

JUST PASSING THROUGH

The Spokane Tourist Experience in the Late 19th Century

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Tourism began in earnest in the United States during the 1840s. Improved transportation in the East had made travel easier. Resorts sprang up that catered to the wealthy, but they were eventually brought within the range of the middle class. Traveling short distances for weekend excursions became a favored activity. Travel destinations and real estate sales have always relied on one important feature: location. In the mid-19th century the area around beautiful Spokane Falls on the Spokane River did not have location in its favor—the lack of transportation facilities in the area made pleasure travel impossible for any but the hardy adventurer. The river was unnavigable at the falls, and major transportation routes such as the Mullan Road passed at a distance of five miles. The falls were at times a full week's journey from Walla Walla, the nearest city, and while people passed through on the way to somewhere else, few stopped.

In 1862 a mule train set up camp on the banks of the river near the falls. One member of the party described the river as rushing past in an irresistible torrent, with a roar and a force that made the rocky walls tremble. The muleskinners spent the night under a wide-spreading pine tree, and the sound of the falls charmed them to sleep. The only accommodations were the ground and stars.

Permanent white settlement began near the falls in 1871. A post office was established in 1872, and a small sawmill began operation a year later. In 1873 the small settlement boasted three or four families and several single men. When James Glover and J. N. Matheny rode into the village in May 1873 they were invited to spend the night in an unoccupied and roofless log cabin where they threw their bedrolls on the dirt floor. Despite the rough accommodations, Glover stated that he "went to sleep with the roar of the falls in my ears, and I had a comfortable and restful night's slumber."

Glover proceeded to purchase squatter's rights to the land on both sides of the falls and set in motion a plan to help Spokane Falls grow. The sawmill was enlarged, and a small trading post was established. By the end of 1873 it looked as if the town was on the cusp of becoming a major destination. But the collapse of the Northern Pacific Railroad that same year precipitated a national depression, and Glover's land investment gamble seemed destined to fail.

Though the next four years saw little growth in Spokane Falls, Glover persisted in his dream and the town slowly grew. Visitors were invited to bed down in the hay in Glover's barn.

The first lodging house in town was Doc Masterson's, a rather rustic hotel that opened in 1877. Guests slept in the loft, accessible by ladder, on buffalo or bear skins thrown on the floor. This sleeping area was called the "corral" and a space could be rented for 50 cents a night. At the Western House, as it was called, after a meal of salmon and bear or deer, the host would tilt

back his chair, put his feet on the table, and enjoy a smoke with his guests. The lodging was crude, but it was a favorite of the cowboys and miners who passed through the area.

In typical frontier fashion, the people of Spokane wanted a hotel of some stature. Together with a railroad, a grand hotel promised to put any town on the path to future success. A regular stagecoach route was established between Spokane Falls and Colfax in 1879, with a stop at the new California House, which opened the same year with eight rooms on the second floor and a loft room that was also called the "corral." Rates were six dollars per week for room and board, or single meals for 50 cents. This is usually listed as the first hotel in town and certainly was the first one built for that purpose. The California House was a landmark in early Spokane, and it continued to grow over the next decade until it boasted 102 rooms.

Not to be outdone, the Western House was remodeled and refurnished, and under new ownership the following ad was placed in the local paper. "We are now prepared to accommodate the traveling and resident public in a first-class manner. Tourists will find this a pleasant home while stopping in the city."

The railroads had a large stake in the settling of the West, but they also profited from the many travelers who were on a quest to experience the great outdoors. By promoting the romance and history of the West, the railroads increased interest in transcontinental travel. Spokane was able to reap the benefits of a successful western railroad promotion.

New hotels sprang up to accommodate the sudden growth. By 1888 Spokane Falls boasted 18 hotels. That number rose to a high of 33 five years later, before the Panic of 1893 forced many of them to close and the number dropped down to 21.

Northern Pacific trains often arrived at night. A Montana journalist described the following scene at the Spokane station in 1888.

The various hotels were well represented with runners and free busses, and above the din of escaping steam, the unloading of luggage, and the excitement attendant, can be heard the yells of the runners, who red in the face, appeal to the stranger to try the merits of their respective hotel with as much fervor as if the hotels were in need of more guests, when in fact, all of them are overflowing.

Whether tourists were traveling in private palace cars or the lowliest of emigrant coaches, they were able to find guides to help them experience the countryside as it passed. Printed guidebooks often contained embellished histories and descriptions of western towns that the train passed through. "The tourist, loving the wild and picturesque, can spend days and days in the enjoyment of this delightful region." The guidebooks also served as geographies of the new areas to a nation with little understanding of the western states and territories.

Eastern travel magazines were joined by such northwestern counterparts as *West Shore* and *The Northwest*. Illustrated promotional literature and the growing hobby of picture postcard collecting also influenced American travel.

By the 1890s the tourist industry had developed new travel features. These included package tours, special excursions, and group rates. Day excursions were developed to "see" a certain area in a short time frame. Special tourist tickets with "free-to-wander" clauses allowed multiple stops and delays in a trip, allowing for sight-seeing and day excursions.

Colorado and California both moved to the forefront of major tourist destinations in the western United States by the 1890s. A cross-country sight-seeing tour almost always included one or both states. Yellowstone was formed as a national park in 1872 and became a busy tourist mecca for the West. Spokane concentrated on attracting tourists who planned to include Yellowstone on their itinerary.

Spokane was advertised in travel literature as a home base from which the tourist could take day trips to enjoy the scenery and recreational opportunities of the surrounding area. Elizabeth B. Custer described the journey northward from Spokane in 1891 in a *Harper's Weekly* article. After leaving the bustle and noise of the rapidly growing city:

...the engine, after some wheezing, brought us to the summit of the divide—over seven hundred feet above Spokane—and here lay a peaceful green lake, with pretty pebbly beach and clear water, reflecting and turning into a rich chrome the disfiguring yellow-pine buildings which are beginning to frighten away the loon, for which this little sheet of water is named.

Spokane Falls attracted the appreciation of tourists. Numerous accounts compared the falls of the Spokane River to Niagara Falls, for example:

The train rolled into the well-lighted streets of a cheerful looking town, and the guard called out "Spokane." By good luck, I went to a hotel just below the falls which gave the city its name, and where I enjoyed from my room a view different from, but strongly reminding one of, the great cataract of Niagara. To the music of these waters I slept joyously, if I may be allowed the term, and waked the following morning with a feeling of exhilaration to commence my quest.

Tourists who passed through Spokane often traveled on to northern Idaho. Coeur d'Alene Lake was a popular destination frequently described in great detail in many of travel brochures and articles. In a *New York Times* article one tourist described rising early to see the sun come up over the lake. He likewise recorded his amazement of the number of trout swimming in the lake.

A second group of tourists traveled for the recreational opportunity to catch the fish previously described. Hunters and fishermen flocked to the new wilderness to enjoy the frontier through the collection of wildlife trophies. Spokane became known as an excellent area for the sportsman. From the banks of the Spokane River "at any point within one hundred yards or twenty miles, trout of large size, and fine flavor may be taken." One publication described Spokane as a paradise for those who love the sport of rod and gun:

The river swarms with delicious, gamey [sic] trout and to catch them does not require more of a journey than five hundred yards from the principal hotel in town. In season, the river and lakes nearby, afford rare sport for the duck hunter, while deer, prairie chickens, pheasants, and grouse abound in the plains and wooded hills close by.

The healthiness of travel was touted in 19th-century publications. Many Victorian-era city dwellers of average means led a sedentary existence and this was doubly true for women whose clothing and expected life-style did not allow for any outlet of physical activity. A journey to the West allowed travelers both male and female to achieve well-being through exercise and fresh air. Activity and mental stimulation undoubtedly added to the success of the journey, alleviating health problems.

Nearby Medical Lake was a popular destination for health seekers beginning in the early 1880s. In 1883 a tourist from Springfield, Illinois, spent \$58.85 on his rail fare and \$16.00 for a week at Medical Lake, which included board, bath, blankets, and clothing.

Most tourists to the West followed a standard circuit or tour and stayed only a few days in any one location. There were a number of side trips and sight-seeing tours that could be added to tour packages. Some visitors marveled at the diversity of culture that Spokane offered. George Dodson wrote the following description of Spokane to his wife:

It is a perfect show to a tenderfoot to watch the people on the street. At any time you look you can see from ten to fifteen "cayuse," that is Indian ponies, going full tilt [with] an Indian or cowboy on their back. This place is full of Indians, there being several Indian Reservations near here.... But to see the different kinds of people it is surprising, ...nearly everyone rides horseback here, [you may see] the hardest kind of looking Indians and cowboys with leather pants and a big 45 revolver buckled on their side and right alongside of them may be seen an Elegant looking lady and "gent" on splendid looking horses both dressed to kill. The gent dressed with velvet riding coat and stiff hat, buff colored knee pants with riding boots and whip; the lady with an elegant riding suit and silk hat. On the walks are dozens of Chinese, Canadians, "English, you know," in appearance, German, French, Irish, and last but not least Americans, and everybody seems to be as busy as can be.

Many tourists to the region felt an urgency to see it all before it was gone. They encouraged others to come and view the sights soon because civilization was taking over the natural areas of beauty. One who expressed this idea most eloquently was Elizabeth B. Custer:

I felt that I would like to go on a pilgrimage through our Eastern States, and beg people to hurry out here before all this interesting country is levelled [sic] off, smoothed down and made tame and commonplace. Think how weary we get of those beaten paths at home, and there is yet time to see some isolated and wild country. But a few years, I fear, will find all the individuality of this wonderland departed, and traffic and bustle penetrating to every distant corner of the Territories.

Spokane, not being a major destination on the major tourist routes, required greater promotion to make travelers aware of the city and its tourist facilities. In the last three decades of the 19th century the town had blossomed from a population of ten to one of 30,000 residents. Through it all, Spokane recognized the importance of providing for its visitors. Businesses were able to expand and new employment opportunities were realized. Travelers were some of the greatest promoters of the town by the falls, and their legacy helped to build a city.

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