

Father of Our National Jewels

THE BIRTH OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
By Horace Albright as told to Robert Cahn
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REVIEWED BY BERT SCHWARZSCHILD

The Birth of the National Park Service" is a remarkable mosaic of personal recollections, anecdotes, stories, interviews, vignettes, observations and insights spanning the first 20 years of our National Park Service, told by one of its major architects, 95-year-old Horace Albright.

Today, many people take for granted the national "jewels" that have become household words: Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Sequoia, Glacier, Grand Teton — the list goes on. Any citizen activist will understand and appreciate the tremendous struggles that were fought during the period chronicled by Albright, 1913 to 1933, to acquire the vast land holdings that became the national park system. Albright shares, through the pen of Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Robert Cahn, the story of the people, events, places, victories and defeats that shaped the development of our national parks.

In May 1913, 23-year-old law school graduate Horace Albright was dissuaded from a planned law career to take a year's broadening experience away from his California home. His life was changed totally during that stint in Washington, when he met Stephen Tyng Mather. For 14 years, he writes, these two jointly and alternately cajoled, persuaded or inspired the decision-makers — and anyone who would listen — to authorize, legislate or contribute to the funding, support and/or talent needed to acquire the national parklands that we now cherish and enjoy.

Mather had been offered the job of developing an administrative framework to bring together and protect the few poorly administered and maintained national parks that existed in 1914. After much consulting and soul-searching, and with Mather offering to augment his meager salary (\$1600 a year), Albright agreed to stay for another year. Thus began a successful, 16-year-long symbiotic relationship between two very talented but different individuals. Together, Albright and Mather made an unbeatable pair of "parents" as they created and nurtured the National Park Service through its infancy and adolescence. Their successful alliance and deep friendship lasted until Mather's death on January 22, 1930.

Our national parks evoke grandeur and wildness; to Albright and his fellow park service pioneers, they were often battlegrounds between park proponents and an array of opponents — loggers, miners, developers, dam-builders and their political allies. Albright, who succeeded Mather as park service director, aptly describes the infighting within government departments.

We learn here about the reluctance of the Army to give up its control of Yellowstone Park (and its other parks and monuments) until Albright gained the ear of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Albright also describes the power struggle between the National Park Service (protected by the Interior Department) and the U.S. Forest Service (protected by the Department of Agriculture), a battle that continues to the present day.

Albright pulls no punches in describing the conflicts that often erupted between the park concessioners and the park service. When ordered to improve their service to the public, the concessioners, who feared for their profits, would call on their political friends. In one such controversy, we learn, the concessioner threatened to have Albright fired. (A modern-day example of the park service/concessioner conflict occurred a few years ago when the then National Park Service director, William Whalen, warned concessioners to improve their sub-standard facilities and services. Whalen was forced to resign after the concessioners' powerful congressional friends complained to President Carter.)



Horace Albright in 1971

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While Albright's serious accounts of the park service's developments are invaluable, his vignettes about the prominent (and obscure) individuals who passed through the parks add a special richness to the book. He gives us a vivid picture of the visits of the great industrialist/philanthropist John D. Rockefeller to Yellowstone, Grand Teton and the Jackson Hole area, sometimes under an assumed identity. And he shows Rockefeller's lifelong dedication to acquiring endangered wilderness land — for park use — that would otherwise have been lost to commercial developers.

Albright is at his best when recalling humorous incidents witnessed in performing his professional duties. One such episode — with explosive repercussions — occurred during a critical Washington hearing on a potential new park in Florida's Everglades. The congressional committee seemed quite impressed by the testimony, according to Albright. Then a key witness, who had just gathered together his collection of Everglade artifacts — shells and photos — exclaimed, "Oh, I forgot something!"

"The witness," Albright recounts, "pulled out a live king snake five-feet long and tossed it on the table. There was instant pandemonium. Members of Congress drew back. The court reporter looked up, saw the snake coming towards him, toppled backwards, his stenograph machine toppling down beside him. A woman in the audience fainted and another screamed ... The damage had been done, however. Journalists started calling Everglade The Snake Park ..."

While other books deal more extensively with the beauty, grandeur, flora and fauna or ecology of the national parks per se, the great value of "The Birth of the National Park Service" is that it chronicles vividly — through the alert eyes of its chief architect — the events and people that shaped the park service during its formative years. ■

Berkeley conservationist Bert Schwarzschild has contributed articles to Audubon and Sierra.