

## BADLANDS IMAGES

On March 13, 1910, prospective homesteader John Everett hopped off the train at Interior, a small town in the South Dakota Badlands. The homesteader boom set off by the coming of the railroad in 1907 had begun to fade. Though the 20th Century was on the verge of its second decade, Interior had an air of the old frontier about it, wide open saloons, wooden rails where you could hitch your horse, and hotels thrown up with rough lumber.

He looked around. Not impressed, he would have returned to Iowa that very day, if a train had been heading in that direction. As it was, he stayed and filed a claim on 160 acres of land just north of town, part of his spread within the borders of yet-to-be Badlands National Park. Everett had no illusions about his claim. It consisted, he said, of cactus, slick Badlands mud, and scenery. Not that he had anything against scenery, just that he couldn't see making a living on it. To make a living, he took a job unloading freight. Three months later, he fetched his bride Cecelia from Iowa.

Like everyone who visits the Badlands, John Everett tried to come to terms with the scenery. What he thought was written down, and we can read it. By contrast, the earliest visitors to the Badlands left no written records of their impressions of the impossibly steep buttes, the raw canyons, and the impassable Badlands Wall. But we know man has been visiting here for more than 10,000 years. We have evidence that at the end of the Ice Age the first Americans killed Colombian mammoths in the shadows of the buttes. Later, their descendents drove herds of bison over the Badlands cliffs, taking advantage of the natural trap presented by the land.

The French trappers of the 18th Century called the *Badlands* les mauvaises terres a traverser -- bad lands to travel across. Practical men, seeking fortunes in fur, the trappers saw the rough country sandwiched between the White River and the Bad as an obstacle on their annual trek to rendezvous in Wyoming, not as a source of esthetic wonder.

Literate army officers, adventurers, scientists, and artists who followed a few decades later wrote reams of reports. They were romantics, influenced by the intellectuals of 19th Century Europe, particularly by poets like Coleridge, Keats, Shelly, and Wordsworth. They saw the Badlands as castles, cathedrals, and entire cities sunk into ruin.

In 1939, however, the Badlands were officially recognized for what they are. Citing the magnificent scenery, the amazing fossils, and finest surviving prairie on the Northern Plains, Congress set aside much of the area to be administered by the National Park Service.

Curiously, up to now, no Thomas Moran, no William Jackson, no John Muir, or Ansel Adams has stepped forward to tell the world that here is a place like none other, that here are images that once seen can never be forgotten. Perhaps the reason for this oversight is the uniqueness of the place. Initially, its buttes are too stark, too other-worldly, to put us at ease. Like Everett, no sooner have we arrived than we grope nervously for our return ticket.

But Fredrik Marsh has ended two centuries of artistic neglect with this collection of black and white photographs. He absolutely forbids barriers of strangeness to intrude between his viewers and the Badlands. In the midst of geologic chaos, he finds suggestions of familiar things to make the place seem comfortable. With his huge contact prints, throwbacks to the days of Jackson, he has mastered Badlands detail and texture. His print of the Yellow Mounds is as intimate as a nude, the clay like skin, and the winter grass like bleached velvet. A butte he photographed is as angular as a machine. A window through a fin becomes the single eye of the locomotive that brought John Everett to Interior, where now his great grandchildren enjoy the scenery.

But, of course, I see the Badlands I have come to love in Fred's pictures. As you turn the pages of this brilliant portfolio, you will see yours.

Jay Shuler, Chief Naturalist

Badlands National Park, November 25, 1987