

THE BIRTH OF NATIONAL PARKS: CULTURE AND NATURE IN VISITING THE WILDERNESS IN THE UNITED STATES
(1920-1940)

O SURGIMENTO DOS PARQUES NACIONAIS: O PAPEL DA WILDERNESS NA RELAÇÃO ENTRE CULTURA E NATUREZA NOS
ESTADOS UNIDOS (1920-1940)

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze the birth of the National Park System and Service in the United States, as well as the factors related to the increase in visitors to the Parks between 1920 and 1940. The work is based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Environmental history, focusing on the history of nature conservation and the creation of protected areas. It delves into the elements of regulation of the services related to national Parks, and the institutionalization of practices of visitation in that period. The central arguments of this article are: the dissemination of natural beauty in the United States, creation of a positive idea about frequency and visitation to parks, and nature conservation areas in the early twentieth century. Also, from the history of the creation of the services and management systems of the National Parks in President Wilson's tenure (1913 - 1921), it is possible to identify the relationship between society, culture and nature in this historical context.

KEYWORDS: National Parks, Wilderness, Environmental History.

RESUMO: Este trabalho tem por objetivo analisar o nascimento do Sistema e Serviço de Parques Nacionais nos Estados Unidos, bem como os fatores relacionados ao aumento de visitantes aos Parques entre 1920 e 1940. O trabalho baseia-se nos pressupostos teóricos e metodológicos de História, com foco na história da conservação da natureza e criação de áreas protegidas. Dedicar-se aos elementos de regulação dos serviços relacionados aos Parques Nacionais e à institucionalização das práticas de visitação nesse período. Os argumentos centrais deste artigo são: a disseminação da beleza natural nos Estados Unidos, a criação de uma idéia positiva sobre frequência e visitação de parques e áreas de conservação da natureza no início do século XX. Também, a partir da história da criação dos serviços e sistemas de gestão dos Parques Nacionais na posse do Presidente Wilson (1913-1921), é possível identificar a relação entre sociedade, cultura e natureza neste contexto histórico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Parques Nacionais, Natureza, História Ambiental.

Introduction

Two years after the National Park System was created in 1916, a set of administrative policies were set in motion. The opening paragraph of the policy stated that it is based on three broad management principles:

First, that the national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form for the use of future generations as well as those of our time; second,

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that they are set aside for the use, observation, health, and pleasure of the people; and third, that the national interest must dictate all decisions affecting public or private enterprise in the parks” (ALBRIGHT & CAHN, 1985, p. 69)

This soon became the National Park System creed, and with it, the understanding that the National Park Service (NPS) would play a vital role in managing the Parks for those who visited them. Visitation to National Parks increased from the 1920’s through the 1940’s due to the creation and efforts of the National Park Service, commercial advertisements emphasizing the natural beauty of the Parks, and authentic love Americans had for the great outdoors.

This article aims to analyze the birth of the National Park System in the United States, as well as the factors related to the increase in visitors to the Parks between 1920 and 1940. The work is based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Environmental history, focusing on the history of nature conservation and the creation of protected areas. The central arguments of this article are: the dissemination of natural beauty in the United States, creation of a positive idea about frequency and visitation to parks, and nature conservation areas in the early twentieth century.

There are two sets of sources used in this article, primary and secondary. The primary sources are threefold: autobiographies, personal journals, and more importantly, local archives from the Naper Settlement¹. Autobiographies give us a great overview of one’s life, but are written for an audience, therefore sometimes not delving deep enough in to their personality. Personal journals are great ways to dive into the personalities and characteristics and show a small window into the life of the person in question. Lastly, local archives give us a chance to look at personal property that is unpublished. When combining all three of these primary sources, it gives the historian a comprehensive look into what the life, personality and thoughts of a person. The second set of sources are secondary, and help us understand the historical context in leading up to and during the 1920’s to the 1940’s. We

¹ The Naper Settlement is now located in Naperville, Illinois, and they are administered by the Naperville Heritage Society and Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The Naper Settlement [Research Library](http://www.napersettlement.org/research-library) contains several hundred volumes of primary and secondary sources pertaining to the history of Naperville, DuPage County and the State of Illinois, as well as select topics of national interest. For more information, please visit <http://www.napersettlement.org/index.aspx?nid=135>.

hope that this article will shed light on the reasons why there was an increase in visitors to United States national parks and its correlation with environmental history.

Environmental History and the American Environmentalism

According to Donald Worster (1988), environmental history can be understood as a revisionist effort of the discipline of history itself; to broaden the horizons of the historiographical field beyond traditional practices and methods. In doing so, the discipline of history can incorporate other different and important narratives, being much more inclusive as to the relations between society, culture and nature. Worster seeks to reinforce the idea that environmental history rejects the conventional premise that the human experience has developed without natural constraints. Environmental history goes beyond the merely anthropocentric view of history, and incorporate into its analogies, critiques, and interpretive procedures the role of nature in the construction of human culture. It also tries to understand human action on nature and its different Impacts on the natural environment.

In that sense, Donald Worster (1988) alerts us to take into consideration some procedures in relation to the different approaches in environmental history. According to him, the historian needs three major thematic axes for interpretations on history and nature: i) nature as an object of investigation itself; ii) the relationship between cultural elements and nature; iii) and the perceptions and vision of nature in certain societies. These three assumptions summarize the three major axes of historiographical work in environmental history and serve as a guideline for this article.

Worster (1988) argues that Roderick Nash's essay, entitled "The state of environmental history" was the first attempt to define this new field of historiography. Nash's recommendations in this essay were that historians could perceive the whole landscape around us as a type of historical document. His observations were directly related to a review of a historical narrative in the United States and how Americans produced a historical narrative about themselves and their ideals.

Pádua (2012) follows a similar path, and places Nash's revisionist effort as a landmark in the institutionalization of environmental history. The author emphasizes that the first university course to use the term Environmental History happened at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1972. The course was taught by cultural historian Roderick

Nash, who in 1967 had published the book “Wilderness and the American Mind” (NASH, 2010). The book is considered a landmark in the history of the institutionalization of historical and environmental studies. In his work, Nash discusses the role of wilderness in the construction of a national identity in the United States.

The field of environmental history, nowadays, has experienced an increase in academic recognition, creating associations of researchers involved with this theme in different countries. In 1977, for example, the first scientific society exclusively interested in the relationship between society and nature was established, called the American Society for Environmental History. The institutionalization of environmental history as a historiographical field is also argued in environmental debates in contemporary society, in a time of re-evaluation and cultural reform about the relationship between society and nature on a global scale.

Recently, a comprehensive effort by Richard White (1985) to trace the development of environmental history acknowledges the value of an unprecedented work by Nash and Samuel P. Hays (1959), a historian of the conservation movement. It also suggests that they had predecessors of the American historiographer school dedicated to the study of the frontier and the west (among these environmentally-minded scholars would be Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, among others²). These older roots were remembered over time as environmental historians surpassed Hays' conservationist policy and Nash's intellectual history to address environmental changes - and again to consider the role of the environment in the formation of the American society (WORSTER, 1988).

Even more recently, another study contemplates the origins of the environmental movement in the United States, where the relationship between culture and nature was the

² In 1893, Frederick Turner inaugurated a historiographical tradition based on the understanding of the social and cultural effects and consequences of the occupation of the American frontier in particular, and of other "empty" territories with "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" "Capable of attracting large numbers of people due to the availability of natural resources. By suggesting the frontier theme, free land - or considered to be free - in the process of occupation or accelerated colonization, he created a new perspective to analyze the history of the United States of America. This perspective is based on the understanding of how the relations between humans and the natural environment they occupy are configured. This concept, successful for many decades in American historiography, and able to guide more recent studies, has also inspired historians interested in the relation between history and nature. Environmental History can be considered as a result of this North American tradition in including nature with historical themes and sources. On the themes of the frontier and nature in the American tradition there are several works that were based on the classic text by F.J. Turner (2010). We can cite: CRONON, 1996; NASH, 1982; SMITH, 2009; WEBB, 2003; WORSTER, 1992.

foundation of social thought and social practices, as explained in the important work of historian Mark Stoll (2015), entitled "Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism". The central thesis of this book is that the origins of North American environmentalism, present in the movements of conservation of nature, environmental legislation and preservation of the Wilderness, had a Protestant background, being based mainly on the Calvinist groups of New England: Congregationalists and Presbyterians.

Taken as historical subjects of the expansion of conservationist ethics and the discourse of the moralization of Puritan life and social order, these communities were analyzed from the social ethos, through a rich and diverse set of sources in the interpretation of the following processes: a) nature in the speeches of Calvin himself and in the sermons of the Calvinist ministers in Europe and the United States between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; b) the artistic aesthetics and the profound theological value of Connecticut Valley painters who revealed the landscape and social morality expressed in the contemplative and moralizing role of nature; c) urban projects and the relationship between social spaces and the moral function of forests and public parks; d) the immersion habits in the Wilderness as Protestant devotion to contact with nature, seen as divine revelation to be "read" in the book of nature; e) in the creation of scientific institutions for the use and conservation of natural resources; f) the policy of agricultural management, forestry and the bureaucratic institution of norms and organizations focused on the conservation of nature; g) environmental activism and religious values in the habits of their agents; h) the creation and expansion of protected areas, among others.

The author makes a consistent analysis on the epistemological basis of the "natural theology", based on the principles of better use of natural resources in agriculture (Improvement), and conservation of forests, springs and other natural assets for future generations (Stewardship). Improvement and Stewardship are key concepts of the Calvinist tradition and Stoll has masterfully appropriated the trajectory of different personalities linked to nature protection activism in the United States such as Pinchot, Marsh, Thoreau, Emerson, John Muir, Rachel Carson and Theodore Roosevelt.

One of the most original contributions is the rich approach of Presbyterians in the establishment of national laws and conservation agencies, parks and forests during the

Progressive Era (1885-1921). The administration of four Presbyterian presidents (Harrison, Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson) was highlighted in the national expansion of nature protection. Combining political history and environmental history highlights the expansion of protected areas and the privileged participation of politicians, environmentalists and bureaucrats of the period.

Historical Background of the NPS

Before trying to understand the benefits the National Park Service (NPS) brought to the National Park system, it is essential to understand the events leading up to its inception in 1916. According to Runte (1979), during the mid-nineteenth century, the western portion of the United States began to be explored; the last frontier was opening up. With little or no conception of what the unexplored West was like, the United States was in the shadow of European standards, in terms of natural beauty. The majority of Americans' perception was that the Eastern portion of the United States possessed less beauty than that of the Alps in Europe (RUNTE, 1979). The belief that the Eastern part of the United States offered no comparable natural beauty to Europe became ingrained in the minds of American travelers. With little knowledge of the Western land, Americans admitted that the East as a whole was too commonplace to surpass the scenic landmarks of Europe. This sentiment would prevail in the American mindset until the early 1920's.

With the Westward expansion gaining ground, three different military expeditions were sent to the northwest portion of Wyoming, between 1869 and 1871. Stories about natural phenomena were abundant from these expeditions. The geyser region they encountered was interesting enough to catch the attention of Congress (HAMPTON, 1971). After visiting the area, part of Lt. Doane's official report contained the following: "As a country for sightseers, it [the explored area] is without parallel; as a field for scientific research, it promises great results; in the branches of geology, mineralogy, botany, zoology, and ornithology, it is probably the greatest laboratory that nature furnishes on the surface of the globe" (EVERHART, 1983, p. 8). On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the act establishing Yellowstone National Park, setting aside two million acres "as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." (EVERHART, 1983, p. 8).

The first National Park of the United States was now established, and with it, a series of unparalleled problems. Civilians were put in charge of Yellowstone National Park,

but they did not have any appropriations from Congress to run the Park effectively. With no money from the federal government, and no staff willing to work in the Park, it became a “free-for-all” for people with dubious intentions (EVERHART, 1983, p. 9). Although the Park was meant for the pleasure and enjoyment of the people, it became a center for vandalism—poaching, mining, logging and grazing. Preservationists of the time suggested that with effective management of the Parks, tourism might generate more revenue than that achieved by exploiting the limited resources of the Parks (RUNTE, 1979). This “free-for-all” in the Parks had tainted much of the populations’ view towards the Parks, and many did not take the Park system seriously. Something had to be done in order to change the negative image the Park administration portrayed to the population.

Due to all the troubles of a weak civilian administration, in 1886, Congress decided to send in mounted troops, which relieved the civilian administration of their duties. Orders were promptly issued and enforced against defacing or removing curiosities, hunting, trapping, commercial fishing, or stock grazing (EVERHART, 1983). For the first time since its inception, well-mounted and well-equipped soldiers were patrolling the Park. Poachers were arrested, and points of interest were protected against wanton vandalism. One of the long-standing legacies of the Army was that they built road systems inside the Parks. They laid out roads in such a way that they did not interfere with natural conditions and were restricted to the smallest area consistent with access to the principal points of interest. This ideology of man-made projects with minimal impact on nature inside the parks would continue when railroad companies began to lay tracks and automobiles were allowed in the Parks (HAMPTON, 1971).

Although the United States cavalry was doing a decent job at keeping trespassers out of Parks like Yellowstone, Yosemite and Sequoia, they still had many problems protecting the lands. Many troops deserted their posts due to isolation, harsh winter climate, frequent bear and moose attacks on their guard posts, and the thought that thirteen dollars a month was not enough to survive. Many officers realized that the duties required of them were not those for which they had been trained, and they suggested that a civilian service be designed to relieve the military of its civil duties (HAMPTON, 1971).

Further, there was a growing tension between the skeptical public and the leadership of the Parks. Wild game was becoming rarer in places outside Parks, so the

cavalry had to try and convince the people settled around the Parks that the benefits of keeping the Parks intact and the game protected would eventually outweigh any immediate gain they might have by sabotaging Park operations. This skepticism and distrust towards the cavalry stationed in the Parks kept people with malicious intentions trying to usurp the Parks, while keeping honest tourists out of the Parks.

Stephen Mather contended that the cavalry could not protect against all the evildoers of the parks, neither properly maintain the grounds. Mather was a self-made millionaire and philanthropist with a profound love of the wild country. He grew up in California, had climbed Mt. Rainier, and was an avid outdoorsman (EVERHART, 1983). On a trip to Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks, Mather was shocked by what he saw—little protection, poor trails and inadequate facilities for visitors. Privateers were logging the parks and mining them. By 1915, Mather sent a letter of discontent to the Department of Interior secretary that forthrightly criticized the condition and management of the National Parks he had seen (ALBRIGHT & CAHN, 1985). The secretary wrote back, “Dear Steve: If you don’t like the way the national parks are run, why don’t you come down to Washington and run them yourself?” (ALBRIGHT, 1985, p. 16)³. Mather accepted the position, on the condition that he would have a lawyer to protect him from legal issues. He was introduced to Horace M. Albright, who became Mather’s assistant (RUNTE, 1979).

The Creation and Impact of the NPS

During the following year, Mather and Albright organized National Park defenders for a major lobbying campaign. Newspapers like the Saturday Evening Post joined the campaign, while magazines like National Geographic devoted an entire issue to the scenic wonderlands (RUNTE, 1979; EVERHART, 1983; ALBRIGHT & CAHN, 1985; LOWRY, 1994) Also, the National Park Service bill had long been seen as the best hope of guarding the Parks against the changing whims and uncertainties of the political climate. The campaign finally paid off, and on August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Park Service Act (RUNTE, 1979). The fundamental purpose of the National Park Service was decreed: “Which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by

³ See also EVERHART, 1983, p. 14; RUNTE, 1979, p. 101; LOWRY, 1994, p. 27.

such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (EVERHART, 1983, 16)⁴. With the National Park Service Act approved by Congress, Mather and Albright could start a campaign to gain the trust of tourists and visitors.

One of the National Park Service’s immediate goals was to figure out a way to persuade people to view Parks with a positive mindset, thus attracting them to the Parks. Though interested in the preservation of Parks as natural beauty, Mather and Albright recognized the need for roads and adequate hotel developments in the Parks to encourage travel and thus gain support from the automobile and railroad traveler. They were also concerned about the education of the visitor and encouraged the establishment of interpretive services in the National Park System. They also fueled a campaign called “See America First” as a way to pursue travelers that were going overseas before they even visited places in their own country (BROCKMAN & MERRIAM JR, 1979).

The Railroad

As early as a few years into the twentieth century, railroad companies began to take interest in National Parks because they provided a new frontier to make money. The more travelers who rode the railways, the more money the company would make. Railroads had already provided the first access to many parks; the Great Northern to Glacier; the Northern Pacific to Yellowstone; the Union Pacific to Zion, Bryce, and the North Rim of Grand Canyon; and the Santa Fe to the South Rim. To attract more passengers, the companies developed some of the great resort hotels of the west, including Yellowstone’s Old Faithful Inn (1903) and Grand Canyon’s El Tovar (1904) (EVERHART, 1983). The railroads did not back the National Park idea out of altruism or environmental concern; rather the lines promoted tourism in their quest for greater profits (RUNTE, 1979). This was a win-win situation with the National Park Service. The railroad companies would experience an economic growth while the National Park Service would experience a growth in numbers of tourists.

A good example of a profitable ambition is the case of the Great Northern Railway. Louis W. Hill was the railway president in 1907, and he had an instinct for profitable investment. He realized the line ran just south of Glacier National Park and wanted to expand closer to the boundary, as well as build establishments close to the park. This way,

⁴ See also LOWRY, 1994, p. 3; RUNTE, 1979, p. 103.

he would enjoy a virtual monopoly over passenger traffic. He even went as far as to wildly promote the Glacier wilderness as the rival of Yellowstone and Yosemite Valley to attract more passengers (RUNTE, 1979). Railroad companies like the Great Northern and other Western railroads indeed became powerful allies with the National Park Service because of their interest in transporting Park visitors. They made strong arguments about the need for Parks by claiming that their business kept tourists, and their dollars, in the country by providing relaxation (LOWRY, 1994).

Such tourists were Margaret and Edward Gherke, from Lincoln, Nebraska. In late 1915, on a train ride back from San Francisco, they decided to take a short side excursion to the Grand Canyon. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway offered a one-day mini-excursion. In 1917 they took the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy line to Yellowstone, where they settled into a Wylie Company tent house nestled in the woods of the Park. Two years later, they took the Great Northern Railway to Glacier National Park. There they hiked and rode horseback from one of Great Northern's hotels and chalets to another (DUNCAN, 2009).

See America First

Another way that the National Park Service attempted to attract more tourists was through the "See America First" campaign. In January of 1917, delegates from Congress, the Parks, the railroads and many civic groups gathered in Washington D.C. to discuss the future of the Park Service and its charges. The chairman of the House Committee on Public Lands, Scott Ferris, said "the amount of money that goes abroad every year by tourists is no less than alarming" (RUNTE, 1979, p. 104). He went on to say that a lot of money "is expended by our American people every year abroad, vainly hunting for wonders and beauties only half as grand as nature has generously provided for them at home." He demanded "that we of the Congress and you members of this conference need to find a way to keep at least a part of that money at home where it belongs" (RUNTE, 1979, p. 105).

This conference aimed at changing the mindset of the American people, who for over a century, believed that there was nothing special about their country in terms of scenic wonders. This campaign would change that perception. By channeling nationalism into both an aesthetic and economic defense of the National Parks, the Service and preservationists considerably strengthened the Park idea in the United States. Confronted

with the evidence that the National Parks were capable of paying economic as well as emotional dividends, for the first time Congress had good reason to add to the system rather than dismantle it.

World War I

Congress was happy with the efforts of the National Park Service's capability to gain economic and emotional dividends, but there was a problem with this newfound happiness. On April 6, 1917, President Wilson signed the congressional resolution declaring war on Germany. This was a huge downturn for the National Park Service; only three months earlier they had gained widespread approval from Capitol Hill to expand the Service. The National Parks still had limited public support and had not yet gained a position of priority in the nation's affairs. Albright went on to say "the war would make it harder than ever for us [National Park Service] to protect park resources from ranching, timber and mining interests that sought to use war emergency powers as an excuse to exploit the resources for their own profits." (ALBRIGHT & CAHN, 1985, 57).

Another problem that resulted from World War I was the Services' inability to recruit workers. It was difficult to recruit superintendents, rangers, and other workers needed for building the National Park Service. Some of those already at work in the Parks wanted to enter the military, and others were subject to the draft. Many rangers and workers were lost in the war effort, which lasted less than two years. Even Albright himself felt the urge to help his country in the war effort. In his younger years, he had served two years in the Coast Artillery of the California National Guard, but the Secretary of the Department of Interior was quite insistent that Albright not go to war (ALBRIGHT & CAHN, 1985).

The Automobile

Soon the war was over; a massive number of strategies to attract people once again into the National Parks were employed. The Park Service openly promoted the horseless carriage as the best possible means of increasing Park attendance quickly and with a minimum economical investment. They welcomed cars to the National Parks with the same enthusiasm previously accorded the railroads (RUNTE, 1979). Although cars had been allowed into Yosemite as early as 1913 and Yellowstone in late summer of 1915, it was not

until the late nineteen-teens that automobiles really changed the way to travel. In 1916, more people entered Yosemite Park by automobile than by rail, 14,527 as opposed to 14,251. The following year, the ratio was nearly three to one, and by 1918 almost seven to one, 22,669 in contrast to 4,000 (RUNTE, 1979). 1919 marked the parade of nearly ninety-eight thousand automobiles through the National Parks, ranking the automobile as the greatest aid to the Parks' popularity. Rocky Mountain National Park topped the list with 33,638 cars (RUNTE, 1979). Yellowstone alone admitted ten thousand automobiles by 1920, many piled high with tents, blankets and food (EVERHART, 1983).

This was the new way to experience the National Park system: auto camping, known popularly as "sagebrushing." The sagebrusher cuts loose from all effete-ness, bringing clothes and furniture and house and food—even the family pup—and lets his adventurous pioneering spirit riot in the mountain air.(RUNTE, 1979) Now visitors could travel through the park on their own schedule and stop wherever they wanted; they could camp, stay at grand hotels, tents, cabins, or in their car. If they camped, they would stay in open meadows, or wherever their automobiles would take them (DUNCAN, 2009).

This was exactly what Laura Wolverton of Naperville, Illinois wrote about in her diaries and scrapbooks. Her two close friends, Miss Graham and Ruth Gamertsfelder, accompanied her on a spectacular journey. They began their journey in Boulder, Colorado, went through Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks and back to Boulder. The trip took place from July 22 to the 26, in 1937. On July 22, the three friends set out on their adventure. Wolverton wrote in her diary "Miss Graham, Ruth and I started on [this] trip for Yellowstone and Tetons in the afternoon."⁵ Note that she clearly states when they decided to leave, in the afternoon. She did not depend on a schedule (like the train or stagecoach) to leave; they had the freedom and autonomy to leave whenever they pleased.

The following day, she wrote "camped on Cody Road for the night, as a storm came up." On July 24, "stayed at Old Faithful hotel for the night, [had] supper at [their] cafeteria."⁶ Again, this shows the autonomy they had to decide where to stay. They camped one night and stayed at a fancy hotel the next. This freedom was due to the fact that the automobile granted such power. Along with the decisions of where to stay the night, they also had the

⁵ The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Travel, Diary #2 Laura Wolverton 1937-41*, Naperville, IL.

⁶ The Naper Settlement, *Ibid.*

power to stop wherever they wanted along the road, for whatever reasons. One of the scrapbooks that Wolverton put together is full of photos she took along the roads. In Yellowstone, she took many pictures of wildlife, including deer, moose and bears. One picture even shows a small black bear on top of another car! Their trip through Grand Teton National Park proportioned many scenic pictures of the mountain peaks juxtaposed with the still water lakes in front of them⁷. Again, this shows the newfound autonomy people had to stop whenever they liked, as opposed to being inside a train or stagecoach, which would not stop just because one person wanted to take a picture. Automobiles revolutionized the way Americans traveled to and in the Parks, thus significantly increasing the number of visitors.

Advertisement of National Parks

Advertising played a big role in getting more tourists to visit the National Parks. By 1920, the number of people who visited Parks exceeded one million, but the Park superintendent, Mather, was not totally satisfied with the results. In 1925, he told his Park superintendents he wanted to see all of them at Mesa Verde National Park, in Southwestern Colorado. To get there, however, they were explicitly instructed not to take the train; they were to form car caravans and travel together on the Park-to-Park highway—and make as much news about it as possible along the way. It was a classic Mather publicity stunt, and a huge success. That year, visitation at National Parks topped two million for the first time (DUNCAN, 2009).

Not only did the National Park Service advertise; the Department of Interior did also. The National Parks Portfolio was first published in 1916 with the help of Mather and money from seventeen different Western railroad companies. This portfolio was comprised of several beautiful photographs including descriptions of the magnificence of the National Parks throughout the United States. Mather knew that such a book was necessary if the Parks were to be made known to the people of the United States (YARD, 1931). The first edition was distributed free to 275,000 leading Americans in 1916 as a publicity volume (RUNTE, 1979). The volume contained words that depict the National Parks in a much romanticized way. The magazine describes the natural beauty of the Yellowstone River Canyon in the following phrase: “and the whole is colored as brokenly and vividly as that

⁷ The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Travel, Scrapbook #1*, Laura Wolverton 2008.39.64, Naperville, IL.

field of a kaleidoscope” (YARD, 1931, p. 14). Later on, it states, “but the day of the unhurried visitor has dawned. If you want to enjoy your Yellowstone—if indeed, you want even to see it—you should make your minimum stay twice five days; two weeks is better; a month is ideal” (YARD, 1931, p. 27). The Department of the Interior employed language which romanticized the natural beauty the Parks in order to create a certain aesthetic image, attracting a larger number of people.

The railroads also did their share of advertising to get people to use their services to enter the National Parks. When Laura Wolverton and her friends visited the West in 1937, they were given a folder from the Union Pacific Railway. This advertisement folder was probably given to them as they crossed through Yellowstone National Park, because this Park was the main tourist attraction of the Union Pacific Railway. The folder stated, “The purpose of this folder is merely to suggest the many solutions of your problems of where to go and how to get there most quickly, conveniently and economically.”⁸ The Union Pacific was also competing against its new foe, the car, and those who traveled in it. The folder stated that trains were safer than cars, and one would spend less money, because there was a “sharp reduction in fares.” It also explained that trains would be more comfortable than cars because they were “veritable metropolitan hotels on wheels.”⁹ Railroads were losing many travelers to automobiles, but it is evident through advertisements like this one that the railroad companies hoped they could continue to increase their clientele.

Lastly, even steamship companies used advertising as a means to attract tourists, which usually took the tourist to National Parks in the Oregon, Washington and Alaskan coastlines. In 1927, the three friends from Naperville took an adventure on the high seas. They boarded the steamship *Alameda*, from the Alaska Steamship Company on a trip from Seattle to Washington, then to Sitka, Alaska.¹⁰ Once on the steamship, they received a pamphlet from the Company itself, outlining the reasons one should go to Alaska, why they should take a ride on the steamship and go on all the excursions available to the public. The pamphlet states, “No other country in the world can offer the many varied scenic attractions

⁸ The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Travel, Alaska, Union Pacific Railway Folder*. Naperville, IL.

⁹ The Naper Settlement, *ibid*

¹⁰ The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Scrapbook, Steamship Trip 1927*. Naperville, IL.

that are on display while making trips to and through this northern wonderland.”¹¹ The variety of scenes that the Northern wonderland offered and the advertisement that went along with it were enough to capture the imagination of tourists and bring them to the Alaskan Steamship Company.

Love of Nature

The love of nature is another reason why people visited National Parks. As Laura Wolverton and her friends were cruising up to Alaska from Seattle in a steamship in 1927, she wrote a letter to her folks describing the beautiful scenery surrounding her. “We can see land on both sides all the time. It is very pretty—mostly mountains and pines and a few islands.... [There was a] shower after we got on the boat...the sun came out afterwards. We saw a wonderful sunset last night”.¹² Wolverton’s words suggest that the landscape that they saw was most beautiful. Later they took a scenic train ride through Sitka National Park. In her scrapbook, Laura wrote, “This train ride was absolutely the wildest most thrilling trip I ever dreamed of.”¹³

One of Wolverton’s friends, Miss Graham, went on a trip herself in the summer of 1935. She put a scrapbook together with all the pictures she took of the trip, along with captions on the side describing her travels. She passed through Smokey Mountain National Park and left many remarks next to her pictures. She wrote “the azalea was wonderful in the park.” The azalea flower is well known for its beauty in the summer months. One day she went to a natural bridge in the Smokies where a church service was in progress. She wrote “Sunday A.M. and the Natural sounding board of the cliff made our Sunday service wonderful.” On another occasion she mentioned some waterfalls, “Face falls...one of the most delicate and beautiful falls I have ever seen.”¹⁴ Later in that same journey, she went through Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. She described the wonders she saw, “the road through Shenandoah National Park is extraordinary, beautiful and the caverns are

¹¹ The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Travel, Alaska*. Alaska Steamship Company, “Alaska in Winter: in Summer” Printed by: Poole Bros. Inc., Chicago.

¹² Letter from Laura Wolverton to her Folks, Sunday AM, 1927. The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Travel, Alaska, Scrapbook, Steamship Trip 1927*

¹³ The Naper Settlement. Archives. *Collection 37, Travel, Alaska, Scrapbook, Steamship Trip 1927*.

¹⁴ The Naper Settlement, Archives, *Collection 37, Travel, Miss Graham, Scrapbook 7303-1, Summer 1935*, Naperville, IL.

fairyland like.”¹⁵ Phrases like these show the wonder and awe that beautiful scenery inspired in the people who, like Miss Graham, visited National Parks.

Thomas Wolfe, a writer in the 1930’s, wrote about his travels in the Western part of the United States. He visited most of the major National Parks in the west. He went on this trip to relax after he had written a book. He always had a passion for the outdoors, but the trip served as a reminder of the power and beauty of nature. He left Portland, Oregon on June 20, 1938, and on his first day he noticed the beauty of Mount Hood. He wrote “[we] went South by East through farmlands of upper Willamette and around [the] base of Mount Hood which was glowing in the brilliant sun” (WOLFE, 1951, p. 3). The following day the journey took him south of Sacramento, into San Joaquin Valley, and he was describing the beauty of the valley. “[It was] bursting with God’s plenty—orchards—peaches—apricots—and vineyards—orange groves—Gods plenty of the best.” (WOLFE, 1951, p. 7)¹⁶ On June 24, Wolfe found himself going around Grand Canyon National Park, on his way to Navajo Bridge. He describes what he sees, “up and up into the timber and the forest now, and all the lovely quaking aspens and the vast and rising rim of sage and meadow land” (WOLFE, 1951, p. 19). It is evident that even a writer and accomplished author recognized the beauty and grandeur that nature offers.

Conclusion

During the 1920’s and 1940’s people had good reasons to visit National Parks, but the story of how that came about was multi-faceted. Americans had a numinous sense of deficit when the natural beauty of the United States was compared to the rest of the world, especially Europe. Congress wanted to change that mentality, so they established Yellowstone National Park. They created other Parks shortly after, but it still was not enough to change a long lasting negative ideology. With no central control of the Parks, the United States Cavalry had to ride into the Parks trying to maintain order. They were somewhat successful, but could not do enough to keep outside pressures from escalating.

In 1916 the National Park Service was created by the Wilson administration to control the National Parks more effectively than the army did. The main goal of the NPS in the early years was to change the negative connotation people had towards Parks and turn it

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

into a positive one, by attracting tourists to the Parks. The NPS used the help of the railway and automobile industries and pushed campaigns like the “See America First” campaign to attract tourists to stay on American soil. Advertisement played a large role in getting people to the Parks. The NPS employed publicity stunts and the railroad and steamship companies handed out pamphlets. Lastly, the authentic love for nature was a reason people wanted to see and re-visit national Parks.

With the widespread use of the automobile as a means of transportation, the railroads companies lost most of their clientele. The post World War II era witnessed an increase in visitors to the Parks by the millions. Between 98 and 99 percent of these tourists were private motorists. The private motorists were literally driving the railroad companies out of business. Companies like the Yosemite Valley Railroad were broke by 1944, auctioned off and torn up for scrap. Less than ten years after the end of World War II, the railroad companies were giving way to the automobile and recreational vehicle, which, in contrast to the days of the “sagebrusher,” often were as luxurious as the train cabins or the hotel accommodations of old.

The lasting effect of the creation of the National Parks is a dilemma that is still debated today. The National Parks rely on people to support their cause, but too many people could bring devastation to the Parks. To exclude people, whatever the reasons, risks loss of support for the National Park idea; to accept more people as the price of support jeopardizes the Parks themselves. This attempt to strike a balance between preservation and use was greatly complicated by the popularity of the automobile.

Strained to the limit by the postwar travel boom, the National Park Service received relief from Congress in the form of Mission 66. This program was put in place to expand the capacity to receive more cars by reconstructing roads, building new, bigger roads, adding visitor centers, and increasing overnight accommodations. The new, bigger roads then joined the interstate highway system, which would be able to handle the larger amounts of visitors to the park. By consolidating museums, restrooms and information offices into a single, modern structure, called visitor centers, the park administration could better handle the incoming travelers at convenient locations. Overnight accommodations were simply the creation of more camping grounds, and accessible hotels for the visitors.

The reason the National Park Service has always been interested in accommodating more visitors is because they believed that the best way to protect and preserve the parks from their many enemies was for the public to use them. The NPS rejected the idea of restricting the number of park visitors through imposed limits or daily quotas in order to accommodate the ideals of other groups, such as the preservationists. The parks belong to the people, and they have the right to use them. Ever since the founding years of Stephen Mather, the Park Service has operated on the assumption that drawing more visitors meant creating more support for the Parks. Indeed, many visited and enjoyed the unimpaired beauty of the National Parks, which were set aside for the use and pleasure of the people.

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