Yellowstone the “Wylie Way”: National Park Tourism and the Western Ideal
One evening in the summer of 1900, a large camping party of young women was settling down to sleep when “the air was pierced with a shriek from Sue Welch.” Minutes after her tentmate thought she heard a bear grunt, twenty-two-year-old Sue claimed “she could have sworn that the bear’s cold nose had been pressed to her cheek.” The entire group of women gathered their “valises, telescopes [and] umbrellas,” intending to go bear hunting in the mild Yellowstone night. Their pursuit was cut short, however, when the chaperone and operator of the site, William Wallace (W.W.) Wylie, told them to go back to sleep before they woke up the entire camp.¹ Like many western travelers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these women eagerly anticipated the thrill of danger that accompanied the wilderness. And, despite their brave grasping of accoutrements, they clearly had no fear that they would be harmed. In the end, they gained excitement without danger – the nose without the claws.

Even after the 1893 census bulletin that declared the end of the untamed American west, the mythologies of merciless nature and rugged individualism of the American West remained integral to American ideology and self-identification.² Rather than ending with what Frederick Jackson Turner dubbed the “closing” of the frontier in his classic 1893 “frontier thesis,” the mythology of the American West gained additional form and function; with improved transportation and accessibility came the opportunity and desire for a new form of western exploration that combined leisure and adventure. The unique geology, western locale, and status as the first American National Park made Yellowstone a locus of this evolving American West ideal. Capitalism, myths of the American West, and the nascent trend of conservation interacted to make the Park an incubator of a new kind of western experience.

The Wylie Permanent Camping Company of Yellowstone National Park is an illustrative example of the contrived nature of early twentieth-century western tourism. Like other western
tourism businesses of the time, the Wylie Company developed a seemingly paradoxical approach that merged the sale of both luxury and adventure to attract travelers. The commodification of western locales is demonstrated by exploring the Wylie business model, including its tour development, methods of advertising, and the company’s interactions with nature and the government. The company’s approach, along with an examination of the class, gender, and geographic origins of the company’s tourists, demonstrates Wylie’s significance as a case study.

In attempting to find a frontier that was both rugged and comfortable, promoters and visitors alike participated in the creation of a tame “wild west” tourism product.

In the last several decades, American tourism has largely been neglected as a field of historical interest. Historian Thomas Weiss suggests this lack of attention – particularly among economic historians – is the lack of an identifiable homogeneous product to be studied in easily observed units. He explains the general history of tourism as an activity initially confined to the elite that became more commodified as accessibility increased. As such, Weiss believes that the topic lacks any sufficient controversy to engage scholarly notice. A more recent argument by scholar Karen Harris suggests that this gap in historical research is attributable to older institutional biases within the historical academic community. She argues that “lowering the disciplinary drawbridge” between business and the humanities is the best way to open up the field for historical study. This project seeks to take steps across that bridge, bringing the evaluative techniques of business and tourism scholarship to explore the development of western commerce and its promotional techniques within a historical context.

Despite the noted systemic limitations of tourism history, historians have made significant contributions in the field of American tourism in recent years. However, the preponderance of this research largely focuses on eastern locations: such as Niagara Falls, the
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Catskills, and the Hudson Valley. Overshadowed by western settlement, reconstruction, and the Gilded Age, the subject of western tourism in this era is largely understudied by historical scholars. The majority of historical scholarship on tourism in the American West is indebted, either ideologically or through a preponderance of source material, to Earl Pomeroy’s 1957 work, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America*. In this book, Pomeroy analyzes the changing role of the tourist in the American West, tracking visitor evolution from the incredibly wealthy and generally unengaged sightseer of the mid-nineteenth century, to new patterns of recreation, such as family camping trips and participation in dude ranches in the 1940s. He describes how the expectations of the West melded with the sensibilities of the east to generate an experience that matched preconceived tourist and developer notions of what the geography could and should be. Pomeroy declares that “the old West is at once undiscoverable, and in other respects, almost indestructible,” emphasizing that the reality of the west was created by its mythology; a mythology he claimed was integral to American identity as a whole. Despite the age of the work, the insight of Pomeroy’s arguments remains integral to most discussions of western tourism. This project is no exception; by interpreting the dual nature of expectations developed by both producers and consumers at the Wylie Permanent Camping Company, this essay engages with a case-study that demonstrates Pomeroy’s claims of Yellowstone camping reality being shaped to fit tourist expectations.

*After In Search of the Golden West*, the topic of nineteenth-century western tourism as a topic of historical inquiry remained relatively dormant until a mid-1990s to early 2000s renaissance of scholars further nuanced and advanced Pomeroy’s argument. These authors were concerned with more modern understandings of why western tourism developed the way it did, as well as the legacy of a constructed western experience. A conference on the topic resulted in
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an anthology and a few book publications at the turn of the twenty-first century, however very few academic contributions have been made in the area since that time. 6 Similar to these monographs, this project will use the Wylie Camping Company as a locus to explore and develop Pomeroy’s observations; evaluating the interplay of gender, class, and business practices against the backdrop of western tourist expectations.

Anthology contributor and famed western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick advances Pomeroy’s argument about the nature of American Western mythology’s role in tourism. She notes a turning point in American descriptions of the west at the turn of the century. Describing the transition as overcoming an inferiority complex, she highlights how boosters and travel writers stopped relying on European analogies to describe western landscapes and began placing “a greater accent on more interesting and distinctive elements of westernness.” 7 This new form of expression coincided with Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous thesis reinterpreting the region as the font of American exceptionalism and democracy. The language of the Wylie Camping Company promotional material certainly exhibits these tendencies, but this project will also contribute to the historiography by discussing the effects of American-centric advertising on the responses of the tourists.

To better understand the anti-European nature of the developing western tourism industry described by Limerick, this project will also engage the claims of Marguerite S. Shaffer. Shaffer furthers Limerick and Pomeroy’s association of American identity with western tourism and tracks its association with national pride. In her text, See America First, Shaffer examines the development of an organization dedicated to promoting western travel as a form of patriotism. She explores the nuanced connections between patriotism, the west, and the spread of capitalism.
and economic planning in the early twentieth century west. Wylie advertisements used similar rhetoric that reflected the cultural attitudes of both the boosters and their intended audiences.  

To further understand why and how the Wylie Camping Company chose to market their product, this project will examine the tourists themselves. In a trajectory widely expressed by historians, tourism prior to the Civil War was only for those with disposable time and money who could afford to engage in leisure travel; however in the 1920s, the proliferation of the automobile changed the nature of travel and democratized tourism. This project will intervene in this historiography by looking more closely at the transitions of the period between. Though a Wylie Yellowstone excursion was certainly out of reach for poor families, the expansion of the railroads and the gradual reduction in ticket fares suggests that traveling became more accessible to the growing middle class of the turn of the century. This is especially true for those who lived in closer proximity to the park. Exploring the commonalities in expectations and experiences of wealthy easterners and middle-class locals suggests that tourism itself continued to be viewed as a luxury, and the changing demographics of tourism did not change the demands on the industry.  

Though it appears that the marketing and services of the Wylie Company altered little to appeal to different social classes, their advertisements did engage with gender expectations of the time. Female advancements in the Progressive Era led to the development of the “New Woman.” Almost entirely white and upper or middle-class, New Women were athletic, active, and educated. They married later than their predecessors, and were characterized by their increased mobility, opportunity, and independence, while still maintaining the “ladylike” qualities of virginity and propriety. One mark of the New Woman was her desire to use her newfound ease of movement to further her experiences and knowledge. Offering an instructional and nominally “wild” experience, as well as matrons designated to protect their dignity, the
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Wylie Company offered an opportunity for the Progressive woman to have a new experience in a socially acceptable way.9

Wylie advertisements also catered to the expectations and desires of male tourists. Though the actual experience of a Wylie trip was scarcely a hardship, for male visitors, participation in Wylie camps was an exercise in asserting masculinity. According to historian David Schuster, the increased productivity and commercial advancements of the turn of the century were accompanied by a general malaise known as “neurasthenia.” Since neurasthenia was thought to be caused from both the stress of maintaining economic gains and the coddling of modernity, the illness could be both a mark of pride and embarrassment.10 Among others, national icon Theodore Roosevelt advocated for the “Strenuous Life” and interactions in the outdoors as a cure for the lack of masculinity in Progressive era men. As an Eastern politician turned rugged cowboy, Roosevelt personified the transformative power of the west. As bankers, politicians, and businessmen, many of the men who traveled with Wylie certainly experienced what Roosevelt called “a life of ignoble ease.” A trip to the wilds of Yellowstone, either with family or business acquaintances would seem to satisfy this call for manly adventure. In their writings, however, male tourists differ little from their female counterparts in their interest in the comfort of the Wylie Way.11

Using one significant tourism business to demonstrate and expand Pomeroy’s thesis, this project contributes to the historical understanding of the development of western tourism. The services provided by tourism vendors supports Pomeroy’s discussion of the commodification of the western experience. Due to the historical upper-class status of early tourists, little work has been done to explore how an individuals’ class and gender influenced their expectations and experiences. With the turn-of-the-century shift in tourist demographics, this project addresses
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This gap, challenging natural assumptions of the society and sex of western visitors. Most importantly, this project seeks to reinvigorate the discussion of how western tourism was established and the significance of its development to the larger story of American history.

This project uses Wylie Permanent Camping Company as its locus due to the national importance of Yellowstone Park and the role the company had in the Park’s formative years. As the nation’s first national park and a geological oddity, Yellowstone Park served as a testing ground for the development of western tourism, especially for attractions on public land. Practices developed there influenced later business/government national park interactions and initiated continuing debates about the nature of the relationship between capitalism and conservation. While Yellowstone itself is the subject of numerous texts, of both the academic and entertainment variety, little is published on Wylie Permanent Camping Company. As a recipient of one of the Park’s original concessionaire licenses, the camping business participated in early negotiations of power between park workers and park vendors. Jane Galloway Demaray, great-grand-niece of the company founders, explores this tenuous relationship in her 2015 text, Yellowstone Summers: Touring with the Wylie Camping Company in 2015. While well cited and deep in sources and biographical content, the text fails to make an argument about the historical significance of the Wylie Company. This project will use similar sources and information, but will provide a deeper context and nuance into how developing tourist structures influenced the expectations and experiences of the Wylie tourists.

Because this project uses the Wylie Permanent Camping Company as a case study in the constructed nature of early western tourism, and the turn-of-the-century company’s years of operation fall in the same period as the transitions in tourism culture, the temporal guidelines for this project reflect the dates of the Company’s operation, from 1893 to 1916. Some sources
used, such as guidebooks and travel narratives of those who did not travel with Wylie’s Company, predate this period. These sources demonstrate the development of a particular kind of leisure ethic in the western tourist and establish additional context to for understanding the role of expectations American western travel.\textsuperscript{14}

As previously discussed, this project uses The Wylie Permanent Camping Company as a focus due to its significance in national park history. The government declared that park land was to be protected, but also to be used by the public. To address the slight paradox, the federal government contracted park vendors as concessionaires who could provide transportation, lodging, and dining services to visitors. In order to prevent destruction of land, the licenses granted were limited in both scope and number. Several companies, including railroads, conducted camping, fishing, and touring expeditions; however only Wylie was granted permission to set up permanent camps. The company’s singular concession gave it a monopoly on a specific kind of experience, one that was more rugged than the hotels, but more luxurious than temporary tents. During its years of operation (approx. 1881-1916), the camping company served almost 20 percent of all Yellowstone visitors, demonstrating its crucial role as intermediary in the early years of park tourism.\textsuperscript{15}

The role of the Wylie Company in providing a relaxing adventure is demonstrated in writings by two distinct groups: Yellowstone tourism promoters and Yellowstone tourists. Published promotional materials as well as other writings and records kept by the company and its staff illustrate the goals, techniques and language used by the Wylie Company. Conversely, both public and private writings display tourist perspectives on their Yellowstone experiences.
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Personal writings by the original owner of the camping company, William Wallace Wylie, demonstrate the ideology of the owner as well as his experiences within the nascent tourism industry of Yellowstone Park. Wylie’s 1926 unpublished autobiography relays the entrepreneur’s reminiscences of the Company’s founding and some of the activities included in his camping trips. The autobiography also signals the general class, education, expectations, and outdoor experiences of visitors via Wylie’s description of tourist questions and attitudes, as well as short and demonstrative vignettes. The diary and letters of Beatrice Boedefeld, a young woman who worked as a “Savage” or Wylie employee in 1916, also discuss similar vignettes about tourist behavior and interactions with staff.16

At the end of 1905, W.W. Wylie sold the Wylie Permanent Camping Company to a small consortium of men who also did business in Yellowstone Park. The involved parties completed the sale with the understanding and contract language asserting that the camps would continue to operate in the fashion established by Wylie, and for a short time he remained with the camps as a salaried advisor. Though Wylie credits the physical hardship of the job as the cause for the sale, the transaction came shortly after a significant legal victory that same year. In a case against the Northern Pacific Railway, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruled that the railroad company used discriminatory rates to disadvantage the Wylie Company, and ruled that Northern Pacific must offer tickets for Wylie’s camps and tours alongside their own. Per his biography, increasing competition and government intervention made camp management more difficult for Wylie, and likely played a role in his decision to sell. His instincts proved wise; a decade later the newly established National Park Service 17

During Wylie’s leadership, Company advertisements largely relied on advertisements, trip contests, and travel testimonials published in Yellowstone area newspapers, promising
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“splendid outdoor life, travel and sightseeing.” With the sale of the company and the geographic spread of materials facilitated by the ICC ruling, the Company added detailed, full-color brochures and pamphlets to their marketing program. Though the medium and larger audience differed, the company continued to operate with the “Wylie Spirit” guaranteed by the sale contract; the quantity and style of advertisements changed, but there was little change in the comfort/wilderness rhetoric of the ads.18

Materials produced by tourists also demonstrate the effectiveness of Wylie Company’s claims and services. First-hand narratives from visitors illustrate the consumer perspective of camping the “Wylie Way.” These primary accounts include published travel journals and newspaper articles written by visitors. The public nature of these sources indicates travelers’ desire to participate in a dialogue about western travel. The writings also demonstrate the joint nature of the production of Yellowstone expectations. To establish context and repeating themes of the Yellowstone visitor mindset, this project also engages with materials from tourists who did not stay at the Wylie camps, but had comparable social classes and expectations of western travel.

Other materials demonstrate the gender and class demographics of Wylie tourists. The majority of the travel journals and diaries describing the Wylie experience were published by women. While a multitude of turn-of-the-century travel narratives were written by women, this preponderance of female voices was reflective of the gender breakdowns on Wylie trips.19 A 1910 brochure asserts that a minimum of forty percent of visitors were women traveling unaccompanied. A random sampling of the Company’s tourist register from 1904-1909, confirms the preponderance of women participating in the experience, and also demonstrates their varied cities of origin.20 At a per-person cost of almost 20 percent of the average income,
this paper asserts that the majority of Wylie campers were upper or middle-class. The same register sampling, combined with available census data and society paper reports, also supports this supposition.

As a type of media that bridged both the producer and consumer sides of tourism, testimonials were a form of advertising highly utilized by the Wylie Company. As evidence of the truth in their advertisements, most of the Wylie brochures include several pages of camper feedback. For almost every state, there are one or two short appreciative testimonials, along with the names and addresses of other (often influential or rich) visitors. The pamphlets go even further, promising that the company can refer the reader directly to “former tourists…from practically every city and town in the United States.” Despite the artificiality – or at the very least cherry-picking – that this style of advertising suggests, the language and style of the testimonials bear striking similarities to the writings of other customers. While not every testimonial contained dual references to comforts of the camps and the exhilaration of the outdoors, it is certainly a recurring theme.

W.W. Wylie’s long-term relationship with the promotion of Yellowstone National Park was influenced by his own consumption of “wild-west” media. Early in the 1870s, Wylie read an account of the harrowing adventures of Truman Everts, a member of the Washburn expedition who was lost for many days in Yellowstone. Fascinated by the descriptions of the park’s natural wonders and dangers, Wylie was “possessed of a great desire to sometime visit this region,” and left his secure position in Iowa in 1879 to accept a job offer in Bozeman in 1879. Over the next few years, Wylie spent his summer vacations exploring the park and writing about its offerings. He and the photographer Henry Bird Calfee worked together to create an educational stereograph slideshow about the region and toured the eastern states to promote the park. Calfee
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and Wylie also participated in the era’s tradition of guidebook authorship with the rather ambitiously titled: *Yellowstone National Park or The Great American Wonderland: A Complete Description of All the Wonders of the Park, Together with Distances, Altitudes, and Such Other Information as the Tourist or General Readers Desires: A Complete Hand or Guide Book for Tourists*. The guidebook, published in 1882, reprinted an 1871 statement from the House of Representatives Committee on Public Lands. The guidebook and the Committee statement both declare that the Park should be available to all, and that it would be a dire mistake “to fence in these rare wonders, so as to charge visitors a fee…for the sight of that which ought to be as free as the air and water.”

Despite Wylie’s desire for greater accessibility to the park, he was one of the first to monetize park excursions. Wylie’s foray into tourism began in the early 1880s, with guided tours of the park with friends and fellow teachers during summer school vacations. However, with the increasing publicity surrounding the newly established park and the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad’s “Park Branch” in 1883, the numbers of visitors on his instructional camping tours of the park increased swiftly throughout the 1880s. Each day before the tour, Wylie and his employees would pack up the camps and move them to the next site. Though he declared his entry into business as “entirely unintentional,” an increasing flow of tourists made Wylie realize that he had carved out a niche in the park tourist industry. By the 1890s, the demands of patrons and their growing demand for greater comfort encouraged Wylie to try offering new services. First, he purchased two luxurious Pullman camping cars: enormous and finely appointed carriages pulled by four Clydesdales, with room to sleep four. Unfortunately for Wylie, these cars were extremely expensive and provided insufficient relief for the mounting visitor volume. When their size generated friction with Park administration and his competitors,
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Wylie abandoned use of the cars and sought a more stable solution. In 1893 – the same year that Turner declared the “closing” of the western frontier – W.W. Wylie petitioned the government for permission to install permanent camps in Yellowstone Park. With the grant of a government lease, Wylie, and his successors were able to expand the amenities offered by the company and create a bastion of civilization in the nation’s first national park.24

The Wylie Camping company joined a growing number of tourism boosters who worked to cultivate the West as a destination. In 1906, the Salt Lake City Commercial Club initiated the “See America First” campaign to promote western tourism. According to scholar Marguerite Shaffer, the purpose of the campaign was to unite “western businessmen, civic leaders, representatives from railroad publicity departments, and city and state politicians…in an effort to advertise the tourist attractions and develop the tourist infrastructure throughout the West.”25 Phrasing the need for tourism development as a patriotic endeavor, the conference leaders bemoaned the large sums that Americans were spending in Europe rather than at home. The keynote speaker of the conference even concluded his speech with a recitation of the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, reworded to declare American independence from touring “the Continent.” 26 A variety of businesses, particularly those doing business in the National Parks, adopted the “See America First” slogan. The sentiment was powerful enough to make it into popular culture. In a short story published by Harper’s New Monthly Magazine in 1887, a tour group decides to visit Yellowstone over Europe precisely because of this changing perception of the west. One member of the party, a younger sister, reads from a guidebook that claims the wonders of the world “combined would not begin to compare with the glories of the National Park on the Yellowstone.” Her ever status-conscious older sister decides then that the west

Simpson 13
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would replace Europe in her quest to be “looked upon as a privileged creature by one’s envying friends.”

Wylie’s publicity materials echoed the “See America First” campaign’s emphasis on tourism as patriotism. The Company’s promotional brochures include extensive details about the history of the park, and anecdotal information about the sights and prominent previous visitors. These notes also explained the science behind the wonders of Yellowstone, attempting to convey the significance of the sights. Pictures, maps and detailed day-by-day trip itineraries reassured potential visitors that they would see the notable places mentioned by the Lewis and Clark journals and the Washburn expedition. Though this edifying material could perhaps be less cynically explained by the instructional background of its founder, the brochure for the 1913 season featured the “See America First” slogan on the front page. This advertising technique indicates that The Wylie Company was aware of their privileged position in the nation’s first national park and knew that use of such rhetoric would appeal to their intended audiences.

Despite the seeming difficulty of such a pairing, the principal emphasis of the Wylie Company’s promotional materials was on the combination of civilization and wilderness. Advertisements asserted that “prospective Yellowstone travelers are interested not so much in what they are about to see, as in how they shall see it,” and attempted to respond to that desire by offering comfort without pretention. They presented these juxtapositions without irony, promising both “a real outing among the pines” and tents “as cozy as a summer cottage” in the same breath. Brochures for the “Wylie Way” guaranteed a “happy medium” between hotels and bed rolls, “retaining the comfort of the former without its ceremony and keeping the outing spirit of the latter without its exposure.”
In keeping with the flamboyantly colored advertisements of the period, many of the company’s promotional pamphlets and post cards took the form of “pictorial handbooks.” These featured panoramas of the camps, the groups of bright green and white striped tents casting a striking contrast against the rocky and geyser-filled landscape. The handbooks also included images of tent interiors that resembled small hotel rooms. Accommodations came in a variety of sizes, featuring rooms with one, two, or four real beds “(no cots)” with floral quilts, a camp stove, wash basin, and even a Persian patterned rug for the raised wooden floors. Brochures also displayed pictures of the numerous other camp comforts, like the large recreation pavilion with polished dance floor, and the dining tent with a full complement of china dishes. By presenting pictures of their amenities, the Wylie Company created a visual testimonial; in an era of emerging awareness about misleading advertising techniques, images of the camps reinforced the comfort and wildlife proximity promised by the advertising copy.

Understanding the tension between the consumers’ wish to be outdoors and their desire for indoor comforts meant that Wylie advertisements walked a fine line in describing their offerings. Anticipating traveler concerns about the supposed ruggedness of the park, most Wylie brochures included several pages answering “questions you will ask.” Here, the company let the campers know about the variety of amenities they could expect. These included daily laundry service of sheets, blankets, towels and napkins as well as fresh milk and cream from the camp cow herd. Entertainment was provided by way of nightly campfire gatherings complete with hot popcorn and songs, and always followed with dancing and other amusements in the recreation pavilion. And for all other business, the Office Tent included mail facilities and a general store that stocked “candies, cigars, postcards, drug supplies, straw hats, rubbers, etc.”
Seeing Yellowstone the “Wylie Way” promised “all the comforts and conveniences of life, maintaining at the same time spice and informality of camp life.”

The Wylie Camping Company also took advantage of the rugged men and new women who sought credibility via outdoor adventure. The company produced and sold a series of postcards that followed the camp itinerary as a way for tourists to illustrate their experience with nature to their family and friends. Each day had a unique postcard depicting “The Scenes on Wylie Way,” and showing images from that day’s planned excursions. While these postcards served as proof of adventure for the status conscious traveler, the Wylie Company benefitted double: profiting both from the sale of the cards and the advertising they provided.

By explaining in detail – down to the time of day – what a tourist could expect to see and do, the Company both cultivated and met visitor expectations about experiencing nature. In his autobiography, W.W. Wylie recounts the anger and disappointment of tourists on days when the geysers were less active. In response to demands for explanation of the dormancy, Wylie writes: “I was obliged to explain that the park was made before I had anything to do with it.” Despite his jokes about tourist expectations regarding geysers, Wylie was not above speculating that human intervention in the park could improve tourist experiences. He suggests that The Castle, a steam geyser in Yellowstone, could someday be supplied water artificially to better satisfy visitors’ anticipations. Wylie tourists wanted to experience nature, but only on their terms and in a fashion that met their expectations.

While the geysers may have been out of the Wylie’s control, the camping company strove to guarantee visitors’ encounters with wildlife. With permission from the park supervisor, W.W. Wylie planted alfalfa on a flat-topped hill by an entrance gate. With a nearby fence that
kept out domestic stock and kept in park game, his sweet grass attracted “elk, deer antelope, and even mountain sheep” all year round. When visitors wanted to see wildlife, Wylie could always count on the area to provide. Colonel Waters, another Park concessionaire, contracted with Wylie to provide steamship tours of Yellowstone Lake. In order to make the ride more attractive, the Colonel stocked an island with hay-fed animals, ensuring that the more “difficult to spot” fauna were on view for the tourists.  

Wylie and his Company also took more direct actions to enable tourists to encounter wildlife. One season, the Company stagecoaches encountered a large dam being built by beavers. Noting the industriousness of the animal and the swiftness with which it repaired any leaks, Wylie decided “it was too good a show to abandon” and began bringing tour groups to the dam for viewing. At each visit, the tour guide used a hook to break parts of the dam so that visitors could see the beaver fix the damage. As the most commonly written about animal of the park, bears received similar treatment. Brochures promised the most enjoyable experience of viewing bears of all sizes and colors eating at refuse heaps “within easy walking distance from the Wylie Camps.” In his autobiography, Wylie recounted the regular practice when a bear came near the camp: the stagecoach drivers encircled the bear to hold it in place until the campers were available, then the campers and drivers all shouted together so that they might see a bear climb a tree. These overt interferences with Yellowstone fauna demonstrate the attempt of the Wylie Company to grant their customers a thrilling and controlled “close-encounter” with nature.

The company’s marriage of the familiar and the strange was also reflected in the relationships of employees and visitors. Camp management referred to employees as “Savages” and visitors as “Dudes.” Wylie expected the Savages to be lively and young, embodying the
fresh energy of the natural landscape. Despite their names, the Company largely employed lower-middle class college students and teachers and touted the “uniformly courteous and intelligent” service provided by their “educated and refined” workforce.\(^{42}\) Savages occupied a strange social space of providing both service and instruction. Employees provided the amenities listed in the brochures, but were also responsible for camp entertainment: singing, performing skits, and providing dance partners for the Dudes. They were prohibited from eating or bathing in the same facilities as the Dudes, while being treated as peers and leaders in the realms of outdoor guidance and amusement. Once their daily work was complete, workers were free to tour the park and enjoy the amenities of the camp – in effect becoming long-term tourists themselves.\(^{43}\) In their dual roles as producers and consumers of Park tourism, the Wylie Savages personify the twin appeal of Wylie’s approach to Yellowstone camping.

Tourist accounts of their “wild” experiences reflect their largely white, upper-middle class status. Though leisure travel had become more accessible, going on a Wylie Camping Company excursion was still a relatively expensive proposition. In an era when the average yearly income ranged between $200 and $400, only those of considerable means could afford the per-capita price of $47 round-trip railroad fare, the six-day Wylie rate of $40, and other incidental costs.\(^{44}\) Not surprisingly, then, typical Wylie patrons were urban, middle-to-upper class professionals or their family members. Although the head of household was not always present, many visitors came from to families of bank managers, business owners, or corporation executives.\(^{45}\) By offering a more authentic park experience than hotels while retaining the comforts of traditional lodgings, Wylie appealed to the adventurous upper-middle class New Women and rugged men.
Either by virtue of clever advertising or by Wylie’s monopoly on camping concessionaire privileges in Yellowstone, the camp became a favorite retreat for well-heeled groups. In 1904, the Wylie Camps hosted the entire Knights Templar Commandery of Pittsburgh on one of the company’s six-day tours. The number and status of those participating merited several mentions of the camp in Pittsburgh society papers. Playing host to affluent parties was not unusual; numerous minor celebrities and political officials also chose the camping company for their Yellowstone experience. Founder W.W. Wylie credited part of the company’s success to his distinguished camp alumni, asserting that customer satisfaction was the reason for his initial concession grant: according to Wylie, the Secretary of the Interior, the chairman of the committee on Public Lands, and numerous other congressmen and senators were previous campers. When it was time to renew Wylie’s concession privileges, the Company again used the sway of influential society. In 1897, Wylie’s lawyers presented the Department of the Interior with multiple glowing testimonials from members of the swiftly growing evangelical religious youth group, the Society of Christian Endeavor, who had visited Wylie the previous year. With over 56,000 members and multiple publications with at least as many subscribers, the Society of Christian Endeavor were powerful advocates. Their testimony, along with other evidence from “satisfied customers” demonstrated Wylie’s contributions to society, and certainly played a role in the renewal of his concessionaire license.

First-person accounts joined Wylie advertisements in reifying the expected experiences of the west. Women authored most of the travel journals and diaries published regarding Wylie camping and the Yellowstone experience at large during this era. It may be that the preponderance of this type of source is simply another example of turn-of-the-century women’s search for ways to express agency and authority. In the case of the Wylie Company, however,
the overwhelmingly female authorship also reflected the composition of camping groups. Daily Wylie excursion group sizes varied wildly, from two to well over one hundred campers per day during peak season. Regardless of the size of the group, camp ledgers and group photographs reflect the glaring gender disparity: women generally outnumbered men by almost two to one. Male travelers, when present, were either members of large business or social groups or accompanying their wives and/or children. Because of this, women’s voices represent the majority of Wylie Company visitor accounts.

The prevalence of female tourists was not unique to the Wylie Company. Rather, the preponderance of women travelers to Yellowstone was so ubiquitous that it was already a trope before the end of the century. In 1887, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* published a story about such a group, discussing the types of visitors to Yellowstone and their reasons for visiting. With an air of experience and detail that undermines the supposed fictional nature of the short story, author Alice Wellington Rollins describes a party made up of two sisters, one married and one single (“The Maiden” and “The Convert”), traveling to Yellowstone with another married female friend (“The Romantic”). The two husbands participate reluctantly, but the focus of the tale is on the expectations and experiences of the women.

The Wylie Company’s clientele reflected the predominance of women tourists in the turn-of-the-century West. Most common to the Wylie experience were groups of consisting of only women, both married and single, travelling together. Occasionally the group had an older matron or a husband accompany them; but just as often women travelled alone, speaking to the perceived safety of the excursion. The Wylie Company estimated that forty percent of their campers were “ladies traveling in small parties or individually, without male escort.” The sheer number of unaccompanied female travelers encouraged the company to hire camp matrons to
“give special attention to the comfort and pleasure of women” and “preclude the characteristic annoyances to female travelers.” These specific conveniences and chaperoning duties are emblematic of the desires of the Progressive Era “New Woman.” As well as literal security, the Wylie Company also maintained the security of social propriety when offering an outlet for the emerging spirit of female adventurers.

Like the women in the opening story, many of the travelers desired two things from their Yellowstone experience: wilderness and safety. Tourists often expressed these twin desires side-by-side. Traveling sisters Fannie and Mattie MacLaury, emphasize the danger of the park in their 1910 account, pointing out craters as “pitfalls for unwary pedestrians,” like the woman in their party whose foot was badly scalded by a misstep. The sisters also visited the site of a famous series of stagecoach hold-ups that took place in two years prior, in 1908. In their joint memoir, the sisters marvel at the twelve robberies in one day, in which “a desperado…thrusting a loaded revolver in the faces of his victims, quickly separated them from their cash.” In the nine-page chapter dedicated to their Yellowstone trip, the sisters dedicate most space to the flora and fauna of the park; however a full third of that chapter addresses the comforts of the camps, the “quite tame” bears, and the increased soldier patrols and tourist protections that followed the famous robberies. Similarly, in her 1907 Reminiscences, Amelia J. Lyle declares that her party would “bow most profoundly” to the “undeviating faithfulness” of Old Faithful’s high, hot blast. While enjoying the natural phenomena, Lyle also appreciates that “the danger line of approach is guarded by a railing to keep the unwary from too dangerous proximity.” At least for the female visitors to the park, it is clear that a certain amount of danger was acceptable – or even desirable – as long as it was accompanied by sufficient safeguards.
Likely motivated by the desire to experience a masculine “strenuous life,” male traveler accounts echo similar yearnings for danger, but are undercut by their preoccupation with creature comforts. Fred Ellsworth, a Michigan financial executive, visited Yellowstone Park in 1912. Like most male Wylie campers, Ellsworth was part of a large commercial group. *Moody Magazine* published the story of his trip with the men of the American Institute of Banking later that year. Though his narrative and phrasing are witty and fresh, his sentiments around the trip vary little from those expressed by other campers. Like most other accounts, Ellsworth mentions a close bear encounter for a number of their group, joking “it is said that the bears were far more scared than the men, but did not run as fast – indeed, the men in question claim that they did a hundred yards in considerably less than seven seconds, which is two or three seconds under the record.” Despite the thrill of the bear encounter, Ellsworth also mentions that the Yellowstone bears are not particularly intimidating, and “not a bit like the ferocious bears that inhabit the story books.” The banker describes the natural curiosities as explained by the guide, including the famous boiling cone beside Yellowstone Lake where fish can be cooked immediately after catching, and the Emerald Pool – so named for the Irishman who fell in and drowned there. The excitement of the group exploits is somewhat blunted, however, by Ellsworth’s constant references to the food provided by the Wylie Company. The regularity of Old Faithful seems equally as remarkable as the speed and skill with which “those dignified bankers did shine as knife and fork artists.” Though the purpose of the retreat was likely an attempt by the businessmen to encounter the rugged “strenuous life” promoted by Theodore Roosevelt, their concerns were largely related to comfort and comestibles. Despite the difference in gender and occupation, the accounts of wealthy male visitors like Ellsworth differ little in content from their female counterparts.
Though the vast majority of Wylie campers were visitors from out-of-state, the Company also made concerted efforts to attract Montana residents to the park. During the peak of the season, the Company ran promotions in state newspapers, advertising special pricing for residents who bought tickets on “Montana Day.” “Montana Day” visitors could purchase a six-day tour and round-trip railroad ticket for the reduced price of $41.75.\(^{57}\) The price, while still substantial to many, represented a steep discount when compared to the regular Missoula round trip rate of $57.60. Wylie publicity in local newspapers varied from small, twenty-word exhortations, to full-page historical and geological summaries of Yellowstone. To encourage Montanans to know their own state better, the longer advertisements employed a light scolding mixed with an appeal to the fear of missing out: “Did any one [sic] ever ask you if you had seen the Park? Really oughtn’t you to know a little about it? You always meant to go – always wanted to go. You never will by putting it off…It would be a lot more fun to go. Ask anybody who has been.”\(^{58}\)

Wylie Company also employed a unique tactic to generate Montana interest in their camps. In partnership with several local newspapers in different Montana cities, the Company held contests for young women to win “all expenses paid” trips to experience Yellowstone the “Wylie Way.” Newspapers used ballot voting to determine the contest outcome. Voting coupons were available in each edition of the paper, and contestants were encouraged to have all of their friends and family buy papers to collect votes. If a new subscriber mentioned a specific contestant, that young lady would be eligible for coupons worth an exponentially increasing number of votes, depending on the length of subscription and pre-payment status. In effect, the newspapers recruited several new saleswomen, while Wylie received numerous ads reminding all readers of the comforts and sights of the “decidedly pleasant” camping prize.\(^{59}\)
Census records of contest winners reflect a decidedly different style of tourist than the typical Wylie “Dude.” The women, all in their late teens or early twenties, were largely working class, holding jobs titles like milliner or seamstress. A number of them came from single-parent homes or were themselves the sole income-earner in a house with four or five younger siblings. Despite their comparatively less privileged upbringing, their reviews of the Wylie experience varied little from those of their upper-crust counterparts. Their recollections too focus on elements of the natural world juxtaposed with leisure and comfort. Sue Welch and Maggie Sullivan, respectively the subject and storyteller of the introductory bear story, were two such contest winners. Other trip recipients – whose stories were published by the awarding newspaper – waxed equally poetic about the fascinating and dangerous paint pots and the “heavens of rest” that were the Wylie camps, reflecting the pervasiveness of the dual emphasis on danger and leisure. Lucy Grannis, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of a laborer from Dillon, wrote several pages about the variety of terraces, geysers, and the “Indian legends” of the park’s mysterious Obsidian Cliff. Though clearly astounded by the oddities of her natural surroundings, Grannis devotes several paragraphs to the tents “equipped with all the conveniences one could wish” and expressing her gratefulness for the tent heater fires started by employees a half hour before the group had to wake up. For twenty-one-year-old stenographer Lizzy Gibney, the startling sights and “wonders to be unrolled before their eyes” paired well with “royal manner” in which she was treated from the moment of leaving her home. The statements of the contest winners are particularly revealing about the nature of western tourist expectations. These young women were not wealthy or accustomed to luxury, yet they expected and praised the conveniences of the camps; they were Montanans, but Yellowstone was somehow more “Wild” and “Western” than the nearby towns from which they came. Of all
traveler accounts, these would seem most likely to stray from the typical. Their adherence to the script of danger and comfort, suggests that the concept of the Western Tour as a product was well established across geographical and socio-economic lines.

Like the testimonials of the contest winners, the endorsements of paying customers included in company brochures affirmed the company’s advertising rhetoric – some with language so close that it is unclear if the promotional copy or the testimonial were written first. Again, the praise from male visitors varied little from that of their female counterparts: Will H. Gates, the superintendent for the Wisconsin School for the Deaf declared that “life in your tents has all the comforts of hotel life but…seems to accord better with the spirit of the Park.” T.N. Shepard of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon House in Seattle congratulated the facilities and accommodation of the Company, noting that the camps provided “the pleasure of camp life without the inconvenience of roughing it.” He also stated his appreciation that “the ‘Wylie Way’ allowed me to see it [the park] in a manner satisfactory to my lungs, my nerves and my appetite.”

More than any other form of promotional media, testimonials demonstrate visitor engagement with the creation of the western tour; they engaged with and created tourist expectations of what a western adventure could and “should” be.

While consistently calling attention to the comfort of “camp life,” promotional materials and visitor testimonials alike both reflected and contributed to the mythology of the “Wild West.” As the frontier shifted toward the Pacific, popular culture repeated and reified tales about the adventures of its denizens. Visitors knew that the west held soaring vistas, wild animals, and Indians, because every romance, dime novel, and themed show told them so. In Custer, Montana, the MacLaury sisters saw “a wagon load of Indians, also one lone Indian.”
presence of Native Americans and the increasingly picturesque scenery were all that were necessary for the tourists to declare the town a “fair sample of the ‘wild and wooly west.’”

In the growing field of western tourism at the turn of the twentieth century, promoters and tourists added a new chapter to the story of the American West. Increased access meant that more people than ever before could experience the frontier and make their own stories. The class standing of many tourists, however, precluded a desire or ability to encounter the dirt and discomfort of their pioneer precursors. Businesses like the Wylie Permanent Camping Company answered those desires for a safer, cleaner western adventure. Beyond providing a simple service, the camping and tour group worked to create an experience that would satisfy visitors’ frontier expectations, while still meeting customer requirements of comfort and quality. Though luxury and wilderness seem diametrically opposed, both the producers and consumers of the burgeoning industry accepted that the concepts did not have to be mutually exclusive. The demand for both security and danger generated new tourist offerings and advertisements, and reestablished perceptions and expectations. This interplay between the allure of adventure and the wish for comfort manufactured an entirely new western experience.

5 Pomeroy is cited by most, if not all western historians cited in this essay. He also wrote the introduction for the Wrobel and Long anthology of note 6.
6 David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long, eds., Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Marguerite S. Shaffer, See America First: Tourism and...
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7 Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Tourism in the American West,” in Seeing and Being Seen, 46. For a different examination of motivations for American tourism see: John F. Sears, Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1989). Sears discusses the American tendency to ascribe sacred properties to geographic and systemic oddities as a response to a feeling that America lacked sufficient history.


9 Jean V. Matthews, The Rise of the New Woman (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); Virginia Scharff, Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 84. Scharff argues that this increased mobility, particularly in the West, led to the spread of communication and eventual passage of women’s suffrage.


11 Ibid., 126; Theodore Roosevelt, The Wilderness Hunter (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1893), 278.

12 National Park Service “Yellowstone Research Library,” NPS.Gov, https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/historyculture/library.htm. Yellowstone Research Library collects many of these works, and “consists of more than 20,000 books, periodicals, theses and dissertations,” as well as newspapers and other audio-visual material.


14 Two such sources include an 1887 tourist narrative by Alice Wellington Rollins (note 26) or the early Yellowstone guidebook authored by W.W. Wylie in 1882 (see note 21)


17 Demaray, 175-177, 171-172; W.W. Wylie Autobiography, 42, 22-24; Culpin, 60-61. A silent partner in the purchase was Harry Child, who co-owned the Yellowstone Park Association and the Yellowstone National Park Transportation Company with the Northwest Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Northern Pacific Railway.

18 Wylie Permanent Camping Company, Advertisement, Yellowstone Monitor, July 16, 1908, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86075153/1908-07-16/ed-1/seq-1/. Newspaper ads located on ChroniclingAmerica.loc.gov. Full-color scans of several brochures available in the Brigham Young Collection, online at Archive.org. In the years following the Company’s sale, Wylie sued the new owners several times about the terms of the contract and his salary, but it does not seem to affect advertising or operations.

19 For a state of the field on women’s travel writing, see: Carl Thompson, “Journeys to Authority: Reassessing Women’s Early Travel Writing, 1763-1862,” Women’s Writing 24, no. 2 (2017): 131-150.

20 Wylie Permanent Camping Company Yellowstone Lake Tourist Register, 1904-1909, Collection 2572, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, MT. E.g. Sample from June 21, 1909 lists 22 visitors, 14 of whom are female. The visitors come from a number of eastern and midwestern states, including Tenn., Miss., Ind., Mo., Ia., Mass., Ill., and N.Y.
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22 W.W. Wylie Autobiography, 1-2. Wylie read the Evert account in *Scribner’s Monthly*. The Washburn expedition (1870) was comprised of surveyors, merchants, others with a vested interest in the area, and a U.S. Army escort. The expedition produced many highly published journals, maps, and writings about the area that were later used to promote the region as a national park.


24 W.W. Wylie Autobiography, 18-19, 25-26. On Wylie’s second tour with the Pullman cars, he was arrested by the Army for scaring the coach horses of other concessionaires. While W.W. experimented with this new form of conveyance, his wife Mary continued to operate the moveable tent business.


29 Ibid, 4. Emphasis original to source.


32 Images of tent interiors and amenities are in most Wylie brochures, see notes 32, 33.


38 Ibid, 52, 66.


40 Every personal journal and many testimonials referenced in this paper make some mention of bears. Wylie also cites the bear as “the wild animal of chief interest to the tourist” in his autobiography, 57; Wylie Permanent Camping Company, *Yellowstone National Park: Daily Service June 15 to Sept. 10*, 1914, 8. https://archive.org/details/yellowstonen1451914wyli.

41 W.W. Wylie Autobiography, 82.

42 See note 32; Demaray, 107.


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from Northern Pacific Railway, “Rates and Arrangements for the Tourist Season of 1901,” Wonderland, (St. Paul, MN: Northern Pacific Railway, 1901), 105; Wylie rates taken from multiple brochures cited throughout text.

45 Wylie Permanent Camping Company Yellowstone Lake Tourist Register, 1904-1909, Collection 2572, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, MT. Occupations and identities verified by census data through city of origin and travel companions.

46 Wylie Tourist Register, August 26, 1904; “In the Social World,” Tensard De Wolfe, ed. The Index Magazine 11, no. 5 (1904): 12, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=s2hJAQAAMAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.RA3-PR17; In addition to the politicians discussed in the following paragraph, Wylie was particularly proud of the tour he gave to the Cowan family, former captives of the Nez Perce during their flight through Yellowstone in 1877, Wylie Autobiography, 69-72.

47 W.W. Wylie, W.W. Wylie Autobiography, 1926: 20, Collection 343, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, MT.

48 Demaray, 119-120.


50 Wylie Tourist Register, random sampling; for a state of the field on women’s travel writing, see: Carl Thompson, “Journeys to Authority: Reassessing Women’s Early Travel Writing, 1763-1862,” Women’s Writing 24, no. 2 (2017): 131-150.

51 See note 34.

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