

Grand Teton

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway

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A Walk Through Time



The Earliest Visitors

Archeological studies established human occupation of Jackson Hole for at least 11,000 years. Knowledge of early people is extremely limited. Data suggests that they used the area from spring to fall, based on seasonal availability of resources. Prehistoric people crossed the passes into Jackson Hole en route to seasonal hunting grounds in the region. In historic times, Indian tribes such as the Shoshoni, Gros Ventre, Flathead and Blackfeet knew the Teton country.

Days of Mountain Men

The splendor of the Teton Mountains first dazzled fur traders. Although evidence is inconclusive, John Colter probably explored the area in 1808. By the 1820s, mountain men followed wildlife and Indian trails through Jackson Hole and trapped beaver in the icy waters of the valley.

The term "hole" was coined by fur trappers of the 1820s to describe a high altitude plateau ringed by mountains. Thus, Jackson Hole is the entire valley, 8 to 15 miles wide and 40 miles long. The valley was named for David E. Jackson, a trapper who reputedly spent the winter of 1829 along the shore of Jackson Lake.

After the decline of the fur trade in the late 1830s, America forgot Jackson Hole until the military and civilian surveys of the 1860s and 1870s. Members of the Hayden Survey named many of the area's features.

Settlers at the Turn of the Century

Because of its geographic location, Jackson Hole remained unsettled until late in the 19th century. The first permanent homesteaders, John Holland and John Carnes, settled north of the present town of Jackson. By 1890 Jackson Hole had a population of 64 people. The soils and climate made ranching and farming risky.

Mountain-valley ranching was the chief occupation; settlers grazed cattle on the public domain in the mountains while cultivating hay in the valley to provide winter feed. While a few prospered, most lived at a near-subsistence level.

As settlement progressed, small communities emerged to provide goods and services. By 1910 Jackson, Wilson, Kelly and Moran had become the dominant villages in Jackson Hole. Elk, Marysvale, Grovont, Zenith and Menor's Ferry had post offices. Incorporated in 1914, Jackson became the seat of Teton County and the commercial center of the valley.

The First Tourists

The region acquired a national reputation for its splendid hunting and fishing in the 1880s and 1890s. Many settlers supplemented their incomes by serving as guides and packers for wealthy hunters. A few, such as Ben Sheffield, made it a full-time occupation. He acquired a ranch at the outlet of Jackson Lake in 1902 to use as a base for outfitting his expeditions. The ranch became the town of Moran.

Others recognized that dudes winter better than cows and began operating dude ranches. The JY and the Bar BC were established in 1908 and 1912, respectively. By the 1920s, dude ranching made significant contributions to the valley's economy. At this time some local residents realized that scenery and wildlife (especially elk) were valuable resources to be conserved rather than exploited.

The Jackson Hole Story Continues

Much of the recorded history of Jackson Hole involves the story of Grand Teton National Park. The emergence of the conservation movement in the United States prevented the transfer of public lands to private ownership in the Tetons. Through the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, President Grover Cleveland established the Teton Forest Reserve in 1897. Teton National Forest was created in 1908. These reserves included much of the land of Jackson Hole.

Congress established Grand Teton National Park in 1929. The 96,000 acre Park included the main portion of the Teton Range and most of the glacial lakes at the base of the mountains.

After touring the area in 1926, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., decided to buy private lands in Jackson Hole for Park use. Rockefeller's agents formed the Snake River Land Company that purchased over 35,000 acres during the next 20 years. Political controversy defeated attempts to add the valley to the Park in the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1943 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued a proclamation establishing Jackson Hole National Monument by authority of the Antiquities Act of 1906. The 210,000 acre monument included most federal land in Jackson Hole. In 1949 the Rockefellers donated nearly 33,000 acres to the federal government and in 1950, Congress passed legislation merging the Park and National Monument.

Today tourism is the cornerstone of the local economy. Visitors come to enjoy breathtaking scenery, wildlife and other natural features of Grand Teton National Park and the John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway.

