

Why We Built the Caverns So Far from the Interstate...

*...and other great Montana
state park stories*

Kaneeta Red Star Harris, a park interpretive specialist at Chief Plenty Coups State Park, remembers the day when a crowd of visitors and dignitaries gathered around the log home of the great Crow Nation chief to dedicate the site as a national historic landmark.

"A tribal drum group was here to sing Chief Plenty Coups's honor song, his personal song," Red Star Harris says. "When the musicians began to sing, two golden eagles suddenly appeared from nowhere and circled overhead, high in the sky, as though drawn to the song. Everyone was in awe. It was just incredible."

The story is short and unadorned, but it captures the spiritual significance of Plenty Coups's homestead and its sacred spring for members of the Crow Nation. Another intriguing story reveals not only the rich archaeological heritage of the park but also how serendipitously artifacts can appear.

"Because the park is a historic site, every time we do maintenance that requires digging up the earth, state archaeologists must come in first and make sure there are no buried artifacts that might be disturbed or ruined," says Red Star Harris. "One day one of our seasonal employees and I were out walking the grounds. We saw that moles had been digging tunnels in the lawn, and one of them had unearthed pieces of an old pipestone pipe. So, we just picked up the pieces and put them in our artifacts collection."

Park manager Susan Stewart laughs at the account. "We can't dig at all around here without doing an environmental assessment beforehand," she says. "And then here's this mole, digging away naturally, and it comes up with an artifact."

Stories can be funny. They can be inspiring. And they can illuminate human behavior. "Every state park has at least one great story that the staff love to tell," says Ken Soderberg, chief of the FWP Parks Division's Visitor Services Bureau. "And usually those stories really do highlight some important aspect of a park." Though space precludes stories from all 50 Montana state parks, here are several that capture the cultural, natural, and even spiritual histories of some state parks—as well as provide insights into park employees and visitors.



You never know

Bannack State Park, also a national historic landmark, has generated many stories that help define the special character of Montana's premier ghost town.

"I've never seen a ghost, but I've lived long enough not to write anything off," says park manager Tom Lowe. "Visitors see ghosts here all the time. They also get what we call ghost photos. They don't see anything unusual when they take the photo, but when they get it developed, sure enough there's an unexplained image in the picture. It's even happened to me. Each fall we put on a show where the cast members dress up in vintage clothing and then apply make-up so they look like they're dead. Twice I've taken cast photos that later turned out to contain ghost images."

Over the years, most of Bannack State Park's ghost stories have featured Dorothy Dunn, a 16-year-old girl who drowned in nearby Grasshopper Creek in 1916. Visitors often mention seeing a ghost, wearing the long blue dress Dorothy was buried in. The apparition moves through the Meade Hotel, one of the town's most popular and elegant buildings.

It gets even spookier. Many visitors have also reported seeing the ghost of a much younger girl.

"That never made any sense," says Lowe.



By Sam Curtis. Illustrations by Peter Grosshauser



"But then last year I was doing research in some old newspapers, and I discovered that another girl, about three years old, also drowned in the creek in 1909. If there really are spirits inhabiting this place, that explains why one is a little girl."

Historic head

There's nothing mysterious about the most popular story told at Travelers' Rest State Park. In fact, it's nationally known. The park holds the only archaeologically confirmed campsite along the entire Lewis and Clark Trail. Darby Bramble, a park interpretive specialist,

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says discovery of the expedition's cook fire and latrine in 2002 has drawn history buffs from around the world.

"Visitors are particularly interested in seeing Lewis and Clark's privy," says Bramble.

When archaeologists excavated the now-famous latrine, the presence of mercury in the soil confirmed that Lewis and Clark had camped at the site. The mercury was residue from pills—composed of 60 percent mercury—commonly ingested by members of the Corps of Discovery to cure everything from stomachaches to syphilis. These powerful purgatives, which caused explosive bowel movements, were called "thunderbolts" by the men.

Bramble acknowledges the humor of Lewis and Clark's bathroom becoming a destination for history buffs. "It's fun for visitors to stand on the very footings that the expedition members stood on," she says, "even if that means they're hanging out at a 200-year-old latrine."

Bramble emphasizes the educational value of learning a part of American history not usually related in school classrooms. "I've found that telling the complete story of what happened here makes Lewis, Clark, and the other members of the expedition more human, more engaging for visitors," she says.

Not Walt's cave

Visitors, of course, are what Montana state parks are all about. And

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visitors are as diverse and surprising as the parks themselves, as Rhea Armstrong, assistant manager of Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park, can testify. After 19 summers of guiding people through the caverns, Armstrong has learned that visitors from areas more urban than Montana sometimes have difficulty understanding the natural world.

"I guided a boy who came from California, where he'd spent some time at Disneyland, and he was truly amazed at the inside of the cavern. 'It looks just like Walt Disney made it,' he told me. 'Yes, but this is real,' I said. 'Well, it looks just like we're inside a mountain.' 'We are inside a mountain,' I replied. Then he burst into tears, suddenly frightened that nature in the raw is not nature as Disney made it."

Other visitors show their loose grasp of the natural world by the questions they ask. One of Armstrong's favorites: "Why did you build this cave so far from the interstate?"

Of course, no cave would be complete without stories about bats and claustrophobia.

Armstrong says one day a park guide was reassuring a skeptical group of visitors that the bats hanging from the ceiling of the cave were harmless. She spoke of the role bats play in controlling flying insects. And she told them not to worry that a bat might bite them or get tangled in their hair.

Those are old wives' tales, she said. Just then, a big bat fluttered from the ceiling and

flew down onto her jacket, where it clung for all to see, up-close

and personal. The collective sucking of breath and ripple of nervous laughter emanating from the gathered visitors suggested that the guide's reassurances had fallen on deaf ears that day.

Caves can cause claustrophobia. Most visitors know before they descend too far into the cavern whether they will be affected by that oppressive, hard-to-breathe feeling. "But one guy didn't admit his claustrophobia until we were halfway through the tour," Armstrong says. "He then revealed his fear but said he'd be okay as long as I kept talking. But, he added, if I went silent for even a moment, he'd have a panic attack."

So Armstrong started talking, and she proceeded to filibuster her





way through the rest of the tour, babbling non-stop for the next hour with every fact, story, and trivial tidbit she could recall about Lewis and Clark Caverns. The visitor made it to the exit without panicking, but Armstrong says she nearly panicked herself a few times thinking she'd run out of things to talk about.

An international affair

Some state parks sit in such remote parts of Montana you'd think nothing noteworthy could happen there. That's what Ryan Sokoloski thought in 2004 when he took his first park manager job at Hell Creek State Park, on the south shore of Fort Peck Lake. At the time, he figured he'd spend most of his time talking to visitors about local wildlife and walleye fishing, and checking to make sure they were having a good time at the out-of-the-way park.

"The job was supposed to be low-key, and I was really looking forward to that," Sokoloski recalls. "I figured the biggest problem I'd have would be someone forgetting to pay a camping fee."

One Saturday, after managing the park for only two weeks, Sokoloski called a staff meeting to go over work assignments. "We're gathered there in the office when suddenly federal law officers, in vehicles with lights flashing, race right up to where the camp hosts' motor home is parked. Clouds of dust are swirling in the air and agents are jumping out, surrounding the motor home and shouting, 'Come out of there, now!' I mean, it's like a scene from a TV show.

"We have no idea why the federal agents are escorting these retired campground hosts in their 70s from their motor home. I'm thinking, Holy cow, what's happening here? And I'm panicked. It's Saturday. My supervisor is at home in Miles City, hours

away. There's nobody to call, and I honestly don't know what to do.

But I'm the park manager, right? I need to assume responsibility, to find out what's going on. So I sort of meander over there and say, 'Um, I'm the park manager. These are my campground hosts. Do I need to be aware of something?'

"Well, they're still talking to these folks and hauling bags of stuff—evidence I assume—out of the motor home. One of the agents takes me aside and explains that the campground hosts are under investigation for stealing cultural artifacts from federal lands. They've been under surveillance for several years. And because the hosts are Canadian citizens, this is not only a federal case, but it's also an international affair!

"You gotta be kidding, I say to myself. I'm supposed to be in this remote park, 25 miles north of Jordan, the most geographically isolated town in the lower 48 states, and I'm part of an international investigation!"

Sokoloski, now park manager at Makoshika State Park, ran back to his office and called his supervisor's office to leave an urgent message. "I said, 'You've got to call me right away. You won't believe what's just happened. I need to be your number-one priority.' Then I added, 'You sure don't waste time breaking in a new manager.'"

The incident became grist for a good, long story (the criminal case is still pending). But often the stories that come out of Montana's state parks are simply little vignettes about what park personnel do best: assist visitors and offer them insights into this place we call Montana.

Chris Dantic, an interpretive specialist at Giant Springs State Park near Great Falls, remembers helping an out-of-town visitor hire a cab to drive her from the park to other famous sites in the city.

"She was a gracious lady in her early 70s," Dantic says. "When the cab arrived, she walked up, looked directly into the cab driver's eyes, and said, 'Please take me to the Charlie Manson Manor.' I looked at the driver, and we both grinned. 'That might be a bit scary, ma'am,' I said. 'You may want to try the Charlie Russell Manor.'" 🐘

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