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THE ORIGIN OF THE NATIONAL PARK IDEA IN AMERICA

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Historians have been prone to accept the statement that the national park idea was born at a campfire in Yellowstone in 1870. In reality, Congressional action had set aside the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias six years before that date that they might be enjoyed forever as scenic resources for all the people.

One of the most interesting articles ever written about the birth and growth of the national park idea is Hans Huth's Yosemite, The Story of an Idea, which appeared in the Sierra Club Bulletin several years ago. Dr. Huth has never seen Yosemite so cannot be considered a prejudiced writer. In his article he traces from George Catlin, the Indian painter, who first suggested setting apart a national park in 1832, through the evolution and growth of the idea to its first practical application in Yosemite in 1864.

Let us take a few minutes to trace, with Dr. Huth and others, the course of man's interest in nature in America to its culmination in our great national park system of today. Incidentally, copies of Dr. Huth's interesting booklet are available at the Yosemite Museum.

I. Introduction

"In the course of the growth of the National Park System it has been frequently stated that with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1874, the idea of national parks was born. More specifically, it has been said that members of the Washburn-Doane Expedition of 1870, in a campfire discussion in Yellowstone, laid the foundation for the national park pattern, and that from there on, like apostles, they carried the new gospel to the people.

"If things really had happened this way, it would indeed have been something of a miracle. It would have meant that public opinion had been prepared for this supposedly new and unique idea in little more than a year, and that Congress was ready to act favorably 'to set apart the vast territory of Yellowstone as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.' Ideas of such far-reaching consequence do not ripen overnight; they develop slowly\* \* \*. Any attempt to elucidate the evolution of the national park idea must start by ex-

ploring two different processes. One is the legal procedure used for transforming an area into a park for public use, as exemplified in the history of the setting up of Yosemite or Yellowstone as segregated areas under state or federal authority. The other is a process which seems more important and has been given little attention--the shaping of public opinion so that it will either demand or suffer conservation measures. Contrary to the usual assumption, it was not the establishment of Yellowstone but rather the setting apart of Yosemite which was preeminent in the basic conditioning of opinion. Yosemite is the point of departure from which a new idea began to gain momentum. Where the idea will lead can hardly be envisaged, but we do know that the manner in which the entire park system developed in this country is specifically American; the system is an institution admirably suited to fill the needs of the people.

## II. The American and Nature

"\* \* \* The attitude of the colonials toward nature \* \* \* is borne out in a little poem published in 1692:

In such a wilderness\* \* \*  
When we began to clear the land \* \* \*  
Then with the Ax, with Might and Strength,  
The trees so thick and strong \* \* \*  
We laid them all along \* \* \*  
(These) we with Fire, most furiously  
To Ashes did confound \* \* \*

"\* \* \* Toward the beginning of the eighteenth century there were occasional changes in this attitude, even in the core of Puritan stock. For example, Jonathan Edwards, the Connecticut minister, who was dismissed from his pulpit for his too strict adherence to the Puritan dogma, rather freely expressed his deep love for the beauties of nature which he considered an emanation of the Son of God. 'We behold the fragrant rose and lily \* \* \* the easiness and naturalness of trees and rivers are shadows of His beauty \* \* \* the golden edges of an evening cloud \* \* \* the blue sky \* \* \* the ragged rocks \* \* \* and the brows of mountains.'

"Evaluation of the attitudes toward nature of writers of the early nineteenth century is difficult only because it becomes hard to know whom to select among the many who are taking an increasing interest in the American scene. Above all is of course James Fenimore Cooper, whose Pioneers must be regarded as one of the most significant books in this respect. Here is one of its typical passages in which Natty Bumppo expresses his feelings:

\* \* \* 'when I felt lonesome \* \* \* I would go into the Catskills and spend a few days on that hill \* \* \*.' 'What see you when you get there?' asked Edwards \* \* 'Creation, lad, all creation,' said Natty. 'How should a man who has lived in towns \* \* \* know anything about the wonders of the woods? \* \* \* None know how often the hand of God is seen in the wilderness, but them that rove it for a man's life.'"

[The first mention of a national park as such was made by] "George Catlin (1796-1872), another untiring explorer and painter, whose particular interest lay in the 'looks and customs of the vanishing races of native man in America.' Traveling up the Missouri River into the heart of the Indian country (1832), Catlin beheld the vast forest covering the banks of the river and he, perhaps as the first man in this country to do so, had the imagination to conceive the idea that these realms 'might in future be seen (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse \* \* \* amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty.' This passage was first published in one of the letters Catlin sent to the New York Daily Commercial Advertiser in 1833 from the Indian Territory. Thus was planted the seed of an idea which, although it took more than three decades to develop, was immediately well circulated in the widely read New York newspaper. [Underscoring furnished.]

"Henry Thoreau \* \* \* wrote:

'Why should not we \* \* \* have our national preserves \* \* \* in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be civilized off the face of the earth' \* \* \* for inspiration and our true re-creation? Or should we, like villains, grub them all up for poaching on our own national domains?'

"The romance of travel was being discovered by a steadily increasing throng. Sarah J. Hale, the publisher of Godey's Magazine, felt that 'circumstances had almost inevitably designed us a nation of travellers.'

"But the West beyond the Rockies was not yet accessible to \* \* \* leisurely travel. We may conclude, however, that the attitude toward nature had changed enough since colonial days to allow Americans to welcome easier access to the West when it should come \* \* \*.

### III. Origin of the Park Idea

"Neither the poet's love of nature and the artist's interest in its esthetic qualities, nor improvements in transportation and the citizen's demand for recreational facilities need have produced the scenic park. But if these forces did not produce it, did the park movement, then, originate in Congress? \* \* \*

"Even some years after the Yellowstone Act had been approved in 1872, many in Congress expressed concern about this new 'asset.' To them it would have been better to have sold the area as other public lands had been sold. After all was it not 'a very expensive luxury.' The Federal Government was not supposed to go into 'show business' nor was it supposed to 'raise wild animals.' With such objections on record we may be rather sure that the park idea did not originate in Congress. Curiously enough, even Frederick Law Olmsted [this name is important] when he tried--to discover the origin of public parks in this country,

had to give up--in all likelihood because he had been too close to the problem all his life. He said only that it did not seem to come as a direct 'result of any of the great inventions or discoveries of the country,' but that it probably had been 'a spontaneous movement of that sort which we conveniently refer to as the 'genius of civilization'\* \* \*."

To a limited degree there had been 'public' parks in this country since the beginning of colonization. When Penn laid out the original plan of Philadelphia he assigned for public use a number of squares, the largest of which had measured ten acres. These were to be graced with trees and not to be built over, except perhaps with a few public buildings. Likewise there were 'commons' such as those in England in most of the New England settlements \* \* \*.

"It seems a logical sequence that we should find that William Cullen Bryant was the first to advocate a public park in New York, a park that would be on a scale which up to that time had been unheard of \* \* \*.

"The proposal \* \* \* [for what was to become Central Park] was well accepted, and in 1851 the first act was passed authorizing the acquisition of the necessary lands. The appointment of Frederick Law Olmsted as a superintendent of the project initiated a new era in the best possible way. After some years of fruitful work in establishing the park, Olmsted disagreed with Park authorities. He gave up his position in May 1863, and accepted another as superintendent of the mining estates of General Fremont, in Mariposa. In the light of Yosemite's later role, this shifting of Olmsted's position from New York to Mariposa must be regarded as a most fortunate coincidence.

#### IV. The Idea Grows

"Even after the first excitement over the California Gold Rush had died down, the East learned little about the beauty spots of the newly acquired territory of California. None but the hardest traveler, and certainly no 'tourist' would have been willing to stand the overland trek or either of the wearisome routes by sea. It is significant that one of the first big news stories to come out of California that was not concerned with gold was a show-business stunt. In 1852 the Calaveras Grove of Big Trees was discovered. The next year, two unscrupulous businessmen, George Gale and a companion, stripped one of the Big Trees, the 'Mother of the Forest,' 315 feet in height and 61 feet in circumference, up to the height of 116 feet, and shipped the bark East for a show in some of the seaboard cities, and then at the Crystal Palace exhibition in Sydenham, London, in 1854 \* \* \*. The show turned out to be unsuccessful since 'owing to the immensity of the circumference, nobody would believe that the bark had come from one tree, and finally, being branded as a humbug, the exhibition had to be ended.' While this was going on in London, the widely read Gleason's Pictorial published a protest by a Californian to whom it seemed a 'cruel idea, a perfect desecration to cut down such a splendid tree \* \* \* in Europe such a natural production would have been cherished and protected by law; but in this money-making-

go-ahead community, thirty or forty thousand dollars are paid for it and the purchaser chops it down and ships it off for a shilling show. We hope that no one will conceive the idea of purchasing Niagara Falls for the same purpose \* \* \*.' Another strong protest was raised in 1857 by James Russell Lowell, who became editor of the Atlantic Monthly in the same year. His article on 'Humanity to Trees' proposed to establish a society for the prevention of cruelty to trees, since 'we are wanton in the destruction of trees as we are barbarous in our treatment of them \* \* \*.' However trifling the incident may seem to us now, it aroused a great deal of sentiment in the East, and caused people to ponder their duty of protecting nature against the vandalism of enterprising businessmen. At the same time it undoubtedly stimulated great interest in the wonders of California.

"The great event in California discoveries, i.e. the opening of the Yosemite was publicized with much less fanfare than the Calaveras tree murder. The account in the Daily Alta California about the scenic wonders of the valley discovered by the punitive expeditionary force of 1851 against the 'Yosemitos' Indians created no stir outside the state. An article published in the Mariposa Gazette of July 12, 1855, by James M. Hutchings, whose activities from then on were to be dedicated to the valley, was of broader interest. Real recognition in the East came in 1856, when the Country Gentleman republished an article by the California Christian Advocate which declared the 'Yo-hem-i-ty' valley to be 'the most striking natural wonder on the Pacific' and predicted that it would ultimately become a place of great resort. Hutchings started his California Magazine in the same year and gave Yosemite good publicity in it. In 1855 and 1856 a California pioneer artist, Thomas A. Ayres, made his first sketches at the valley; some of these were lithographed and spread widely over the East. With such nationwide publicity the fame of Yosemite was bound to grow year by year.

"As one might have expected Horace Greely paid his respects to Yosemite as soon as possible and made the most of it. For reasons unknown, Greely was in a tremendous hurry and did more horseback riding in the valley than was good for him, especially since he was riding 'in torture' with Mexican stirrups that were too small. Being badly disposed, he was disgruntled at the lack of water in Yosemite Falls (it was August) and said so, which afterward caused a furious dispute. But he could not help being overwhelmed by the 'grandeur and sublimity of the wondrous chasm'; he considered Yosemite the 'greatest marvel of the continent,' and hoped that the State of California would immediately provide for the safety of the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees.

"With so much interest devoted to Yosemite by travelers, journalists and writers from the East, it would be fascinating to know who in California was taking active interest in the destiny of the valley. We unfortunately know only very little about this. Certainly the Reverend Starr King's enthusiasm made him one of the leaders in the effort to conserve Yosemite \* \* \*.

"The men who were recommended as the first commissioners of the Yosemite grant are most likely those who helped to prepare the act [which formed it]. They were Professor John F. Morse, Israel Ward Raymond, and Frederick Law Olmsted. Of Morse we know only that he was a well-thought-of physician in San Francisco. About Raymond we are better informed. It was he who addressed the decisive letter to Senator John Conness urging him to present a bill concerning Yosemite to Congress. He was known to have been a public-spirited citizen \* \* \*. Altogether, it is quite safe to assume that as a whole the group of men promoting the interests of Yosemite did so for idealistic reasons. This is demonstrated in the measures they recommended and pushed.

"The coincidence of Olmsted's arrival in California at the very moment when he was most needed has curiously enough never been noticed. For once it seems that the right man was in the right spot at the right time. Living in Mariposa, Olmsted was in close touch with Yosemite, and, we can be certain, thoroughly familiar with its problems. Certainly no one was better prepared to take an active part in urging the Yosemite grant and to keep the ball rolling. Preliminary discussions must have taken place, probably with Olmsted and the other potential commissioners, before Raymond addressed a letter to Senator Conness [which stated in part]: \* \* \*

'It will be many years before it is worth while for the government to survey these mountains. But I think it important to obtain the proprietorship soon, to prevent occupation and especially to preserve the trees in the valley from destruction and that it may be accepted by the legislation at its present session and laws passed to give the Commissioners power to take control and begin to consider and lay out their plans for the gradual improvement of the properties.

'May not this be a sufficient description:

"That cleft of Gorge in the granite peak of the Sierra Nevada Mountains situated on the head waters of the Merced River and known as the Yo Semite Valley \* \* \*.

"Also all those quarter sections in Mariposa County on which stands the grove of Gigantic trees known as the 'Mariposa Big Trees.' \* \* \*

"The above are granted for public use, resort and recreation and are inalienable forever." \* \* \*

"Conness was able to introduce the bill on March 28, 1864. There was some discussion on the floor of the Senate in which Conness stated that the bill had come to him from various gentlemen in California 'of fortune, of taste and of refinement,' that the General Land Office also took great interest in the bill, and that there was 'no other condition of things like this one on earth.' Finally he referred to the sorry incident of the killing of the Calaveras tree in 1853. The bill was passed, and on June 29, 1864, it was signed by President Lincoln.

"So far nothing was extraordinary about the Yosemite grant, and national public opinion certainly was not aroused by the federal action; grants to states were given quite frequently. However, there was something peculiar about this grant, and as it happened, it was destined to set a precedent of real importance. The grant was given 'upon the express conditions that the premises shall be held for public use, resort and recreation, shall be held inalienable for all time.' These terms implied that no profit was to be expected from the new institution \* \* \*. What was really new about the grant was the fact that it served a strictly non-utilitarian purpose. It is necessary to stress this point in view of the claims that Yellowstone set this precedent \* \* \*.

"All through 1865 Olmsted was hard at work preparing a plan of management. In a letter to his father (July 5) he expressed his feeling that Yosemite was 'far the noblest park or pleasure ground in the world.' Just at this time he received the first group of dignitaries from the East who wished to visit the park. They were Schuyler Colfax, Speaker of the House, and a group of friends from the East and from San Francisco. Among them were Samuel Bowles, publisher of the Springfield Republican. In the travel account published later, Bowles made this remarkable statement:

'The wise cession and dedication [of Yosemite] by Congress and proposed improvement by California \* \* \* furnished an admirable example for other objects of natural curiosity and popular interest all over the Union. New York should preserve for popular use both Niagara Falls and its neighborhood, and a generous section of the famous Adirondacks, and Maine, one of her lakes and its surrounding woods.'

"Here we have in unmistakable language a formula not just for the protection of this or that area of interest to some group or other, but for a systematic approach to an over-all system of protection of areas which illustrate specific features of nature throughout the nation. That is exactly the pattern which was followed many years later after the National Park Service had been established.

"Confirmed in his actions by Colfax and his party, Olmsted happily continued his efforts to organize the park. All his suggestions for improvements were summed up in a report approved by the Yosemite committee and submitted by him to the legislature. Unfortunately this 1865 report is lost and cannot be traced in the papers of the legislature in Sacramento \* \* \*.

[At this point let us leave Dr. Huth briefly to mention that this missing report was found in 1952 after a diligent and lengthy search on the part of Miss Stella Obst, secretary to the present Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted. It was published in its entirety in Landscape Architecture for October 1952 in an article by Laura Wood Roper. The following excerpts from it show the great foresight of "The Father of American Landscape Architecture":

"It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect beyond any other conditions which can be offered them, that it not only gives pleasure for the time being but increases the subsequent capacity for happiness and the means of securing happiness. The want of such occasional recreation where men and women are habitually pressed by their business or household cares often results in a class of disorders \* \* \*.

"If we analyze the operation of scenes of beauty upon the mind, and consider the intimate relation of the mind upon the nervous system and the whole physical economy, the action and reaction which constantly occur between bodily and mental conditions, the reinvigoration which results from such scenes is readily comprehended. Few persons can see such scenery as that of the Yosemite and not be impressed by it in some slight degree \* \* \*.

"The first point to be kept in mind \* \* \* is the preservation and maintenance as exactly as is possible of the natural scenery; the restriction, that is to say, within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodation of visitors, of all artificial constructions and the prevention of all constructions markedly inharmonious with the scenery or which would unnecessarily obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery.

"Second: it is important that it should be remembered that in permitting the sacrifice of anything that would be of the slightest value to future visitors to the convenience, bad taste, playfulness, carelessness, or wanton destructiveness of present visitors, we probably yield in each case the interest of uncounted millions to the selfishness of a few individuals.

"It is an important fact that as civilization advances the interest of men in natural scenes of sublimity and beauty increases \* \* \*."

[Now we see Olmsted as a prophet--remember, this was 1865]:

"It is but sixteen years since the Yosemite was first seen by a white man, several visitors have since made a journey of several thousand miles at large cost to see it, and notwithstanding the difficulties which now interpose, hundreds resort to it annually. Before many years if proper facilities are offered, these hundreds will become thousands and in a century the whole number of visitors will be counted by the millions. [Visitors in 1957: 1,138,716]. An injury to the scenery so slight that it may be unheeded by any visitor now, will be one of deplorable magnitude when its effect upon each visitor's enjoyment is multiplied by these millions. But again, the slight harm which the few hundred visitors of this year might do, if no care were taken to prevent it, would not be slight if it should be repeated by millions \* \* \*."

[We return again to Dr. Huth:]

"After 1865 the Yosemite grant was developed normally; \* \* \*  
The fame of Yosemite grew \* \* \*.

"The year 1868 brought John Muir to California. His profound devotion to the Sierra initiated a new era in spreading the glory of Yosemite." [Muir wrote: "Thousands of nerve-shaken, overcivilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."]

"Yosemite, once it was set aside, progressed smoothly, contributing far more than Yellowstone, it would seem, toward advancing the idea of conservation. It makes little difference that one area was under custody of a state and the other of the federal government. Certainly the purpose to which Yellowstone was 'dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people' in 1872 did not differ from the purpose for which the Yosemite grant had eight years earlier been given in trust to the State of California,' upon the express condition that the premises shall be held for public use, resort and recreation \* \* \* inalienable for all time \* \* \*. From the time on when the Central Pacific touched Stockton (1869), national tourist travel began to invade the valley. Yosemite was soon in a niche in the minds of the American people, who admired their country and took pride in it. Most people could not go out to California, but a chromo by Prang was within the reach of almost every lover of nature; the enormous editions of these lithographs, showing Yosemite, proved how eager people all over the nation were to satisfy their desire to become familiar with the wonderland of California \* \* \*.

"In the year of the Yosemite grant another milestone was passed in the publication of George P. Marsh's Man and Nature. This book was the first to approach the theme of conservation in scholarly fashion. It was widely read and most influential; \* \* \*. [From it we take these words:]

'It is desirable that some large and easily accessible region of American soil should remain as far as possible in its primitive condition, at once a museum for the instruction of the students, a garden for the recreation of the lovers of nature, and an asylum where indigenous trees \* \* \* plants \* \* \* beasts may dwell and perpetuate their kind \* \* \*.'

"As a logical consequence of these ideas, Theodore Roosevelt [who camped with John Muir in Yosemite in 1903] inaugurated the conservation program out of which the National Park Service [authorized in 1916 and now embracing some 180 areas, of which 29 are national parks] grew. The idea the program represents is based on a series of trends--deeply rooted in the American pattern of life, developing in various strata, ranging over a long period of time--that were finally embodied in park, state, and federal initiative. The idea of keeping intact some of the grand scenery of the New World such as Chateaubriand had celebrated--'there is nothing of age in America but the woods \* \* \* that is well worth monuments and ancestors'--was never quite lost sight of, from the day George Catlin conceived it until it matured in the protection of the jewel of all \* \* \* Yosemite. With this achieved, other successes were no longer difficult. One pearl after another was collected and strung with the others to form a national park system which is the unrivaled adornment of this hemisphere."