



A Remarkable Inheritance

TELLING THE STORY OF

America's National Parks

BY WENDY K. PROBST

Dayton Duncan visited his first national park when he was nine years old. “Fifty years later, I can still remember that trip, day by day,” says Duncan. “We went to Badlands, to Little Bighorn Battlefield, to Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Dinosaur National Monument, and through Rocky Mountain National Park... one of the most memorable aspects was arriving in Yellowstone two days after the horrific earthquake of ‘59. We experienced a number of major after-shocks during our visit. I’ll never forget that.”

Working with noted PBS producer Ken Burns, Duncan recently co-produced the six-episode PBS documentary series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, which begins airing this fall. Duncan and Burns have an impressive track record of working together to create award-winning documentaries that strike a particularly sentimental chord about American history, including *The Civil War*, *Baseball* and *Jazz*, as well as a 12-hour series about the history of the American West.

Two of Duncan's favorite outdoor activities are hiking with his family and smoking his pipe. “One is obviously more healthful; one is more relaxing,” he says.

“Dianne, my wife, enjoys hikes, as does our 18-year-old son, Will. Emme, 21, considers ‘hike’ a four-letter word, though we sometimes fool her into a ‘walk.’” They all enjoy swimming and kayaking on New Hampshire lakes near their home.

“My parents were able to take me and my sister to the national parks because they were affordable and we had as much right to them as anyone else in the nation,” says Duncan, whose inspiration to create such a documentary came from the national parks’ accessibility and consistency. “I was able to show my children the exact



Of PBS Duncan says, “We like that we can make each scene as long or short as we think makes artistic sense.” Left: Grand Teton National Park; above from left: cinematographer Buddy Squires, Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan at Grand Teton.

same scenes—unchanged—50 years later because we, as a people, had decided to preserve them unimpaired for future generations. That’s a remarkable inheritance we all share, and I wanted to make that clear to every American.” Duncan’s sister has a deep devotion for the Appalachian Trail in particular. “She and her husband now live in eastern Pennsylvania because they love that section so much; and their small church near the Delaware Water Gap provides regular shelter and food to hikers. I think that shows the power of the park idea and how deeply

it can affect people’s lives.”

The inception of *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* series followed a natural and logical progression in the writer and producer’s creative process. “In 1998, I took my young family on a long trip to the West, focusing on national parks. Seeing my children experience their first national parks reawakened my memories from the trip I took as a boy with my parents—and I realized how important parks are to the nation as one of the last refuges where precious memories can be safely stored and then passed on from one generation to the next. Name any other place in the land where the

same can be said.” Once the idea was there, Duncan proposed it to the man he knew could help to bring his vision and message to fruition, Ken Burns. “I realized that, like jazz and baseball, the national parks are a uniquely American invention. We had already done documentaries on the other two, so convincing Ken to do one on the national parks took me about 30 seconds.”

Dayton Duncan is a highly celebrated author. Two of his books *People of the West*, and *The West: An Illustrated History for Children* are focused on a young audi-

“Doing this project took me to all 58 of the national parks; I stood with our camera crews in the best moment of everyday—dawn—waiting for the perfect light in the best possible location.”



ence. The *America's Best Idea* series will also serve as an excellent conduit for reaching young audiences. “Our series will make a great ‘campfire’ around which families can gather to listen to stories and witness some of the most spectacular scenery on earth. I think young people will enjoy meeting fascinating people from the past, and I think they’ll like seeing the bears of Katmai, the bison of Yellowstone, the wolves of Denali—and learning how the parks played a role in keeping such magnificent animals from extinction.” But both Duncan and Burns certainly do not limit their audience in any way; their distinct desire with this and other series is to find a common ground that any viewer could connect with.

“We make our films for the broadest possible audience, not any specific demographic segment. Our hope would be that as many Americans as possible see our film and realize what a string of treasures they own, simply by virtue of living in this country,” says Duncan. “We hope that people already familiar with the parks will be fascinated to learn about the wide variety of people who made those parks possible; and we hope that people who haven’t yet visited a park will be inspired to go to one.”

Of writing and producing, Duncan says he is a writer first. “I love the research and the challenge of translating what I’ve learned into stories that are factual and compelling emotionally,” he says. But he also loves the work involved in producing. “Doing this project took me to all 58 of the national parks; I stood with our camera crews in the best moment of every day—dawn—waiting for the perfect

“I have the best job in the world,” says Duncan. Above: Buddy Squires and Dayton Duncan in Grand Canyon National Park; right: South Rim, Grand Canyon.

light in the best possible location. And, because I work with such talented people, I enjoy the collaborative process in the edit rooms, when the words I’ve written take on new life with the images, the music, and the voices of the past coming to life, creating something far more than I could have hoped for from the printed page.”

From inception to completion it took more than ten years to create the *America's Best Idea* series. “I started doing the initial research and scouting at various parks, while still finishing two other documentaries on Mark Twain and the first automobile trip across America, says Duncan. “We shot in 53 of the 58 national parks, compiled 800 rolls of film, [and] amassed 12,000 archival photographs.” Duncan explains that in undertaking a topic with such a massive historical and geographic scope, patience is the best practice. “We deliberately take a long time on our films, especially a major series like this one. It allows us the opportunity to explore the topic fully before making final decisions about what stays in and what has to go, and it permits us to steadily improve our storytelling. It’s a constant process, and I love every part of it.”

The collective voice of the series is that of hundreds of individuals, some quite historically obscure; and a portion is devoted to the untold stories of these lesser known contributors to the parks. “The national parks are for everyone, regardless of their race, their ethnicity, their gender, or even how long they’ve been in America,” says Duncan. “That’s the central tenet of the park idea, the American tilt that in





“If you stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon, or watch a bison herd walking across Yellowstone’s Lamar Valley, ... or see a flock of birds crossing the horizon at Everglades, or walk a trail in the Great Smokies, ... it’s pretty hard not to have that experience move you in some way.”

essence applied the Declaration of Independence to our landscape and made possible something that had never happened in any other country, where the special places were reserved solely for the rich or for royalty ... we found that, from the very start, people from every walk of life have played a role in the evolution of the park idea.” Among these are: the African American Buffalo Soldiers who were the first protectors of Yosemite and Sequoia; George Masa, a Japanese immigrant who was instrumental in mapping portions of the Appalachian Trail in the Great Smokies; George Melendez Wright and his crusade for the wildlife and plant life; the painter Chiura Obata in Yosemite; Lancelot Jones, whose father had been a slave, and who helped save Biscayne Bay; and currently Gerard Baker, a Mandan-Hidatsa, who is the first Native American superintendent at Mount Rushmore, where he is trying to make sure that the whole story of the Black Hills is told.

Duncan says that he and Burns “focused on the people whose passion and dedication resulted in parks being added to the system and on how the park idea broadened beyond the majestic western parks to include places like Mesa Verde (preserving the ruins of an ancient civilization), Acadia (first park in the East, created out of gifts of private land), the Everglades (created to preserve an ecosystem of remarkable birds, animals, and plants), and then historic sites and battlefields, national seashores and wild rivers and trails such as the Appalachian Trail.”

While working on the script for the



“It’s a sweeping story, filled with wonderful characters—some well-known, some totally unknown to most Americans,” says Duncan. Left: climbing ranger Lincoln Else at Merced River, Yosemite National Park; above: George Masa in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, photo courtesy the Pack Memorial Public Library.

series, Duncan got to know a lot of extraordinary people, from the past and the present. “I thought I already knew John Muir, but I hadn’t fully realized what a remarkable human being he was—and what an eloquent voice for preserving the natural world,” he says. George Melendez Wright, who fought to convince the Park Service that their mission was more than protecting scenery, [but] protecting animals and plants in their natural state, has become a personal hero of mine, as is Adolph Murie, who fought for the protection of Denali’s wolves—a vision that found its later expression when wolves were restored to Yellowstone. Both were powerful voices who turned the park idea in an important new direction.”

The series tells the story of others whose passion was to protect America’s wildlife. “Without Yellowstone National Park—and the efforts of people like John F. Lacey, Theodore Roosevelt, and George Bird Grinnell—the bison would have disappeared on our continent. No park, no buffalo—it would have been as simple as that,” says Duncan. “Those same three were also instrumental in laws that protected plumed birds from the slaughter—and ultimately led to the creation

of Everglades National Park.”

The personal and professional devotion that both Duncan and Burns infused into the series is sure to promote greater park use. “Showing people the majesty of the parks—while telling them the stories of their creation and demonstrating that these precious places belong to them—will prompt many Americans to go out and see those places,” says Duncan.

“If you stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon, or watch a bison herd walking across Yellowstone’s Lamar Valley, or stand in the shadow of a giant sequoia in Yosemite, or see a flock of birds crossing the horizon at Everglades, or walk a trail in the Great Smokies, or witness lava creating brand new land at Hawaii Volcanoes, it’s pretty hard not to have that experience move you in some way. It becomes an even more powerful experience if you’re sharing it with your children or someone else you love. And more powerful still when you realize that what you’re seeing is what generations before you have seen,” says Duncan. “In many ways, these awe-inspiring, often majestic places not only make us understand how ‘small’ we are as individuals with one short lifetime, they somehow make us feel ‘bigger’ because we have connected to something far bigger than ourselves. And we’re a little prouder of our nation for having saved such places. John Muir called it a ‘good practical sort of immortality,’ I think many people have felt it, and in the end it’s that personal connection that makes Americans love their parks so fiercely.”

PHOTOS BY CRAIG MELLISH, COURTESY PBS.