



Tracing the cultural history of upper Snake River guides in Grand Teton National Park

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Abstract This study traces the development and evolution of Snake River use and management through an in-depth exploration of historic commercial scenic river guiding and concessions on the upper Snake River in Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) from 1950 to the present day. The research is based on a combination of methods including archival research, oral history analysis, historical landscape analysis, and fieldwork. I suggest that a distinct cultural community of river runners and outdoor recreationalists developed in Grand Teton National Park after World War II. In GRTE, a combination of physical, cultural, and technical forces shaped this community's evolution including the specific geomorphology and dynamic channel patterns of the upper Snake River, the individuals and groups that worked on this river, and changes in boat and gear technology over time. The following paper presents the early results from the first year of this project in 2016 including the work of a graduate student and myself. This study offers connections between the upper Snake River and Grand Teton National Park to broader national trends in the evolution of outdoor recreation and concessions in national parks, the impact of World War II on technological developments for boating, and the cultural history of adventure outdoor recreation and tourism in the United States.

Introduction

This study traces the development and evolution of Snake River use and management through an in-depth exploration of historic commercial scenic river guiding and concessions on the upper Snake River in Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) from 1950 to the present day. This project is in its early phases. In 2016, a University of Wyoming-National Park Service Research grant supported a summer of research for myself and an incoming graduate student to Idaho State University, Matthew Bingman. During the summer of 2016, we read historic primary sources located at GRTE archives, recorded and transcribed oral histories of pioneer river guides, concession owners and managers, and began the process of building a larger project for future years of research

that can expand to cover more outdoor recreation history for the park including additional pioneer commercial river guides, NPS river and climbing rangers, and additional sections of the Snake River above Jackson Lake. In this report, I offer the beginnings of a park cultural resource study that blends qualitative methods with an interdisciplinary stream of literature from social and physical sciences to better understand Grand Teton National Park's cultural, social, and recreational history. Specifically, I draw upon the findings of river geomorphology and stream ecology studies to explore how changes in the river over annual and seasonal time periods shape the recreational use of the river by commercial river runners.

Grand Teton NP (GRTE) has a long, complex, and rich history of outdoor recreation and tourism. This history includes pioneering contributions to river raft-

ing, climbing, mountaineering, hiking, and dude ranching that fit into larger trends across the United States during the post World War II recreation boom years, changing national park recreation management strategies, and the development of commercial guiding industry and equipment. Yet few scholarly projects explore these aspects of the park's past through a sustained cultural and historical approach that connects researchers with NPS managers and the public. There is a research need for additional studies of these topics, especially as the National Park Service celebrated its centennial in 2016 and park visitors seek out new ways to understand and connect with the cultural and social histories of Grand Teton National Park.

Grand Teton National Park is a natural laboratory for geologists, biologists, ecologists, and other physical scientists. Scholars have studied the Upper Snake River's channel morphology and fluvial dynamics over time using aerial images, field measurement, and remote sensing (Marston, 1990; Marcus et al., 2002; Erwin and Schmidt, 2006; Marston et al., 2005; Legleiter and Overstreet, 2012). Biologists have studied the Snake River's riparian corridor to better understand vegetation patterns as well as beaver (*Castor Canadensis*), river otter (*Lontra Canadensis*), Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*), and trout activity along the Snake River (Kroger, 1973; Kiefling, 1978; Hall, 1983; Mitton, 2003; Gribb and Harlow, 2004; Gresswell and Homel, 2008).

The park is also a cultural laboratory for tracing ideas about the evolution of concessions, river management policies, outdoor recreation, and tourism history. Scholars from the fields of history, geography, anthropology, tourism, and art history have made significant contributions to the documentation and scholarly descriptions of the cultural and environmental history of national parks and tourism (Dilsaver and Colten, 1992; Wyckoff and Dilsaver, 1997; Rothman, 1998; Pritchard, 1999; Lippard, 1999; Patin, 1999; Dilsaver and Wyckoff, 2005; Runte, 2010). Some scholars have published excellent studies of western rivers in national parks and their environmental and cultural histories (Aton and McPherson, 2000; Harvey, 2000), including Tim Palmer's *The Snake*

River: Window the West (1991). Several studies of Grand Teton NP focus on cultural and social histories (Righter, 1982; Betts, 1978; Sanborn, 1993; Daugherty, 1999; Righter, 2014). Still other scholars have published cultural studies of guides and commercial outfitters in national parks (Nash, 1989; Teal, 1994; Leavengood, 2004; Westwood, 1997; Sadler, 2006). However, much of this scholarly publication record concentrates on the evolution of commercial river rafting and guiding in Grand Canyon National Park, the Colorado River or other rivers and national parks in the western United States. Some excellent published works about Grand Teton National Park and Snake River rafting lay the foundation for a deeper exploration of its cultural and social history (Huser, 2001; Hoops, 2009; Johnson, 2016). This oversight of Grand Teton National Park's contributions leaves a gap in the research concerning the role that the Snake River and GRTE played in the larger history of commercial river rafting in the United States, guide and river ranger history, national and regional tourism trends, and human-environment interactions on western U.S. rivers.

Methods

Study Area

The study area is focused on the 42.0 km (26.1 miles) long stretch of the upper Snake River from Jackson Lake Dam to Moose, Wyoming in Grand Teton National Park (Figure 1) in northwestern Wyoming. The contemporary park is 485 square miles including 40 miles of the dramatic fault block Teton Mountain Range, rising from around 6,800 feet in the valley floor to iconic mountain peaks including Grand Teton at 13,370 feet and eight peaks over 12,000 feet high. The park is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and lies about 10 miles south of Yellowstone National Park (YNP), established in 1872 as the first national park in the world. The upper Snake River in the study area has a braided channel pattern that migrates and shifts over time due to a stream flow regime of fluctuating water levels by season and dam release as well as the river's interaction with sediments in its glacial outwash plain of the valley of Jackson Hole (Marston et al., 2005). The Snake River

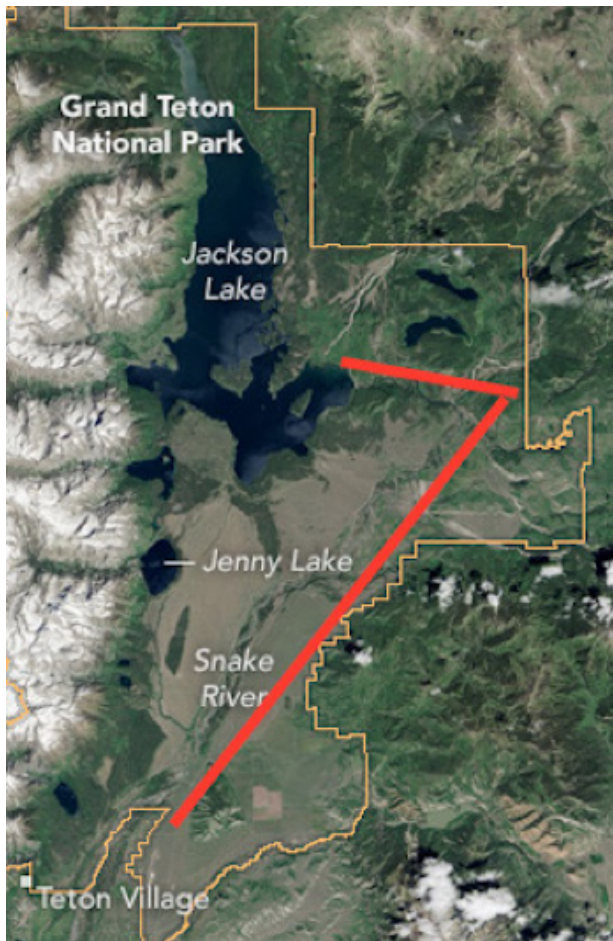


Figure 1. Upper Snake River study area (in red) from Jackson Lake Dam to Moose, WY.

is an increasingly popular site for recreational boating including commercial fishing and scenic float concession operators as well as private boaters, kayakers, and canoeists. It should be noted that while the Snake River south of the town of Jackson is a popular whitewater and scenic float location, this study is focused upstream, on the Snake River as it flows through Grand Teton National Park. This study is also limited, at least for now, to the history of commercial scenic float trip history but does not include fishing trips, canoes, or kayak history.

Archival research and oral history collection

This project employed a mixture of qualitative research methods including archival research and oral history transcription and analysis. We based our

2016 archival research for primary documents in the collections at the Jackson Hole Historical Society and, to a greater degree based on the depth of the document record, GRTE's NPS Museum Collections and Archives in Moose, WY. Specifically we used a variety of written and visual materials from the following GRTE NPS collections: Historic Concessions Files, Cultural Resource Management Records, Historic Records Collection, and Snake River Use and Management collection. We worked closely with NPS museum, archives, and cultural resources staff members to locate archival and museum collections that might best benefit this project.

We also conducted oral interviews of pioneer river guides and company owners and managers in Jackson or in the park. Each interview was digitally recorded and then, later, transcribed into text as both an outline and a full interview. We analyzed these oral interviews and transcriptions for themes and events that helped us to better identify and write an initial description of historic river guiding in GRTE, pioneer guides and concessions, and historic boat launches.

During these interviews, we sometimes discussed primary sources such as documents or photographs with the interviewee. If possible and agreeable to all parties, we digitized these documents as well in the hopes of expanding the Snake River Use and Management archival collection of GRTE to include more items that document the cultural history of river guiding. All documents, including scanned and digitized written records, photographs, and oral interviews were organized and digital copies shared with 1) the NPS GRTE Museum Director for public access in the future after processing into the collection and 2) with the individuals and families interviewed for this project. Frank and Patty Ewing graciously shared their photos and documents about their Snake River rafting business from their family collection for this project. This approach highlights the transdisciplinary nature of this project that brings together the efforts of scholars, NPS staff and managers, and members of the river rafting public community to better understand and document this history. As such, it is a goal of this research project

that these digital products will increase the size and extent of the digital and searchable archival collections concerning cultural resources in GRTE and provide greater access to documentation of the history of concessions river rafting and river ranger programs in GRTE from 1950 to the present. This work will contribute to a larger understanding of concession and NPS river ranger history in GRTE and add to collections that other scholars and researchers interested in this topic may access for their research.

Preliminary Results

This 2016 research project resulted in 1) a preliminary written description of the social and political context of upper Snake River commercial rafting in GRTE in 1950s and 1960s, 2) new additions to the archival and museum collections in GRTE through oral histories and transcripts, digitized written and photographic documents relating to outdoor recreation and commercial rafting and 3) the identification of historic river rafting boat launches used for commercial float purposes in GRTE between 1950 and 2016. Over the course of this project, we digitally recorded 5 oral histories as told by Frank and Patty Ewing, pioneer river guides and owners of Barker-Ewing Whitewater Rafting and Bill Guheen, pioneer river guide and current river boss for Grand Teton Lodge Company. We also transcribed all 5 interviews as both outlines and full word-by-word transcriptions and digitized 16 photographs and 314 documents.

Social and political context of early upper Snake River commercial rafting in GRTE

In the 1950s and 1960s, participation in outdoor recreation rose to new levels as Americans flocked to their national parks after World War II. It was an era of unprecedented opportunity and growth in the emerging outdoor recreation industry of the United States. This recreation boom from 1945 to the mid 1970s was fueled by increased income, access to private automobiles, an expanding national network of roads, and technological advances in outdoor gear based on wartime developments. Commercial river rafting took advantage of these social, cultural, economic, and political shifts to expand as a new tourism indus-

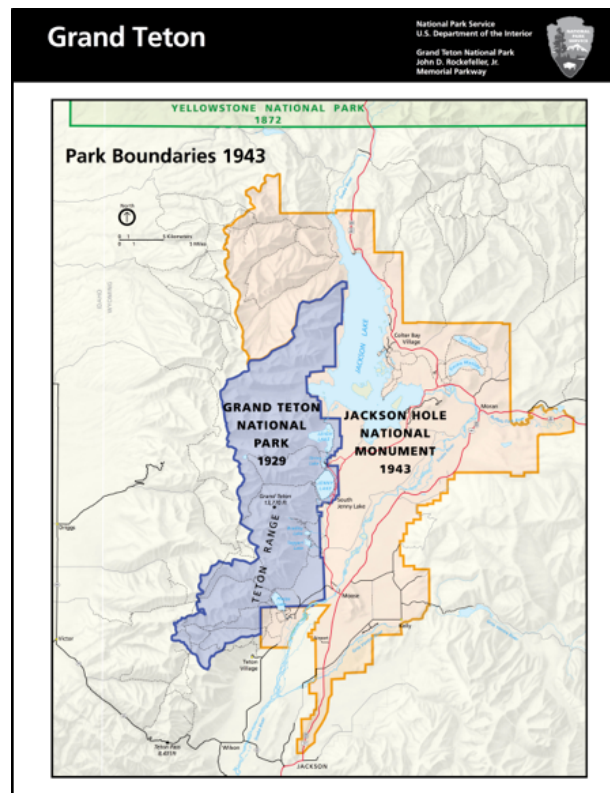


Figure 2. Grand Teton National Park 1929 and Jackson Hole National Monument 1943 boundaries. Source: U.S. National Park Service.

try in the western United States in places such as Grand Canyon NP and Grand Teton NP. Early commercial outfitters sought out military surplus boats, waterproof bags, ropes, and watertight boxes as low cost gear for their float trips. Many of the pioneering river guides were former soldiers and enlisted men returning home after the war. Visitors flocked to parks and rivers as increased income and leisure time allowed for these new outdoor activities.

The history of Grand Teton National Park's growth and political boundary changes are deeply connected to the development of commercial river rafting in the park. The park was established in 1929 to protect the Teton Mountain Range and a few moraine lakes at its base. The park boundaries expanded eastward in the mid 1900s. In 1943, an executive order of Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Jackson Hole National Monument using the Antiquities Act of 1906 (Figure 2). This new monument contained primarily private lands

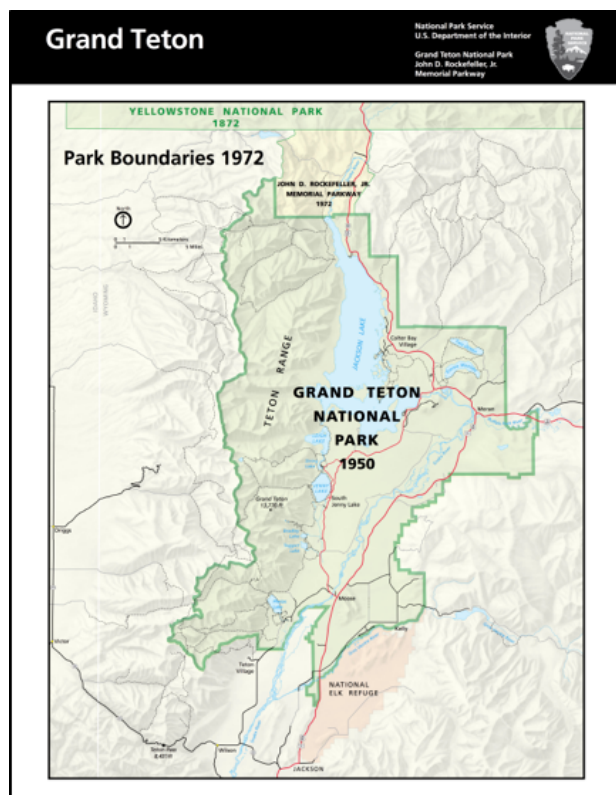


Figure 3. Grand Teton National Park boundaries in 1950. Source: U.S. National Park Service.

purchased by John D Rockefeller through his Snake River Land Trust. The monument met with fierce resistance from some local and regional communities who were concerned with a shift from private land ownership to public, federally managed lands and a associated move from ranching to tourism.

In 1950, lands contained in the 1929 national park and the 1943 national monument merged to create the larger footprint that defines the contemporary GRTE (Figure 3). Importantly for this study, the 1950 expansion brought the section of the upper Snake River from Jackson Lake Dam to Moose into the realm of the national park boundaries. This change resulted in new ideas and approaches to river use and management precipitated by increased tourism and recreation. In 1950, for example, 189,286 people visited the park but by 1951 those numbers jumped to 785,343 and reached over 1 million visitors in 1954 (National Park Service visitor use statistics). The 1950 expansion also coincided with a national trend

of increased outdoor recreation in the post World War II era and new boating and recreation technology and gear from wartime developments that ushered in the birth of commercial river rafting in Grand Teton National Park. Pioneer river guides and concession operators stepped forward to shape the development of Snake River rafting during this early era.

Pioneer guides and concessions

Pioneer guides and commercial river concessions identified in the course of this study include Frank Ewing, Dick Barker, Wayne Johnson, Bill Guheen, Charlie Sands, and John Turner. It should also be noted that many early commercial river companies operating on the upper Snake River were also small business that grew and prospered in no small part from the teamwork of the entire family. Patty Ewing and Barbara Barker, for example, cooked meals for scenic float trips and drove shuttles along with countless other accounting and logistical support. At times, Patty stepped into the guide role as well rowing boats on particularly busy days. These businesses prospered in unique and lasting ways through teamwork and the key contributions of time, energy, and skill from the family.

Through initial oral history interviews and archival research at the GRTE Archives and Museum Collections in Grand Teton National Park and the Jackson Hole Historical Society in Jackson, Wyoming, several pioneer commercial river runners were contacted for initial baseline interviews and an initial list of early commercial companies were identified in the archival records. Concession files in GRTE archives confirmed an initial list of commercial operators, however, these records were only a start and additional work is needed to confirm specific years of operations and potential other rafting businesses. Based on this preliminary work, commercial scenic float trips on the Upper Snake River in GRTE started in the late 1950s with an increase in commercial operations and new operators between 1955 and 1975. Companies that started offering scenic float trips in the Upper Snake River from various put-in locations between Jackson Lake Dam to Moose, Wyoming included Grand Teton Lodge Company, Frank Ewing's Snake River Float

Trips, Dick Barker's Scenic Float Trips, Fort Jackson Float Trips, Triangle X Ranch, and, later Barker-Ewing Scenic Float Trips, Solitude Float Trips, and Heart 6 Guest Ranch. Additional commercial companies may become apparent with continued oral histories and archival research.

Historic boat launches

Through archival records and oral history interviews, we identified historic boat launches sites in GRTE. Some are still used as contemporary sites while others have faded from use. Historic boat launch sites include, from north to south, Jackson Lake Dam (historic launch on river right), Cattleman's Bridge, Pacific Creek, RKO road, Deadman's Bar, Schwabacher Landing, and Moose.

Conclusions

Additional research is needed for more in-depth analysis, interpretation, and recommendations. However, this short study confirmed the need to document this relatively overlooked aspect of cultural and outdoor recreation history of Grand Teton National Park. The evolution of commercial river running in GRTE tells a local story but also fits into a larger narrative of America that emerged after the World War II with growing numbers of visitors flocking to national parks, shifts in park recreation and environmental management across the NPS system, and the evolution of commercial outdoor recreation guiding to meet the demands of the mass tourism industry.

Commercial river rafting is also part of a much larger story of the evolution of outdoor recreation in Grand Teton National Park. While this summer project focused on an initial group of commercial river guides and companies, additional research is needed to expand this work to include oral histories more pioneer guides and companies, National Park Service river rangers, and private boaters. Only by looking at this wide spectrum of Snake River users over time can we begin to understand the full picture of changing recreation, culture, equipment, and river conditions.

Future Work

This work relies on a transdisciplinary partnership between university scholars, the U.S. National Park Service, and local and regional citizens that make up this community of river runners. Through this collaborative and interdisciplinary effort, we are able to produce public geographies that might not be possible without this cross-pollination of ideas, methods, data, and information.

Future research on this project will aim to build on the groundwork of 2016 by expanding our documentation and interpretation of the historic record including digitizing more written documents and photographs, recording and transcribing additional oral histories of other pioneer guides, and creating sets of repeat photographs of historic boat launch sites in the park. The project will also expand to include oral histories of pioneer NPS River Rangers whose contributions to river safety and management are valuable pieces to this cultural history. For repeat photography, we will use historic photographs gathered from archival research and oral history contributions to visit each boat launch and take a contemporary image of the site from the same position and angle as the historic photographer. By comparing historic photographs to our contemporary image of the same site, we could then analyze the image for specific landscape changes such as bank erosion, boat ramp alterations, or river channel changes.

Future project plans also including expanding this work to include additional river sections beyond the Jackson Dam to Moose stretch in GRTE. This next phase would extend to the north to include the only free flowing section of the Snake River in the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway. In this section, the Snake River flows south out of Yellowstone National Park, and then meanders towards Jackson Lake.

While I attempt to capture a relatively recent history (1950 onwards) here, there is a pressing need for this work now, while this time period is still a living memory. Without documentation and interpretation, we may lose this history of pioneer commercial river guides, NPS river rangers, rafting operation owners and managers, and guests who experienced

first hand these early years of river running in the western United States and an important chapter in GRTE history.

Acknowledgements

I thank the UW-NPS Research Station for financial support of this project and partial funding from the National Park Service, Bridgette Guild and Elizabeth Engle (NPS) for feedback and archival assistance, Emily Winters and Steve Roberts for archival assistance (Jackson Hole Historical Society), Sue Consolo-Murphy and Shannon Dennison for facilitating this research, Matthew Bingman for his diligent and well organized research help, Harold Bergman, Michael Dillon, and Bonnie Robinson for facilitating arrangements at the research station. A special thanks to the many individuals in the river running community who have contributed their knowledge, experiences, and historical accounts through oral interviews, personal donations of historic photos, documents, and other objects. In particular, I'd like to thank Frank, Patty and Heather Ewing, Barbara and Leith Barker, Wayne Johnson, Bill Guheen, John Turner, Verne Huser, and Herm Hoops.

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