

Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park Study Guide

Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park by Lee Whittlesey

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Plot Summary

Yellowstone National Park was created by Congress on March 1st, 1872, though it has had American inhabitants, tourists, and travelers for decades prior to that. The park, the first of its kind, is mostly located in Wyoming, but reaches into Montana and Idaho. Organized explorations started in the 1860s and the Army started to administer the park soon thereafter. In 1917, management of the park was given over to the National Park Service. The Park is 3,500 square miles and has a wide range of geological phenomena, such as geysers like Old Faithful, many hot springs, the massive Yellowstone Lake, a volcano, the Yellowstone Caldera, and hundreds of mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles. It may be the most famous national park on earth.

Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park is about the death and serious injury that has occurred in Yellowstone National Park for as long as there have been records, which extend back to the 1830s. The author, Lee Whittlesey, has thirty-five years of experience in the park, first as a bus tour guide and then as a park ranger. He has an M.A. in history from Montana State University and a J.D. from the University of Oklahoma. As such, he knows the geography, history, and legal background of the park and is able to give a comprehensive picture of the deaths and injuries that occurred there.

Over three hundred people have died according to park-specific causes. The causes range widely, from death by scalding in hot springs, to death from bison and bear goring and death from poisonous plants. Some have been killed by avalanches, some from falls, and some from fires. But these are only 'death by nature'. Deaths by man have come from fights with Native Americans, deaths from diving, deaths from self-defense, deaths from suicide and deaths by plane crash. Whittlesey is an expert story teller who makes all of the death stories he tells vivid.

While some of the stories are somewhat amusing, almost all of them are tragic, some of them terribly so. And many of the stories are quite gruesome. But Whittlesey did not write the book for laughs. As he emphasizes over and over again, nature is not the friend of humanity. People often have an idyllic picture of the wild, almost deliberately ignoring its dangers. They pay no attention to warning signs on hot springs, they get too close to the edge of canyon rims and they feed the bears.

Whittlesey is stunned by the almost constant stupidity of some who come to the park, but he goes most out of his way to condemn those who are not only stupid but those who, when someone gets hurt, blame the park and bring a legal suit. These suits often force the National Park Service to 'sanitize' the park and insulate people from danger rather than leave a wide range of choice and personal responsibility to visitors. This sanitization destroys the wilderness, making the Park less special for everyone.



Introduction, Chapters 1-2, Hold Fast to Your Children: Death in Hot Water, 'These Animals Are Not Real': The Myth That Can Kill You!

Introduction, Chapters 1-2, Hold Fast to Your Children: Death in Hot Water, 'These Animals Are Not Real': The Myth That Can Kill You! Summary and Analysis

Yellowstone National Park is a beautiful place that is full of fatal dangers. Part of the fascination with Yellowstone is the danger tied to it, but many who go to Yellowstone have a false sense of security such as believing that animals are tame. This book tries to correct these errors in order to promote safety, but the stories are also fascinating in their own right. The stories teach and their pedagogical value is the reason the author wrote them down.

The author, Lee H. Whittlesey, was a Yellowstone Park Ranger and a later law student who studied wrongful death and personal injury cases in Yellowstone. It became clear to Whittlesey that some deaths and injuries were due to nature and the other caused by man. Some were car and snowmobile wrecks that have been omitted. Yellowstone contains many novel ways of dying: hot springs, bison and poisonous gas. It is uniquely dangerous.

Many of the deaths in Yellowstone were not mere accidents but the result of stupidity and negligence. Many rationalized their actions as did families of victims. In most Yellowstone cases, the author argues, the victims are simply incorrect that the injury or death suffered was a true accident.

Death in Yellowstone covers three hundred deaths and each one was a very emotional story for someone, so the author has tried to be delicate; further, the incidents are complex, open to many ambiguities and misinterpretations. The central message of the book is clear, however, is to play safely and think before you act.

On July 20th, 1981, David Allen Kirwan, 24, and his friend, Ronald Ratliff, 25, parked at Yellowstone's Fountain Paint Pot. While they view the springs, Ratliff's dog 'Mossie', a large Mastiff, escaped from the car and jumped into Celestine Pool, which routinely measures 202 degrees Fahrenheit. Kirwan prepared to go in the spring and a bystander yelled not to do so. Kirwan yelled, 'Like hell I won't' in response. He took two steps in and dove head first into boiling water. Kirwan swam, found the dog and got it out of the pool. He sustained second degree burns to his feet. Kirwan said that he was stupid after he got out.



Kirwan's skin was quickly peeling off and he soon went blind. When the men took off his shoes, his skin came off. Ultimately Kirwan had third degree burns on his entire body. The clinic at Old Faithful could only pump IV fluids into his body. Ratliff's dog died in the pool. Kirwan died the next morning. Rangers found warning literature in the men's truck.

Surprisingly, hot springs deaths occur more often than grizzly bear deaths. They are beautiful but deadly. Nineteen have died due to hot springs and seven were children. The injuries began early, at least in 1871 when Macon Josey and photographer H.B. Calfee entered the area. Josey fell into a pool trying to help a deer and was badly burned. As tourists increased, so did the chance of injury. In 1882, Walter Watson died by falling in a deep geyser tube. Two women died in the Thumb Paintpots in 1901 though the park ranger failed to reported it. By 1993, again, nineteen people had been killed.

The first death is shrouded in mystery as many details were lost. James Joseph Stumbo was born in late November 1882; he died February 22nd, 1890. His relatives claim that he died after falling into a hot spring. Lester LaDuke, aged 4, died at LaDuke Hot Springs on July 23rd, 1905. The author then discusses many more deaths and burnings, much of them caused by confusion over which springs were deadly and by thinking that some pools had cooled when they had not. Danger signs were erected after each death. Full board walkways were not introduced into thermal areas until the 1960s.

One of the worst things about falling into the spring is realizing that one could remain fully conscious for hours awaiting death. Before the springs were roped off, several experienced this fate, such as Rollo Gallagher who died August 15th, 1927, when he fell into a hot spring near Firehole Lake, though there was a great delay in his receiving medical attention. Some deaths, shockingly, occurred when people who were measuring the temperature of the springs fell in. New trails were carved to avoid springs and geysers. Whittlesey explains how some died quickly, like Karen Anderson, and others did not, like six-year-old boy, Danny Lewis. He then discusses two deaths due to park employees trying to 'hot pot' or swim in springs, the vast majority of which are 50-100 degrees too hot to swim in.

The worst accident happened June 28th, 1970, when Andy C. Hect, 9, was walking with his family along Crested Pool near Old Faithful. Wind blew hot vapor into his eyes, blinding him, and he tripped on a railless boardwalk, plunging into a pool where the water was over 200 degrees. He tried to swim but after a few strokes he was scalded to death and sank. His mother watched him fall and burn to death. Eight pounds of bone, flesh and clothes were recovered the next day. However, some others, such as Andy's sister Margaret, say that Andy walked out into the pool and fell in. Some say the father yelled 'Andy!' several times.

Andy's father, a chemical engineer named James Hecht, wrote the Secretary of the Interior to encourage him to take positive action and he and his wife started to organize to make the National Park Service commit to improved safety. He filed a wrongful death lawsuit and received \$20,000. Other people added their injuries to his campaign and it



resulted in increased funding for regional safety officers and more warnings in handout literature. The Hecht's demanded fences around all the hot pools, but this demand was unreasonable. But after tragedies, people react with rage. They need someone to blame other than themselves.

James Hecht was a chemical engineer. He obviously knew the dangers but his complaints raise the issue of how much warning is required in the park. The wilderness always poses danger and many have silly expectations. Many have no common sense about the outdoors and new warnings. But visitors have responsibility and this says something about where American society is headed. Legislation and regulations cannot guarantee that people will take reasonable care of themselves. Kirwan's death was caused by taking his dog on the Yellowstone trails, which Whittlesey emphasizes is a terrible idea for many reasons.

Whittlesey then discusses the case of John Mark Williams, who is the only person to die in a hot springs in the winter. He was a park employee travelling with other employees. The story was very detailed as Williams's friends were park rangers and provided a lot of information to the authorities. The Park Service always analyzes these incidents after the fact.

Two hard-and-fast rules in Yellowstone are to not walk or ski in a thermal area in dark or blizzard conditions and to always camp in your assigned backcountry site. In addition to these rules, parents must always hold fast to their children in the thermal areas.

In the second chapter, Whittlesey notes that the bison or buffalo is heavily mythologized. It is a mere painting or statue in the minds of most, yet several visitors have been killed or injured by bison. By 1993, only two deaths had occurred but the potential for injuries is great. Bison can weigh around a ton and are unpredictable. On March 22nd, 1902, Dick Rock, a well-known Yellowstone poacher and animal keeper was killed showing a friend how 'tame' they had become. He was gored twenty-nine times. In fact, goring, trampling and striking occurred one to ten times a year because visitors approached Bison too closely. Often people want to sue, though they have no case since the park service provided warnings.

No human deaths have occurred with elk or moose in Yellowstone, though they have caused injuries, as a moose broke several of Beverly Bittner's ribs in 1990. Coyotes cause some injuries as well. Two people have been bitten by rattlesnakes in the park. It never ceases to amaze Whittlesey how some people cannot understand that animals can hurt them. A foreign visitor was gored to death on July 31st, 1983; Jean-Jacques Dumont, 21, of Toulouse, France, wanted to get his picture taken close to a buffalo.

People are incredibly foolish about danger from animals and often think park rangers overreact. Yellowstone visitors should never approach bison or wild animals. They should give the animals a break as well.



Chapter 3, Human Deaths from Bears and How to Keep Them From Happening

Chapter 3, Human Deaths from Bears and How to Keep Them From Happening Summary and Analysis

Bears have injured people throughout Yellowstone's history but deaths are not common. Mostly biting and scratching occurs. 115 were injured in the 1930s because visitors were feeding bears. Others occurred because of garbage dumps behind camp hotels. The first documented death occurred in 1916, a man by the name of Frank Welch, 61, though a death that cannot be cross-checked occurred in 1907. Feeding bears is an extremely bad idea and has resulted in needless injury and needless death of bears. The bears are not at fault. However, sometimes injuries occur due to factors other than bear feeding, such as when people put their children on the backs of bears to have their pictures taken.

An 'entire book' could be written about Harry Walker, 25, who on Friday, June 23rd, 1973, hitchhiked into Yellowstone Park illegally with his friend 'Crow' and thereby missed the standard warning literature. The men had foolishly camped near Old Faithful by the Grand Geyser. On the 24th, they saw a grizzly bear rooting through their campsite. Whittlesey was a park bus-tour guide at the time. The bear charged Crow and rolled away. Walker pointed his flashlight at the bear and it charged him, dragging him away. His body was found at 5:00 am, a quarter of it having been eaten by the bear.

Their story ended bears being allowed to feed along the road of Yellowstone. It also created a court case, where a wrongful death lawsuit was filed against park management. The judge for the case wanted more signs along boardwalks and campgrounds fenced for safety purposes which gave no thought to keeping the park natural or blocking animal migration routes. He also wanted all bears tracked for safety. Whittlesey thought the request was ridiculous, as it would cost \$3000 a bear to track them. This is only one example of how individual irresponsibility led to a pointless death that resulted in a ridiculous legal settlement. Whittlesey discusses some other cases.

Whittlesey understands that humans want to touch large animals, perhaps for affection or domination. But this must be totally avoided. Everyone wants people to be more in touch with nature; learning about it is one way. Whittlesey then discusses three more avoidable deaths due to getting unjustifiably close to bears. He notes that even the very experienced, like his friend Randy Ingersoll, a fifteen year veteran ranger in Yellowstone, was severely injured by a bear.



Chapters 4-10,

Chapters 4-10, Summary and Analysis

Only seven hundred of the world's three hundred thousand species of plants have caused death or serious illness to those in the western hemisphere. Yellowstone has only two. They are water hemlock and Death Camas. Two or three deaths have come from water hemlock. Six deadly poisonous mushrooms grow in Yellowstone as well, such as the Death Cap, Destroying Angel, Deadly Conocybe, Deadly Cort, Deadly Galerina, and the Conifer False Model. Deaths occur due to kidney or liver failures and all six have caused deaths. There is no evidence of mushroom fatalities that can be verified in the park.

The Water hemlock is dangerous because it looks like an edible wild parsnip and carrot. When eaten, it affects the nervous system, causing convulsions and usually death. Whittlesey then tells several of the relevant stories, such as that of Keith Marsh, 25, who died in August, 1985.

The two naturally occurring poisonous gases in Yellowstone are hydrogen sulphide and carbon dioxide. The first has an odor and both are found in high concentrations in the thermal areas and the caves. At least one near-death is known from the gases—Lillie Henderson in 1883 stepped into the basement of her family's home near Mammoth Hot Springs. No human death is known but there are several simple stories about poisoning survivals.

At least five people have died from lightning throughout the history of Yellowstone. It is more common than one would think in Montana, but not Wyoming. Several surveyors have felt high concentrations of electricity on certain peaks during storms and others have been knocked unconscious. A trapper, hunter and guide was killed by lightning in the park on August 27th, 1894, named Bayard T. "Curley" Rogers. A shepherd named Isaac Rowe died June 19th, 1899. Mr. Ed Robinson died on August 10th, 1926. Lightning strikes can rarely be attributed to negligence. It is hard to draw morals from the stories.

Seven people have died in avalanches and at least eight from freezing or what is called 'exposure.' All but one occurred in the early park days before Yellowstone had a winter season for visitors. These are needless and lonely ways to die. Sometimes the temperature in Yellowstone falls to 40-60 degrees below zero. Winter visits have grown substantially since the seventies but everyone is able to keep sufficiently warm. The first avalanche victim was Jacob Hess on February 21st, 1884. Seven victims of freezing and avalanches were army soldiers from Fort Yellowstone. Several stories are reviewed. We know more about the death of Lt. Joseph McDonald on January 9th, 1916. He died in an odd place west of Cleopatra Terrace. An unusual snow slide occurred which buried Lt. Joe McDonald, who died trying to rescue a child.



Peter Hanson, a civilian park employee apparently died on May 13th, 1907 from a cave-in. This is the only case and his death was not reported in the newspaper.

Stones on hillsides are not stationary and three, perhaps four deaths have been caused in Yellowstone from falling rocks, typically when the rocks are dislodged by people, animals or geologic forces. The rocks gain substantial speed over a large distance before they hit victims. They were sometimes caused by people throwing stones into canyons, which there was no law against early in Yellowstone's history. George Wingate caused an avalanche in this way in 1885 though no one was hurt. An early death occurred in 1917 due to twenty-year-old John Havekost and his acquaintance Perry Norris. In two cases deaths were caused by people on the rim of the Grand Canyon dislodging rocks. Lorrie Grewe, 11, died on July 11th, 1972 due to an unidentified boy around age fourteen. The boy's family was angry and refused to remain until the rangers arrived.

Falling trees can cause death as well and four, maybe five people have died from falling trees in the park inside of buildings and one outside. They mostly happened from windstorms, logging and rotting trees. Yellowstone has never been extensively logged for timber as it was set aside by Congress before settlers arrived. Little is known of the earliest death. But Mr. R.N. Adams died the second death on December 18th, 1900 while trying to chop down a tree. Robert Walker, age 6, died from a gust of wind that uprooted 176 trees. He was instantly killed.

Several other cases are discussed. The National Park Service solved many of these problems by cutting down many trees. However, those who brought stupid lawsuits are to blame for the fact that Yellowstone has lost many of its trees. Everyone suffers because of them.



Chapters 11-14, Fatal Attraction: Deaths From Falls, Deaths From Forest Fires: Smoke Chasing Can Kill, The Gloom of Earthquakes: Shaky Breaky Park, Danger in the Water: Deaths From Drowning

Chapters 11-14, Fatal Attraction: Deaths From Falls, Deaths From Forest Fires: Smoke Chasing Can Kill, The Gloom of Earthquakes: Shaky Breaky Park, Danger in the Water: Deaths From Drowning Summary and Analysis

As of 1995, twenty-four people have died from falls in Yellowstone, four from manmade structures, three from mounts and the rest into canyons. There is also a special case of a man and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Earl J. Dunn, who backed their car off the rim of the Yellowstone Grand Canyon on July 13th, 1924. No one could figure out how it happened. Other deaths were more 'normal' such as the death of Jack Davis, who died after falling off a high scaffolding on August 29th, 1940. Whittlesey then notes that something about the chasm attracts people despite the danger. He then quickly reviews a list of deaths from falling off the rim. Some have survived serious falls, such as Dennis Rumble, 7, who fell on August 6th, 1988. And of course, falls have led to lawsuits against the park as well. A number of hikers and rangers have fallen off of high mountains.

It is rare that forest fires take lives in Yellowstone, but a 1940 fire killed Civilian Conservation Corps worker James Hester who lost his life fighting the fire. In 1937, a horrible fire killed fifteen firefighters and injured thirty-nine others. Earthquakes occur in Yellowstone nearly every day but no known deaths have been caused by them. An earthquake killed twenty-eight people on August 17th, 1959.

However, more people in Yellowstone have died from drowning than any other single cause of death save those not included in the book (since they were not caused by anything specific to Yellowstone). More than one hundred people have drowned. The first two occurred in 1883—John Fogerty and Thomas Parker, ages unknown.

Swimming accidents have killed many in both natural bodies of water and swimming pools in the park. Four have drowned in the latter. But swimming is not the only way one



can drown. A deserting soldier drowned due to falling in the water and another died from falling due to intoxication. Mrs. Louis Helbut died in 1899 from fainting. Seven have drowned from car wrecks and due to falling in the Gardner River. Six people have drowned in fairly unusual places, such as Gallatin Lake and Hellroaring Creek. Four have drowned in Yellowstone's Shoshone Lake. Seven have drowned in Lewis Lake. However, the Yellowstone River has claimed twenty-one lives. Most of the river drownings are due, expectedly, to extreme currents and rapids.

The most drownings have occurred in Yellowstone Lake and arguably no body of water in the Park (and probably the whole United States) is more potentially dangerous. It is 136 square miles with 110 miles of shoreline and is 450 feet deep in some places. Prevailing winds can produce waves five to six feet high. And most deaths are due to boating. The era of drowning began in 1930s, when many private boats and boat rentals occurred there. Thirty-nine people have drowned in Yellowstone Lake and eleven (maybe seventeen) have unrecovered bodies. Several people have simply vanished by the lake, some completely without a trace. And a number of plural drownings have occurred, and two of them triple drownings.

What lessons can be drawn from all the drowning? First, if you want to boat on Yellowstone Lake, go in a small, short boat and stay close to shore. The boat should be in good shape and not overloaded. Do not go during storms and do not stand up in the boats. Whittlesey will only consider sailboating on the Lake when it is early morning or late night. You must have a life jacket and get out of the water if a boat turns over. More obvious rules include do not swim or fish alone, do not drink while engaged in water activities, be careful fording streams, and respect wild nature.



Chapters 15-20, Clash of Cultures: Deaths From Indian Battles, A Knockout at Bacon Rind: Deaths From Fights, A Death From Diving, Wild Horses: Deaths From Horse, Wagon, and Stagecoach Incidents, Deaths From Accidental and Self Defense Shootings, Malice in

Chapters 15-20, Clash of Cultures: Deaths From Indian Battles, A Knockout at Bacon Rind: Deaths From Fights, A Death From Diving, Wild Horses: Deaths From Horse, Wagon, and Stagecoach Incidents, Deaths From Accidental and Self Defense Shootings, Malice in Wonderland: Yellowstone Murders Summary and Analysis

Many of the earliest deaths in Yellowstone come from battles with Native Americans. Five fur trappers were killed in 1839 and two park visitors in 1877. We know little about these incidents and Yellowstone was not prime country for Native Americans historically. The Shoshones and Bannocks lived to the west and south, the Blackfeet to the north and the Crows to the northeast. We have only one account of the 1839, but more is known about the deaths of Charles Kenck and Richard Dietrich who were killed by the Nez Perce in 1877 though this was due to an invasion into their territory. Whittlesey considers the deaths justified in a time of war and reviews the battle details in some detail. These two deaths and the five in 1839 are the only ones due to white encounters with Native Americans. There is evidence that earlier battles took place, though probably only between Native Americans.

Only one death from a fight is known about; it occurred in 1933 due to a discipline problem among members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which were part of the Park from 1933 to 1951 when they built trails, cleaned, and built buildings. First Sergeant George Satriano ordered Abraham Yancovitch, an 18 year old camp worker, to obey regulations. Satriano suggested that they fight and Satriano hit Yancovitch, which later led him to die of a fractured skull and cerebral hemorrhage a few hours later.



One death from diving occurred. On August 15th, 1919, Louis Boatman was touring the park with his aunt and sister and decided to swim in the Yellowstone River. He jumped off a bridge, hit the bottom and died instantaneously from a skull fracture.

Wild horses, wagons and stagecoaches obviously killed people in Yellowstone's early days but they still killed many. Thousands of horses once occupied the park during the 'Grand Tour' which often occurred in stagecoaches that would last for five to ten days. The horse and stagecoach era in Yellowstone lasted from 1872 to 1915. Accidents were fairly common, about six times more common than auto accidents today.

Chapter 18 begins with its own list of deaths. J. L. Sanborn died while on a runaway horse who hit the side of a building and instantly broke his neck. A bicycle and a horse killed Eliis Lingard on August 2nd, 1893. However, a horse fatality occurred even on August 29th, 1956, though no wagon was involved when Diana Alberta Parks Schramm died.

Horses combined with wagons have killed at least eight people. F. M. Scott was killed in a wagon wreck on July 23rd, 1897. Sometimes drivers were run over by their wagons. Frank Rose died October 31st, 1905; he was intoxicated.

Stagecoach wrecks occurred one or more times a summer, but surprisingly, only four fatalities are known. Mrs. Joseph Lippman was killed in 1899 when their stagecoach struck a rock on the road and flipped over. Her husband, Mr. Lippman, fell on her, crushing her. Often stagecoaches would wreck due to a broken front axle, which would send wheels flying off. Sometimes the coaches would fall in rivers. Perhaps the last stagecoach wreck occurred on July 24th, 1916.

Seven people have died from accidental and self-defense shooting. The self-defense shootings were less tragic than the accidental shootings. An accidental shooting occurred on November 15th, 1938 when Robert Leroy 'Pud' Robinson, a thirteen year old son of the Master Mechanic of the park, was playing with a loaded .22 rifle. At 5:15 pm, he shot himself in the head. A self-defense shooting happened in 1886 when stockmen Alex Ferguson and Charles Carpenter had just had a fight about Ferguson's cattle being on Carpenter's land. On June 21st, 1886, Ferguson met Carpenter driving cattle and their cattle became mixed. When they separated them, a fight broke out. It escalated and Ferguson eventually shot Carpenter through the ribs, killing him a few minutes later. A jury found him not guilty. Similar stories are laid out thereafter.

One of the more interesting stories occurred when an Army soldier was shot by his superior. They were stationed in Yellowstone during the winter, long before people came to Yellowstone much. In the army era of 1886-1918, the snow was too deep. The army duty was dreary and in 1911-12 some of the men got cabin fever. Hatred developed between Sgt. Clarence Britton of First Cavalry and his four men, Privates Frank Cunningham, Frank Carroll and two others called Mutch and May. They fought constantly until they stopped speaking. The privates planned a coup against Britton. When Britton came back from a ski patrol early and heard them plotting, he entered and



an altercation began, with Britton quickly pulling out his pistol and shooting Cunningham right between the eyes.

Most murders in Yellowstone were composed of characters not entirely good or bad. Five murders have occurred inside Yellowstone and ten in nearby towns. On August 20th, 1883, George Weber started arguing with John Zutavern; they were both employed by the park improvement company and were fighting over a trade they had made. Weber accused Zutavern of stealing. During a later physical fight, Zutavern starting beating Weber with a rock and Weber responded by shooting Zutavern in the left breast; he then watched Zutavern died and quickly thereafter fled to the Yellowstone River. Weber had been a gang member. After escaping to the park, he was eventually captured and convicted of second-degree murder. After serving five years President Grover Cleveland pardoned him after the German consul pulled for him.

Among the most gruesome murders happened June 3rd, 1899 when Mrs. George (Margaret Gleason) Trischman slashed her youngest child's throat with a hunting knife. The story is not well-known. Mrs. Trischman had been committed to an asylum before the incident and appeared to have recovered when her husband, George Trischman, took her out. But her recovery was only temporary. Five days later she nearly severed the head of her youngest child. The Trischman family was quite prominent in Yellowstone, with many family members employed there; the children later became park staples. Another list of homicides are discussed that tell similar stories, although less gruesome than the Trischman murder and more than the Zutavern murder.



Chapters 21-25, Powerless in Eden: Deaths From Suicide, Missing and Presumed Dead, Deaths From Gas Stove Explosions and Structural Fires, Deaths From Carbon Monoxide Poisoning, Travel in Wonderland: Death on the Road and in the Air, Conclusion: Pay Attent

Chapters 21-25, Powerless in Eden: Deaths From Suicide, Missing and Presumed Dead, Deaths From Gas Stove Explosions and Structural Fires, Deaths From Carbon Monoxide Poisoning, Travel in Wonderland: Death on the Road and in the Air, Conclusion: Pay Attention and Don't Sanitize the Woods Summary and Analysis

Fifteen people have committed suicide in Yellowstone and four outside of the park. Most have been park employees. Suicide is usually deeply personal, so it is not always clear why it occurs. The first suicide was committed by Mrs. Emily Moore, 27, who died January 27th, 1884 from overdosing on morphine. She had neuralgia and seems to have deliberately taken too much. Phillip Bassett died on May 1st, 1884 with an unknown poison. Other stories are discussed. Whittlesey finds such suicides tragic, though personal and ends by suggesting that Yellowstone may have been the right place for them to kill themselves.

Others disappear from Yellowstone and are never seen again, such as LeRoy R. Piper who disappeared on July 30th, 1900. People have theorized about how he died for a century. Whittlesey thinks he died after falling into a hot spring and disintegrated. All the disappearances are unsolved mysteries. Some have died from gas stoves and structural fires, such as Mrs. H.P. Knapp who was burned to death by her gas stove on July 12th, 1925. Only two such explosions have occurred. Seven people have died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Two incidents killed six of them, one on December 9th, 1923 and the other on June 20th, 1947.



The automobile was allowed into Yellowstone in August, 1915 and the park has been motorized since the summer of 1917. Travel deaths occurred from automobile accidents even before then, along with airplane deaths. Today Yellowstone sees between zero and five auto deaths a year. Buses are occasionally involved in wrecks but they rarely cause death. A park bus killed a woman on July 15th, 1921. A park bus driver was killed on August 25th, 1931. And on 1949 a bus accident killed a bus passenger. Six airplane crashes have killed twenty people in 1943, 1963, 1970, 1978, 1987 and 1981. The largest aircraft death was the first, when US Air Force B-17 Bomber crashed between California and Montana in the park from 15000 feet. Whittlesey discusses the six crashes.

The number of violent deaths in Yellowstone between 1839 and 1993 is over three hundred; adding in auto and snowmobile wrecks, there are another few hundred. Nature demands that we pay attention; national parks are valuable but the wild creates danger. Many people enter the wild every day unprepared. And the dangers cannot be eliminated without making the wild something other than a wilderness. It is not like any old commodity that can be safeguarded. Whittlesey goes out of his way to argue that Yellowstone must not be sanitized and destroyed by irresponsible, litigious park visitors. People simply take too many chances. There is a challenge of balancing adequate warning and personal responsibility and our culture errs too far towards the former and away from the latter.

Whittlesey reminds the reader that wilderness is not your friend and neither is Yellowstone. The wild does not care whether you live or die and if you want to enjoy the wholeness of nature, you must accept the dangers and prepare for them yourself.



Characters

Lee Whittlesey

Lee Whittlesey is the author of *Death in Yellowstone*. Whittlesey says that he first became interested in the problem of deaths in Yellowstone when he served as a bus tour guide and later a park ranger in Yellowstone where he spent over two decades. Whittlesey later became a law student where he examined wrongful death suits and injury claims that were tied to Yellowstone. He also has a master's degree in history, which equips him to understand the historical context of problems in the park and the laws and deaths associated with them. Whittlesey often thought about death in Yellowstone through answering questions about deaths on tour.

Whittlesey inserts much of his own emotion and opinion into *Death in Yellowstone*, so his character and personality comes through. First, Whittlesey displays great care in reporting each death and relying on the most reliable sources available. He clearly cares for those who died, even those who died long ago, seeing each death as having an emotional story behind it. However, he is also condemnatory, believing that most of the deaths in the park were caused by negligence or foolhardiness.

Whittlesey is particularly concerned to urge park visitors to be humble and to play it safe. Too many people think that they are smarter than nature or that nature will be kind to them just because. Whittlesey is quick to point out that nature is the friend of no man and that its beauty is tied to this fact. This is a fact that can be destroyed by the lawsuits brought by families struck with avoidable death.

Negligent Visitors

If *Death in Yellowstone* can be said to have an antagonist or villain, it is negligent visitors. This may seem odd at first, as the visitors are usually the victims of some horrible happening in the park. Children die in hot springs, friends are swept away by river rapids, and some die in pointless gun fights. That said, most of these deaths, in Whittlesey's view, are the fault either of those who die themselves or the fault of their friends, family or parents.

But fault alone is not sufficient to explain what is so dangerous about negligent visitors. The problem with such visitors arises when their families, often the negligent parties, blame the park and the park rangers for the death out of their grief. Many bring frivolous law suits and in some cases uninformed judges award them settlements and force the park to change its practices, often in ways that harm the park.

One example of such a threat arose when two parents of a child who fell in a hot springs and died blamed the park for not placing enough warning signs around the springs, despite ample warning literature and signs surrounding them. The parents had simply been negligent; they failed to protect their child and the worst happened. Their



lawsuit was successful however. A judge forced them to increase their warning signs, thereby removing some of the wilderness in Yellowstone, destroying what is beautiful about it.

Yellowstone National Park Workers

Many of the minor characters in *Death in Yellowstone* are park workers, who typically strive to do their best to protect visitors and the wilderness and wildlife in the park.

The National Park Service

Formed in 1916, the NPS is a federal agency which takes care of parks and monuments in the United States. The NPS employees all the park workers in Yellowstone including Whittlesey.

The United States Army

Prior to the existence of the National Park Service, a number of Army officers were stationed in Yellowstone to protect the area. Some early stories in the book involve Army officers.

Bears and Bison

Park animals that have killed many careless visitors who unjustifiably thought they were tame.

Parents

Parents often lose children in the park due to negligence.

David Allen Kirway and Ronald Ratliff (1981)

Two friends and park visitors in 1981, Kirway ran into a hot springs and was scalded so badly he eventually died. Ratliff failed to stop him.

Dick Rock

The first man to die needlessly and recklessly from bison goring in 1902.

George Weber and John Zutavern

One of the first known murders in Yellowstone that occurred in 1883 was committed when Weber shot Zutavern in the chest.



Objects/Places

Yellowstone National Park

This is the famed national park where Death in Yellowstone is set.

Yellowstone Lake

This is the major lake in Yellowstone that claimed many lives due to currents.

Old Faithful

This is the most famous geyser in Yellowstone which is located between hot springs.

Mammoth Hot Springs

This is one of the major and popular hot springs areas where many died.

Yellowstone River

The central river in Yellowstone that, like Yellowstone Lake, claimed many lives due to currents.

Warning Signs

Signs litter the park, although some visitors choose to disobey them or through negligence, simply do not see them. When these visitors complain, park employees are often forced to place more signs, making the park less natural.

Water Hemlock

This is a very poisonous plant in Yellowstone that is often mistaken for a parsnip. It has killed several people.

Man-Made Death

In the book, Whittlesey divides the deaths in Yellowstone into two categories, the second of which are deaths caused by man.



Nature-Made Death

This is the first category of deaths in Yellowstone, which include all those deaths due to natural events and formations in Yellowstone.

Litigation

Litigation by negligent visitors often harms the park and park employees, along with making the park less enjoyable for other visitors.

Hiking

Hiking is a popular activity in Yellowstone but the many dangers that surround it have led to a lot of deaths.



Themes

The Wilderness

Yellowstone National Park is 3500 square miles and have been a national park for one hundred and forty years. The large majority of the park has never been 'tamed' and remains as wild as it has been for ten thousand years. The author, Lee Whittlesey, thinks that preserving the wilderness is very valuable. However, he thinks that many people have an idyllic image of the wilderness as somehow friendly to human beings. Modern Americans have a romantic notion of the wilderness as 'natural' to man and therefore it won't harm them.

One of the entire points of *Death In Yellowstone* is to combat this myth. While the wilderness is valuable, it is not the friend of humanity. The plants, animals and geological formations of Yellowstone care nothing for humans. They are not 'in harmony' with man and are indifferent to whether children are melted in a hot spring, are crushed by rocks or are choked by poisonous gas. It is for this reason that in valuing the wilderness we recognize this indifference. Otherwise, when we recognize the reality of the harshness of the wild we will try to destroy it or sanitize it and thereby deprive the wild of what is valuable.

Whittlesey demonstrates with many examples, but few are more poignant than park tourists' attitudes towards bison. Many have been gored by bison, as there are convinced that bison are tame and kind. The stories Whittlesey tells directly contradict this.

Tragedy

While Whittlesey emphasizes irresponsibility and culpability related to many of the deaths and injuries in Yellowstone, many of the deaths are simple tragedies. Many of those who have died have died tragically due to factors wholly beyond their control. Some have been struck by lightning and others choked by poisonous gas. Falling rocks have simply caught some people unawares, whereas stagecoach and planes have crashed.

The greatest tragedies are the deaths of children. Some children simply wander off and, say, fall into a hot springs and are scalded to death. The most horrifying death of children occurred when a mentally ill mother and member of a prominent family in the park slit her child's throat after being released by an asylum too early. Another tragic case occurred when a child fell off a canyon rim and died instantly.

Some tragedies are caused by the irresponsibility of others. For instance, many children die from the irresponsibility of their parents. When one boy died in a hot springs from falling into a hot springs after his parents failed to watch him, the parents blamed and sued the park, which only made the child's death more tragic because the parents could



not take responsibility for their actions. Other tragic deaths occur when some at the top of a canyon throw rocks which at the bottom create avalanches that can kill. Thus, many of the stories are quite sad, although these stories are not the main emphasis of the book.

Irresponsibility

The author, Lee Whittlesey, claims to have written *Death in Yellowstone* in order to acquaint people with the dangers in Yellowstone and to show how serious those dangers can be. Over three hundred people have died in Yellowstone due to Yellowstone related causes since its inception and many of these deaths were not only gruesome but easily avoidable.

The problem is that many people are simply uneducated about the dangers because they decline to take the time to read the many warning signs or to read the warning literature put out by the park. Others deliberately and knowingly disobey the rules at their own risk because they think they won't get hurt. This irresponsibility creates a number of problems. First, it causes needless injury and death and not only to those who take the risks but to those who do not. Some who take risks die horrible deaths in hot springs or through drowning or through being shot due to an altercation. In other cases, the irresponsibility of parents leads to the death of their children, the irresponsibility of friends leads to each other's deaths.

But one major but unrecognized problem arises when these irresponsible individuals dare to take risks and not familiarize themselves with the dangers of the park and then refuse to take responsibility for what happens. Many sue the park, forcing park employees to 'sanitize' the park, making it less wild and authentic, just to protect individuals from the costs of their own irresponsibility. Because Whittlesey values the wild, he demands that visitors take individual responsibility for their actions because when they sue the park, they make the park less special for everyone.



Style

Perspective

The perspective of *Death in Yellowstone* is that of its author, Lee Whittlesey. A thirty-five year veteran of the park, Whittlesey has served as a tour guide and park ranger. He has an MA in history and a JD in law and so not only knows the geography of Yellowstone well, but knows its history and is familiar with the legal issues that the park often becomes involved in. All of these hard won series of expertise make Whittlesey acutely aware of the dangers in Yellowstone and have given him enough experience to understand how to preserve it.

Whittlesey's perspective is most clearly characterized by a sense of moral indignation against foolish and arrogant park visitors. The staff of Yellowstone National Park goes out of its way to provide ample warnings to visitors about the various dangers associated with the park and yet many do not listen. When they fail to listen, they are often injured, sometimes quite badly and in some cases, even die. What's more, when they are hurt or die, they or their families often press charges against the park. Then a judge, often unfamiliar with the challenges faced by park staff, orders the park staff to make the park 'safer' thus making it less wild and diminishing its value. In many places, Whittlesey expresses utter disgust for these individuals, while simultaneously lamenting the extreme costs they pay for their behavior.

Tone

Death in Yellowstone's tone reflects its author's aims. On the one hand, the author wants to communicate the tragedy of the three hundred deaths caused by Yellowstone-specific causes within the park. On the other hand, he wants to both hold responsible those who caused the needless suffering and death in the park when it was avoidable and to warn those who might be irresponsible to take the dangers of the wilderness more seriously, respect the warnings in the park, read the warning literature and not take unnecessary risks.

Thus, the tone has three main elements. First, it is somewhat dark. It describes gruesome deaths, such as children being scalded to death in hot springs and their flesh melting off due to their parents's failing to wash them. Thus the tone even displays a bit of the macabre. Second, the tone reflects a sense of danger and peril, such as when the author describes the danger of bison and grizzly bears, the dangers of falling off the rim, and the threat of extreme temperature in the park. Further, the tone of the book is somewhat harsh, condemnatory and preachy due to its message of holding the irresponsible accountable and demanding that those who choose to be irresponsible not blame others and sue the park when things go wrong. Finally, the tone does have a deep element of respect for nature, but a respect built upon acquaintance, understanding and fear.



Structure

Death in Yellowstone is basically a catalog of death and injury. It discusses all three hundred known deaths in Yellowstone due to Yellowstone-specific causes. Following an introduction where the author outlines the main themes of the book and gives some background on himself and his subject, the book divides into two parts.

Part One: Death by Nature covers deaths and injuries specifically caused by nature. Each chapter title is somewhat long, pointing out how people will die in each chapter, such as 'Hold Fast to Your Children: Death in Hot Water.' Many of the chapters are short, as few people die from a particular cause, such as deaths from cave-ins. Other chapters are quite long due to a large number of deaths, such as deaths from being horribly scalded in hot springs. The fourteen chapters include deaths from hot water, bears, bison, poisonous gas and plants, deaths from lightning, avalanches, freezing, cave-in, falling rocks, and falling trees. People die from falls, smoke, earthquakes and drowning.

Part Two: Death by Man covers deaths that occurred in the park due to the actions of human beings that are park-related. It also contains both quite short and very long chapters. Chapters fifteen through twenty-five are contained here. The second part reviews deaths from Indian battles, fights, diving, horse, wagon and stagecoach incidents, accidental and self-defense shootings, murders, suicides, disappearances, gas stove explosions, structural fires, carbon monoxide poisoning, and death on the road and in the air.

The book ends with a conclusion that draws lessons from the foregoing list of deaths and encourages people to take responsibility for themselves and their families rather than blaming the park and this leads the park to be 'sanitized,' which destroys the wilderness.



Quotes

"Finally, the central messages of this book, aside from fascinating history, must be these: PLAY SAFELY, and think before you act" (Introduction, xiv.)

"Like hell I won't!" (Chapter 1, pg. 3.)

"They are confused and frustrated and need to strike out. They need to hate or get revenge; they need to blame. They need, most of all, to avoid blaming themselves" (Chapter 1, pg. 18.)

"Again and again, the issue came back to the public and the overwhelming need to make them understand that it was unhealthy, unnatural, illegal...that it was wrong to do the one thing they most wanted to do in Yellowstone-feed the bears" (Chapter 3, pg. 37.)

"The obvious cardinal rule about plants is do not eat them unless you are certain of what you are eating...never eat wild mushrooms, never eat plants that resemble wild carrots or parsnips, and more generally, never eat any plant unless you are positive of what it is by virtue of specific training" (Chapter 4, pg. 64-65.)

"Preventing death by freezing (exposure) is a fairly self-evident proposition. Preventing death by avalanche is a more subtle affair" (Chapter 7, pg. 82.)

"Every little rock can kill" (Chapter 9, pg. 86.)

"I think that I shall never see, A thing more dangerous than a tree" (Chapter 10, pg. 90.)

"Falls generally are true accidents, or are caused by negligence. They often occur unexpectedly due to a moment of carelessness or inattention" (Chapter 11, pg. 101.)

"The safety rules for waters...are the ones our mothers always told us about" (Chapter 14, pg. 127.)

"Here's luck to all you spark-plug cleaners. You have gasoline in here at last; may you have the success in the future that I and my tackies have had in the past" (Chapter 18, pg. 150.)

"Each of these stories offers insights into human behavior, some of them gravy, but there is a larger lesson here about Yellowstone itself: people live their lives here like everywhere else. In addition to being a wilderness, Yellowstone is a human place too" (Chapter 20, pg. 171.)

"Nature demands of us that we pay attention" (Conclusion, pg. 195.)



"While appreciating its wholeness, we must never abandon a healthy respect for wilderness. Wilderness is impersonal. It does not care whether you live or die. It does not care how much you love it." (Conclusion, 198)

"So while we are loving the Yellowstone wilderness, while we play in it, indeed, revel in it, taking it on its own terms and helping to protect it, we foolish mortals must always remember to respect it. For not only can it bite us, but, indeed, it can devour us" (Conclusion, pg. 198.)



Topics for Discussion

How do people die when they enter the hot springs? Retell two of Whittlesey's stories.

Why shouldn't people feed the bears? Give two examples.

How does Whittlesey distinguish between park-related deaths and non-park-related deaths? Do you think the distinction holds up?

Which death in the book do you think is the most culpable? Which is the least?

How do you think Whittlesey believes that the park should balance protection with personal responsibility? What are reasons to leave space for personal responsibility?

How do law suits by negligent visitors harm the park? Give at least one example.

Who is Whittlesey's audience? Who is he trying to convince and of what?