

## Old Faithful

*In 1974, during my college years, I landed a summer job cleaning outhouses at a US Forest Service recreation area in Oregon. I hesitated to tell my mother about it. She was a classy, high-society lady and I knew this job wouldn't pass her glamour test. Eventually, I worked up the nerve and broke the news to her. To my utter amazement, she reacted with support, and even excitement. Seeing the quizzical look on my face, she told me a family story I'd never heard before. These are her own words:*

In 1948, when we were in college, my best friend Rita and I spent a summer at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, where we cleaned tourist cabins. The concessioner, The Yellowstone Park Company, was incorporated in Minnesota, our family's home state. My father had the right connections to get these jobs for us. Overcoming protests from our prim-and-proper mothers, Rita and I packed our bags and set off on the adventure of our lives.

At that time there were over 2,000 tourist cabins in the park, and the large summer cleaning and maintenance crews stayed in dormitories at the park headquarters. During the day we girls worked hard cleaning cabins; after hours we explored the park and enjoyed its natural wonders.

Rita's boyfriend Mel also had a summer job at Yellowstone, in the maintenance department. He was an engineering student, and quite the prankster.

Yellowstone is famous for its many geysers—hot springs in which water intermittently boils, sending tall columns of water and steam into the air. The Old Faithful geyser has the reputation of going off every hour, on the hour, but the actual period between events at that time ran from 35 to 120 minutes, so I'm not sure just how we pulled this off. We employees joked about the crowd size, calling it the 'Old Faithful Indicator.' The bigger the crowd, the longer it had been since an eruption.

A small maintenance shack sat adjacent to the Old Faithful viewing area. Mel and one of his buddies moved some equipment stored there to another building, and in this shed they secretly constructed an elaborate-looking machine, complete with lights, buzzers, a dial gauge, and a big lever. Of course, the machine didn't connect to anything, but it looked impressive.

As our part in the prank, Rita and I brought tourists to the shed for a special, 'behind-the-scenes' look at how the crew 'controlled' the geyser. There must have been small warning signs just before an eruption, because somehow Mel seemed to know just when to give a technical-sounding lecture.

"Old Faithful was discovered by the Washburn expedition in 1870, just two years before Yellowstone became our first national park," he said. "The geyser was named for its frequent and somewhat predictable eruptions, which occur about 21 times each day. For decades we tracked the height of the steaming water and the length of each eruption and we used that information to predict the next one. But in recent years the geyser has become less reliable, and sometimes people just wait for it in vain."

Mel dramatically whipped a tarp away, revealing the shiny contraption.

"But you folks are in luck," he said. "Just this summer we've perfected this machine that takes the guesswork out of the process. In fact, if the old girl threatens to act up, we can now give her the encouragement she needs."

The crowd followed his gaze as he looked out the open door toward the silent geyser. "In fact, I think she just might be dragging her feet a bit right now."

Mel dramatically pulled the lever. The dial whirled, the buzzer buzzed, and the lights flashed—just as the geyser erupted. The visitors oohed and aahed, and we perpetrators felt pretty smug about the deception.

We kids entertained ourselves this way for several days before management caught on to our antics. One afternoon, the head ranger quietly entered the shack and watched our charade from the shadows behind the onlookers.

When Mel pulled the lever and the crowd gasped in amazement, the ranger stormed to the machine, looking very angry. He grabbed Mel with his left hand and Mel's buddy with his right hand and he dragged them unceremoniously out of the building. Rita and I ducked and melted into the dispersing crowd. We watched from a distance as the ranger raged at the young men.

Eventually, a manager from the concession company arrived, scowling as he listened to the ranger. The result wasn't pretty. Mel and his friend got fired, but Rita and I managed to miss the fallout.

We behaved ourselves the rest of the summer, but 1948 was a year that neither of us will ever forget.

*So that's why, when I told Mom about my summer job with the Forest Service, she just smiled.*

*"Go," she said. "Enjoy yourself. Take a friend along. This is the stuff that makes memories."*