



Yellowstone National Park, in which 43 members participated. Such tours were popular during the society's heyday in the early 1900s.



Photos courtesy of Geographic Society of Chicago

thy that she critiqued them in the Tribune each time he came to town. Burton's biggest competition in the 1920s and 1930s was Richard Halliburton, a washbuckling adventurer and superlative writer whose lectures, like Burton's, often were standing-room only. With matinee-idol good looks, Halliburton and his daily comings and goings were a staple of gossip columns until he disappeared in a typhoon while sailing a Chinese junk from Hong Kong to San Francisco in 1939.

"Earlier in the century, most people couldn't afford to travel very much," said Sholeen. "In the winter, this was exciting stuff, to come downtown and see slides or film of a tropical paradise and listen to a really polished storyteller who happened to be the guy who took the pictures."

The society also organized guided tours for members, both locally and, in the earlier days, to national destinations such as Yellowstone National Park. Later, it began to offer guided tours to foreign locales too.

Society membership kept growing after World War II, peaking in the early 1960s. Then television discovered the public's interest in exotic places and well-told natural history, and programs such as "National Geographic Explorer" began satiating those hankerings in the comfort of people's own living rooms.

Moreover, with jumbo jets and savvy tour packaging, the travel industry opened the world to people of modest means, letting them bring home their own camcorder videos from exotic ports of call.

As a result, the last three decades have not been kind to geographic societies. But the Chicago society's local and foreign guided tours continue, as does its winter travel adventure lecture series, with 10 speakers each season. Now, however, the lectures are in a 500-seat auditorium at the Harold Washington Library, two presentations on Saturdays, one on Sunday, none usually filled to capacity.

"We have a grayning membership, but a very faithful group," said Sholeen. As for the tablets, John Brinkman, an ancient-language scholar at the Oriental Institute who examined them, said: "This is an incredibly generous gift from the Geographic Society, one we very much appreciate. We'll give the tablets a good home. They won't sit here just gathering dust."

projector's beam would pierce the darkened auditorium, delivering pictures to the screen as Burton delivered a cultivated, informed, often witty narration. No less than Claudia Cassidy, the doyenne of Chicago's mid-century arts criticism, deemed Burton's lectures so noteworthy that she critiqued them in the Tribune each time he came to town.

But Chicagoan Burton Holmes was the legendary standard by which all other travel speakers were measured. From 1893 to the early 1950s, the elegant, goateed Burton strode across sold-out lecture hall stages in a tux and white tie. The lights would dim and the film

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