



Text Version of Audio Story: Hell

“Well there I was,” he said as he sat around the campfire talking to other mountain men. “Those Blackfoot Indians were chasing me. I had escaped from them. They had taken all my clothes away from me, and there I was naked as a jay bird running through the briars and thickets, gritting my teeth. I made it to the icy river and dove in. I came up under a beaver lodge and just hid there until the Indians were gone.”

He was friends with the Crow Indians, and that would explain why the Blackfeet hated him so. After escaping, he had to walk 200 miles — completely naked, with no provisions or weapons — to a frontier trading post.

John Colter, the mountain man, was a guy’s guy, a legend in his own time.

When Thomas Jefferson engaged Meriwether Lewis and William Clark for the Great Expedition, there was one fellow they knew they just had to take along — John Colter, the mountain man. He was one tough son of a gun, and smart. But if for no other reason, it was worth it to take him along just to hear him tell stories around the campfire, stories so fantastic they just had to be made up. But, who cared, they were so entertaining.

Colter often spoke of what he had seen on one of his outings. It was a story so fantastic, fun to listen to, but so fantastic, of course, no one would believe it. John Colter had finally gone a bit too far with his storytelling. He spoke of hell. He had seen it, and it was on Earth — a place so hot the ground boiled and the streams ran hot. Steam hung everywhere. The fury of Satan right here on Earth, erupting through portholes in the ground, portholes that shot evil into man’s domain. Most could laugh the story off as just that, a story ... but for others, oh, the fear.

Today, many a sinful American have been to hell and back. But, of course, today it’s better known as Yellowstone National Park.

Mountain man John Colter was the first white man to see Old Faithful and the other geysers, to see the boiling mud pots, to see the treasures of what is now known as Yellowstone. Imagine his frustration at not being believed. He had taken copious notes of what he had seen; notes taken in vain, for few would believe him. He wrote of catching fish in the river, cleaning them and then placing them in a small pond of scalding water to cook. He cooked eggs in the hot water. He would bathe in pools of warm water. Oh, imagine how good that must have felt for a mountain man long on the trail.

John Colter died a fairly young man, before reaching 40, but not in a fight with a bear; and he wasn't scalped by Indians. He came down with jaundice. His grave, which today should really be a national monument, was destroyed along with others in a little cemetery. The railroad was coming through, right through that little cemetery. Hardly seems right, does it? Colter's remains, and that of other souls, were tossed about the new railroad bed. It's hard to even begin to fathom the scope of what adventurers like Colter have given to America, their discoveries, their stories, their courage for being the first to explore the foreboding unknown. Your spirit, John Colter, is still felt. And wherever you are now, may God rest your soul.

Broadcasting from the Juniata Valley with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.