McCartney's Hotel. "McCartney's Hotel," YELL 941, Army Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

built was not nearly as luxurious or big as the hotel there today. McCartney's hotel, as it was named, was a small log cabin with a dirt floor and an accompanying bath house. In 1872, questions arose as to the legality of the structure when Yellowstone became a national park, but, because this structure and claim to the land predated the national park, it was grandfathered into the region.⁶⁹

Over the course of the next few months, hundreds of people visited the hotel. It became clear that the hotel was a booming business not just because it was the only accommodation within the Park but because it also capitalized on a popular theme to draw in its visitors: the West as a healing, wonderous place.⁷⁰ This narrative can be found in advertisements and firsthand accounts of visitors who went to the springs. As one article in *The Helena Weekly Herald* put it, "There will undoubtedly be a large number of visitors seeking health and pleasure at these springs this summer. The wonders of the surrounding country, and great medicinal virtues of the waters of the springs have attained a national reputation."⁷¹ Many in the surrounding area also relied on the popularity of the springs as one man, John Werks, advertised, "Ho! Ho! Ho! For Mammoth Hot Springs. I am now prepared to carry invalids and pleasure parties from Bozeman to the celebrated Hot Springs of Horr and McCartney."⁷² Washburn and Norris were right in stating that the disabled individuals would be a reliable source of patronage and money, not just

⁶⁹ Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 129.

⁷⁰ For more on this theme, see: Gregg Mitman, *Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁷¹ "Mammoth Hot Springs," *The Helena Weekly Herald*, May 8, 1873, 8.

⁷² John Werks, "Ho! Ho! Ho! For Mammoth Hot Springs," *The Bozeman Avant Courier*, August 29, 1872.

for the Park but for tourism in the region as well.⁷³ This celebratory narrative of healing raised some concerns, though. The glorification of the “cure” in disabled bodies denied that disability was a societal problem and instead made it an individual one. This issue then led to another problem with the cure: it uplifted the able-body. By encouraging disabled people to accept a cure, these statements implied that disabled people should change themselves to attain the social norm: an able-body.⁷⁴

During the nineteenth century, American society did not interpret the medicinal qualities of Mammoth Hot Springs in a nuanced light; many believed the place was the key to a miraculous chance at a new life. Yet, not all had these generous attitudes towards the cure and disability. For tourists like Edwin J. Stanley, healing was very specifically and narrowly defined as something that could only occur within a physical wilderness. Commenting on the medicinal qualities of the springs in his travel diary, Stanley wrote, “Some remarkable cures have been effected here, mostly diseases of the skin and rheumatism. But I think that the invigorating mountain-air and the healthful influencer of camp-life have much to do with many cures that are effected as these are known to be wonderful remedies in themselves of many of the ills which flesh is heir to.”⁷⁵

⁷³ For more reading on the healing properties of medicinal springs, see: Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

⁷⁴ The cure is a very nuanced topic. To read more about its complexities, see: Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfect: Grappling with the Cure*.

⁷⁵ Edwin J. Stanley, *Rambles in Wonderland or, Up the Yellowstone, and Among the Geysers and Other Curiosities of the National Park*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 58.

Stanley's excerpt here implied a difference in his description of the two means of curing. While one form of healing required sitting and bathing in warm waters, the other required a ruggedness and overt strength. Stanley, as a proponent of the latter, prioritized physical exertion over leisure, valuing the able-body and able-bodied means to "cure" oneself of disability. By doing so, he reinforced what Frederick Law Olmsted invoked in his "Olmsted Report on Yosemite," further strengthening a long history of able-bodied wilderness narratives.

Stanley perhaps exemplified a more subtle version of ableism at this time through his travelogue. Meanwhile, tourists like Thomas E. Sherman, an aspiring Catholic priest from the East Coast, exemplified more overt ableism and discrimination against the disabled people who would use the springs. In his journal about his visit to Yellowstone, Sherman wrote,

An enterprising frontiersman, McCartney by name, has built a number of bath houses to facilitate the use of the water by patients who come here to avail themselves of its salutary properties...Doubtless before long Mammoth Springs will be a common resort, perhaps a fashionable watering-place where the old will go to hobble and croak and the young to dance and chirp introducing scenes from the farce of life to mar the plot of nature's stately drama.⁷⁶

Such words were a powerful statement that placed value judgments on who did and did not belong in Yellowstone. As someone who seemingly subscribed to the dominant nineteenth-century wilderness narrative, it was unsurprising that he rejected McCartney's Hotel, a sign of modernization. Sherman went beyond just merely renouncing the hotel, though, and extended his criticism to the people who inhabited it. It was in his description of the elderly that he drew a clear line between physical strength and value; they could only "hobble" and "croak," making it difficult for them to be physical in the wilderness. As Sherman continued, his language became

⁷⁶ Thomas E. Sherman, "Across the Continent II. – The National Park," in *Ho! For Wonderland: Travelers' Accounts of Yellowstone, 1872-1914*, ed. Lee H. Whittlesey and Elizabeth A. Watry (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 55.

even more forceful and violent; disabled individuals' presence was not just lesser here, but it also destroyed nature itself. To Sherman then, only specific people and activities belonged in nature's stately drama: those who not just appreciated and valued an untouched wilderness, but also those who did not need assistance in moving through it.

Sherman's one small statement here illustrated a larger historical trend: disabled people were not welcome in public spaces, even in Yellowstone, the land of wondrous healing. Such cultural attitudes explain why stories of disability, even in healing narratives, were excluded from popular thought; in the words of Sherman, they "mar the plot of nature's stately drama."⁷⁷

In the decades to come, the names of Washburn and Norris would be cemented into the Park's identity as they became associated with some of the most famous attractions in Yellowstone. Despite the prevalence of these names, few know of their associations with disability. This chapter clearly explained the reasons for such an omission: these disabled individuals, and countless more, self-censored themselves out of a deep-seated fear about their own masculinity in this changing time. Regardless of this self-censorship, there is the fact that disability did exist in the Park. Even further, in the case of Mammoth Hot Springs, disability made the Park a possibility in those early, unsteady years. This type of tug and pull, between able-bodied masculinity in wilderness and the reality of disability and accessibility, was a tension that was lurking in the shadows during this time. It would not stay that way for long. This tension would begin to define disability in Yellowstone as the decades went on when the world found itself amid a countercultural revolution.

⁷⁷ Sherman, "Across the Continent II. – The National Park," 55.

CHAPTER TWO

UNTOUCHED AND INACCESSIBLE: TWO CONFLICTING ENVIRONMENTAL
IMAGINATIONS

When one approaches Old Faithful and its visitor center in Yellowstone today, signs of access are everywhere. After decades of what many visitors described as a cramped and outdated space, a new visitor center opened in 2010, signaling a new wave of accessibility within the Park. Currently, there are dozens of accessible parking spots, benches, and ramps that allow disabled individuals to enter and participate in one of the most popular wonders in Yellowstone; even in this isolated corner of Wyoming, accessibility exists. These features on the building and surrounding parking lot seem commonplace to any visitor today, but this accessibility was hard-fought for in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the tension between accessibility and preservation overtly defined the management of the Park. The tug and pull between these two management styles had characterized Yellowstone ever since the National Park Service was created in 1916. What was different about this moment in the 1960s was that access had taken on new meanings, encompassing disability. At the same time, preservation began to resemble older interpretations of the term, meanings that seemed to preclude disability. These new elements and the tension that followed often resulted in contradictions and conflicting messaging within natural spaces.

This chapter will explore this central tension through the lens of disability to examine how Yellowstone officials navigated and understood these two different ideals. After a brief background about disability rights in the 1960s and 1970s, this chapter will highlight foundational Park documents to argue that Yellowstone was returning to the ideals of a

nineteenth-century wilderness to favor preservation over access in their management style. This return had consequences both practically and conceptually for disabled individuals in the Park. Most extremely, these arguments barred disabled individuals from entering the backcountry, the last remnant of the pristine. And yet, arguments surrounding preservation did not always reign supreme; some Park officials, no doubt influenced by the rise of the disability rights movement, resisted this philosophy in favor of integrating a more holistic access for disabled individuals. This chapter will conclude by highlighting an example of that, the “Three Senses Nature Trail.” This trail ultimately proved that preservation and access, two seemingly opposed ideas, could coexist peacefully together.

Imbeciles No More: Disability in the 1960s and 1970s

In the decades following the Civil War, disability awareness gradually grew into the American public’s consciousness. Initially, this process began slowly as disability was still very much a social taboo. In the early twentieth century, the eugenics movement capitalized on this attitude and began a campaign to sterilize as many disabled people as possible. Proponents of this movement justified this sterilization campaign by insisting that the country’s strength relied on upright and able-bodied citizens, a narrative not that dissimilar from the nineteenth-century wilderness rhetoric of masculinity. Accordingly, the able-body continued to be deeply tied to the ideal American identity. Even when disabled individuals tried to protest this treatment, the Supreme Court, the highest court in the land, overruled them. In 1927, Justice Oliver Wendell

Holmes famously wrote in the decision of *Buck v. Bell*, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”⁷⁸

This type of treatment, though, did not dissuade disabled activists. In the 1960s and 1970s, they began to properly organize themselves in a fight for respect and independence. Like many countercultural movements of the time, this movement began at UC Berkeley. In 1962, Edward Roberts, a polio survivor, became the first disabled individual to attend UC Berkeley. While there, due to a lack of accessible housing at the university, Roberts had to live in the school’s hospital away from the regular dorms. This did not upset him, though. As more disabled individuals began attending Berkeley, Roberts and others transformed the hospital into a site of resistance for the disability community. As those within the hospital began speaking with one another, they realized that they shared a common experience: at Berkeley, they each respectively thrived in a way similar to able-bodied individuals because the environment was built for them. The accommodations in place made it possible for them to live mostly independently for the first time in their lives. They knew that on a broader scale, given proper accommodation, they too could flourish outside of the university. Thus, with Roberts at the helm, they decided to create the “Rolling Quads,” an activist group that advocated for accessibility in the larger Bay Area.⁷⁹

This type of grassroots resistance eventually grew into a national campaign. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Although this landmark bill helped protect the rights of many marginalized populations in the United States, the bill did not include

⁷⁸ Nielsen, *A Disability History*, 117.

⁷⁹ Nielsen, *A Disability History*, 163.

any protections for the civil rights of disabled individuals.⁸⁰ The disability movement decided then to think beyond just the Bay Area and fight for this much needed civil rights protection on a national level. The first landmark victory came in 1968 with the passage of the Architectural Barriers Act. This act required that federal and federally funded buildings must be designed, constructed, or altered to meet accessibility requirements for disabled individuals, similar to the spaces at Berkeley. Ideally, this act would literally open doors to places that disabled individuals had not had access to before: rest stop bathrooms, county voting offices, and even national park visitor centers. A law is only as good as its enforcement, though, and unfortunately there was little of that.⁸¹ As a result, the movement continued to demand more federal protection on a broader scale.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was an answer to that demand. Most of the act focused on extending and revising grants for vocational rehabilitation services for disabled individuals. However, this main purpose was not why the legislation became such a significant moment in the fight for disability rights: that distinction was reserved for section 504. This part of the act stated that anyone with federal aid could not discriminate based on disability, thus creating a miniature disability civil rights law.⁸² Now it was not just buildings that had to accommodate disabled individuals; federal employers and establishments had to do the same since they now

⁸⁰ Specifically, the bill outlaws discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.

⁸¹ Nielsen, *A Disability History*, 165.

⁸² The exact wording of this section is as follows: “No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 705 (20) of this title, shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service.”

could not deny someone the right to work because of their disability.⁸³ These crucial pieces of legislation and subsequent ramifications relied upon the philosophical foundation that Roberts and the Rolling Quads laid during their time at Berkeley: disabled individuals could thrive just as much as able-bodied individuals if the environment was accommodating. Now their dream of an accessible world was slowly starting to become a reality.⁸⁴

It would not be outlandish to say that such legislation would not have been passed if it was not for its timing. The countercultural turn of the 1960s and 1970s bolstered calls for equality and equity. More than any other time in recent history, this period was categorized by a call for change in every part of life: race, gender, and even wilderness. Whereas the disability movement called for radical change and paradigm shifts, the wilderness movement relied on older narratives to bolster itself up. These various approaches would ultimately end up with clashing philosophies that had substantial ramifications in natural spaces across the US like Yellowstone National Park.

Frozen in Time: The Revival of Nineteenth-Century Wilderness

In the years since the Civil War, wilderness became even more of a pillar in the everyday American home. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Organic Act, a piece of legislation which established the National Park Service (NPS) as a new agency within the Department of the Interior. The act created a much-needed organizational system to the existing national parks, but the act also unintendedly created an inherent tension at the heart of the park service that still plagues the agency today. The act charged the NPS with a double mandate “to

⁸³ Nielsen, *A Disability History*, 166.

⁸⁴ Even though the law was passed in 1973, enforcement of it was not immediate.

conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”⁸⁵ This act set up a fundamental question: how could the NPS both preserve the landscape while also making it accessible for future visitors?

Balancing these two seemingly opposed ideas became harder as Yellowstone grew in popularity. Thanks to the invention of the automobile, visitation to Yellowstone National Park steadily increased from a respectable 26,188 in 1905 to a record breaking 807,917 in 1946.⁸⁶ This large spike was not just because of the automobile, though; it went deeper. After World War Two, there was a large sense of unease due to distinct changes happening at home and abroad. Domestically, the war had introduced a series of new technologies that were becoming an everyday part of American lives. Internationally, of course, the country found itself in a cold war with the Soviet Union. With the introduction of the atomic bomb, another new technology, the American public became even more uneasy. All these swift changes led to stress, and many white middle-class Americans had a distinct feeling that life would not go back to the way it was before the war. The American public looked for a solution, and they found it by looking to the past: wilderness, untouched, once again became a remedy for this problem as these natural places would be devoid of the new stressors of everyday life. In their eyes, wilderness could be “an escape not *from* reality but *to* reality.”⁸⁷

New technology seemed to threaten this remedy. When the construction of the Echo Park Dam threatened the ecosystem of Dinosaur National Monument in 1955, groups like the Sierra

⁸⁵ Organic Act H.R. 15522, 64th Cong. (1926) (enacted)

⁸⁶ “NPS Stats, Visitor Use Statistics,” National Park Service.

⁸⁷ James Ramsey Ullman, *The Age of Mountaineering*, (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1964), 320.

Club and the Wilderness Society began one of the first big public campaigns to protest this invasion into pristine America. The campaign rallied around many principles, but one prominent one was a rejection of technology with one activist saying "...by machines, we are torn loose from the earth."⁸⁸ This attitude towards technology continued in the 1960s as the work of a few organizations grew into a proper environmental movement. Perhaps one of the most well-known pillars of this change was Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*. Her book warned Americans about the harmful dangers of pesticides and herbicides for all life and told readers to not trust the government, industry, or technology with the environment. Carson's work cemented a growing trend in some environmental circles at the time: technology (or more aptly human management of technology) and the environment could not peacefully coexist.

These thoughts eventually culminated in the creation of the Wilderness Act of 1964, a landmark conservation bill. Howard Zahniser, the primary author of this legislation, had been working on this bill for almost ten years at the time of its signing. Zahniser, the executive secretary at the Wilderness Society, had been a lover of nature his whole life. Born in Pennsylvania near Allegheny National Forest, he began to develop his own thoughts and beliefs about nature. By the time he joined the Wilderness Society, Zahniser had a multi-faceted philosophy and approach to wilderness. Like other men at this time, he appreciated a wilderness that was pristine in its nature, saying that "wilderness is a place where the hand of man has never set foot."⁸⁹ While affirming these more exclusive narratives of wilderness, he also viewed wilderness in a more holistic way, praising it as an example of the "interdependence of all life."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears*, 85.

⁸⁹ Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 229.

⁹⁰ Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 229.

Thus, Zahniser's beliefs about nature were not always fixed. At certain times, one approach came out more strongly than the other, a fact that the Wilderness Act illustrated. When speaking of the importance of preserving wilderness, he said that "we are not fighting progress. We are making it. We are not dealing with a vanishing wilderness. We are working for wilderness forever."⁹¹ Contrary to other narratives at the time that valued a primeval wilderness, Zahniser seemingly embraced the change and progress that were occurring; he saw wilderness as something that would endure with this change.

While Zahniser's statement encouraged a more inclusive approach to wilderness, the actual language of the Wilderness Act relied on arguments of the pristine to ground its approach to wilderness management. It stated that "a wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."⁹² By using unique language such as "untrammelled," the act conjured up romantic images of a pure and virgin frontier, untouched by the corruption of the industrial East.⁹³ A return, both practically and conceptually, to a such a "virgin" wilderness, though, precluded any ways to change the wilderness to become more accessible to disabled individuals, a fact that well-known wilderness advocate Edward Abbey made abundantly clear. In his autobiographical book *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, Abbey wrote about the beauty of the then Arches National Monument as a way to critique the rise of human management in these types of

⁹¹ Howard Zahniser, "Wilderness Forever," in *Voices from the Wilderness*, ed. William Schwartz (n.p., 1969).

⁹² Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 227.

⁹³ Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 227.

natural places. Similar to other wilderness advocates at this time, he believed that increased industry and technology (specifically cars) were destroying the pristine nature of wilderness. As a way to remedy this problem, visitors needed to leave “civilization” behind, writing, “yes sir, yes madam, I entreat you, get out of those motorized wheelchairs, get off your foam rubber backsides, stand up straight like men! like women! like human beings! and walk-walk-WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!”⁹⁴ Abbey’s statement made it clear that pristine environments had no place for disabled individuals or their assistive equipment, clearly favoring past narratives of untouched wilderness.

At a time of such cultural change, why would wilderness advocates want to look back to the past? There were many possible and complicated answers to this question. One partial reason was put forward by historian Susan Schrepfer: it was in fact because of this cultural change that it was time to look to the past. She wrote:

The eagerness with which white middle-class men embraced “the wilderness idea” in the 1960s reflected the realization that the sites of their childhood were being irrevocably altered. Their eagerness also reflected a sense of how much American society appeared to be changing and how much the changes threatened the presumably traditional preeminence of middle-class men.⁹⁵

Just as men were threatened by the changes society was undergoing in the post-Civil War era, now in the 1960s, white men were experiencing the same fear, the fear that their privileged place in society would be made obsolete. An untrammelled wilderness could be a refuge once again for them.

Zahniser’s complex approach to wilderness in the Wilderness Act reaffirmed an inherent contradiction and tension which was not that dissimilar from the larger tension and questions

⁹⁴ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, (Simon & Schuster, 1968).

⁹⁵ Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 227.

occurring within the outdoor community. Should wilderness activists look to the future or to the past for guidance? Should public lands managers value access or preservation? These questions would soon not just be asked in these broader wilderness spaces; they would enter the minds of Yellowstone officials, and they had to interpret this tension for themselves in the management of the Park.

Creating an Untouched Yellowstone

It was a late spring day in 1963 as one of the many Yellowstone maintenance crews arrived at a pullout along the side of Grand Loop Road. Winter was finally ending which meant that these crews were busy repairing the damage that the previous season had wrought. In the backs of their trucks were the usual assortment of tools: hammers, shovels, safety helmets, etc. But on this particular day, there was one obvious outlier that filled up one truck: young saplings. Today, the maintenance crew took a day off from their usual tasks of pounding tread and clearing trails to plant trees alongside the road in one of the biggest preserved parks in the United States. They got to work, trying to quickly complete their work before tourists began populating the Park.

The trees, which were a part of a larger initiative trying to undo decades of mismanagement, expose the irony and ableism of old and new narratives around Park policy. Beginning in the 1910s and 1920s, the Park began to interfere and protect species such as elk and pronghorn antelope due to their popularity among tourists. Through different types of human interference like winter feeding and predator control, these species began to flourish and increase in numbers, much to the delight of those visiting Yellowstone. The ecosystem began to degrade, though, since these now overly abundant animals were taking away vital resources from other

animals like bighorn sheep. As a way to correct this problem, the Park decided to kill over 4,300 elk in the winter of 1961. However, with the environmental movement on the rise, the public was outraged, citing the destruction of an integral part of America's first national park.

In response to this PR nightmare and broader trends of environmental degradation, Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, appointed a committee to reevaluate the management of wildlife in national parks in 1963. This committee created a document entitled "Wildlife Management in the National Parks," or colloquially known as the "Leopold Report." Yellowstone was at a crucial moment where it needed to examine and improve the well-being of its entire ecosystem, so the report itself was largely a scientifically based approach to more intelligent management of wildlife and the surrounding ecosystem of Yellowstone. Even though most of the report was a series of these types of recommendations, it was primarily known for the ways in which it strayed away from science, veering into creating an overarching philosophy for national parks. It stated that the agency's primary management goal should be to recreate "the biotic associations in national parks...in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man."⁹⁶ While the exclusive language was perhaps not as obvious as the Wilderness Act, the undercurrents of primitivism were still very much present. In order to return to this undeveloped landscape, obvious signs of human interference should be kept to a minimum. Such desires, though, meant subscribing to nineteenth-century wilderness ideals which valued a natural space for its ability to uplift able-bodied characteristics such as physicality, strength, and rugged athleticism.

⁹⁶ Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears*, 88.

This was how the maintenance crew found themselves on the side of a road trying to hurriedly plant trees in Yellowstone: they were creating a primitive park by obscuring anything that was “artificial.” Even more than that, they were trying to do their work quickly to conceal any traces of human management to the public. The irony of such work was almost laughable: even when human interference was seen as the enemy, the Park had to intervene to create this wild and untouched landscape. By this logic, then, direct management was acceptable as long as it was used to hide anything “unnatural” in Yellowstone. Yet, such value judgments on the natural and unnatural immediately precluded the needs of those who would require human interference the most: disabled individuals. The accommodations that the Rolling Quads were advocating for at the same time in Berkeley were seemingly not in line with the pristine Yellowstone that the Leopold Report advocated for, and the Park enacted. Thus, the Leopold Report fell into the same trap as the Wilderness Act as it continued to create barriers for disabled individuals in Yellowstone.

This push for a completely natural landscape continued more as the years went on. In 1973, Yellowstone published its annual “Master Plan,” a document published by the Park to highlight the goals for the year. Most of the document had practical recommendations such as road improvements or building maintenance. This particular year was different as the Park decided to make a massive change to its managerial policies by altering the very mission statement that guided them. The original mission statement published in 1872 read that Yellowstone was “dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people” and “for the preservation, from injury spoliation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders...and their retention in their natural

condition.”⁹⁷ While there was an element of preservation in this statement, there was equally a recreational enjoyment that the founders valued and emphasized.

With the environmental movement well under way, the Park decided that a reinterpretation was needed. Instead, Park officials believed it should be read as, “to perpetuate the natural ecosystems within the park in as near pristine conditions as possible for their educational, cultural, and scientific values for this and future generations.”⁹⁸ Such a statement again overcorrected the policy: it invoked the pristine, a narrative that created barriers for disabled individuals because it historically rejected human interference.⁹⁹ Disabled individuals needed such accommodation in order to simply exist in these spaces. In this instance, that was not considered: now an untouched nature reigned supreme.

“Join the ‘Out’ Group”

With these new Park policies bookending the push for preservation in Yellowstone in the 1960s and 1970s, this fundamental tension once again made itself known: how could the Park interpret and enact accessibility according to the new federal laws when their mission was first and foremost to conserve a pristine landscape? The answer to this question was complicated, with many twists and turns. Eventually, the interactions between disability and the environment would complicate the Park’s seemingly resolute and straightforward policies about preservation, but in the beginning, disability and disability awareness were seemingly absent from Park policies.

⁹⁷ Yellowstone National Park Protection Act, 42nd Cong. (1871).

⁹⁸ Yellowstone National Park, “Master Plan,” National Park Service, 1973, Planning Office, 19-22.

⁹⁹ To see an example of this, see: Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*.

In the 1960s, Yellowstone employees made a concerted effort to emphasize the need for visitor safety after there was a steady increase in injury related incidents. One of the ways that they did this was through a public safety media campaign which placed informational posters throughout the Park. However, the tactics used in these posters to convey this message of safety are startling from a disability perspective. One particular poster portrayed a man balancing on one leg with a crutch. His other leg looked to be hindered in some way while other areas of his body appeared to be injured as well. Most obviously, his thumb was wrapped in a splint. It is impossible to know today if the people who made this poster intended for this man to be disabled. Nevertheless, a case can be made to identify this man as such, particularly given the visual cues in the poster itself: certainly, his injured leg would encounter an inaccessible environment, thus making it difficult to have the same experience there as an able-bodied individual.

Above this disabled man, the text of the poster appeared, reading, “Join the ‘Out’ Group. Admission: Ignore Safety.”¹⁰⁰ What did the “out group” refer to? In order for there to be an out-group, presumably there was an in-group, a group that was socially accepted and included. For the purposes of the poster campaign, the in-group consisted of those who complied with public safety rules. By contrast, those in the out-group then were those who did not follow these rules, i.e. the man in the poster. Most importantly, members of the out-group could be identified by the appearance of the man depicted: disabled. With disability as a defining feature of the out-group, presumably others would reject this identity for its connections to the undesirable out-group.

¹⁰⁰ Join the “Out” Group, 1966, Series 3, Box 05, Folder A7615, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

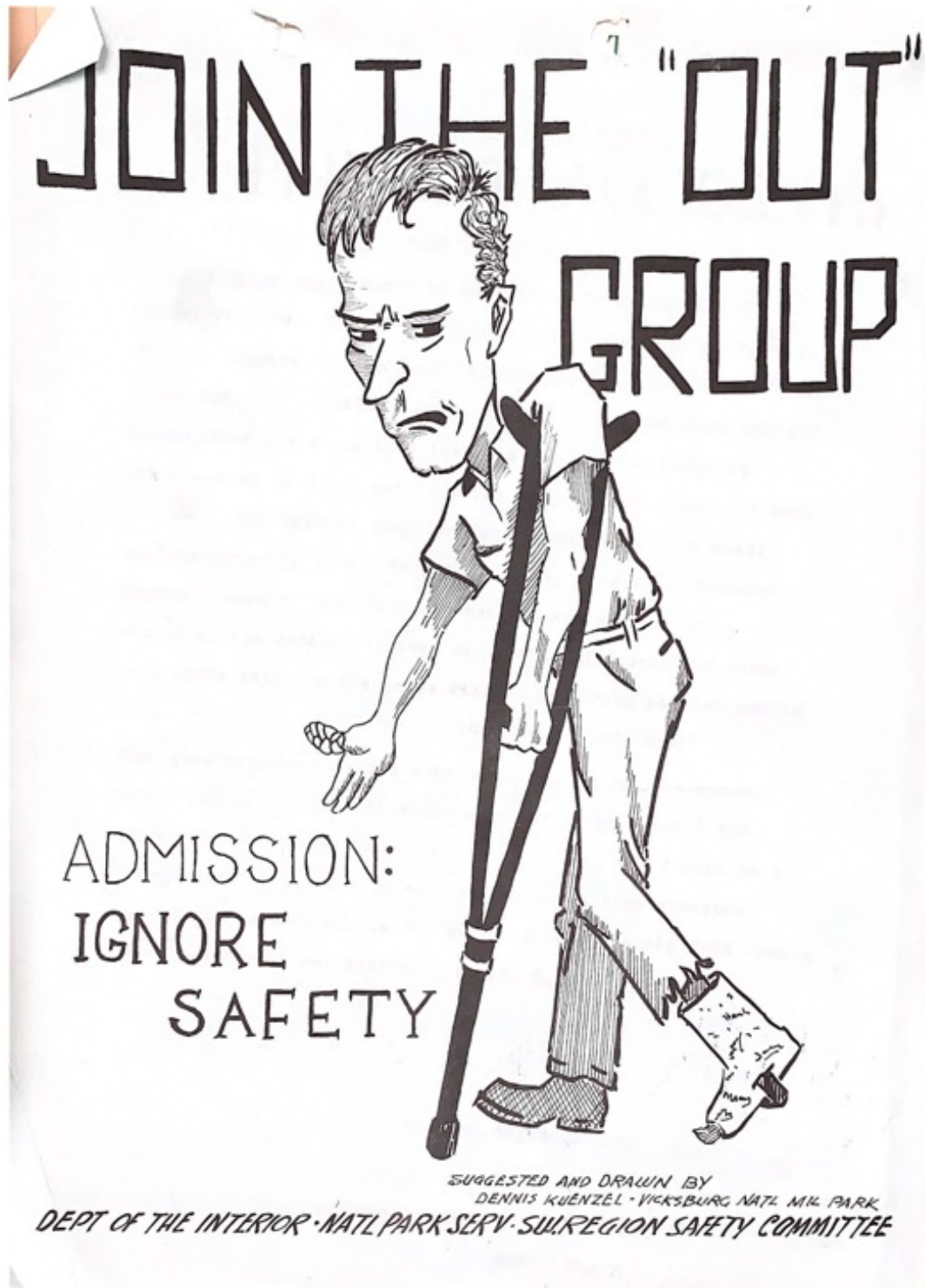


Figure 4. Safety Poster. "Join the 'Out' Group," 1966, Series 3, Box 05, Folder A7615, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

This poster, with its rhetoric and portrayal of a disabled man, used disability then as a shaming tool to make others comply with safety rules.¹⁰¹

The graphic went beyond just rhetoric to ostracize disability; the imagery further hammered home this point. The way that the creators of this poster designed the appearance of the man made it seem like he himself was untrustworthy. Instead of having proper and neat pants, his left pantleg was ragged. This type of presentation made him seem unkempt and perhaps unhygienic. In a society where presentation mattered, there was always an automatic distrust of anyone who looked messy. This distrust was only further emphasized by the look on this man's face; his frown made him look odd and creepy. These two aspects combined solidify the distrust that we, the onlookers, should feel when looking at this print of this disabled man. These facets work together to fundamentally other this disabled man, making it difficult for disabled individuals to feel culturally accepted and welcomed in Yellowstone at this time.

You Can Take the Stairs: Varied Accessibility in Yellowstone

Even though this example would make it seem like there was little reason for optimism in regard to disability in Yellowstone, as the years went on, considerations for disability access became more prevalent in the practical management of Yellowstone. This progress was not straightforward, though, a fact that visitor Marshall Gates learned the hard way. Gates made the long journey from Terrace Park, Ohio to Yellowstone in the late winter of 1973. As he no doubt marveled at Old Faithful and Mammoth Hot Springs, something seemed amiss to him. Although

¹⁰¹ For more on rhetoric and othering, see: Josue David Cisneros, *The Border Crossed Us: Rhetorics of Border, Citizenship, and Latina/o Identity*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama, 2014).

he was enjoying the lack of tourists in the Park and the small number of facilities that were open during the off-season, even as an able-bodied person, he saw the barriers that the existing buildings, boardwalks, and trails presented to disabled individuals, particularly paraplegics. This issue continued to puzzle him even when he returned home to southwestern Ohio. He eventually decided to issue an official complaint form to Yellowstone detailing what he saw in March of 1973 to voice his concerns and possibly create some change.

The Park's responses to Gates's complaint were varied. Perhaps the most alarming response was from an undisclosed Park official who wrote, "although there are no ramps at Canyon Village or Old Faithful Inn, there should be little problem with the steps at Canyon."¹⁰² In actuality, many disabled individuals in wheelchairs cannot use steps no matter how shallow. Furthermore, this lack of knowledge regarding accessibility issues negated any responsibility that the Park had to disabled visitors to provide an accommodating environment.

Thankfully, this response was not the only one that Gates received. In another letter received almost three months later, another anonymous Yellowstone official wrote a reply that attempted to undo the harm done in the previous message. This letter expressed that "throughout Yellowstone National Park, adjacent to the primary road system, practically all of the walks and foot trails which lead to main points of interest...are accessible to paraplegics via constructed ramps to accommodate wheelchairs."¹⁰³ This reply gave some desperately needed hope to disabled individuals in the Park at this time. It showed that Yellowstone officials were beginning

¹⁰² Transmittal Slip, March 26, 1973, Series 2, Box 26, Folder A3619, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

¹⁰³ Letter to Thomas A. Luken, Series 2, Box 26, Folder A3619, Management and Accountability Records, Gardiner, MT, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

to think about how accessibility could fit into the protocols and policies of a national park, especially at a time where signs of obvious human management were being discouraged.

Despite this progress, this letter did point to another tension arising. Indeed, some front-country attractions were now accessible to those in wheelchairs, but the previous letter did nothing to address backcountry accessibility. Now more than ever, the backcountry in Yellowstone began to represent the ethos and spirit of the Park.¹⁰⁴ Characterized by narrow trails and no facilities, these places were examples of the pristine wilderness referenced in the 1973 Master Plan, and as such they were heavily protected and guarded. Given these conditions, it would be almost impossible for disabled individuals to get into the backcountry by themselves. Even when there was a chance, disabled visitors, such as Allen Haegele, were denied. Haegele arrived in Yellowstone from Milwaukee, Wisconsin with his son excited to show him one of the greatest wonders in America. His son had an undisclosed mobility related disability that made it difficult for him to walk, but Haegele did not let that deter the plans he had for their visit. He thought that he could use a horse at the stables located near the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone to take his son to the lesser-known areas of the Park. However, when he got to the stables, Mr. Adams, the head wrangler, refused to let Haegele's son on a horse, stating that he did not want to take responsibility if the boy were to become injured. Mr. Haegele filed an official complaint form regarding this experience, but nothing substantial came from it. The response from the Supervisory Park Ranger simply stated that he had discussed the matter with Mr. Adams.¹⁰⁵ At this point, it seemed that the backcountry was closed to disabled individuals.

¹⁰⁴ Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears*, 103.

¹⁰⁵ Disability Complaint Form, July 17, 1969, Series 2, Box 20, Folder A3619, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

Groundbreaking Access: New Dimensions on the Three Senses Trail

Nonetheless, even amidst these instances of disability exclusion, there were some Park employees who were trying to build upon the previous instance of accessibility in Yellowstone and envision a more holistic way to approach this tension. In 1973, the same year as the signing of the Rehabilitation Act, that approach became realized. On July 7, 1973, a group of people gathered around Firehole Lake right off the Grand Loop Road in Yellowstone. Amongst those gathered were photographers, park rangers, and even Superintendent Jack Anderson; however, the most honored guests there were students and teachers from the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind. They were all gathered for the dedication of the Three Senses Nature Trail, Yellowstone's first trail specifically made with accommodations for blind individuals. The idea for the trail was more than two years in the making. In 1970, certainly influenced by the rise of a national disability rights campaign, Chief Park Naturalist Bill Dunmire began to conceive of an idea for a trail for blind and sighted visitors alike that could help deepen the Yellowstone experience.¹⁰⁶

In 1973, with its construction complete, Dunmire looked at the unique makeup of the trail with pride. The trail itself was 0.8 miles long wrapping around a part of Firehole Lake before disappearing into the forest where it reached its terminus. The path was not standard dirt or loose rock; rather, the architects opted for a boardwalk to mitigate any possible injury that such a trail could bring to a blind visitor. Attached to the boardwalk was a guiding rope, similar to a railing,

¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, no information could be readily found about Dunmire to see if he had any personal connections to disability.

that visitors would use to lead themselves down the path. This construction would make the trail accessible to the blind visitor.

For Dunmire and other Park officials, the meaning of an accessible trail did not stop there. Dunmire firmly believed that “blindness is by no means a total barrier in experiencing the natural features in the wilderness of Yellowstone. The sound of bubbling thermal pools, the touch of different kinds of pine needles and rocks, and the air filled with forest odors and pungent sulfur compounds are there too.”¹⁰⁷ Because of this philosophy, the trail also had seventeen strategically placed signs on the rope. These interpretive signs, written in both English and Braille, prompted the hiker to use their senses to deepen the experience, hence the name *Three Senses Nature Trail*.

This intentional construction made it clear that this trail was more than just a path in the woods. Whereas most guidebooks about other Yellowstone trails at this time described the depth of a stream or the steepness of an incline,¹⁰⁸ the architects described this trail as something that had meaning and a specific purpose: a multi-sensed understanding of inclusion. During its dedication, Dunmire told the audience gathered that the trail “is designed to give a more meaningful awareness of the park’s environment... The seeing visitor who closes his eyes and follows a guide rope stretch the length of the trail may learn how little he actually uses his other senses.”¹⁰⁹ He went on to say that such an experience “opens up a new dimension and awareness

¹⁰⁷ Yellowstone National Park News Release, July 7, 1973, Series 4, Box 14, Folder 08, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

¹⁰⁸ 1970s Yellowstone Guide, 1975, Special Collections, Montana State University Library.

¹⁰⁹ Yellowstone National Park News Release.

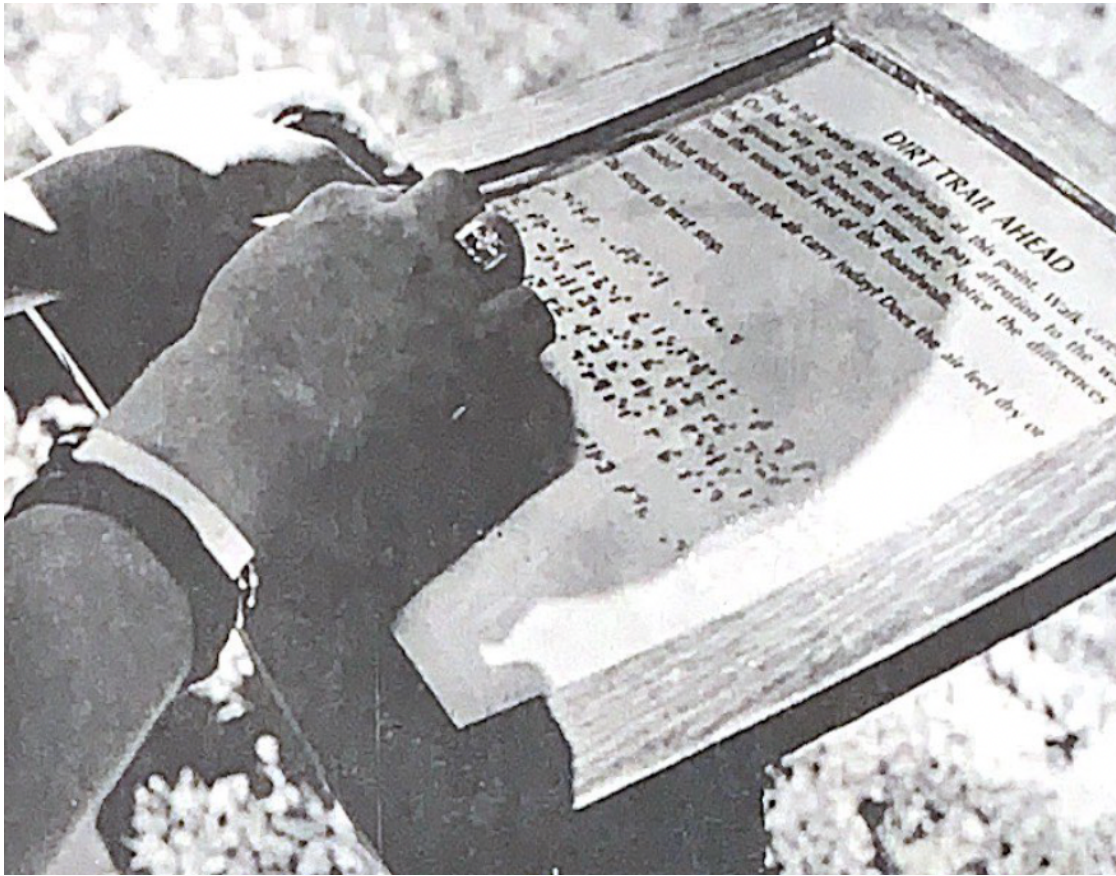


Figure 5. Three Senses Nature Trail Interpretative Sign. The Billings Gazette “Trail for Awareness,” July 7, 1973, Series 4, Box 14, Folder 08, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

of the environment.”¹¹⁰ Such statements about this trail are in direct contrast with dominant wilderness narratives. Instead of a disability, in this case blindness, being a weakness or hinderance, it was now a strength, a way to open up new understandings within the nation’s first national park.

This inclusion did not stop there. As Dunmire concluded his speech at the trail’s grand opening, he specifically addressed the tension between access and preservation that plagued this

¹¹⁰ The Billings Gazette “Trail for Awareness,” July 7, 1973, Series 4, Box 14, Folder 08, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

era by saying, “special considerations for the blind, who don’t receive them normally in daily life, are as inconspicuous as possible on the trail which is open to all.”¹¹¹ Dunmire did what many environmentalists could not do with the dual mandate of the Organic Act: he married together the tension between accessibility and preservation. It was in fact possible to create a trail with accommodations that did not entirely alter the environment, a fear that characterized Park policy. The trail was proof of that, and it could even open up new avenues to the wilderness experience. Finally disabled individuals could move beyond the halls of UC Berkeley’s hospital to find inclusion and acceptance in natural spaces. Such a meaning was not lost on the disabled individuals who attended this dedication. While speaking to reporters after the ceremony, one anonymous blind individual said,

For the National Park Service to extend the awareness of this great national park to all senses sight, touch, hearing olfactory is significant in that it will make the environment more meaningful to a segment of our population without sight, so that they too may achieve a degree of understanding of this fantastic park. It is so fitting that during this centennial anniversary of this, the first national park, that the first “Three Senses Trail” be dedicated here.¹¹²

Yellowstone was charging into the next century of its existence with inclusion on the mind.

Unfortunately, this moment of hope for the disability community was short-lived. In the 1980s, an unidentified man vandalized the interpretive signs along the trail. The Park never repaired the damage and subsequently closed the trail.¹¹³ Around the same time in 1983, while mocking affirmative action policies, Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt famously said, “I

¹¹¹ Three Senses Nature Trail Opens in Yellowstone Park, May 24, 1973, Series 4, Box 14, Folder 08, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

¹¹² Dedication Speech, July 7, 1973, Series 4, Box 14, Folder 08, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

¹¹³ Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears*, 165.

have a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple. And we have talent.”¹¹⁴ While it is impossible to say whether there was a direction causation between Watt’s statement and the vandalization of the trail and the Park’s inaction, the timing of these two events is certainly of interest. They both signaled a deep and vicious reaction towards the disability community and their place in wilderness at this time. Ultimately, they showed how wilderness and wilderness advocates continued to mock and exclude disabled individuals from natural spaces.

This erasure points to the larger tension afoot during this era. If one thing was evident about disability and the environment, it was that there was a constant tug and pull between these two elements. Although in the 1960s and 1970s strides were made in the disability community to increase activism and accessibility, the environmental movement pushed for little human interference in natural spaces which had serious consequences in Yellowstone. Disabled individuals were both practically and conceptually barred from fully experiencing the Park. Yet, within that chaos, there arose a new trail which created a new narrative of disability in Yellowstone. Unfortunately, that trail was destroyed, ironically mirroring the way that disability was and still is viewed in the United States: invisible. With such stop and start progress, the question for the next several decades was if disability and subsequent inclusion could actually stick and become foundational inside Yellowstone.

¹¹⁴ “Watt Asks that Reagan Forgive ‘Offensive’ Remark About Panel,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 1983.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM PAVEMENT TO PRISTINE: DISABILITY ACTIVISM REACHES THE
BACKCOUNTRY

In July of 1983, Mary M. Ullmer and her family arrived at the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel excited to spend their fourth of July together in Yellowstone. Packed inside their car were their usual summer vacation essentials: sunscreen, cooler, hiking backpacks, and a collapsible wheelchair. Ms. Ullmer's husband, J.K. Ullmer, had a mobility related disability that prevented him from walking. Knowing that a national park would present accessibility challenges for her family, Ms. Ullmer had started making plans earlier in the year to ensure that the family vacation could go ahead. She had begun by calling Mammoth Hot Springs to secure "inexpensive wheelchair housing for four."¹¹⁵ When they arrived at their accommodation, cabin 1C, many months later, they found their room to be anything but accessible. The cabin itself was at least eighteen inches off the ground, and the bathroom access required the user to ascend two steps. Even the portable ramps that Ms. Ullmer had packed in the car as a precautionary measure were rendered useless since they were not big enough to fill the gap. After failing to get relocated to a different cabin, Ms. Ullmer decided to submit a complaint form to the Park, detailing her frustrations with this inaccessible environment. Even though section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act had been passed nearly ten years prior, in a reply, B.H. Downie, the Vice President of

¹¹⁵ Mary M. Ullmer Complaint Form, July 1983, Series 2, Box 30, Complaints 1983-1985, 1995-1998, Public Correspondence, Gardiner, MT, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

Operations for Concessioners, could only promise that “soon, we will be able to provide suitable accommodations at every location.”¹¹⁶

Ms. Ullmer’s story offers an example of the challenges that disabled individuals faced when visiting Yellowstone National Park in the 1980s. With an abundance of new accessibility laws in place across the United States, the meaning and prevalence of access was changing. And yet, in circles outside of the disability community, there was ignorance and confusion about the meaning and implementation of these rules in different environments. This chapter will primarily explore how Yellowstone Park administrators handled the confusion surrounding the meaning of access in the places under their jurisdiction. After a brief introduction about emerging wilderness and disability movements at the time, the chapter will examine access in Yellowstone to demonstrate that arguments surrounding the “natural” and “nature” continued to hinder disabled persons’ full access to Yellowstone in the 1980s, confining their movement in the Park to curated experiences of the frontcountry. I will then demonstrate how the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 began to change these narratives. The meaning of access in national parks evolved into a more holistic interpretation that invited disabled individuals into the backcountry. Even with newfound access to the backcountry, however, the amount of Park experiences available to disabled individuals in the 1990s still fell short of the range of choices available to able-bodied individuals, favoring a limited interpretation of the term within the backcountry.

¹¹⁶ Letter from B.H. Downie to Mary M. Ullmer, August 1983, Series 2, Box 30, Complaints 1983-1985, 1995-1998, Public Correspondence, Yellowstone National Park Archives, Gardiner, MT.

Confluence: Disability and Environmental Advocacy Meet

Yellowstone administrators who tested new accessibility initiatives in the 1970s did so amid a contentious national debate over the future of wilderness. As the wilderness movement started to value the Park's founding ideal of preservation over its other founding ideal of access, the issue of overpopulation began to rise in prominence. In years past, overpopulation referred to an abundance of species like elk or deer; this time, overpopulation referred to an excess of humans. In Yellowstone alone, the number of people visiting the Park increased from one million visitors in the 1960s to well over two million by the early 1980s.¹¹⁷ Public land agencies like the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management also observed similar trends.

There had been spikes in visitation before. What was different about this latest spike was that these visitors were mostly hikers, i.e. individuals seeking the backcountry wilderness experience. With more people backpacking, these places, romanticized for their pristine nature, began to show signs of stress. As a result, people within this wilderness culture wanted to revisit the question of Park access and preservation once again. How could wilderness still remain accessible to the increasing number of backcountry hikers while also preserving the untouched landscapes that they themselves found so appealing? There were two different responses to this dilemma. The first response created an ethic of minimal-impact camping. Hikers, companies, and agencies alike began to campaign for a "leave no trace" approach to nature, creating special gear and practices to limit the impact that humans were having on these spaces.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ "NPS Stats, Visitor Use Statistics," National Park Service.

¹¹⁸ James Morton Turner, "From Woodcraft to 'Leave No Trace:' Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in the Twentieth Century," *Environmental History* 7, no. 3 (Jul. 2002): 462-484.

The second response was to lean on new ideas within science to reexamine and bolster preservation efforts. For wilderness advocates, the new field of conservation biology was the perfect way to reevaluate preservation practices. Unlike other types of science that favored a reductionist approach to ecosystem management, conservation biology considered “the entire biodiversity hierarchy at diverse scales of space and time.”¹¹⁹ In this field, landscapes were processes, things in motion.

Park officials realized that they needed to adopt this new approach of conservation biology when oil drilling around Yellowstone became a problem. In an effort to protect the geysers from such activity, Park officials were asked to draw boundaries around these natural phenomena. However, conservation biologists recognized that geysers had a vast underground network of tunnels; their lifeforce extended far beyond the immediate crack in the Earth’s crust. Thus, they concluded that events happening outside of the Park boundaries could have an effect inside Yellowstone. Such a discovery only further confirmed to Park officials that Yellowstone was not merely a recreation source, but a more dynamic landscape in need of protection from human exploits in any form.¹²⁰ Therefore, any human-made additions to the Park needed to be carefully scrutinized for their impact. In response, protective policies like permits were created to physically limit the amount of people that were putting stress on this complex ecosystem.

This management philosophy which seemed to prioritize fewer people within the Park may have followed the patterns of the past by signaling a new wave of exclusion for many marginalized populations. The tenets of conservation biology did help to partially guard against

¹¹⁹ Paul Schullery, *Searching for Yellowstone: Ecology and Wonder in the Last Wilderness*, (Helena, Montana: Montana Historical Society Press, 2004), 219.

¹²⁰ Schullery, *Searching for Yellowstone*, 214.

that, though, because of its emphasis on interdependence: the field was inherently holistic, inclusive, and relational in the way it addressed the environment. This approach could similarly be applied to relationships between humans and natural spaces, recognizing the personal connections and value between the two no matter the circumstances. In the late 1970s, a new wave of the environmental movement noticed and adopted this philosophy. Different from the wilderness movement, the environmental movement was primarily focused on protecting the planet from polluters. This focus made the movement inherently personal for historically marginalized communities in a way that the wilderness movement never had. In the 1980s, women in particular grew concerned over issues like household toxins and nuclear warfare because of the direct impacts it had on their daily lives. As a result, they began leading the charge for reform.¹²¹ This diversity was not just evident in these larger movements; it trickled down to the level of leadership within the National Park Service. In 1970 only three percent of women in the NPS were park rangers. By the 1980s, nineteen percent of women in the NPS occupied this traditionally male-dominated position.¹²²

This widespread call for inclusion was not just evident in the environmental movement; it also reflected the current moment in the fight for disability rights. After a long-fought battle, in 1978 the government finally made laws that would enforce section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.¹²³ However, this victory was short lived as all parts of the government began attacking it.

¹²¹ Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, (Washington DC: Island Press, 2005), 216-218.

¹²² Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 142.

¹²³ For more, see: *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, directed by James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham, (2020; Park City: Higher Ground Productions), Netflix.

Beginning in the early 1980s, a series of Supreme Court decisions weakened the power of section 504. Simultaneously, the Reagan administration began to look for loopholes, citing the negative impact it was having on businesses.¹²⁴ It became clear to disabled activists that their fight for civil rights was not over. They needed a true disability civil rights act in order to live the lives that section 504 had promised: thus, the campaign and cultural movement for the American with Disabilities Act began.¹²⁵

The Nature of Aesthetics in the Backcountry

Even though Reagan had weakened section 504, it was still largely in effect for federally funded institutions and places like national parks. No doubt influenced by the renewed national campaign for disabled civil rights, the Department of the Interior finally began to enforce 504 for all of its respective agencies in 1985.¹²⁶ Whereas in years past inaccessible environments had plagued Yellowstone, the newly enforcement section 504 required the Park to reconstruct these environments to comply with accessibility standards. Ideally, disabled individuals would get to experience the Park in ways that able-bodied individuals had for decades. However, actualizing this ideal was not that simple. It introduced new questions for the examination of disability in Yellowstone: namely, what did access mean in these spaces? What did equal opportunity mean when experiencing Yellowstone, especially when the NPS was charged with preserving its natural wonders?

¹²⁴ Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 54-59.

¹²⁵ Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 62.

¹²⁶ 504 Guidelines for Parks, 25 March 1987, Series 3, Box 11, Folder A7615 Protection: Health and Safety 1987, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

The answers to these questions began with the Department of the Interior and the creation of its official accessibility directive. After the Interior sent out its memo stating its intention to start enforcing 504, many of the government officials within the department knew that they now had to create guidelines and protocols to help places like Yellowstone comply with these new accessibility laws. Since 504 was the first law of its kind, many did not know how to interpret and apply it to public lands. Recognizing their lack of knowledge, the Department of the Interior contracted out to consultant Steve Stone, an outdoor recreation planner for disabled individuals, to help. They tasked him with creating a brief of considerations that the Interior should keep in mind when creating their own accessibility protocols.

For Stone, the brief aptly titled “Some Important Items to Consider When Providing Handicap Accessible Facilities,”¹²⁷ was about more than just getting the Park “up to code.” He wanted to integrate disabled individuals into the whole experience of these landscapes. As he asserted, “with a degree of physical assistance the vast majority of the service’s disabled visitor population will be provided every opportunity to receive a rich and rewarding visit.”¹²⁸ This passion for integration is clear throughout his 45-page document. He left no stone unturned and examined everything from picnic areas to bathrooms. For Stone, a rich and rewarding visit did not just apply to these built structures, though; he also wanted trails to be accessible for disabled individuals, even though they created a unique challenge for outdoor spaces. Namely, the trails needed to be hard surfaced, using materials like asphalt or concrete to accommodate visitors who have difficulty walking. However, Stone recognized that “the black color of asphalt is a high

¹²⁷ Handicap Access, January 20, 1985, Series 3, Box 10, Folder A7615 Health and Safety 1985, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

¹²⁸ Handicap Access, Management and Accountability Records, 5.

profile, profoundly visible aesthetic impact to the resource, particularly in natural and historic environments.”¹²⁹ Instead of completely doing away with asphalt trails to preserve the “aesthetics” of the space, he proposed a different option: a method called Plasti-Pave Penetration Binder. This method would cover the black color of the asphalt with a sandy-brown surface, an almost exact match to the surrounding environment.

Stone’s consideration of environmental aesthetics was reminiscent of the debate over the meaning of “natural” and “unnatural” in Yellowstone in the 1970s. It would have been easy for Stone to follow a simplistic understanding of these terms, advocating less for backcountry accessibility in order to preserve what was “natural” in the landscape. Instead, Stone thought creatively, showing how these two apparently opposing ideas – access and preservation – can be incorporated together. If the Park approached this issue from such a holistic perspective, they would have the means to enhance and provide opportunities for disabled individuals while also maintaining the “aesthetics” of the natural environment.

As innovative and inclusive as Stone’s brief was, it was not an official regulatory document; it was merely a series of recommendations that the Interior should consider. In the months following its circulation, the Interior spent countless hours interpreting Stone’s brief to formulate their own series of official guidelines. In April of 1985, the Department of the Interior finally sent out its own completed booklet of accessibility rules to the national parks, asking for feedback regarding its feasibility. The document centered on one common goal: “to prohibit

¹²⁹ Handicap Access, Management and Accountability Records, 11.

discrimination of the basis of handicap in programs or activities.”¹³⁰ The Department of the Interior wanted to provide disabled individuals with equal access to the nation’s natural wonders, but how would its staff interpret what access meant? Would it be the rich and rewarding adventure that Stone advocated, or, rather, a more circumscribed experience?

The 1985 directive spent much of its 50-plus pages emphasizing the need for access in visitor-heavy areas like interpretive programs and older visitor centers while also stating that action must be taken within 60 days to make these places “readily accessible and useable”¹³¹ for *all* disabled individuals. But the access that the directive demanded was not as simple as providing accessible parking spots; rather, it called for complete accessibility at all levels of programming. Complete accessibility required Braille signs, ASL interpreters, a designated person to guide a disabled individual through an inaccessible environment, audio-visual materials describing the landscapes, and “other innovative methods” to ensure that disabled individuals would receive a quality experience.¹³² These requirements were in addition to the more obvious structural changes that needed to be made to existing bathrooms, doors, steps, and boardwalks. These were all substantial adjustments to a place that had a very specific way of operating. Changes like these would certainly make the human management of Yellowstone more pronounced, making it more “unnatural” by previous standards. The Department of the Interior chose to go ahead with these changes anyway, slowly chipping away at exclusive interpretations of wilderness.

¹³⁰ Enforcement of Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Handicap, 22 April 1985, Series 3, Box 10, Folder A7615 Protection Health & Safety 1985, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT, 11.

¹³¹ Enforcement of Nondiscrimination, Management and Accountability Records, 25.

¹³² Enforcement of Nondiscrimination, Management and Accountability Records, 47.

Yet, while these new measures marked a step forward for disabled visitors to Yellowstone, disabled individuals continued to experience serious challenges in the Park. Despite the increased accessibility to visitor-heavy areas, the Interior's brief made some spaces in the Park inaccessible by reaffirming the natural-unnatural dichotomy that guided its development in the 60s and 70s. When considering the alteration of Park visitor programs, the document stated that programs may only be altered for a "qualified handicapped person." In such programs, a qualified handicapped person is one who can "achieve the purpose of the program without modifications in the program that would result in a fundamental alteration in its *nature*."¹³³

This debate about the "nature" of a program reflected a Supreme Court decision made in the case of *Southeastern Community College v. Davis* in 1979. The case centered on Frances B. Davis, a nursing student who relied heavily on hearing aids and lip reading to communicate with others. When she applied to Southeastern Community College to become a nurse, the college denied her, stating that her disability would prevent her to safely care for her patients. Soon after, Davis sued the college under section 504. After moving from district courts to federal courts, the case eventually landed in front of the Supreme Court in 1979. The Court ultimately ruled in favor of Southeastern Community College. While defending its decision, the Court stated that even though a disabled person might be otherwise qualified, their disability may prevent someone from taking a job because it would interfere with the "nature" of the job itself. To further clarify, the Supreme Court used the example of a blind individual applying to become a

¹³³ Enforcement of Nondiscrimination, Management and Accountability Records, 14.

bus driver: even though they might be qualified, their limited vision would disqualify the person from the job because of its nature.¹³⁴

The ruling was controversial and devastating. By invoking the absolute “nature” of something, the ruling placed the burden of disability purely on the disabled person while also weakening the enforcement for businesses to provide accessible environments. Equally frustrating were the inconsistencies inherent in the word “nature.” The example that the Supreme Court gave about the bus might offer the public an obvious example of what “nature” might look like, but invoking the term “nature” in Yellowstone was not quite as black and white. Considering the Park’s own complex history with this term, it was hard to pinpoint exactly what it would look like in a place that sought to preserve the landscape while also offering equal opportunities for the disability community. What was just as frustrating was that the Department of the Interior gave no interpretation of this meaning, even though the agency managed the National Park Service; Yellowstone Park administrators were left to interpret these meanings themselves.

After publishing its directive, the Interior gave the national parks a year to formulate and present an accessibility plan to their regional directors. Just as peak season was about to start in 1985, Bob Barbee, the superintendent of Yellowstone at the time, and his staff hurriedly got to work. As they gathered in a cramped room at Park headquarters in Mammoth, Barbee, a 30-year veteran of the NPS, grew concerned about the lack of time, resources, funding, and, most notably, direction in which to take this project. The legal definitions of “qualified handicap

¹³⁴ Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 53-54.

person” and “fundamental alteration to its nature”¹³⁵ confused the very few full-year employees who were assigned the project. As the deadline grew closer, Park employees realized that they would need at least another year to create a well thought out accessibility guide. In lieu of such a document, Barbee sent off a list of “Handicap Accessibility Goals” in 1986 to the regional director of the Rocky Mountain Region of National Parks in Denver as proof that they were still hard at work trying to make accessibility a reality. The list of goals, which contained categories of high, medium, and low priority, served as an interim guide until Yellowstone had enough personnel and funding to conduct a complete inventory and survey of the Park.¹³⁶

Barbee’s ten-page brief was what anyone would expect from a government document: straightforward and to the point with little unnecessary detail. The order in which Barbee and his staff listed improving projects is illuminating, though. Namely, it helps explain Yellowstone’s interpretation of the Supreme Court’s meaning of “natural” and “nature.” In the section listed as high priority, Barbee mainly included built structures: areas such as parking lots, visitor centers, and food services that needed to be modified in order to get the Park up to code. The low-priority section contained areas that were less built, what some would categorize as the “natural” areas of the Park like backcountry campsites and trails. This section proposed minimal alterations to these areas that presumably were the least accessible to disabled individuals.¹³⁷

The differences in priorities and plans illustrated the Park’s distinction between natural and unnatural. Indeed, it was entirely possible that they prioritized frontcountry spaces because

¹³⁵ Enforcement of Nondiscrimination, Management and Accountability Records, 2.

¹³⁶ Handicapped Access Goals, June 1986, Series 3, Box 10, A7615 Protection: Health and Safety, 1986, Management and Accountability Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT, 1.

¹³⁷ Handicapped Access Goals, Management and Accountability Records, 2-6.

these were places that most tourists visited. However, as many avid hikers and wilderness advocates at this time believed, there was a fundamental difference in the experience between that of the frontcountry and the backcountry, the prized jewel of the outdoor community. Ever since the Park's inception, visitors from all over cherished Yellowstone for these vast, "natural" landscapes. As the Park became more developed, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, the backcountry and trails, the last remnant of this nature, became a haven for visitors. One wilderness advocate wrote that "it now was no longer enough for visitors to just hum along in their cars...The new wilderness visitor would quit the car and get into the backcountry, experiencing the Park on a more complete, deeper level."¹³⁸ Thus, it is entirely probable that Park officials were interpreting "nature" and "the natural" as areas that still resembled, as much as possible, the idea of the pristine wilderness in order to protect these symbolic spaces. Because officials ascribed these characteristics to these parts of the Park, they did not have to make any changes to them, further limiting the amount of people who can access these spaces. In turn, these arguments about nature would only further assist the Park in their goal to combat human overuse in the backcountry.

This interpretation of "nature" had vast implications for what access looked for disabled individuals in the Park as a whole. Despite the push to include disabled individuals on trails in the 1970s with the creation of the "Three Senses Nature Trail," Yellowstone officials in the 1980s prioritized other spaces for disabled individuals that were distant from the healing balm of nature. Disabled individuals were instead directed towards areas in the frontcountry: visitor centers, amphitheaters, and boardwalks. These experiences of overcrowded boardwalks were

¹³⁸ Wondrak Biel, *Do (Not) Feed the Bears*, 103.

almost formulaic when contrasted with the freedom and space able-bodied visitors were able to enjoy in the backcountry. Yellowstone's approach to access in the 1980s was therefore paradoxical: there were significant strides towards including disability in the Park, but what got lost in the Park officials' story of success was that able-bodied visitors were still able to participate in the full experience of Yellowstone in a way that still barred disabled individuals.

Crawling Towards Accessibility

While Yellowstone National Park was trying to formulate its official accessibility policy for disabled individuals, disability activists continued to fight for civil rights on a national level. As early as 1984, they began working on drafting a new civil rights bill, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), that would protect disabled individuals in both private and public sectors. Influenced by a draft bill that the National Council on Disability had completed in 1986, the first version of the ADA was introduced to Congress in 1988. The bill tried to undo all the problems that had arisen because of section 504's weakened power. It stated that all businesses, structures, institutions, etc. had to comply with accessibility law with immediate effect. James Weisman, a lawyer who worked on the ADA, said, "Under this law, even the space shuttle would have to be accessible."¹³⁹

The first version of the ADA did not have the impact in Washington that many disability activists had hoped. Many politicians, particularly Republicans, were worried about the language of immediacy; they feared that it would place an undue hardship on businesses and local governments. The timing of the ADA's introduction was also not optimal. Introduced in April

¹³⁹ Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 95.

1988, an election year, many politicians were distracted with campaigning and did not wish to focus on a potentially controversial bill. Disability activists used this lull to return to the drawing board to bolster more support. While the few politicians who introduced the bill worked on its revisions, these disability activists reached out to their own networks of disabled individuals asking them to write a “discrimination diary,” an account of the injustices they faced because of their disability. These entries were sent to local and federal politicians so that by the time the ADA was reintroduced in 1989, no one could mistake the need for disability civil rights.¹⁴⁰

The ADA still faced challenges as it made its way through Congress. In March of 1990, as the Senate passed the legislation, news spread that negotiations had stalled in the House. After all their hard work, disability activists refused to let this stop them. As a result, around 500 activists, disabled and able-bodied alike, decided to make their way to the Capitol Building to protest. As they met outside near the steps in the early afternoon, the disabled individuals that were there did something that few had ever seen: they ditched their wheelchairs, their walkers, or any other type of assistive device they had and proceeded to crawl up the steps of the Capitol. As Jennifer Keelan, an eight-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, prepared to make her way up these steps, she said, “It is the hottest day in March, and I’m dripping sweat, but I want to climb these steps. I *need* to climb these steps.”¹⁴¹ The “Capitol Crawl” as it is now known today was an act of defiance, a symbol to show lawmakers the immediate need for accessibility; after all, without accommodations, disabled individuals would have to crawl up steps in order to access many

¹⁴⁰ Arlene Mayerson, “The History of the Americans with Disabilities Act: A Movement Perspective,” Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, 1992, <https://dredf.org/about-us/publications/the-history-of-the-ada/>.

¹⁴¹ Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 193.

buildings, even the US Capitol.¹⁴² A few days later, the ADA passed. The ADA was a landmark piece of civil rights legislation for disabled individuals, protecting them from discrimination in almost every sphere. The ADA additionally required employers, schools, and businesses to provide reasonable accommodation and also imposed new and improved accessibility standards for public transportation.¹⁴³

While these legal protections were substantial and needed, the ADA was more than just a piece of legislation. It was the culmination of a cultural movement for disability rights, a movement that this legislation energized and revived. There was no denying that this conviction impacted many able-bodied people across the nation with many reconsidering the necessity for accessibility. This energy carried all the way to Yellowstone where the Park was already trying to implement standards from a pre-ADA standards. With the cultural impact of the ADA, the Park knew that the conversation around access had changed and expanded. Instead of shying away from this change, though, the Park began to incorporate these new attitudes in its “Statement for Management: Yellowstone National Park.”

Published in November 1991, the document primarily established goals that the Park wanted to accomplish during the year. One goal tackled the issue of backcountry overuse. This goal approached the issue of overuse differently than in the years before the ADA. The Park administrators wrote that they wanted to “protect the backcountry resource, and to accommodate reasonable wilderness uses in a manner that does not cause significant deterioration to those

¹⁴² Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 192.

¹⁴³ Davis, *Enabling Acts*, 206.

resources.”¹⁴⁴ In years past, the goal of protecting the backcountry relied on arguments that glorified the absence of human interference. Indeed, this statement expressed the wish to protect the landscapes of the backcountry, but it recognized the need to work with, not against human use in achieving this goal. The Park had to accommodate and directly manage its many uses, further implying that its officials understood the impossibility of an untouched wilderness.

This 1991 Park document went beyond just recognizing the presence of human management and interference in the Park; it expanded the meaning of “use” to include disabled individuals as well. In another goal for the coming year, Park officials explained in the section, “Access for Special Populations” that they wished to “provide access opportunities for all visitors to the Park’s main attractions and facilities, and to provide access for several backcountry trails.”¹⁴⁵ This initiative marked a monumental shift in the narrative of access in Yellowstone National Park. The backcountry, an area that just five years prior was excluded from the Park’s interpretation of access, was now beginning to be opened up to disabled individuals to allow them to hike on these trails. This transformation, though, surpassed just the practical; it made a statement about the changing “nature” of the backcountry. The Park no longer relied purely on characteristics such as “pristine” and “untouched” to define its nature. Although nature was not precisely defined here, the exclusion of idealized characteristics assumed that the nature of the backcountry was something more comprehensive; it was a place that was beginning to allow human alterations. These changes made it possible for disabled

¹⁴⁴ Statement for Management, November 1991, Series 22, Box 1, Folder A6423 Organizations – Management Policies 1991, Management and Accountability, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Statement for Management, Management and Accountability Records, 2.

individuals, a marginalized population, to participate in what many have said is the ethos and spirit of the Park.

The troubling part about this section, though, was that unlike other goals in the document, no practical steps were listed to help make the backcountry accessible. Many of the “to-do” items in this portion highlight areas in the frontcountry that were not yet accessible for disabled individuals. Unfortunately, these areas would soon take priority in the eyes of Park as the federal government became more overtly and directly involved with the everyday management of the Park.

Frontcountry Compliance and Codifying Nature

In the summer of 1991, an anonymous disabled individual entered Yellowstone National Park. With the combination of new accessibility initiatives from the 1980s and the newly signed ADA, they arrived hopeful that they would get to experience areas of Yellowstone that in decades past were unavailable for someone with a mobility related disability. Driving from the south, they arrived at the West Thumb Geyser Basin, a popular first stop along the edge of Yellowstone Lake. After finding an accessible parking spot, this disabled individual, now in a wheelchair, and their party began to try to find a way onto the sidewalk. After looping the parking lot several times, they realized that a sufficient enough curb break did not exist; the disabled individual had only one choice: to navigate their wheelchair up onto the curb, a skill that only someone who had been in a wheelchair for a long time would have had. After that obstacle, the party was hoping for a smoother experience around the geyser basin. However, as they made their way around the boardwalk, they found that areas of it did not have any edge protection; thus, the smallest movement off to the side would mean peril for this disabled

individual. Fearing for their safety, they decided to leave and visit Old Faithful, a more populated area of the Park which they presumed would have better infrastructure and accessibility. They were sadly disappointed on arrival as they could not find any accessible parking spaces in the east or west lots.¹⁴⁶

In decades previous, little could be done about this frustrating experience. However, with the passage of the ADA, protections were now in place for disabled individuals when they experienced such inaccessible environments. When this disabled individual returned home after what was surely a disappointing trip, they filed a complaint with the US Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (ATBCB). After the passage of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the federal government created this board to monitor violations of accessibility law. After 1990, the ATBCB's workload had nearly doubled since they were responsible for the full enforcement of both 504 and the ADA.¹⁴⁷

As the ATBCB reviewed the case, they found that curb breaks, parking spots, and boardwalk edges were just the beginning of the inaccessible features in Yellowstone. They also found that there was inadequate directional signage to show the location of accessible parking spots, steep and often inaccessible ramps, and scarce enforcement of the few existing accessible parking spots by the Rangers.¹⁴⁸ By the summer of 1992, after its review, the ATBCB notified

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Judith A. Hasiam to David C. Park, 24, November, 1992, Series 3, Box 01, Folder 01 Accessibility – Old Faithful and West Thumb, 1993, Facilities and Maintenance, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

¹⁴⁷ “Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board,” Federal Register, <https://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/architectural-and-transportation-barriers-compliance-board>.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Judith A. Hasiam to David C. Park, July 21, 1992, Series 3, Box 01, Folder 01 Accessibility – Old Faithful and West Thumb, 1993, Facilities and Maintenance, Yellowstone National Park Gardiner, MT.

Yellowstone of its failure to comply with federal accessibility standards and asked for corrective action. Yellowstone officials quickly got to work, trying to formulate yet another accessibility plan and directive. Unlike other complaints that Park staff had received in the past regarding disability access, Yellowstone officials knew that they had to respond with lightning speed because they knew that the eyes of the federal government and disability activists were now on the Park. By the fall of 1992, they had submitted their new access plan to the ATBCB. The plan was straightforward: it set out a timeline to correct the construction and compliance of ramps, parking spots, curb breaks, and boardwalks with accessibility standards by the summer of 1993.¹⁴⁹ The ATBCB reviewed the accessibility directive and found the guidelines acceptable, moving this case to “monitoring corrective action”¹⁵⁰ status.

Although such changes only examined access from a frontcountry perspective, the timely response and action still impacted Yellowstone’s journey towards implementing a more complete understanding of access. In years past, disabled individuals had the option to complain to the Park directly about a lack of accessibility, but often times the Park’s responses were delayed and offered few concrete solutions even if the complaints were about a frontcountry experience. This immediate action reflected a shift towards prioritizing access in the Park, a shift caused both by the enforcement and revived culture of the ADA. Even though these responses only considered built environments, the Park would soon revisit the promises made in the 1991 management report to consider ways to incorporate this momentum into the backcountry.

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Michael D. Snyder to the Associate Director of Operations, Series 3, Box 01, Folder 01 Accessibility – Old Faithful and West Thumb, 1993, Facilities and Maintenance, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

¹⁵⁰ Letter from Judith A. Hasiam to David C. Park, November 24, 1992, Facilities and Maintenance.

Backcountry Access: Reaching the Limits of Progress

In 1994, after a much-needed break for the holidays, the few permanent Park employees still in Mammoth began the new year the way they always did: by planning. As they looked forward to the year ahead, they decided to revisit the question of accessibility. Whereas, in the past Park employees mainly considered access in terms of the frontcountry, they once again turned their attention to the backcountry as they looked over the finalized Master Plan for 1994. This Master Plan differed from previous plans, namely because it was the first time in decades that the Park had formulated a new one. The last Master Plan, written in 1974, served as a guide for how to integrate scientific preservation into its management policies. Twenty years later, the Park had evolved. In light of the 1988 fires, the 1990 ADA, and the approaching reintroduction of wolves, Park officials knew that they had to reexamine this document. They now had to equally prioritize the preservation of the landscape with renewed calls for access. As Park officials began to consider access in this new era, they reflected sentiments expressed in the 1991 Statement of Management, stating that they wanted to “provide access for several backcountry trails.”¹⁵¹ With this revived commitment to disability access in the backcountry, they faced the difficulty of actualizing these ideals practically. Access could mean a host of things: it could refer to the physical alteration of terrain, permission to bring adaptive equipment, or in the case of Joan Rubin, license to camp at any campsite in the backcountry.

In August of 1994, Joan Rubin wrote to the Park to inquire about a possible backpacking trip she was coordinating. She and her husband were planning on making the cross-country trip

¹⁵¹ Outline of Planning Requirements, January 31, 1994, Series 01, Box 26, Folder 02 Master Plan: Planning Program, Outline 1994, Facilities and Maintenance Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

from Maryland to Yellowstone National Park to enjoy the early sights of autumn in the Bechler region of the Park. The logistics of the trip proved difficult to organize because of her disability. She wrote that complications from Bulbar polio had caused her “hiking range to vary between four and nine miles per day, with no advance warning whether it is going to be a four-mile day or a nine-mile day.”¹⁵² Due to issues of overuse, however, Yellowstone had very strict policies on backcountry permits for campsites; backpackers had to prearrange for each individual campsite per night so as not to overstress the environment. A staunch supporter of the wilderness movement, Rubin noted that Yellowstone was “correct in doing so.”¹⁵³ But she also believed that accommodation did not have to get in the way of preserving the wilderness, writing,

We realize that you wish to provide a quality wilderness experience to the citizens covered by the largest Americans with Disabilities Act and still preserve wilderness values. I am therefore requesting a note or “pass” from you to permit us to camp in any designated campsite in the Bechler region.¹⁵⁴

Rubin’s language about the backcountry should not be overlooked. She did not want to go to the frontcountry to have a quality wilderness experience. Rubin, like many other people at this time, associated such an experience with the backcountry. Even with her love of wilderness and wilderness conservation, though, she did not see accessibility as something in conflict with these values. Rather, she saw the possibilities that wilderness experiences can open up to disabled individuals like her.

¹⁵² Letter from Joan Rubin to Chief Ranger Dan R. Sholly, August 8, 1992, Series 4, Box 1, Campgrounds, Backcountry Correspondence 1960s-1990s, Land Use Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

¹⁵³ Letter from Joan Rubin to Chief Ranger Dan R. Sholly, Land Use Records, Yellowstone National Park.

¹⁵⁴ Letter from Joan Rubin to Chief Ranger Dan R. Sholly, Land Use Records, Yellowstone National Park.

Dan Sholly, Chief Ranger of Yellowstone National Park, wrote back to her several days later expressing his support of Rubin and her husband's trip by granting them such an accommodation.¹⁵⁵ Although the letter is short and largely dry, his decision to grant her an accommodation marked a further step that Yellowstone made not only to welcome disabled individuals into the backcountry but also to change the entire meaning of access in the Park. Sholly's response showed a more holistic perspective and interpretation of access. Here, it was not about checking boxes for government compliance but rather coming up with dynamic solutions so that Rubin could experience the backcountry. When in years past, the Park seemed solely concerned with accommodating access concerns in frontcountry spaces, the Park was now beginning to accommodate and direct disabled individuals to the backcountry.

In the case of Rubin, granting access to the backcountry was relatively straightforward. With her husband carrying all of her camping gear, Rubin did not need to bring any adaptive or assistive equipment that would help her traverse the environment. From the Park's perspective, the feasibility of access became more complicated when considering accommodations that required permanent alterations to the landscape. Kerbe Havnes and her request for accommodation in 1994 made this fact abundantly clear.

Havnes, a seven-year-old girl from Etna, Wyoming, had an undisclosed mobility related disability that confined her to a wheelchair or "stroller."¹⁵⁶ In order to help her navigate public

¹⁵⁵ Letter from Dan R. Sholly to Joan Rubin, August 24, 1994, Series 4, Box 1, Campgrounds, Backcountry Correspondence 1960s-1990s, Land Use Records, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Dan R. Sholly to D.J.Metcalf, 3 August, 1994, Series 3, Box 12, Folder A7615 Protection: Health and Safety, 1994, Management and Accountability, Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, MT.

environments, her doctors prescribed her a service dog. The service dog proved to be an additional difficulty for the Havnes's family as they planned a trip to Yellowstone. Due to the rise of preservation initiatives in Yellowstone, the Park limited the areas where dogs were allowed, explaining that they could cause irreparable damage to the environment. They were now confined to "developed areas," i.e. anywhere within 100 feet of the road. For Havnes, this rule posed questions for her family about how she would navigate the Park on their trip. It would be highly unlikely that Havnes would be able to see anything of the Park, frontcountry or backcountry, because she needed her service dog with her at all times. Recognizing this problem, her grandmother, D.J. Metcalf, wrote to Chief Ranger Sholly to ask if an exception could be made to the rule. With the passage of the ADA, Metcalf was hopeful that some sort of compromise could be reached. Sholly's reply was mixed. He wrote, "We authorize Havnes to take her dog on the main trail from the Old Faithful Geyser to Morning Glory Pool and on the Lone Star Geyser trail... While on these trails, we asked that a responsible adult closely supervise the dog and that the dog ride in the stroller on the trail at all times."¹⁵⁷ This authorization represented an unprecedented amount of access that a disabled individual could receive with their dog as a companion.

Sholly continued, writing "this authorization does not apply to other trails or boardwalks in the Old Faithful area or elsewhere in the Park."¹⁵⁸ Sholly did not give a reason why this access was limited to only these two trails. No doubt, most of those trails would be difficult to traverse via wheelchair, but this statement continued to practically limit disabled individuals in the Park.

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Dan R. Sholly to D.J.Metcalf, Management and Accountability, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Dan R. Sholly to D.J.Metcalf, Management and Accountability, 1.

Indeed, Sholly's response to Havnes's request for access fell short when compared to the full breadth of the able-bodied Park experience. Whereas able-bodied individuals were allowed to go on any trails in the Park, Havnes was confined to just two because of her dog, a medically prescribed service animal that served as an extension of her body.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the question of access preoccupied Park officials. The enforcement of legislation like 504 and the cultural movements which spurred on disability civil rights made it impossible for Yellowstone to ignore the disability revolution taking place across America. This revolution presented challenges as officials in charge of implementing new laws for disability access in national parks struggled to define the meaning and limits of accessibility. They first rooted their accessibility in the Park's frontcountry, leaving the backcountry safely preserved from disruption. However, after the passage of the ADA, the Park began to reconsider its interpretation of access, fundamentally shifting to a more inclusive understanding that included all areas of the Park. In the best cases, access came to mean finding a dynamic solution that would ensure both backcountry accessibility to a disabled individual and the preservation of the landscape. Yet in other cases, a limited view of access still prevented disabled individuals like Kerbe Havnes from experiencing what the whole Park has to offer. Although the Park made significant progress in the inclusion of disabled individuals for a more enriched experience of Yellowstone, its policy of inclusion was still limited in its total reach.

EPILOGUE

THE PROMISE OF TRUE ACCESS

In the years since my 2015 trip to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park, this tiny corner of Wyoming became a second home to me as I started visiting the region almost every year. My family's connection grew too: in 2017, my sister became an interpretative ranger at Yellowstone, solidifying my desire to devote as much time as possible to this area. My time spent there was decidedly different from my experience in 2015. Even though I continued to live with an autoimmune disease, I had made sufficient progress in treating and managing my condition that I could walk long distances. I still took some necessary precautions while hiking in the outdoor environment, but the elaborate and extensive routine that had defined the 2015 trip was now definitively in the past.

Even though my experience in national parks had undergone another change, I was unable to forget the issue of disability and accessibility in these spaces. Without fail on every visit, there was at least one obvious example of this problem. On one of these trips to stay with my sister in Yellowstone, I arrived at the lower terrace of Mammoth Hot Springs. As I waited for my sister to find a parking spot, I observed an individual in a wheelchair trying to navigate the boardwalk. Though at a distance, it was apparent that this person was struggling to safely traverse over some loose and rickety boards. I turned away not wanting to stare, but a little while later this person wheeled past me, clearly deciding that the risk of falling through the boardwalk was not worth it. Instead, they waited by their car for the rest of their party to finish walking around, in a remarkable echo of my own experience several years prior. That very familiar and disheartening feeling once again overcame me: disability still remained invisible in Yellowstone.

Having written this thesis, I wonder how this work helps us grapple with and understand the enduring issues around disability access in our parks. How do the stories in the previous chapters illuminate contemporary experiences and incidents of disability in Yellowstone? And what do these stories tell us about disability and wilderness more broadly? In the introduction, I stated that disability and access were and still are contested subjects within natural spaces such as Yellowstone, and I set out to prove that point throughout the subsequent chapters. Throughout my research, the power and hold that nineteenth-century wilderness values had over Yellowstone during its more than hundred-year existence became clearly evident. In addition to its racial and gendered undercurrents, nineteenth-century wilderness was inherently tied to the ideal of the able-body. As such, the prominence of these values contributed to a wilderness experience that precluded disability access not only practically, on the physical trails of the Park, but also conceptually, in Yellowstone's very culture. Even when Park officials offered accessible experiences to disabled individuals, their efforts often fell far short when compared to their accomplishments in making Yellowstone accessible to able-bodied individuals. In the case of Mr. Haegele's incident at the Canyon stables or the incident over Kerbe Havnes's guide dog, Park officials predominantly interpreted access in narrow terms, often relying purely on circumscribed bureaucratic processes to guide their implementation. In many ways, this reality remains the case today.

If this dominant interpretation of access was too narrow, what would a truly comprehensive access paradigm, reflecting all ranges of ability, look like in Yellowstone and other national parks today? The stories in this thesis show that true access should be about more than just considering physical barriers. Andrew Flakker, an administrative assistant at Eagle

Mount Bozeman, a local organization that seeks to provide quality outdoor experiences for disabled individuals in Montana, believes that “accessibility more than equipment and ramps is a *mindset*. You make things accessible by the way you think about things and approach problems.”¹⁵⁹ True access then is a way of viewing the world where disability and disabled individuals are meaningfully integrated into the everyday narratives and decisions in people’s lives. This is not to say that access in wilderness does not encompass these more material obstacles: they are after all abundant in the outdoors. But, as this thesis has shown, invisible barriers, specifically in the form of wilderness narratives, are just as powerful a tool to prevent disabled individuals from fully experiencing these spaces; indeed, these exclusive cultural narratives often legitimize the physical barriers.

As such, it is impossible to move forward and address access without transforming existing understandings of wilderness, a belief that has been well argued by scholar Dina Gilio-Whitaker. Her book, *As Long as Grass Grows*, is fundamentally a call to action to rethink wilderness and environmental justice. She argues that throughout time, settler colonialism coopted and used wilderness narratives to oppress Native Americans. As a result, current conceptions of environmental justice cannot address these past harms because its foundations are linked to its settler colonialism past.¹⁶⁰ I again wish to extend Gilio-Whitaker’s arguments to disability. If the understanding of wilderness is based on arguments of the pristine, wilderness narratives will continue to erase disability from these natural spaces. It is necessary, then, to move away from this purity notion of wilderness and fundamentally embrace wilderness as a

¹⁵⁹ Andrew Flakker (administrative assistant at Eagle Mount Bozeman) in discussion with author, February 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows*.

place where humans, human infrastructure, and nature can coexist together. In the past, infrastructure has often been seen as the enemy of the environment, and those arguments do have some merit. Projects like coal mining or dams have had brutal effects on the environment. These projects have also particularly oppressed and harmed Native Americans.¹⁶¹ It is perhaps wise to proceed cautiously when considering the role of infrastructure in natural spaces, but this caution has led to an overcorrection, affirming old notions of purity in wilderness. Even further, this rejection of infrastructure has affirmed the binary between access and preservation.

This binary need not exist. Infrastructure is in fact necessary and needed for disabled individuals to access the wilderness, and there are creative and thoughtful ways of working with the landscape, preservation, and access. The Three Senses Nature Trail in the 1970s is certainly evidence of this fact. Chief Park Naturalist Bill Dunmire, its creator, intentionally worked through questions of disability, infrastructure, and wilderness preservation, seeing these realities neither as dissimilar nor mutually exclusive, but rather complementary to the experience of Yellowstone National Park. Rather than subscribing to pure wilderness narratives that would see disability (in this example, blindness or visual impairment), as a hinderance in the Park, he believed that blindness enhanced the experience of wilderness, adding new dimensions and understandings to Yellowstone's unique landscape. It was from that holistic understanding of wilderness, that creative mindset, that the idea for the trail came about. We should follow Dunmire's example and rethink concepts of wilderness to see it as a place where humans and nature can work together and learn from each other.

¹⁶¹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*.

Ultimately, such an intervention is what disability can contribute not only to questions about Yellowstone National Park but also to the field of environmental history. Questions of wilderness have been a pillar in this field.¹⁶² Although scholars are exhaustively pursuing questions pertaining to race, class, and gender, the emerging field of disability studies proves that there are still new areas to explore in the wilderness debate. Even more, this disability lens offers historians, outdoor enthusiasts, and NPS officials alike a way forward to transform these spaces. In the last few decades in Yellowstone, there are some signs that perhaps this transformation of wilderness is taking place as the Park is including disability more. Disabled individuals can now receive a free lifetime pass, the “Access Pass,” to the Park. The ever elusive and “pristine” backcountry is now more opened to disabled individuals than it has ever been: service animals are allowed to go anywhere, frontcountry or backcountry, in the Yellowstone. Additionally, the Park has two accessible backcountry campsites reserved for disabled individuals.¹⁶³

Despite these shifts, it is clear that this needed transformation towards a more holistic understanding of wilderness has not fully occurred. These aforementioned policies and services were of course important, yet they become rather small when compared to the Park’s overall accessibility. Seventy-five percent of the vault toilets currently do not comply with the Architectural Barriers Act. Most trailhead signs not only lack information about the trail’s condition but also obstruct adaptive equipment. As I saw firsthand, many boardwalks are

¹⁶² For more, see: Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,”; Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, eds., *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows*.

¹⁶³ “Accessibility,” Yellowstone National Park, National Park Service, updated March 3, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/accessibility.htm>

unstable or require significant repairs.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, it would be difficult to allocate the amount of labor and funding necessary to correct these inaccessible features. In an interview with Yellowstone's former accessibility coordinator, Lori Gruber, I discovered that accessibility projects are difficult to organize because of the type of funding needed. Unlike the Park's general budget, which comes from the federal government, accessibility funding must come from park entrance fees. That money is controlled solely by the office of the superintendent. Therefore, if the superintendent does not want to spearhead an accessibility project or feels that funding for such projects will drain too much away from other necessary expenditures, the changes simply will not happen.¹⁶⁵ Given both the complicated history of disability within Yellowstone and oppressive wilderness narratives, it is hard to imagine the superintendent prioritizing these extensive projects. It is all the more necessary, then, to reconstruct the meaning of wilderness within the Park, fostering a culture that deeply values human involvement in every sphere. Without that culture, it is entirely possible that the Park as a whole will continue to do what has been done in the past in regard to access, making it more difficult for disabled individuals to become fully visible in these historically oppressive spaces.

Nevertheless, I do believe that there is reason for optimism. In the spring of 2022, Yellowstone National Park is set to release a groundbreaking document, the "Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan." The goals of this document are to detail both existing barriers to disabled individuals within Yellowstone and effective approaches to solving these issues. Above all, the

¹⁶⁴ "Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan: Yellowstone National Park Accessibility Program," Unpublished Government Document, (Gardiner, MT: Yellowstone National Park, 2022).

¹⁶⁵ Lori Gruber (former Accessibility Coordinator at Yellowstone National Park) in discussion with author, February 2022.

creators of this document wrote that this plan will “instill a culture around creating universal access and accessibility awareness”¹⁶⁶ This move coincides with the news that earlier in the year, the NPS hired the first ever Wilderness and Accessibility Coordinator, Quinn Brett. Brett herself is a disabled outdoor enthusiast who formerly worked as a climbing ranger in Rocky Mountain National Park. She aims to create one accessible backcountry trail in every national park.¹⁶⁷ The narrative around wilderness and disability is changing. The culture of access is changing. A full transformation of wilderness may take a while, and there are many steps that still need to occur, but these recent developments give me hope that a foundation has been laid for a dynamic and holistic change within Yellowstone regarding wilderness and disability.

¹⁶⁶ “Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan,” 6.

¹⁶⁷ Morgan Tilton, “A Climb for Greater Accessibility,” REI Coop, January 22, 2021, <https://www.rei.com/blog/climb/a-climb-for-greater-accessibility>

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