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Rustic Roosevelt Lodge

By Tamsen Emerson Hert

A stop at Camp Roosevelt will not appeal to everybody. It is well to understand that there are no rooms with bath, or other service elements of an elegant or luxurious nature. It is well to know, also, that there is little opportunity for "dressing up" and formal entertainment. Camp Roosevelt is a comfortable western camp surrounded by a wilderness. Its primary appeal is to visitors who delight in (or who need) foot trails, saddlehorse trails, trout fishing, exploration, nature study or relaxation.2

Tucked away in the northeastern corner of Yellowstone National Park stands Roosevelt Lodge. Constructed in 1919 and opened the next year, it is one of the few "original" lodges remaining in the park.

William Wallace Wylie initiated camping tours through "Wonderland" in 1892 using portable equipment. From then until 1905, he was a Park fixture. In 1896 Wylie was granted a long-term lease and established four permanent camps at points of interest around the Grand Loop. His camping tours provided a less expensive alternative to the hotel system. By 1898 the Wylie Camping Company had camps at Apollinaris Spring, Upper Geyser Basin, Lake Outlet and Grand Canyon, with lunch stations near Norris and Thumb. The success of Wylie’s permanent camps did not set well with the Northern Pacific Railroad or with Harry Child, owner of the hotel and transportation companies.

"Wylie constantly irritated the wealthy and snobbish Child because the tourists who used his camps were a different sort, not at all like those who stayed at the posh hotels; his guests paid low prices for Spartan accommodations and dust-plagued stagecoach tours."2

Ed Moorman, long-time employee of the Camping Company, recalled that business at the Wylie camps was very slow in 1904, but:

The hotels, however, did a good business that year... The railroads, too, made discriminating rates against the Camping Company. If I recall correctly, a round-trip ticket could be purchased to Gardiner including stage and hotel accommodations at a good saving as against buying a rail ticket to Gardiner only and then buying locally the ticket for the Camps tour of the Park. It was this problem that led W. W. Wylie to go to Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1905 to appear before the Interstate Commerce Commission, in the hope to have this discrimination discontinued.3

1 Yellowstone Vacations Camp Roosevelt. (Chicago: Poole Brothers, 1923).
3 E. H. Moorman, Manuscript, Hays Collection #3151, Box 6, Moorman Manuscript folder, American Heritage Center. University of Wyoming
The discrimination did end, but following this victory over the Northern Pacific, Wylie sold the camping company to H. W. Child and A. W. Miles. Under their management, the Wylie Permanent Camping Company became even more successful.

Miles expanded the business in 1906 by adding two new camps: Camp Roosevelt near Tower Falls and a camp at swan Lake Flat, south of Mammoth Hot Springs. With the completion of the Union Pacific/Oregon Short Line branch to West Yellowstone in 1908, an additional camp was established at Riverside. A record number of visitors, 5,024, toured the Park via Wylie Camps in 1909.4

Several others were interested in providing camping tours through Yellowstone during this period. One company, Shaw and Powell, obtained a lease for permanent camps.

The National Park Service was established in 1916 as a new agency under the Department of the Interior. The first director, Stephen A. Mather, and his assistant, Horace Albright, had charge of all business endeavors in the national parks. They sought to consolidate the various Yellowstone concessions. “They believed that the competition among franchisees was detrimental to the traveling public and that monopolies for each major facet of the operation—hotels, transportation, and camping—would simplify administration and increase visitation.”

As a result of the restructuring, Child maintained ownership of both the hotel and transportation companies while F. J. Haynes continued operating the photographic franchise. A. W. Miles and J. D. Powell, owners of the two major camping companies, joined together to form the Yellowstone Park Camping Company.6

Ed Moorman recalled this episode in Park history:

“Many of the former operators were not pleased with the new set-up, but in reality it was very good for the tourists as they were free from the annoyance of being solicited by many outfits if they had not heretofore purchased their Park tickets elsewhere.”

With the onset of World War I, railroads were no longer allowed to transport excursion trains. This limited visitation to Yellowstone. All hotels were closed and, while the camps remained open, they lost money. After undergoing these hardships, Miles and Powell sold the Yellowstone Park Camping Company to Howard Hays in 1919.

Hayes rebuilt the camp operation by constructing more substantial facilities and promoting the “camps way” in Yellowstone. He started by changing the name of the company to the Yellowstone Park Camps Company. In the fall of 1919, his firm began construction of a rustic lodge at Camp Roosevelt.

4 Barringer.
5 Barringer, 7.
6 For additional details, see Barringer and Moorman.
7 Moorman, 16.
The site was established as a camp in 1906 to commemorate the 1903 Yellowstone visit by President Theodore Roosevelt. The 1907 Wylie Permanent Camping Company announced: "The New Roosevelt Camp Trio".

Camp Roosevelt is the most perfectly ideal location for a camp in the Park... A beautiful little meadow with majestic fir trees encircling it on three sides and a grove of quaking-aspen screening it from the road on the fourth, a crystal, ice-cold mountain stream coming from the forest and skirting one side of the meadow... and a most superb view of the serried and crags of the Absarokas on the East and Northeast; surely Nature has done everything possible to make this a perfect spot to enjoy outdoor life."

Frederick Dumont Smith, in his Book of a Hundred Bears, wrote: "We reached Camp Roosevelt in time for a late lunch. The camp is set in a charming grove, with tent houses and tents for cooking and dining."

Camp Roosevelt was chosen as the site for the first lodge building in a new system of accommodations designed to meet the needs of automobile tourists. Albright, then superintendent of Yellowstone, was pleased with the idea of a new lodge system, believing that the rustic log construction would provide a "dude ranch appearance."

Construction of the lodge began in the fall of 1919, but it was not completed until the following spring. The dimensions of the one-story log building were about 90 feet by 50 feet with the "L" extension of 29 feet by 59 feet. The exterior log walls were unpeeled and saddle-notched. The front porch, constructed of matched and dressed pine flooring atop log joints, originally wrapped around the southeast corner of the building. (This is apparent from a Haynes postcard). The extension was removed about 1947.

The lodge interior was designed to provide a lounge and dining area for campers. Features of the room included two stone fireplaces with concrete hearths and loge mantels and a log rail, 25 feet long, separating the lounge from the dining area. The furnishings were of a rustic design and included "a eleven-inch diameter enamelled-iron drinking fountain, a Bradford upright Grand piano, pine tables, a "rustic" hat rack, log settees with loose cushions, 110 maple folding chairs, and assorted bookcases."

The dining room was furnished with 14 pine tables of various sizes, pine serving stands, 93 black and yellow dining chairs with bar backs and cone seats. Both areas

8 Wyle Permanent Camping Company. Yellowstone National Park (Chicago: Poole Brothers, 1907), 21.
11 For instance, see Haynes postcard #27468.
had striped linen curtains hung on wrought-iron rods and hangars. A framed print portrait of Theodore Roosevelt hung over the mantel of the lounge.13

From 1921-1923, Camp Roosevelt served as the headquarters for the Yellowstone Park Forest and Trail Camp. Serving as director was Prof. Alvin G. Whitney from the Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station, New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse. The camp’s purpose was stated in a 1921 publication:

The Forest and Trail Camp is a summer nature school designed for boys between twelve and eighteen years. Its basic principle is that of character-building through the hardy pastimes of woods and trail, through self-discipline, and through helpfulness in a cultured camp community....

The celebrated wonders of the Yellowstone, with its geysers and hot springs, its vast forests and mighty canyons, as well as those other varied recreational interests— the herds of big “game,” the marvelous trout fishing, the scenic trail trips afoot or on horseback, and for the more adventurous the climbing and exploring among remote lakes and mountain gardens—appeal alike to all who visit the great Park; but it is to the growing boy that they are most fascinating.14

The Camp headquarters or council building was built one quarter mile from Roosevelt Lodge. Meals were provided at the Lodge. Ed Moorman recalled building a small swimming pool for the Camp along with an “assembly house” in 1920.15 Whitney charged $500 for the nearly six-week long camp, but Moorman mentions that Whitney brought out a number of boys, but not enough to pay the Company for the operating expenses. He estimated that the company lost $4,000 on the venture.

Howard Hays, president of the Yellowstone Park Camping Company, continued to promote Camp Roosevelt. In 1923 a brochure titled “Yellowstone Vacations, Camp Roosevelt,” was published. Many of the tours offered by the Yellowstone Park Transportation Company passed by the Roosevelt area, but the overnight stay there was not included in the cost of the tour:

In General

A stop at Camp Roosevelt is not included in the standard four and one-half days’ sightseeing tour of Yellowstone Park....Many travelers who are using the regular service of the Yellowstone permanent summer camps, or the Yellowstone hotels, go to Camp Roosevelt for an extra day or an extra week in the Park. Almost all regular tours pass the camp, thereby eliminating any extra transportation charges; on the three regular tours which do not pass the camp, the side-trip to Camp Roosevelt is made for an extra transportation charge of five dollars.16

In 1924 Child, the owner of the boat, hotel and transportation companies, acquired the camps. Again, the name was changed, this time to Yellowstone Park Lodge and Camps Company. Cabins were added to the Roosevelt Lodge area under the oversight of Vernon Goodwin. Use of the camps and lodges increased and more Americans drove their automobiles to and through the park.

Because of the Great Depression, no services were provided at Camp Roosevelt in 1932-33. The camp was closed again from 1943-46 because of the labor shortage brought about by World War II. After inspection by the U. S. Public Health Service in 1947, it was determined that Roosevelt Lodge needed a new kitchen. The camp remained closed.

W. M. Nichols, the president of the Yellowstone Park Company,17 proposed abandoning the Roosevelt area and relocating all assets to Fishing Bridge. Camp Roosevelt never had been profitable and the Fishing Bridge area needed additional accommodations. After consideration, however, the kitchen was upgraded and the lodge remodeled.18 Few modifications were made to the Lodge although cabins continued to be relocated there from other parts of the park.

From 16 permanent camps operated by the Wylie Permanent Camping Company and the Shaw and Powell Camping Company in 1913, three “rustic” lodges operate there today. Roosevelt Lodge remains the most casual and rustic lodge in the Park and it still offers the scenic vistas and western experience valued by the traveler in an earlier, less harried era.

13 Haynes postcard #22740.
15 Moorman. 18.
16 Yellowstone Parks Camps Company, Yellowstone Vacations, Camp Roosevelt (Chicago: Poole Bros., 1923).
17 All of Child’s properties, the Yellowstone Park Hotel Company, the Yellowstone Park Transportation Company, the Yellowstone Park Boat Company, and the Yellowstone Park Lodges and Camps Company, were merged in 1936 into the Yellowstone Park Company.
18 McDonald, 31.