Troubling Signs
1916

Although Mather had cleaned up the Yellowstone concession problem, he certainly had not solved the concession problem in Yosemite. It was in worse shape than it had been the year before. His old enemy David Curry had slammed his foot in the door of a car and, because of diabetes, had contracted gangrene and died in April 1916. He had a bad apple of a son, and soon Mather and Foster Curry were locking horns. The whole mess was simply too much for Mather, so he tossed the Curry problem to me.

To solve this, I went to Secretary Lane, knowing he shared my fondness for Mrs. Curry and my sympathy for her difficulty in operating the company and reining in her son. After some discussion, we decided to let Curry matters drift, giving the company a decent franchise of five years and Mrs. Curry an opportunity to plan the future. Lane's only stipulation was that this was his plan, his plan alone, in case Mather got upset by the solution and turned on me.

Lane had been frank with me in questioning Mather's volatile mood changes. I assured him that Mather was fine, that it was only stress. He had so much on his mind, especially Yosemite.

Desmond had resigned and left a financial disaster behind him. Two of his hotels burned down under suspicious circumstances. Then there were two huge hotels in the works, one at Glacier Point, and another, the Grizzly, on which construction hadn't gotten beyond some foundations. The service, food, accommodations, and bookkeeping were in their

usual mess. Creditors were howling like wolves at the door. The San Francisco backers paid a cash advance of seventeen thousand dollars and then were forced into a voluntary sixty-percent assessment on their shares.

Of course, Mather was financially involved in all this. I never asked and I never knew the exact details. His Chicago attorney handled it all. From a legal standpoint, though, this scared me as it had earlier. Should Mather's involvement become common knowledge, he would probably be dismissed from the Interior Department, and the high regard in which he was held might be permanently damaged—and the National Park Service with it.

I delicately tried to talk to Mather about it, but he just clamped his mouth shut and would not say a word. Fortunately, once more, by telling me nothing, he kept me out of the situation, but I knew he was deeply concerned and worried about his favorite park and his favorite project.

To get his mind off his problems, Mather did two things. First, he engaged in a frenetic social whirl. Mrs. Mather lived in Chicago. He lived at the Cosmos Club in Washington. He hated being alone. He rarely was. He loved entertaining friends and did so with a lavish hand. There were luncheons for congressmen, writers, and anyone else whose company he enjoyed, dinner parties at the Cosmos Club for men only, and lovely suppers at the finest hotels, with theater parties afterward, for mixed groups.

One of the most beautiful evenings was a large party he gave in honor of Grace's twenty-sixth birthday on October 23, 1916. It was at the Willard Hotel. At her place at the table was her birthday present, twenty-six pink roses in a magnificent Dresden china bowl. After dinner we all went to the Belasco Theater to see *The Boomerang*, then to a supper club for a midnight repast and dancing. Mather was one of the most thoughtful, kindly, and generous men I ever knew.

His many friends entertained him too. Fortunately for Grace and me, we were included in most of the larger parties. I remember a particularly great evening. General Scott was an intimate friend of Buffalo Bill Cody. Cody was in Washington with his 101 Ranch Show, so Scott had a dinner party in his honor: just Scott, Mather, the Albrights, Buffalo Bill, and several of the latter's friends from the show.

Buffalo Bill was as picturesque as you'd imagine, alert physically and mentally, marvelously entertaining. He was especially pleased that so much attention was being given to his namesake town. Turning to Mather, he said: "I particularly want to thank you for your part in this publicity about

Cody and for honoring my Irma Hotel and Pahaska Lodge with your visits."

That was the wrong thing to say. I mentally cringed, and for good reason too. Mather always spoke up when he had something on his mind. He smiled sweetly and, in a cool tone of voice, replied: "Mr. Cody, I did indeed visit your hostelries, but I assure you I will not again unless you take steps to rectify the sad conditions they are in."

To my great surprise, Buffalo Bill roared with laughter. "Send me a list of sad conditions. We'll see they're corrected." And with that Buffalo Bill Cody rounded up the party and swept us off to enjoy his dazzling 101 Ranch Show.

Another thing Mather loved was to throw plans and ideas around among groups of men, so he instituted all kinds of meetings. "Let's see how they play," he'd say. He arranged several in New York and Philadelphia. Then he rounded up Lane and some friends from outside the government and paid for them to come to Atlantic City to discuss plans for improvement of the parks and methods of protecting them better.

It turned out to be a rather disturbing meeting. As time passed, Mather grew excitable and wildly extravagant. It was quite unlike him. His ideas were not very realistic and were fearfully expensive, especially as we had no guarantee of funds. He had told me right from the start of our relationship: "I've got a lot of ideas, some good, some bad, some terrible. Now it's going to be your job to sort out these ideas, and, when you think there's a bad one, throw it out—or throw me out." Fortunately, there was no necessity for me to try, for everyone politely ignored the situation. However, this meeting eventually produced some fine ideas on when and in what amount appropriations might be doled out to our service. Only later did I recall Mather's unusual behavior.

Mather sent me off on some short trips during the next month. There were several meetings in New York with government officials and the American Game Association concerning the care of wild animals in Yellowstone during the winter season. There was deep concern that some animals, the bison and the antelope in particular, might die out as a species. Years later this problem would be called one of "endangered species." Back in 1916 there were two real, or imagined, threats.

One was how to protect animals against famine in the worst climatic years. In fierce winters, there was an incredible loss of life among the elk and other ungulates. Starvation took a heavy toll, and the question was,

should the animals be fed artificially? Should hay be bought and brought to them? And if so, where was the money coming from to do it? Actually, fear was so great about the bison that grain was grown for them up in the Slough Creek area of Yellowstone. But what to do about the others? There was a sharp division of opinion on this question.

This led to the other problem, the matter of the predators. They were always waiting on the sidelines for the young and the weak. The predators had been very vigorously pursued by the army. By 1916 mountain lions appeared to have been wiped out, and only a handful of wolves were left in Yellowstone. Coyotes roamed in abundance even though hundreds were shot or poisoned each year. Rows of coyote skins were hung out in Gardiner for the taking.

I had gotten very interested in game protection and had been getting a crash course from my "tutor," Henry Fairfield Osborn, president of both the Museum of Natural History and the New York Zoological Society. I think he mailed me a package of books and brochures at least once a week and then quizzed me on them when I saw him. He was the first one to teach me about balance of nature, about allowing predators to exist as a balance for too great an increase in their natural prey. It took years before I was able to build on these ideas and put them into practice, but at least I was learning all the time.

The months from October to the end of 1916 were filled with odds and ends of national park business. We were so stymied by lack of funds that we could initiate practically nothing.

Mather was like a caged lion. He got into one controversy after another with Bob Marshall. It was frustrating for Mather, as he was very fond of Bob and had high hopes for him. Likewise, Bob was as devoted to Mather as all the rest of us were. He felt he was doing a good job and simply couldn't figure out why he wasn't pleasing Mather. It was a bitter, acrimonious situation.

Both had a deep love and interest in the parks, but Marshall had a more thorough knowledge. Mather visualized that Bob would become the director of the new bureau, that he and I could then quietly slip away to pursue our interests as originally planned. However, what had started as simple differences of opinion between the two men progressed to an irreparable break. Mather criticized Marshall's methods of accounting, his arrogant handling of people, and his quarrels with concessioners and superintendents. He overlooked his fine traits and any attempt to make peace.

Marshall also ran into trouble when Mather told him to write the National Park Service report for the 1916 Interior Department annual report. Mather disliked the results intensely and ordered me to write another one. I hated to do so, as I was fond of Marshall and didn't want to see a fight develop between Mather and him. So I went to Secretary Lane with the problem. His answer was for me to go ahead and obey Mather but take my time about it. He'd include Marshall's version in his annual report and get it to the Government Printing Office as fast as possible. He'd take the blame if there was any fallout. That's the way it went, except that Mather was furious that Marshall's was the official report, and he had mine printed separately at his own cost. I think only a few copies of mine ever surfaced, and I had to make my own peace with Bob Marshall without taking sides in their quarrel. During the two terrible years ahead, although he hated Mather and never forgave him, Marshall stayed a loyal and faithful friend to me, giving me help and advice.

Marshall's final misstep was when he rashly ordered an early closing of Yellowstone, believing that a threatened rail strike would cut off the stream of tourists. Besides infuriating Mather, it caused a furor with everyone in Montana and Wyoming who made a nickel off the park, and complaints poured into their representatives in Congress. Now these people in sparsely populated Montana might not have made any difference, but the Child family did. Immediate reaction came from the junior senator from Montana, Thomas J. Walsh.

Harry Child owned the hotels and transportation in Yellowstone. He was taken seriously ill and was supposed to be dying. His only son, Huntley, took over the business without his father's knowledge or permission. He was an arrogant, spiteful "whipper-snapper," as Mather called him. The dislike was mutual.

Huntley feared Mather's plans for concessioners, feared for his profits melting away. The soldiers stationed in Yellowstone, of course, were bored to death and spent most of their pay in the little rundown town of Gardiner, at the north entrance to the park. Here Child had interests in almost every store. Most of all, Harry Child's hotel interests were financially backed by the Northern Pacific Railroad, and he was half owner of the largest cattle ranch in Montana.

When Huntley Child raised cain with Senator Walsh, you can bet Walsh got busy. He immediately protested the park closure and then

extended his quarrel to troops leaving Yellowstone. With few exceptions, Walsh was the meanest man with whom I ever crossed swords. And I crossed plenty with him until his death in 1933.

Marshall had accidentally stirred up a hornet's nest. This was the last straw for Mather. He removed Marshall as superintendent of national parks and returned him to the Geological Survey. Marshall was enraged and bitter, and he forever held a deep-seated grudge against Mather. In correspondence he complained to his friends throughout the country. In person he claimed to anyone he met—even in the sacred halls of the Cosmos Club—that Mather was a megalomaniac and was mentally unbalanced. He said he was "fired" (not transferred) because Mather wanted him out of the way so he could have the directorship himself.

In the course of time, a letter Marshall wrote to Secretary Lane surfaced and seemed to corroborate what he had been saying. On December 22, 1916, Marshall wrote Lane:

> Mr. Mather informed me last evening that he felt he should take the position of Director of the National Park Service when it was your privilege and pleasure to make the appointment, and that you desired him to do so. You no doubt know that I have had some reason for expecting that the honor and responsibility would come to me when the Service was organized. However, in view of Mr. Mather's statement of his and your wishes, it seems to me best to retire now, as I do not for a moment desire in any manner whatsoever to stand in the way of your wishes in the management and development of the national parks. Therefore, may I presume to ask you to allow me to return to my position in the Geological Survey at your earliest convenience?

Marshall felt he had been betrayed by his close friend, Stephen Mather, had been summarily put aside with apparently no warning. It was a messy business, especially when Secretary Lane let Mather know he was displeased and openly showed his affection for Marshall. All this had a very bad effect on Mather and weighed heavily on his mind.

In October Mather told me Secretary Lane wanted him to investigate an area of sand dunes in Indiana. Senator Thomas Taggart of Indiana had sponsored a resolution calling for hearings on the dunes in preparation for including them in a national park.

Mather growled that we had no money to improve existing parks and no money to develop new parks like Lassen and Hawaii. Interesting

areas east of the Mississippi weren't in any future plans at the moment. Why did we have to waste our time considering sand dunes? I answered, "From a legal standpoint, if the Senate says we do, we do."

"All right, Horace," Mather replied, "if we do, you will go with me to investigate this sandpile." I tried to duck out by saying I thought there was too much work in Washington for me and even threw in the fact that Grace hated being alone so much and hadn't been feeling too well.

"Nonsense, Horace, we haven't much real work to do around here and we'll take Grace with us. Do her good. Tell you what. Bob Yard is coming, so we'll have him bring his Margaret. Then all of you come stay at my house in Chicago until after the election. You and Bob will be on government business. I'll treat the girls to the trip. How's that?"

What could I say? Grace and I left for Chicago at 7:30 P.M. October 28 on the Baltimore and Ohio train.

Mather and his daughter Betty met us at the Chicago station at 3:40 the next afternoon. In his elegant, chauffeur-driven limousine we returned to his equally elegant Dorchester Street home. We had a lovely dinner and spent the evening there, with Mather and myself in his study looking over maps of the dunes while Grace and Mrs. Mather got better acquainted. The latter was a tall, impressive lady, rather quiet and withdrawn but kindly, austere and aristocratic but gracious—quite different from her ebullient, gregarious husband.

About ten o'clock Mather took us over to an apartment he owned where we were to sleep; meals were to be at his home. When the Yards joined us several days later, they also stayed at the apartment.

The next day, October 30, Mather conducted a hearing as specified by Taggart's resolution. It was held in the federal building in Chicago. About four hundred people attended, and many from various fields of art, science, education, and business spoke on behalf of the dunes.

The next morning Grace, Mather, and I met a large contingent of professors from the University of Chicago, friends of Mather's from the Prairie Club, and a wide assortment of politicians, with a few women mixed in, about twenty in all. We rode in a private railroad car to Michigan City, Indiana, where we were met by the mayor and his group of fifteen or more people. He had plenty of cars lined up for the drive out to the sand dunes, which stretched for miles along the southern shore of Lake Michigan.

The scene was most impressive—towering dunes rising from the blue lake to the forested interior. As a matter of fact, a good portion of our

party took one look at the formidable sand hills and decided to remain near the cars, later joining us for lunch. Led by Professor Henry C. Cowles of the University of Chicago, a renowned botanist, only about half the party trudged out across the dunes, had numerous photos snapped, and took a long, pleasant lunch break at the Prairie Club's Beach House. A lot more of the group decided the comfortable wicker chairs and pleasant view were preferable to hiking in sand, so we were down to about ten brave souls, including Mather, Grace, and me. We had a really interesting and fun time for another two hours, at one point sliding down the dunes as if they were snow hills. Then it was back to the cars and the train and a quiet evening at the Mather home.

However, there was a surprising change in Mather. Although he was always electrically energetic, I had rarely seen him so excitable. He couldn't sit still. He paced up and down, laughing and talking a mile a minute about what a marvelous national park these dunes would make.

I tried to throw cold water on his enthusiasm. "Mr. Mather, all the prospective land is privately held and would cost a couple of million dollars to purchase it. Where on earth could we get the money? Congress won't even give us enough to run the Washington office. At that price, why would they even consider these sand dunes, no matter how wonderful?"

He overrode every objection I brought up. This sudden about-face on creating parks baffled me. He had been so adamant about consolidating the system, improving it, but not trying to expand it except for Grand Canyon and existing park extensions. Now he was wildly excited about sand dunes. Not that the area wasn't interesting. It was, and in time it did become part of the park system. For now, I kept quizzing and discouraging him about it.

Suddenly he whirled around, glared at me, and, for the first time since we had met, barked out: "Horace, this is none of your business!" That hit me like a thunderbolt, and it hurt too. My face must have registered how badly I felt, for he came across the room, gripped my arm, and said: "It's all right. You didn't mean any harm and I forgive you." Forgive me? Here he had switched moods in two minutes and was all rosy and good-humored. These mood switches made me very uneasy. They were so unlike him.

The next day it seemed to be water over the dam. Mather appeared to be his usual self and wanted to get down to business. Yard had arrived in the meantime. We spent the remainder of our visit in Chicago,

November 1—8, on National Park Service affairs, meeting with railroad officials and concessioners like Ford Harvey. Mather also spent some time at Sterling Borax on affairs of his company, while I used his office and a secretary to write the official report of our sand dunes inspection for Secretary Lane. Mather detested writing and never had written more than personal letters since finding I enjoyed writing and did a reasonable job of it. Along with Bob Yard, I was also "allowed" to write his speeches.

Tuesday, November 7, was election day. Mather had become more and more nervous and worried as the day approached. It was infectious, for Yard and I were getting jittery too. This was quite unlike either of us. We three had talked ourselves into believing that if Woodrow Wilson and his Democrats weren't reelected, our beloved Park Service would be in mortal danger. A Republican administration was unknown to us and therefore feared. As a matter of fact, all three of us were so-called Progressive Republicans, although I was the only one who had voted for Wilson in 1912. Of course, I didn't admit this to my boss, for he probably would have fired me for not supporting Teddy Roosevelt.

Besides this, I was the only one of the three who was very concerned about the European war. This was mainly because I was of fighting age. America had been interested but not deeply concerned with that conflict until the election. Suddenly there was apprehension that a new administration might get our country involved in the war. Wilson's campaign was run on the slogan "He kept us out of war." Theodore Roosevelt bellowed about fighting the Germans, and the Democrats tagged his slogans on their opponent: "A vote for Hughes is a vote for war."

On election day Mather was the only one who could vote and did so as soon as the polls opened. Yard and I were residents of the District of Columbia, federal territory, so couldn't cast our votes. By nighttime, Mather was fit to be tied. We were all supposed to go to the theater, where he had reserved a box for the Franz Lehar musical *Alone at Last.* At dinner he suddenly decided he wouldn't go, but insisted that Mrs. Mather, Grace, and Margaret Yard attend anyway.

We three men adjourned to the Quadrangle Club to listen to election returns. Mather was a bundle of nerves, never sitting down, pacing around the room, talking incessantly. The returns coming in were not very hopeful for Wilson, and this only increased Mather's agitation. Men began to glower at him. A few made shushing noises. Yard whispered to me: "Horace, let's get him out of here. He's getting too upset. What'll he do if Wilson loses?" We convinced him that it was almost time for his

limousine to pick up the ladies at the theater, so we'd better be taken home now.

When the three women walked in from the theater, they saw a sad and sorry group of husbands. Mather was slumped in a chair with his head in his hands, moaning about the American people being a bunch of idiots—that is, the easterners and midwesterners. The southerners were passable, but he had faith in what the dependable westerners would do. I was disconsolately sitting on the stairs silently watching Yard pacing up and down, figuring out what course we could take in the future, relying on the fact that we could dredge up Mather's connection with Teddy Roosevelt.

Then Yard suggested that we all pile into the limousine and drive around town checking on further election results, anything to get Mather's mind occupied. Mrs. Mather declined to go and excused herself. The rest of us drove around Chicago stopping at various nightspots, hotels, and clubs until we decided that Wilson had lost. Charles Evans Hughes was our new president.

Hughes thought so too, and he went to bed apparently not realizing that California's thirteen votes could reverse the outcome. When a reporter saw that California results were favoring Wilson, he came to the Hotel Astor to talk to Hughes. His valet said, "The president has already retired," and the reporter replied, "When he wakes up, tell him he is no longer president."

The next day, results proved that Hiram Johnson's vindictiveness had cost Hughes the election. By the slim margin of four thousand California votes, Woodrow Wilson was reelected. Mather was delighted, and, according to him, the National Park Service was saved. Grace and I returned to Washington the next day.

On November 17 I received a telephone call from Mr. Mather. It was most unusual, for we almost never incurred the expense of a phone call. His voice sounded odd to me, strained and anxious. He told me to get the first train and come to Chicago. When I asked the reason, he replied, "Horace, do as I ask."

I had to tell Secretary Lane where I was going, for I needed travel orders from the department. He questioned me rather thoroughly and then asked, "Why are you evasive, Mr. Albright? Is there something wrong?" I answered that everything was fine. It was probably just a matter of clearing up the Indiana Dunes report, which of course was already in my possession being polished. He wasn't particularly satisfied but gave me the proper papers, and I left at noon.

I hated like the dickens to leave Grace, for she was crying, said she didn't feel well, and as always was terrified of being alone. We had been married almost a year, and with all my short trips away she had managed either to have someone come stay with her or to go to a friend's home. Not knowing how long I'd be away, I phoned one of Grace's friends and arranged for her to stay there while I was in Chicago.

When I walked into Mather's study on the eighteenth, he looked up from his desk in surprise. "Why, Horace, what's the trouble? What are you doing here in Chicago?" I was stunned and hardly knew how to answer. I fumbled in my coat pocket and brought out Lane's orders, which of course had given no reason for going to Chicago.

"Didn't Lane give you any reason for these? What's his problem? Didn't he tell you anything?"

I gulped out, "He just told me to report to you."

"What's the matter with the man? There's nothing here for you. Better get on the first train and go home." But on second thought, he added, "Well, I was about to meet some people from the Great Northern Railroad. You'd better at least talk to them, so you can report you were doing Park Service business." This I did and then caught the night train back to Washington, totally perplexed and inwardly somewhat frightened. What on earth was the matter with my chief?

Mather returned to Washington sporadically for the remainder of the year. His sole interest was a conference of national park superintendents to be held in Washington in January 1917. Bob Marshall and I had initially been detailed to plan this meeting, but Mather now shut Marshall out, only a few weeks before the conference was to open. Mather's plans for the conference were to discuss ideas for the Park Service once money had been allocated, to interest congressmen in development of the service, and to bring in men from outside the government to add new ideas and recommendations to use in the future.

It was an ambitious undertaking. He cared about nothing but making a success of it, and I devoted every minute of my time to seeing his plans carried out. But suddenly my life seemed to be a toboggan going downhill fast.

Grace hadn't been feeling too well even before we went to Chicago. On December 7 she stated she was really sick, but because of her normal good health and strength we both passed it off as "just one of those things." A week later she had to confess she couldn't go on as she was and

finally consented to see a doctor. He told her it was just a bad case of nervous indigestion.

The same day we received a telegram saying that my brother Leslie, who was in Europe, had contracted typhoid fever.

By the sixteenth Grace was so ill she couldn't eat a thing, could barely, get out of bed. The next day the doctor finally came to the conclusion that she had a serious case of yellow jaundice (which today we know as hepatitis). I don't believe I had ever seen anyone so sick. I was frantic. There was no other person at the office, so I had to go to work, but I simply couldn't leave my girl alone. I ended up calling on Eva Larsen to take Grace to her home to nurse her properly.

The next day, Sunday the seventeenth, we received word that my dearest brother Leslie had died.

Aside from Bob Yard, there was absolutely no one to help with the conference. Mather remained in Chicago over the Christmas season, not returning until the day before it was to open. When Marshall and Acker heard of my predicament, they offered their help. What a blessing they were!

And none too soon. Yard had placed articles about the conference in newspapers all around the country, and interest in it exploded. We had dozens of requests for information or tickets to attend the sessions. We did not have enough help in answering letters, and we had no more room at the National Museum, where our conference was to be held. What more could go wrong?

A telegram arrived on December 30 saying that my beloved granddad Horace Marden had died in San Francisco of a heart attack. I was alone in the office when it was delivered. I put my head down on my desk and cried for the first time in years. All the recent events stacking up were suddenly too much for me. My granddad had been my inspiration, probably the one who had shaped my ambition and character more than anyone else. Now the second close relative was dead within two weeks.

I was more than ever filled with dread that the news of Leslie's death and her father's passing would cause my mother's death too. My inclination was to catch the first train for California, but the responsibility for Grace and for Mather's conference had to take precedence. Both were such a deep concern to me, especially with the way Mather had been acting recently.

The eventful year of 1916 ended with my Grace's first outing after her illness when we joined a small group at the Shoreham Hotel on New Year's Eve. Mr. and Mrs. Mather gave an elegant, festive dinner to celebrate the banner year we were just concluding. Champagne was in order. Mather was ebullient, laughing, and lighthearted as he proposed a toast: "Who would have thought a year ago tonight that 1916 would end in such a burst of glory? We have accomplished a miracle and will go on to reach higher pinnacles of success in 1917." We all rose, lifted our glasses, and drank to the glowing future of 1917.