

John Colter

John Colter was a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the discoverer of what is now Yellowstone National Park. For many years it was called Colter's Hell, because no one believed him when he described what he had seen.

John left the Lewis and Clark Expedition and became a trapper and a mountain man. He knew that trapping in Indian country had its risk, particularly in Blackfoot domain. Death often was an easy escape for trespassers. Unfortunately, the best beaver trapping was in Blackfoot country. Aware of the risks, Colter and his partner, John Potts, another former member of the Corps of Discovery, set their traps by night, emptied them in the early morning, and hid during the day. They were emptying their traps one morning when they heard a thundering sound. Colter identified it as Indians, Potts as buffalo. Instead of seeking cover, the two men continued in their canoe downstream. As they rounded a bend, they encountered between 500 to 600 Blackfoot Indians lining the shores. Escape was impossible, so the men responded to the gesturing of the Indians and headed ashore.

Possibly knowing what lay in store, Potts opted for an easy escape. He raised his rifle and shot dead an Indian. Arrows riddled Potts' body.

John was taken captive. He was stripped naked. From what he understood of the conversation, the Blackfoot were trying to decide how they would kill him. One Indian wanted to have him tied to a post and used for target practice. Another suggested they turn him loose and hunt him down like a deer. The chief asked Colter if he was a fast runner. Colter lied. He told the chief he was "a very bad runner." The chief walked with him about 400 yards then indicated that Colter should run for life. He did. Behind him he heard the whooping and hollering of nearly 600 Indians in pursuit of the prize—his scalp. He ran. His bare feet time and again landed on the spines of the prickly pear. He ran. The exertion caused the capillaries in his nose to burst, splattering his body with blood.

It was six miles to Jefferson Fork, Colter's only hope for escape. He had run five miles, outdistancing most of the Indians. Only one was able to close the distance. Within a mile of the fork, Colter suddenly stopped, turned around, and with arms spread, blood covering his chest, he faced his pursuer. Surprised and exhausted, the Indian faltered and tripped, breaking his spear. Colter seized the point of the spear and "pinned" the Indian to the ground. With the hordes descending upon him, Colter grabbed the dead Indian's blanket, ran the last mile to the river, and hid underneath a "raft of drift timber." For hours the Indians searched the riverbank and raft of timber. The darkness of evening brought hope to Colter and despair to his pursuers. Nothing could be found in the dark.

Colter remained hidden long after he was covered in darkness and silence. Finally, confident that he was alone, he swam downstream. He made his way toward Manuel's Fort 200 miles away. It took him eleven days to reach the fort. He entered it exhausted, hungry, and burnt from exposure to the sun.

