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# HISTORICAL OVERVIEW FOR THE CRATERS OF THE MOON NATIONAL MONUMENT OF IDAHO

by

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## Exploration

The duration of the aboriginal occupation of southern Idaho is a problem still debated by anthropologists and archaeologists. Dates of Euroamerican penetration and occupation of the region, on the other hand, are a matter of general consensus among historians. The major question of debate is the extent of this exploration and occupation.

As part of the Astorian expedition of 1811, John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company dispatched Wilson Price Hunt and Donald Mackenzie to pioneer an overland route to the Pacific, and to determine the potential for trapping in the interior West. Their party arrived at the abandoned Fort Henry on Henrys Fork of the Snake River, 8 October 1811. Attempting to navigate the Snake River, the expedition suffered a nearly catastrophic loss of their canoes at Caldron Linn. Splitting up, the expedition's focus turned from exploration to survival; they managed to descend the Snake River Plain on foot. The following year, a party of returning Astorians led by Robert Stuart, ascended the Snake River and pioneered major segments of the future Oregon Trail.

Settlement of the Snake River Plain required the explorers and fur trappers to overcome problems of logistics, and the hostility of the native American Indians already occupying the region. A band of Astorians led by John Reed was massacred, January 1814, while attempting to establish a post near the mouth of the Boise River. An

attempt by the North West Company to establish a post in the same area in 1819 resulted in the death of two British trappers. Only the untiring efforts of Donald Mackenzie (now employed by the North West Company) normalized relations between British fur trappers and the Indians of southern Idaho.[1] The merger of the North West Company with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) established a monopoly over British trade in the Snake River country. This British monopoly effectively forestalled penetration of the Oregon Country by unorganized American fur trappers. Nonetheless, permanent posts (Forts Hall and Boise) were not successfully established until 1834.

Attempts by American and British trappers to exploit the fur resources of the Oregon Country resulted in the rapid exploration of the Snake River Plain. Godin arrived on the Big Lost River in 1823 (named ten years later when another party failed to find the valley).[2] The Rocky Mountain Fur Company reestablished an American presence in the Oregon Country in 1825, when William Ashley and Jedediah Smith explored the Snake River below Lower Salmon Falls.[3] Antoine Sylvaille trapped the Big Wood River for HBC in 1828. He found the Snake River country greatly depleted of beaver because of the increasing number of American trappers. American Fur Company trappers returning to the Big Wood River in 1830 found little reward for their

efforts. Incidently, the ever more widely ranging search for fur resulted in the first documented exploration of the periphery of the Craters of the Moon region, by the Benjamin L.E. Bonneville expedition of 1833-1834.[4] By 1840, only a handful of trappers remained in the Snake River country. Forts Hall and Boise became service centers on the newly opened Oregon Trail, remaining active until 1855 (when they were abandoned because of Indian hostilities). Furthermore, tens of thousands of emigrants traversed the Snake River Plain during the 1840s and 1850s, but generally followed the main route along the Snake River. Not until 1862 did recurring Indian hostilities force a significant traffic to the periphery of the Snake River Plain (and the Craters of the Moon).

The Goodale's Cutoff

By 1862, the threat of Indian hostilities forced many emigrants to leave the Snake River near Fort Hall, and skirt the northernmost edge of the Snake River Plain, returning to the regular Oregon Trail in the vicinity of the Boise valley. Named for Tim Goodale, a half-breed guide who pioneered the route,[5] the cutoff literally skirts the lava fields of the Craters of the Moon. Trail remnants can still be seen along the perimeters of the lava fields. Fortunately, the emigrants' recorded impressions of their

travels survive to a much greater extent than those of the fur trappers before them.

The Goodale train of 1862 included several hundred wagons, more than one thousand men, women and children, and a large herd of stock.[6] Constantly on alert for Indians, O.B. Slater, one of the emigrants, recorded:

> There were fifty armed men on horses who went ahead as guards and fifty more brought up the rear. The teams were driven by women and boys mostly. The men marched in squads of twenty each to guard the train.[7]

The train reached Lost River (named because "It has no outlet except by losing itself in the sand or lava. . ."[8]) by July, where Slater's father died from "mountain fever" and was buried in a wagon box.[9] Slater observed that the road "was very dim and rocky," not traveled since 1854.[10] Nellie Slater reportedly "Saw some names cut in trees and rocks, which had been done in 1854." Furthermore, she recorded that "Some of the boys found in the rocks a trunk which had been lost or hid in 1853. It was full of clothing, dishes and other small articles."[11] Nellie Slater recorded:

> We are traveling now through a volcanic country. There's mountains all torn up and it is a very rough desert of a looking place.[12]

George Goodhart, an old fur trapper, reported that as early as 1862, "old man [Louis] Arco" established a ranch and trading post on Goodale's Cutoff.[13] Two years later, Goodhart found Arco's ranch crowded with Indians.

He reported that "The river was lined with lodges for about a mile up and down on both sides."[14] Goodhart also made reference to "Dead Man's Flat," which may be a segment of the lava fields.[15]

Julius Caesar Merrill, a member of the 1864 emigration, penned a vivid description of the Craters of the Moon:

> As far as the eye can reach there is nothing but this black volcanic rock. This region must have received some terrible scorchings and shakings years ago. These rocks are thrown up in every conceivable shape. Some are like columns fifteen or twenty feet in height and I often wondered how it became so well balanced as to stand without proping. Again it would be thrown up like the roof of a house with the top edges a few feet apart leaving a chasm many feet in depth between. It appeared to be a crust and when cooled from two to four feet in depth was thus rent asunder by some pent up gasses. I saw it in many places where it had the appearance of running when quite thick. Upon the outer edge of the stream it would seem to cool and that more hot would still press forward leaving it wrinkled. Sometimes it would overflow and form a new crust which might easily be removed. I can give no just description of it. It must be seen to be appreciated.[16]

Merrill described the road as "very rough." The road was

> <u>all rocks</u> in several places. Some so large as to scarcely pass under the wagon. At one place we were obliged to drive over a huge rock just a little wider than the wagon. Had we gone a foot to the right or to the left the wagon would have rolled over. The road was very crooked as it followed along the edge of the hills most of the time it being the only route possible on account of this black rock. It was like following along a rough beach. As some steep point or bluff would run out into this rock then did we expect to see our wagons smashed. Such roads and surrounding country beggars description. The man whom Aesop described as being chained in a pool

> of water with an apple dangling above his head and being unable to quench either thirst or hunger was in a Paradise in comparison to him who drives a "Bull team" across such places.[17]

Merrill recorded his "relief to see the distance widening between us and that volcanic strata." He concluded:

> It was a desolate, dismal scenery. Up or down the valley as far as the eye could reach or across the mountains and into the dim distance the same unvarying mass of black rock. Not a shrub, bird, nor insect seemed to live near it. Great must have been the relief of the volcano, powerful the emetic, that poured forth such a mass of "Black Vomit."[18]

The Woolverton family also participated in the 1864 emigration. They described the Craters of the Moon as a "black valley of death." The trail was visible only because of "the rocks and lava being crushed by the many teams passing over it." They observed "pieces of broken wagons" scattered all along the trail. The Woolvertons described this section of the trail "to be far the hardest part of our travel. . . . Every man, woman and child must walk in order to lessen the weight of our axle trees to prevent breaking."[19]

Forty years later, Annie Jane Foster's family trekked along Goodale's Cutoff (now a stage road). Annie Jane Foster described the road as "the crookedest road any one ever traveled." Foster observed:

> All the valley was lavy rock so black looked like where a strawstack had been burned. The rocks were black and full of holes but heavy as lead the rocks looked like honey comb so many holes. Surely wonderful. They call this place

> the Craters of the Moon. The mountain had grass on not many rocks the soil was sort of red and sandy. It just looked like there had been a place left for a road. . . . Not very pretty place. Mountains on one side and lavy rock on the other.[20]

For the twenty year period before Foster's trek along Goodale's Cutoff, a Lost River resident, Judge D.J. Martin, remembered seeing "thousands" of emigrants utilizing the road; many traveled west, but many also had abandoned the coast and were returning to the East.[21]

Settlement

The emigration to Idaho was heavily augmented after 1860 by the gold and silver strikes throughout the territory (particularly the 1862 strikes in Boise Basin and the Owyhees). With the exception of isolated ranches and stage stations (such as Arco), the emigration bypassed the Craters of the Moon in its rush toward the gold fields. The Wood River District was prospected by 1883, when the Martin family homesteaded the Martin ranch on Goodale's Cutoff. The following year, Frank and Samuel Martin discovered hornsilver on the north fork of Champagne Creek. The Horn Silver Mine was located, June 1884, and a tent city in Poison Gulch developed into the boom town of Era (named for Samuel and Mattie D. Martin's son--Tom Martin's father). A post office was established at the Martin ranch.

By 1885, the town of Era boasted "six saloons, a drug store, the Pacific Express Office, three general stores, one hardware store, one mining equipment concern, one barber shop. . . one blacksmith shop, one opera house, a rambling boarding house and an unrecorded number of 'houses of ill repute.'"[22] A number of tents and private dwellings surrounded this business district sufficient to house a working population of about 3,000.[23] Additionally, Frank Martin directed the construction of a "huge dry crusher mill."[24] In an election in 1886, the town of Era mustered 140 votes.[25] This mining activity encouraged homesteading and prospecting throughout the Lava Mining District. Towns such as Arco, Houston, Gem, Cliff City, Carbonate, White Knob, Alder Creek, Custer and Bonanza were newly established, or prospered because of mining developments. By 1890, the Horn Silver Mine alone is estimated to have produced one million dollars in silver.[26] But low-grade ore and a crash of the silver market killed the town of Era by the end of the century.[27]

A stage line was established on Goodale's Cutoff in 1879 by Alexander Toponce to connect Blackfoot and Challis.[28] Stage stations were constructed along the line, including at Arco. A town developed around the station, and changed its location twice. Only after the Mackay Short Line Railroad was completed in 1901 was the town situated in

its modern location.[29] Local residents were familiar with the Craters of the Moon, and called it "'big craters' or some such name."[30] Wood River rustlers even utilized the lava fields as refuges and way stations for stolen stock.

Craters of the Moon National Monument

The expansion of settlement in the region surrounding Craters of the Moon resulted in increased interest in the lava fields. As early as 1879, local residents such as Arthur Ferris and J.W. Powell explored the lava fields for water sources to supply cattle herds. Powell reputedly erected a stone marker at a water hole in Vermilion Chasm.[31] Furthermore, a cow's shoulder bone reportedly was discovered in Buffalo Cave in 1926, with names and the date of 1885 "written" on it.[32]

The initial scientific exploration of the Craters of the Moon was sponsored by the United States Geological Survey. I.C. Russell surveyed the northern region in 1901 and 1903. He called the lava fields the "Cinder Buttes" region.[33] Russell concluded that the fields were active as recently as 100-150 years.[34] Samuel A. Paisley, who became the monument's first custodian, explored the lava fields beginning in 1910.[35]

In 1921, the U.S.G.S. dispatched Harold T. Stearns to survey the Craters of the Moon. Stearns was accompanied

by O.E. Meinzer, another U.S.G.S. geologist; and by Fred E. Wright, a Carnegie Institute geologist. On the basis of this field work, Stearns in 1923 recommended to the National Park Service the creation of a national monument at the Craters of the Moon. In Stearns' opinion, a monument "Would preserve for the people of the United States the most recent example of a fissure eruption in this country."[36]

In an attempt to establish the date of the most recent eruptions at Craters of the Moon, Stearns

> visited Mr. Powell in 1926 and was surprised by his remarkable memory of the principal features in the area. Mr. Powell stated that in 1879 he interviewed Major Jim, a Bannock Indian scout, who spoke English well, regarding the time of the last eruption in the area. Major Jim replied that his great-great-great-grandfather saw fire in the region. On the basis of this statement the last eruption occurred in the early part of the eighteenth century. It is not impossible that an eruption occurred in the area at that time, but it is as likely that a fumarole or steam vent could have been considered fire by the Indian.[37]

Stearns concluded:

> It is probable that the ancestors of the modern Indian witnessed eruptions in the area as Indians frequented the region for hunting or took refuge from enemies in the numerous caves and craters. However, to attempt to fix the date of an eruption on the basis of Indian tradition may lead to serious error.[38]

Incidently, Stearns attributed the name, Craters of the Moon, to "The similarity of the dark craters and the cold

lava, nearly destitute of vegetation, to the surface of the moon as seen through a telescope. . ."[39] Stearns received a presidential commendation for his efforts toward preserving the Craters of the Moon.[40] On 2 May 1924, President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed thirty-nine square miles of the lava fields to be the Craters of the Moon National Monument.

Stearns returned to the region in 1926, to complete his survey in cooperation with the Idaho Bureau of Mines and Geology. These efforts resulted in an increase in the size of the monument, from thirty-nine to eighty-three square miles.[41]

Although a federal reservation by 1924, improvements and maintenance depended initially on local initiative. Road improvements (including construction of the loop drive) began in 1922, and was "carried on by the local citizenry seemingly in self-preservation measures."[42] Samuel A. Paisley, appointed first custodian, developed Cinderhurst Camp at Registration Waterholes as a headquarters, 1924-1927.[43] But seismic activity, July 1927, apparently caused the waterholes to dry up. The monument headquarters was moved to the site of Crater Inn, then under construction.[44]

Robert Winfield Limbert

Harold T. Stearns returned to Washington, D.C., after his 1921 expedition, to produce his report to the National Park Service. Meanwhile, a Boise taxidermist, naturalist, and fledgling writer conducted his own explorations of the Craters of the Moon.

"Two-gun" Bob Limbert was born is southern Minnesota, 24 April 1885. Soon after his birth, he was adopted by Jesse and Ida (Smith) Limber; the family moved to Omaha, Nebraska. Sometime before moving to Idaho, Bob changed his adopted name, with the addition of a final letter "t".[45] Growing up in Omaha, Limbert became an amateur wrestler, and entered the business of taxidermy. With taxidermy came an unbounded love of wildlife and the outdoors, and an interest in learning about every facet of outdoor life, from Indian lifeways to motion picture making.

Leaving Omaha, Limbert Practiced taxidermy in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Denver, and Ogden, before arriving in Boise in 1911. Managing another business for two years,[46] Limbert went into business for himself by 1914 (initially in partnerships; with A.A. Austin, 1914; and E.C. Eckart, beginning 1915). His arrival in Boise also resulted in marriage, to Margaret Wiggs of Omaha, 14 December 1911. An indication of Limbert's early popularity in Boise and professional esteem was his appointment in 1914 to organize and manage

the Idaho state exhibit at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco, requiring him to leave Idaho for fourteen months.[47]

Once established in Boise as a taxidermist, tanner and furrier, Limbert increasingly devoted more time to activities promoting the West, wildlife, and "Two-gun" Bob Limbert. His activities on behalf of the West, and natural history, included work with the United States Biological Survey, the Idaho State Game Department, the Idaho State Historical Society, the University of Nebraska, and the Izaak Walton League. He became a deputy commissioner of the Boy Scouts. He eventually acquired a professional manager and entered the national lecture and performance circuit.[48] Limbert performed as a quick-draw artist, shooting demonstrator and instructor, and forensics specialist. He consulted with police departments and sheriff's associations.[49] And if all else failed, he gave bird and animal imitations. Examples of his expertise with a weapon included shooting while standing on his head; or standing upright, splitting a bullet on an axe blade, and breaking targets positioned on both sides of the blade.[50] A Chicago newspaper reported that Limbert once challenged Al Capone to a pistol duel at ten paces.[51] Capone evidently declined. Limbert once explained to a newspaperman why Westerners have such a proficiency with guns: "to protect

their lives and shoot grasshoppers for bait. . ."[52] A somewhat apocryphal story suggests the breath of Limbert's showmanship and bravado:

> Back in the days when the region was largely peopled by Indians, a lone white man was cooking his supper over a camp fire beside a little stream on the Fort Washakie Indian Reservation in Wyoming. A party of Indians rode up and, dismounting, said: "You huntum money rock" (meaning "prospecting"). "Me no like."
>
> Relying on his ability to awe the red men through their superstitious natures, the white man retorted, "Me no huntum money rock, me huntum money," and with clever sleight-of-hand maneuvers he palmed several coins from his pockets. "Ho, look, ketchum money all around!" he exclaimed, as, with sleeves rolled up, he began picking actual money out of the air.
>
> The braves watched every move with keenest interest and finally the leader concluded, "Huh, heap big medicine man!" and they sat around the camp fire, delighted while Bob Limbert went through his whole repertoire of tricks and magic.[53]

But although a compulsive practical joker, Limbert apparently failed to appreciate jokes at his expense. Harold T. Stearns had developed a friendship with Limbert while working at the Craters of the Moon. In his memoirs, Stearns recalls:

> The topographic map of the monument made by the [U.S.G.S.] at my request was completed in 1926. I named all the features that my good friend Bob Limbert had not named in his early National Geographic article. . . . He was a compulsive practical joker but never liked jokes to be played on him. When he sent me my bear rug, made from a hide I had sent him for curing, he enclosed a check for

> one million dollars, written on a defunct Boise bank, along with other useless objects used in packing. I took all the heavy rock specimens from the Craters of the Moon. . . and sent them to Bob via express collect, with a brief letter stating that this was the load off my heart after receiving his gifts. I never heard from him again.[54]

Of ultimately greater historical importance than his lectures and performances, Limbert recorded his perceptions and observations of Idaho for posterity. In addition to writing articles and columns for numerous magazines and newspapers, Limbert became an avid still and motion picture photographer. He recorded in photographs areas of Idaho, including the Craters of the Moon, prior to their discovery by the general public, and subsequent development.

Robert W. Limbert died unexpectedly, 15 July 1933 While on tour in the East, he received word that his mother had fallen ill. Driving back to Boise, he was fatally stricken at Cheyenne with a brain hemorrhage. His mother died the following day, and they were buried in Boise in adjoining graves.

Among the Craters of the Moon

Robert Limbert recounted in a 1924 National Geographic article (which together with Harold T. Stearns' favorable report generated the publicity necessary to prod President Calvin Coolidge to designate the Craters of the Moon as a

national monument):

> For several years I had listened to stories told by fur trappers of the strange things they had seen while ranging in this region. Some of these accounts seemed beyond belief.[55]

His curiosity aroused, Limbert retraced the explorations of I.C. Russell. On his second hike into the lava fields he was accompanied by Wes Watson and Era Martin, ranchers whose homesteads adjoined the Craters of the Moon. Watson and Martin provided invaluable logistical support and orientation for Limbert. Finally, May 1923, Limbert (together with W.I. Cole, and an Airedale terrier) trekked across the Craters of the Moon, hiking north from Minidoka to Martin's ranch. The two men packed "bedding, an aluminum cook outfit, a 5 x 7 camera and tripod, binoculars, and supplies, sufficient for two weeks. . ."[56] They quickly discovered their mistake in bringing the dog, "for after three days' travel his feet were worn raw and bleeding. In some places it was necessary to carry him or sit and wait while he picked his way across."[57] Limbert claimed that he and Cole were the "first white persons to cross this plateau from south to north."[58]

Relying on water found in caves and crevices, the men navigated "old Indian" trails. Limbert claimed to have traced one "well-worn" Indian trail across the lava fields, entering the Craters of the Moon

> about six miles west of Martin, near the sinks of a lost stream known as Little Cottonwood. It is istinct for about 11 miles, and then fades; yet we found traces of it all the way across. It is sparingly marked with small rock piles and pieces of sagebrush, with rocks to weight them. A few flint or obsidian arrow-points can be picked up along it. Where these trails go and why, no one knows.[59]

Along the journey, Limbert and Cole discovered evidence of bears "digging for roots and rolling rocks for ants."[60]

During their trek, Limbert and Cole named many of the natural features encountered, including Vermilion Canyon and Sheep Trail Mount (Butte). On a subsequent visit in August, Limbert named several other features, such as Yellow Jacket Water Hole, Bridge of Tears, and Trench Mortar Flat.

Limbert concluded that, although the flows "seem as if they had happened only yesterday," they probably occurred as recently as two hundred years before.[61] Limbert concurred with his friend Stearns' recommendation that part of the lava fields be preserved as the Craters of the Moon National Monument. This action would insure preservation of "surface phenomena which are paralleled only by those in Iceland."[62] Robert W. Limbert devoted the remainder of his life to the preservation and promotion of this monument.

FOOTNOTES

[1]De Jong, p. 64.

[2]Rutledge, p. 1.

[3]De Jong, p. 115.

[4]Irving, p. 203.

[5]Nellie Slater, p. 4.

[6]Ibid. O.B. Slater, p. 3.

[7]O.B. Slater, p. 3.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Nellie Slater, p. 4.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Anderson, p. 214.

[14]Ibid., pp. 319-320.

[15]Ibid., p. 318.

[16]Merrill Ms.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Woolverton Ms.

[20]Foster Ms.

[21]Hagen Ms.

[22]Clezie, p. 24.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Clezie, p. 24.

[25]Hagen Ms.

[26]Clezie, p. 25.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Rutledge, p. 2.

[29]Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[30]Hagen Ms.

[31]Stearns 1977, p. 27.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Russell.

[34]Stearns 1977, pp. 26-27.

[35]Reynolds Ms.

[36]Stearns 1923.

[37]Stearns 1977, p. 27.

[38]Ibid., p. 31.

[39]Ibid., p. 1.

[40]Ibid., p. ii.

[41]Ibid., p. 1.

[42]Zink, p. 35.

[43]Ibid., p. 61.

[44]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

[45]Hawley, p. 653. Lawrence, Personal Communication.

[46]Hawlay, p. 654.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Howell Ms.

[49]Howell Ms.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Limbert Family Ms.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Fordyce.

[54]Stearns 1983, p. 41.

[55]Limbert 1924, p. 303.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., p. 328.

[60]Ibid., p. 306.

[61]Ibid., p. 328.

[62]Ibid.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Idaho State Historical Society, Boise

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|---|---|
| Catalog # 61-170.2 | Indian Tunnel |
| 63-132.13 | Big Crater |
| 70-86.10 | Tree Moulds |
| 70-86.11 | Crystal Pit |
| 70-86.12 | Washington's Profile |
| 70-86.13 | Lava Burnt Tree |
| 72-201.32A-H | (untitled) Rhodenbaugh Collection |
| 72-201.32I-K | (untitled) Rhodenbaugh Collection |
| 72-201.32L | 1923/1924 |
| 72-201.32M | Frank Swanson & F.L. Stilson |
| 72-201.32O | 1938/1939 |
| 72-201.32P | 1939 |
| 72-201.32Q | 1940 |
| 72-201.32U-W | (untitled) Rhodenbaugh Collection |
| 72-201.32R,S | 1940 |
| 72-201.32T,X | (untitled) Rhodenbaugh Collection |
| 61-178.6 | Lava Flow |
| 71-141.7 | Administration Building & Inn (K.W. Farling) |
| 74-5.41a-i | Arthur A. Hart photos |
| 75-129.19 | Wild buckwheat (1948) |
| 75-129.20 | Washington's Profile (1948) |
| 76-2.5A | Tree Mould |
| 76-2.5B | AA Lava |
| Biography Group #833 | Jake Ruebens, Ezra Meeker, Bob Limbert, Major J.W. Burns at site of Sinker Creek massacre |

Limbert Family Ms.

Uncataloged

National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Still Photo Branch)

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|---|---|
| Catalog # 79-G-19M-1a | Pahoehoe lava near Indian Tunnel (Frank Lipp photo) |
| 79-G-19M-2a | Spatter Cones near the Big Crater (Frank Lipp photo, August 1942) |