



A Step Backward *1918*

After a nostalgic visit with my dad and mother in Bishop, I went to Berkeley. I had decided to use this time to make a break with the Park Service and find a position with a lawfirm in California. Grace and I were finally together and looking forward to months of happiness.

Our "months" lasted one day. A telegram from Secretary Lane arrived, which stated: "You must return at once. Matters here make it imperative." I left immediately, only stopping in Chicago long enough to learn from Harold White, Mather's close friend and financial advisor, that Mr. Mather was suffering a mental relapse. It was a different twist from his earlier illness. This upset was marked by irrational check-writing for political purposes, seizure of hotel and transportation concessions in Yellowstone to make them public corporations, and appointing a man outside the Park Service as superintendent of Yellowstone. Badly shaken by this information, I wondered if something worse had happened to warrant Lane's orders to me. I hurried on to Washington and arrived on October 31, 1918.

At the Interior Department I went directly to Secretary Lane. He was anxiously waiting for me. Usually placid and calm, he greeted me with: "Albright, thank God you're here. I've got a wild man on my hands. You're the only one that can handle him. Get him out of Washington. Get him to a doctor. Just get him away from this department before all hell breaks loose."

I quickly assured the secretary I'd do my best, but I had to know what Mr. Mather's problem was. He gave me a rundown of events that chilled

my bones. Mather was not in any form of the depressive and physically weakened condition of January 1917. He now exhibited a frenzied euphoria and extreme aggressiveness, considering himself infallible. He was apparently riding the crest of a wave. He was just as big as all outdoors, the mightiest man in the world.

Spending the rest of the day carefully avoiding Mather, I talked with almost everyone else associated with him to get a clear, unbiased account of his actions. They all loved the man so much that no one wanted to say anything detrimental. Isabelle Story was more open and frank, suggesting that he probably wasn't as well as he had appeared, that he hadn't really regained his confidence to go it alone. My departure, so soon after he had returned to office, had thrust more responsibility on him than he could take. It sounded reasonable, but that didn't solve the problem.

Before the day was out, I was dealt another blow. Mather had appointed a new Yellowstone superintendent, Emerson Hough. I simply couldn't believe my ears that Mather had actually appointed that old curmudgeon, who couldn't get along with Santa Claus, the superintendent of Yellowstone.

Hough himself broke the news to me. Mather had been grateful for all the articles he had written on behalf of the parks, all the help he had given the Park Service, so he offered him the job. Hough was pleased and proud and accepted the offer.

Late in the afternoon Hough reappeared and informed me that Mather had told him he could use my apartment until he got out of the army and could set off for Yellowstone. At this time he was serving as a captain in the intelligence division. After announcing that, he looped his arm through mine saying, "Well, let's go pick up my things and get settled over at your place." No one would enjoy living with Emerson Hough with his cigars, clacking typewriter, and foul moods. A few days out in the Sierra Nevada was one thing, but holed up in a tiny apartment was something else.

November 1, 1918, was a day to remember. I went down to our office early that morning. Before I could even plan what to do about Mather's situation, I received instructions to go to school. School? Mather had ordered every member in his bureau to meet in the basement at 9:15 A.M. Not only that, but he had summoned the other bureau chiefs of the Interior Department to attend, including Geological Survey, Indian Affairs, and so forth. Even more astonishingly, Secretary Lane had been

instructed *to* attend. Mather stated that he would lecture the class on "principles of government."

Needless to say, the other bureau chiefs politely declined Mather's summons, and I never heard what Lane's reply was, if there even was one. The "school" was the talk of the department. Of course, those under Mather's control obeyed and were dutifully assembled. Mather presided like a schoolteacher. He wouldn't allow any whispering. Everyone just sat there, listening to his rambling, disconnected, but very enthusiastic sermon on the future of the National Park Service and its mission. I'm sure every one of us felt the same: grimly silent and obviously distressed to see our chief in such a condition.

After Mather let us out of school, he and I were alone in his office. I asked, "What is all this you are doing?"

"Don't you like it?" he replied.

I answered, "No, I don't, and we can't have this kind of thing, Mr. Mather."

His answer was short and to the point: "You are fired. You can't interfere with what I am doing. I am back here now taking up the reins, and either you agree with what I do or get out."

I was not going to get into an argument with him or get him more excited, so I simply nodded and left. First of all I went to Lane and reported the incident. I told him that I just wasn't going to challenge Mather anymore in his fragile state of mind, that Lane would have to handle it. I probably overstepped myself by emotionally saying, "You'll have to do the dirty work yourself."

Fortunately, Lane recognized that I was overwrought, so he ignored my words and answered quietly, "I just don't want him around here anymore. He's messing in politics. He's messing up my department. Just get him out of Washington."

That sobered me immediately. I was fearful that he would summarily replace Mather, so I asked him directly if that was his plan. He didn't answer me immediately, just seemed to give some real thought to the question. Finally, he said, "I don't want to lose Steve, but I can't have a repetition of his breakdowns disrupting my department. So have him take another rest, and in the meantime I'll reappoint you acting director."

Much as I hated the thought, I quickly decided it was better that I had the position than that Lane should appoint someone else or just remove Mather permanently. I assured the secretary that I would get

Mather out of Washington immediately but asked him please not to tell Mather I was to be acting director.

Then I called Chicago and spoke to Mrs. Mather and Harold White. They informed me that the amount of the checks Mather had been writing for the election of senators and congressmen was increasing. He had donated thousands and thousands of dollars so far. Now another disturbing thing had cropped up. He planned to go "on the road" to campaign for his favorite candidates before the upcoming election. He especially wanted to work for his good friend Representative Julius Kahn of San Francisco, one of those who had no opposition.

I went back to see Mr. Mather, who had apparently forgotten I was fired. I was very quiet and agreeable no matter what he said. I pulled the conversation around to the elections, and he eagerly told me how he wanted to campaign for friends. Picking this up with great enthusiasm, I proposed that we head for Chicago. "Let's get out of Washington, move back to the heartland of America, and plan strategy." He thought it a splendid idea and proposed that we leave that very night. Quickly calling on a railroad friend, I secured a drawing room on the first train for Illinois.

We pulled away from Washington and were comfortably settled in for the night. Mather was in the lower berth, I in the upper. Suddenly he jerked me awake with, "You get down out of there. We've got work to do. We have to sharpen a lot of razor blades." He was standing there with a handful of his straight-edged razors. My heart pounding, I jumped down, not bothering to put on a bathrobe, and relieved him of his blades. I advised him to get some rest, that I'd sharpen them. And I honed razor blades most of the night. Every time I would try to quietly leave these things in the little bathroom and sneak back to the upper berth, he would pop out and question how I was doing or volunteer to do it himself. I wasn't going to trust him with the razors, so I would get him back to bed and start stropping the darn things myself.

We pulled into Chicago the next morning. Mather was bright as a button but still wired as though tied to a battery. I was drained from no sleep, worry, and probably loss of blood from my multiple cuts. I had never handled these antique nineteenth-century weapons before.

When I got Mather in a cab and gave the address of his home at 5638 Dorchester Avenue, he flatly refused to go there, insisting on the Athletic Club instead. Mrs. Mather had warned me not to cross him in any way, so we went to the Athletic Club, where I signed him in. Then I quickly called Harold White for help.

Before White could get to the club, Mather decided he was leaving immediately for Denver and ordered me to make reservations. When Harold arrived, we tried to talk Mather out of his Denver destination. He was adamant, so we three went down to the station. When it was time for the train to go, we had to tell him he couldn't leave. We took his suitcase away and checked it. At the same time, White hissed at me, "Get out of Chicago and leave this to me."

I didn't need a second warning so immediately headed back to Washington to start unraveling what Mather had done. Of course, I did not know the extent of the damage. When I reported to Lane on the outcome in Chicago, he was so relieved that I feared he was about to kiss me for spiriting Mather away, saving him from taking action himself.

For the next several weeks, Mather made a short visit to Darien, then went on to Henry Fairfield Osborn's Hudson River estate for several weeks, and finally entrained for Hot Springs. At Dr. Weisenburg's suggestion, and with Lane's consent, I assigned Joseph Cotter and Frank Griffiths from the Interior Department to stay with my chief.

On November 20 Griffiths reported: "STM is wrought up much as he was a few weeks ago. He is all worked up over the Child—Yellowstone Hotel matter." I settled this problem by suggesting to Child that he join Mather at Hot Springs and talk to him man-to-man.

Child arrived in Hot Springs and joined Mather at a bath house. As they lolled in the warm mineral waters, Harry tossed off, "Hey, Steve, I want to thank you for taking those damn, money-losing hotels and buses off my hands. They were killing me and I wasn't making any money anyway." Mather jumped at this opportunity, conceded he'd made a mistake, blamed it all on Harry's son Huntley, and practically begged Harry to take his white elephants back.

Now I had to figure a way to get rid of Emerson Hough's superintendency of Yellowstone. First, on November 21, I wrote Mather:

I hope you will do or say nothing about the matter of appointing Mr. Hough to the Yellowstone until I have a chance to talk to you. There are a good many angles to this matter which we ought to go over together before any final steps are taken. You know he is disliked cordially in the Jackson Hole, and Mr. Mondell [Wyoming's congressman] has no use for him. We must go slowly on these accounts until the Greater Yellowstone bill is brought up. Furthermore Mr. Lindsley has a right to some consideration in this matter. It is hardly right to put a man in just

to give prestige to an office while another man has to do all the work at a lower salary.

Mather's reply was more than a little discouraging: "I am still following up the matter of Mr. Hough taking the superintendency of Yellowstone. Mrs. Hough expresses herself as thinking well of it and is willing to accompany him and live in one of our stone houses."

Now there was only one way to go. I had to disenchant Emerson about the job. Sometimes in the evening when we were sitting around my apartment, we would "chew the fat," as he called it. Every opportunity I got I threw in the disadvantages of his being superintendent of Yellowstone. He would lose his identity as a writer. He would be required to remain in the park all year—even during the long months of those terrible winters. His yearly salary would be peanuts compared to just one serial in the *Saturday Evening Post*. And, of course, that was a moot question because he'd never have time to do any writing for the *Post* or anything else.

Hough was a complete hypochondriac, so I gave him food for thought about the terrible time we were having to recruit a doctor for Yellowstone. No doctor worth his salt would take the job. I worried out loud a lot about how we'd "end up with some doctor we used for treating sick bison."

Remembering what Mather had written, I casually mentioned the superintendent's house. It certainly would be hard for Lottie to keep up that enormous four-story house. That was a brilliant stroke and the one I think did the trick. It was a terrifying idea that he would be isolated in a huge, drafty old stone house with snow piled up to the windows and no one but Lottie and the French maid to keep him company. The Airedale would even have to stay in the kennels in Chicago.

If I ever needed a job, I guess I could be a snake oil salesman because it worked. Eventually Hough backed out with apologies and thanks to Mather. Later, when I became superintendent of Yellowstone, Mather accidentally let Hough know about my effort to squash his appointment. Hough never let me forget that he believed I had eased him out of the job so I could have it. That was very embarrassing, but I guess he forgave me because he and Lottie came for an extended stay at our home in Yellowstone in 1919 before we had our suitcases unpacked.

In the meantime, the best of all possible news burst on the nation. The war finally ended on November 11, 1918. The town went crazy. About

6:00 P.M. I went downtown to the corner by the Treasury Department, 15th and Pennsylvania. The place was pandemonium. Every vehicle that could be commandeered—trucks, cars, bicycles, even some horses and wagons—milled around. Horns on the vehicles were blown. There were cowbells and drums. The noise was unbelievably loud and raucous. I stood there on the corner, wondering if I wanted to celebrate, mix with the crowd. I admit to being a coward when it came to the Spanish Flu. Instead I went to dinner with an old friend from California with a mixture of joy and thanksgiving. When Spanish Flu cases plummeted almost from the hour of the armistice, Americans breathed a sigh of gratitude and prayerful thanks to God for these two miracles.

With the conclusion of the war, Mather apparently recuperating in Hot Springs, and the Park Service operating smoothly in Washington and across the country, I had to weigh my options for the future carefully. I must say I was very unhappy. I had never felt so unsure of the future. For almost two years I had been positive that when Mr. Mather came back full-time as director I would be set free. I could return to California, go into a legal firm in San Francisco, and settle down with Grace. Now Mather's renewed collapse was a blow to all my hopes. I was depressed, unhappy, and in a dreadful quandary.

I could simply resign and leave the Park Service. But I was appalled at the thought of deserting this fledgling bureau and the goals we had set for it. Most of all, I couldn't fail Stephen Mather. There were whispers all over the Interior Department that Lane was ready to ease Mather out. With the directorship open, he could of course appoint someone new. The end of the war would open a floodgate of men looking for jobs in government, men with money or influence in the Democratic administration. Lane had only feeble political clout, so it seemed probable that those close to Wilson could pick the man.

I could find out nothing concrete about my chief. I simply had gotten to the point that I couldn't face an endless future of uncertainty. I'd been forced to assume all responsibility for the Park Service for two years, and now I felt like I had to fish or cut bait. Was Mather in or out? If I had to keep taking his place, would I be appointed director should he resign? Or was I always to be doing the work of a director but having the title of assistant? What exactly was my real authority and my future, if any, in the National Park Service?

It boiled down to the fact that, under current conditions, I couldn't abandon Mather and the Park Service. On the other hand, I couldn't stay

under these conditions, never knowing what my future was. After agonizing over the pros and cons, I came to the conclusion that I must bring the entire question of Mather and Albright directly to Franklin K. Lane and have it out in the open and settled.

With Hough in my apartment, I set up my typewriter late at night in the office. I wrote a letter to Lane that was succinct and unemotional, just a request to see him to ascertain Mather's future. But after I went home and lay in bed, I couldn't sleep. Suddenly I looked at the whole problem in a different light. I got up, dressed, returned to the office about 3:00 A.M., and wrote a very long letter to Secretary Lane, presenting every fact I could muster as to why I should be appointed director of the National Park Service should Mr. Mather be unable to continue in that position. My new letter tried to convince Lane to keep Mather as director, but if he decided against that, to offer every reason I could think of why I should replace him.

The formal letter was followed by a seven-page legal-like brief entitled "Confidential Memorandum for the Secretary." I began with a long summation of Mather's brilliant success since coming to Washington in 1914. Next I turned to my qualifications for the position of director if he were no longer holding it.

On November 26 I received a reply to my letter. It had been mailed to me the day before, not hand-delivered as was the custom in the department. It was brief and to the point: "Dear Mr. Albright: I hope Mather will be able to return soon to take charge of his work. In the event that he can not I have in mind one or two men who I would put into his place; and if you would find it impossible to remain as Assistant Director of course you could resign, much as I would dislike to see this because of your identity with the work, your interest in it, and the good work you have done. Cordially yours, Franklin K. Lane."

I was stunned, hurt, and humiliated. His abrupt words and what seemed to be callous indifference shook me to the core. His use of "Mather"—not Mr. Mather or Steve, as he always called him—hit me as an insult to my chief. It was as if he had brushed this incomparable man and his accomplishments aside like a worrisome fly.

I read and reread those few lines. First anger, furious anger, replaced shock. Then I began to feel wounded, rejected, and dismayed. I had succeeded in everything I had ever tackled and felt I had accomplished a great deal in my twenty-eight years. Now Lane, with a few blunt sentences, had badly undercut my self-confidence.

I couldn't understand at first why he had dismissed my proposals out of hand. Why couldn't he have offered a kindly explanation? Or why couldn't he have waited to talk it all over with me in person? The main point was that Lane was obviously through with both Mr. Mather and me. It was now only a question of when, not if, a new man would be taking over the National Park Service.

But the more I thought about it, the more I decided there was something beneath the surface. Lane was a very insecure man. He often referred to the fact that he was chosen for his position not because of ability to run the Interior Department but because he could pull off the Hetch Hetchy deal. Wilson needed that to secure the support of the San Francisco political machine. Lane also frequently complained that he wasn't "in" with the president, wasn't consulted on many issues outside his own department, was ignored at cabinet meetings.

Could my comments on Mather's and my success at the University of California been construed in Lane's mind as a reference to his inability to graduate? Furthermore, references to Mather's success in business and his wealth might have rubbed Lane the wrong way. He complained about not being able to keep up a style commensurate with his social position. He was always scrounging for money and let people pick up tabs at dinners, hotels, and so forth. He had a deferential, almost humble, attitude toward powerful and wealthy people.

I remember a clash Lane and Mather once had when the secretary expressed his opinion that he was in favor of the federal government preserving wilderness. After a pause, he added, "as long as convenient." While Mather's blood pressure rose, Lane went on to explain why the government should aid economic growth. He gave the impression that he would go along with conservation of parks and forests as long as it didn't interfere with economic expansion or private business making money from public resources. We found that out in 1919 when Lane came out strongly for water and power interests in Yellowstone.

Lane always helped big oil companies while he was secretary. He was in favor of government support of them through tax benefits and letting them make good profits from the public domain while paying very little to the United States government. He endorsed disputed private claims within the Elk Hills naval oil reserve and was in favor of large firms receiving tax write-offs. He resigned as secretary of the interior to become vice-president of Edward Doheny's Pan-American Oil Company at a salary of fifty thousand dollars a year. Later Albert B. Fall,

another interior secretary, was jailed for accepting a loan from Doheny tied to the same oil fields in Wyoming. Fall always claimed that the shenanigans surrounding Teapot Dome had started during World War I under Lane.

All these ideas were neither here nor there because the conclusion was basically the same. Secretary Lane was preparing for a change in the National Park Service that would eliminate Mather and Albright. I was heartsick. For myself, I really wanted a new direction for my life out in California with Grace and our new baby to be born in a few weeks. For Stephen Mather, a man I had grown to care for more than any other, I could hardly bear the thought of what an abrupt dismissal might do to him. I tried to console myself by believing I had done everything I could to spare him the pain.

I had my meeting with Lane. I was cold and polite while he was pleasant and normal as always as though no correspondence had been exchanged. He never brought it up, and I was still so angry that I knew it was the better part of valor to keep silent. He asked me offhand if I would be around during the holidays and I replied, "Well, I could, Mr. Secretary, but with Washington practically closed down from the Christmas holidays to the new session of Congress, I'd like to go West and tackle problems out there."

Lane agreed to that. He added that my first concern should be to have the California Legislature remove the state's authority over Yosemite. He casually remarked that of course I'd remain as acting director. He also requested that I stay in Washington until after the New Year to see how Mather was doing and what his schedule was going to be.

In Hot Springs Mather decided that a relaxing trip to the West Coast was just the thing. In December, accompanied by his friend Herb Gleason, he traveled through the Northwest. By the end of the year, he was back in Chicago and felt he would pick up the reins in Washington soon. Quick action this time had saved him from a serious and lengthy relapse.

In Washington I was preparing for the coming summer season. In view of the war's end, we anticipated a flood of tourists to the parks, which required endless, precise planning. I was also responsible for projecting the budget for the upcoming fiscal year and for testifying before Congress to support my recommendations.

Christmas came and went like every other day, except that I didn't go to the office. New Year's Eve, December 31, 1918, was just as bad, the most miserable I had ever spent in my life. No gay, whirling evening at a grand Washington hotel. No romantic toasts to the New Year. No beautiful wife

to waltz around a dance floor. I took out my little pocket diary and, with mounting depression, added up the dismal score: I had only been with Grace four days in the last six months! I made a New Year's resolution right there that 1919 was going to be different, and we were never going to be apart that much again.