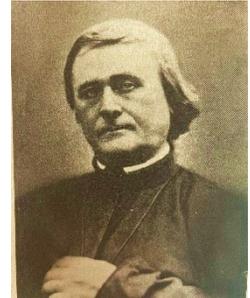


# Brief History, Legends, and Bozeman Trail Tales of Lake DeSmet

This compilation was prepared as part of a September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, program at Lake DeSmet presented by: The Jim Gatchell Memorial Museum; Fort Phil Kearny/Bozeman Trail Association; Fort Phil Kearny State Historic Site; Bighorn Audubon and Special Guest Linwood Tall Bull of the Northern Cheyenne. For more information, please contact [fpkbta@gmail.com](mailto:fpkbta@gmail.com)  
Compiled by J. Puckett.

**Lake DeSmet** is named for Father Pierre-Jean De Smet (1801-1873), a Belgium born Jesuit priest whose adult life was dedicated as a pioneering missionary and peacemaker to the American Indians. In his endeavors it is said he traveled over 180,000 miles including across the plains and over the Rockies several times and crossing the Atlantic 16 times seeking mission funding and support. A chronological table of his travels is available upon request.



During late in summer of 1851, Father De Smet and his traveling party came through this area enroute to a Fort Laramie peace council, known as the Horse Creek Treaty. They passed “a lovely little lake about six miles long” which his companions then named in his honor. <sup>1</sup>



A detailed USGS 1959 geological report states “Lake DeSmet north of Buffalo occupies a depression formed by the natural burning of the 150-200 foot thick Lake DeSmeth [sic] coal one in the Wasatch Formation” (55.8 to 50.3 million years ago).

The report mentions fossil discoveries in the area including that of a Mesohippus, a horse that lived 32-37 million years ago. <sup>2</sup>

To the left is a “restoration” Mesohippus image by Ernest Hall, Chicago Field Museum, which states “these little horses were only two feet high”.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lake DeSmet was approximately 1.5 miles wide and 3 miles long and described by many as beautiful but brackish. This paper includes diary excerpts from emigrant and military Bozeman Trail travelers 1864-1866 noting their first glimpse of the lake.<sup>3</sup> Edward Gillette’s 1910 report<sup>4</sup> mentions tales of the legendary serpent(s) which may also be entertaining to the reader. See pages 6 & 7.

Not surprisingly, the lake has long held beliefs to those here before the pioneers and U.S. Army. Two American Indian legends are mentioned in this collection but there are many more. During the program Linwood Tall Bull will share the Northern Cheyenne’s historical significance and beliefs of the lake and of its birds. Photo (r): At the water’s edge – Piegan, by Edward S. Curtiss, 1910; Library of Congress. Uncertain location.





The lake's water quality and size changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Jim Gatchell Memorial Museum's "Sentry" Vol 32, No. 2, Summer 2023 includes an extensive and well-written article by Sharon Miller "The 1974-1975 Enlargement of Lake DeSmet" <sup>5</sup> explaining the successful expansion of the lake.

Image of Jim Gatchell (l) and unidentified man at the Lake DeSmet monument. This grand monument claims Father De Smet traveled through here in 1840 – the actual year was 1851.

During prohibition it is said there was a well-known floating gambling and speak easy operation on the lake, using a houseboat that could hold 12-20 people.



Lake DeSmet is now a favorite recreational area for locals and visitors, thanks to Wyoming Game & Fish for fisheries management and to Johnson County Road and Bridge for recreation management.

Recent fire events remind us that Lake DeSmet is also critical for aircraft (aka super scoopers) firefighting efforts in Johnson and Sheridan Counties.

## American Indian Legends

From the Arapaho:

"Lake De Smet was known as 'holy or powerful water' or 'circling or whirlpool water'. A brief version of an Arapaho story on Lake DeSmet is that the tribe was traveling, and the bands split up because there was not enough grass for their horses and wood. When they gathered again one band was missing. Tracks went into the lake and after riding around the lake twice, tracks could not be seen coming out of the lake. They say that sometimes at night you can hear the sound of the band moving, dogs barking, horses whinnying, children playing." <sup>6</sup>

One Crow Legend

"..the horse was in the water and came out of the water. It came because of a mysterious woman who came to a war party and then said [to a warrior] 'You are practically my husband. I give you this gift.' So he took the horse and then from then on that horse said take me back there. So he took him back, and they found a mare there on the shores of Lake DeSmet. And then from that, they [horse herds] started growing." Barney Old Coyote, Crow Tribal member, and decorated WWII Code Talker<sup>7</sup>

## Bozeman Trail Travelers 1864-1866

“Lake De Smet, ten miles northwest of present Buffalo, Wyoming, was a small saline lake in the Bozeman Trail era. In this [21st] century, dams at both ends and water diverted into it have changed it into a much larger freshwater lake. Bozeman Trail passed about a mile west along the length of the lake. Lake De Smet was named for Father Pierre-Jean De Smet who passed it on his way south to the Fort Laramie treaty council in 1851. Some [Bozeman Trail] travelers mistakenly called it Smith or Smith’s Lake.” Susan Badger Doyle, *Journeys to the Land of Gold* <sup>3</sup>

“In the afternoon we traveled up the creek a few miles then left it and drove over a high and rolling country passed a lake [Lake DeSmet] some 2 or 3 miles long & near one wide from the road it was beautiful this evening we camped on small stream [Shell Creek] after driving about 16 miles to day”  
Abram H. Voorhees Diary, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1864 <sup>3</sup>

“At 11 o’clock A.M., July 13<sup>th</sup>, we had passed Lake Smedt and were in camp on Big Piney Fork, just east of the crossing of the Virginia City road [Bozeman Trail], and about four miles from the Big Horn Mountains. At last, we had the prospect of finding a home, and Cloud Peak seemed to look down upon us with a cheerful face as the sunlight made his features glow and glisten”  
Margaret Carrington, Friday, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1866 <sup>8</sup>

“We moved out this morning and crossed the creek [Rock Creek] five times in the course of three miles. We then left the stream and came to a dividing ridge. Crossed it and came in view of a fine lake [Lake De Smet] surrounded by burnt hills, as red as brick. <sup>a</sup> (All been once in a great conflagration and the lake in the middle of it, very large masses of lava are lying on the border of the lake.<sup>b</sup> The lake on examination is surely a deadly body of water for it has a very stinking sulfurous smell. At the lower end of it a seam of coal has been exposed for several acres in extent by a flood of water and on its surface are very large petrified trees. Some parts of them has turned into iron, while others are turned into rock. Game, grass water and wood abundant. Road good for traveling.”

Richard Owens Diary, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1864 <sup>3</sup>

- a. This region is known for the striking beds of bright red scoria or clinker formed when exposed coal beds were ignited, such as by lightning. The coal beds burned slowly, baking the surrounding shales and sandstones into red slag, in the same process as when clays are baked to form brick. Noted by Susan Badger Doyle
- b. Here Owens is mistaken, since scoria is sedimentary and not volcanic in origin. Noted by Susan Badger Doyle

“Quite hot. We traveled 12 miles and camped in a poor place. Passed a lake [Lake De Smet] on the north side of the road. About 3 miles further on we saw seven buffalo and a number of antelope. Also saw elk. Travelled 12 miles today. Distance to Platte 143 miles.”

John S. Hackney Diary, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1864 <sup>3</sup>

“Passed over rough and roaring country passed Red Lake [Lake De Smet] camped on a small creek [Shell Creek]”

Abraham Polk Flory Diary July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1864 <sup>3</sup>

“Seven miles from Clear Fork we came to a very pretty lake, about two miles long and about three-fourths of a mile wide, which Major Bridger told us was DeSmet Lake, named for Father DeSmet. The lake is strongly impregnated with alkali, in fact so strong that an egg or a potato will not sink if thrown in the water; large red bluffs are to be seen on both sides, and underneath the lake is an immense coal vein. Not many miles from this lake is a flowing oil well. A scheme might be inaugurated to tunnel under this lake, pump the oil into the lake, set the tunnel on fire and boil the whole body of alkali water and oil into soap.”

Captain H.E. Palmer, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1865 <sup>9</sup>

“Fine weather in the forenoon, but severe rain fell, and it was quite cold at night. Travelled 16 miles and camped on a branch of...Piney fork of Powder river [Little Piney]. Road rolling, but good to travel over most of the way. At noon we passed about one-half mile west of Father DeSmule’s lake [De Smet], a fine sheet of water, about one mile long by half mile wide. Our course during the day was parallel with the Big Horn mountains, at a distance of from five to eight miles of their base.”

James A. Sawyers Diary, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1865, Sawyers Expedition <sup>3</sup>

“..fine day in forenoon made 16 miles northwest to a branch of Piney Fork [Little Piney] and camped severe rain in evening and quite cold fine lake on right half way along, Father DeSmule’s lake [Lake De Smet], fine valley on Piney Creek for a ranch (Fort Phil Kearny was established here in July of the following year SB-D) road quite rough most of the day”

Lewis H. Smith Diary, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1865, Sawyers Expedition <sup>3</sup>

“..after 4 or 5 miles further travel passed a fine lake [Lake De Smet] off our right from 3 -5 miles long I should judge and half mile wide also passed several other small runs of water and good grass on one of which we camped after 16 miles travel plenty of wood, water and grass after getting into camp quite a wind storm came up followed by a little shower of rain the first we have had for a month”

C. M. Lee Diary, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1865, Sawyers Expedition <sup>3</sup>

“Broke camp at 5 AM weather clear and warm -- Traveled 7 <sup>6/10</sup> miles passing near Father De Smiths Lake [Lake De Smet] a clear sheet of water about one mile long and one half mile wide and camped at 10 AM on branch of Piney Fork of Powder River Mercury 93 degrees in shade Wood grass and purest water in abundance Here we found Col Carrington with seven companies of the 18<sup>th</sup> Regt. U.S. Inf[antr]y – engaged in the erection of a Fort [Phil Kearny] for which the site is admirable The vally can be made very productive by irrigation and the mountains 5 miles distance furnish a never failing supply of stone coal and excellent pine timber”

James A. Sawyers Diary, July 21<sup>st</sup> 1865, Second Sawyers Expedition<sup>3</sup>

“Passed Smith’s Lake [Lake De Smet] this morning. Did not have time to go and see it.”  
Perry Burgess Diary, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1865 <sup>3</sup>

“Don’t think it advisable to lay over any more than is absolutely necessary in the dangerous country but to get through as soon as possible. Made early start. Government train ahead. Went down an awful steep hill. Crossed Rocky Creek [Rock Creek] Passed Smith’s Lake [Lake De Smet] Camped for lunch. Water in the lake was salt.” Davis Willson Diary, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1865 <sup>3</sup>

“Made an early start, and camper near Smiths Lake [Lake De Smet] at noon, - a distance of 10 miles.... The water of Smith’s Lake [Lake De Smet] is clear and nice looking, but it is salty, and not fit for stock.” Samuel Finley Blythe Diary, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1865 <sup>3</sup>

“We left camp at 7-50 crossed Rock creek in two miles & going on up the divide I had a good view of Smith lake [Lake De Smet] I went on down to the edge of the water the water is clear & looks like it was not more than a couple of feet deep seen some wild geese and ducks the lake is about 3 miles long & one wide surrounded by bluffs, making a nice place the whole of it can be seen from the top of the bluffs the train camped about 2 o’clock 1 mile opposite the head of the lake near a little run of water [Shell Creek] a picket from Fort Philip Carny [Fort Phil Kearny] came down & told the captain where to camp came 12 miles 2 miles of the fort some of the men went over Bernard staid. I think all the sent got drunk. I saw my first buffalo this morning.” George W. Fox Diary, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1866 <sup>3</sup>

“To reach our goal in safety was the single desire of our hearts and the concentrated thought of our minds, and so we dragged along until we reached the beautiful Lake De Smedt, on the last day of the journey. This lake was named for the celebrated Catholic missionary priest first sent to the Flathead, Crow, and other Indians of the northwest, and whose successful and honored labors eventually took him to the country now known as Wyoming. He visited the Powder River country, and if he had not other monument than that erected in St. Louis in 1873, this lake will be a perpetual reminder of his useful life among the Indians more than twenty years before the period of which I am writing. He published two volumes, “Letter and Sketches” and “Oregon Missions,” which contain most valuable information ..... There still remain in Wyoming a few old residents who remember his beneficial work and testify to the personal merit of “Black Robe” as he was called by the Indians upon his first arrival to labor in their behalf.”

Frances Carrington, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1866 arrival at Fort Phil Kearny, along with then-husband Lieutenant George W. Grummond <sup>10</sup>

## Serpent Stories

In early 1910, Edward Gillette "completed a reconnaissance survey of a proposed railroad from Sheridan to Casper, Wyoming, for Verner Z. Reed and Oliver H. Shoup of Colorado Springs, Colorado. With others, these men owned a large tract of land adjoining Sheridan, and it was proposed to increase the value of these and other lands by furnishing additional transportation in constructing the proposed railroad, which, no doubt, would prove a paying investment on account of the resources then developed."

"Lake de Smet, situated twenty-five miles south of Sheridan, is a body of water three miles long by one mile wide. It was named for Father de Smet who to the northern regions was much the same as Padre Escalante to the southern. This lake is in an interior basin with no outlet and small water shed, draining a country in which there is considerable alkali, so that the waters are brackish, but not so much so as to be unpalatable to stock or prevent the existence of some species of water life. This basin, no doubt, was caused by the burning out of a coal vein, which, in this vicinity, is 120 feet thick. Evidence of this is shown by coal veins on fire at the present time close to the lake, and the large quantity of scoria or clinkers surrounding the lake indicate intense heat at some former period. Some of the smaller veins of coal have been converted from a semi-bituminous coal to practically an anthracite, as per analysis.

This lake appeared to afford an ideal reservoir for irrigation as the flood waters of Piney creek, four miles distant, could be diverted by a canal to the lake, and its surface raised thirty feet before overflowing the rim of the basin. This would involve the flooding of a thousand acres of land, and we were employed to purchase the same from the farmers owning these lands.

While making a survey of the lake, we concluded to take a swim, but, on wading in a short distance, ugly specimens of fish with large heads and mouths equipped with teeth swam around us and we quickly sought the shore. Fishermen told us later of these animals and said there were larger fish of the samples we had seen, which tore their nets when seining for German carp.

There have been rumors of sea serpents in the lake from the time of the Indians, but little credence has been given these reports. It is related that while a party of Indians were camped at the Lake a water animal resembling an alligator, except with much longer legs, came out of the water, seized a papoose about two years old and disappeared with it in the Lake. This accounts for the aversion the Indians have had for Lake de Smet.

A few persons, some excellent swimmers, have been drowned in the Lake, the reasons given being that they became tangled up in the long sea grass, and also cramps, but as they disappeared suddenly without making any frantic efforts to keep afloat, it is thought that possibly the sea serpents may have been the cause. It is of some significance that the bodies of those drowned were never recovered, although cannon were fired at the Lake and great efforts made to do so. This Lake has never been considered safe for bathing and the only boats used there are for the purpose of duck hunting.

A part of the land to be submerged had been purchased from a rancher, named Barkey, and he was allowed to pasture this land until it was flooded. Mr. and Mrs. Barkey, with their daughter, had gone to the lake one morning to repair a fence, and I met them a little later. They were all very much excited, stating that they wished I had arrived half an hour earlier as they had seen two sea serpents which had made a great commotion in the water, and swam as fast as a horse could trot. At times one would chase the other, which, on being approached, would jump from the surface exposing its length; finally, in about fifteen minutes, the serpents disappeared down the lake. Upon asking them to describe these animals as accurately as possible, Mrs. Barkey stated that "they looked like a long telephone pole with lard buckets attached," referring no doubt to the fins or flappers along their sides. Although living near the lake for twenty-five years, nothing of the kind had been seen by them before, and the story of sea serpents had never been believed by them. In fact, if anyone had told them of witnessing the sight they had experienced, they could not have thought it true.

I repeated this story of the Barkey's to a rancher, named Arthur Senff, who lives a mile north of the lake, and he stated that the Barkeys must have been mistaken, as he had lived a long time in that country without seeing any such manifestation. A few weeks later, however, I met Senff; he had visited the lake on a certain day when it was perfectly calm and the thought arose that conditions were good to view a sea serpent if there was such a thing in the lake. As if in answer to this thought, a sea serpent raised its head about, what seemed to him, six feet out of the water, and rushed down the lake, making a wake or waves which might swamp a small boat. Senff went to his ranch for a rifle, hoping to get a shot at the serpent, but was unsuccessful then, and for several days thereafter.

These testimonies coming from thoroughly reliable persons, familiar with the country through long residence, and who discredited the old sea serpent reports, makes one come to the conclusion that probably there are some specimens of a supposed extinct species of water animal in this lake, similar to those recently reported from Patagonia. Personally, I have no reason to doubt the statements of these ranchers. The only disturbance of the waters in the lake which might deceive a stranger would be a string of ducks, flying and keeping in line, but this they all stated was not the case. The Barkeys watched the performance of these water animals for fifteen or twenty minutes as they sported many times up and down the lake, and Senff saw the serpent rise out of smooth water so close at hand as not to be deceived. Besides these people were entirely familiar with the actions of ducks as they had hunted them on the lake for many years. What impressed them as much as anything was the great swell or waves caused by these animals at all times and especially so on turning to the opposite direction. It would no doubt be a simple matter for a paleontologist to name these animals, could one be secured, and highly interesting to the world at large.

The Leiter Estate of Chicago, Illinois, has recently secured Lake de Smet reservoir for irrigation purposes, and conducted an inlet canal from Piney creek, which is now in operation. The lake has been raised several feet. What effect this fresh water will have on the animal life in the brackish waters of the lake can only be conjectured, but ultimately, no doubt, the lake will be converted into a body of fresh water, in which trout will thrive the same as in all lakes in this region."

Edward Gillette <sup>4</sup>

Compiled by J. Puckett on behalf of the Fort Phil Kearny/Bozeman Trail Association. Sources:

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