

Creating the National Park Service

The Missing Years

By Horace M. Albright
and Marian Albright Schenck

Foreword by Robert M. Utley

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Also by Horace M. Albright

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*My father wanted this book dedicated to "the Greenies"—
the National Park Service rangers in the field, the
dedicated, hard-working, backbone spirit of the service.*

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Foreword

by Robert M. Utley

I first met Horace Marden Albright on an autumn day in 1968. I was chief historian of the National Park Service, he a venerated icon of the formative years of our service. Also a passionate student of history, he dropped by my Washington office to get acquainted. For three hours, this spare, soft-spoken, kindly man reached deep into his incredible memory to pour forth a chronicle of the origins of the National Park Service. Expressed in the animated and lucid detail that marked his conversational style, Albright's fascinating stories yielded new insights into my professional antecedents.

Beginning on that day, I formed a lasting friendship with Horace Albright, one grounded in respect, admiration, and shared interests and values. After I left the government in 1980, we continued to exchange letters until his death in 1987 at the age of ninety-seven.

Horace Albright's significance in the early years of the National Park Service can hardly be overstated. As the second director, 1929-33, he expanded and diversified the National Park System and solidified the canons of its management. Greater and more lasting contributions, however, marked the first years of his service. In the painful birth of the National Park Service itself, and in the adoption of a creed to guide the infant agency toward maturity, Horace Albright played a decisive role.

Albright was twenty-three and a graduate student at the University of California when he went to Washington in 1913 to take a position on the staff of Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane in the new administration of President Woodrow Wilson. Stephen T. Mather was thirty years his senior and a man of great wealth when he arrived in 1915 to oversee the national parks. The extraordinary bonds of friendship, admiration, and respect cemented between these two took an agonizing turn when Mather suffered periodic episodes of manic depression.

Near the end of his long life, Albright and his daughter Marian came increasingly to term the formative period of the National Park Service, 1917 and 1918, history's "missing years." For this Albright himself bore some of the responsibility. So solicitous was he of Mather's significance and reputation that he blurred or withheld vital information. In his last years, however, his daughter persuaded him that he owed posterity a true accounting of the missing years.

These were the years when the newly established National Park Service was organized and placed on a firm foundation of policy, principle, and tradition. These were also the years in which Mather suffered what then passed as a "nervous breakdown" but now is seen as the fluctuations of manic depression.

Mather's illness left his young assistant with daunting political and administrative responsibilities, hidden from public view because Mather's condition had to be kept secret. Earlier publications have contained hints of Albright's pivotal role in the congressional passage of the National Park Service Organic Act in 1916; in the formulation of principles and policies to govern the management of the national parks; in the defense of park resources against exploiters using the cover of World War I to gain entry for cattlemen, sheepmen, lumbermen, and miners; and in other issues critical to the future of the fledgling parks. Until his last years, however, Albright persisted in hovering outside the spotlight that bathed Mather.

Albright enjoyed a phenomenal memory until the day of his death, and he kept nearly every scrap of paper that recorded his life—correspondence, reports, news clippings, little pocket diaries, and even railway ticket stubs and the menus of special dinners. He and his daughter, set forth to tell the story of those years. They wrote, in Albright's characteristic style, a virtually day-by-day chronicle of the missing years, as well as the preceding years. The result was a huge manuscript of more than two thousand pages.

Much reduced for publication, here is Albright's story, assembled with the devoted help of Marian Albright Schenck. This book restores Albright to his proper place in history without diminishing the significance of Mather and reveals, in incontestable detail, that the momentous events that gave birth to the National Park Service were a joint achievement. Stephen Mather was the public-relations giant of sweeping vision, exceptional ability to persuade and move people, and unswerving dedication to

a splendid system of parks for all Americans—talents tragically crippled by mental illness. Horace Albright was the young, able, self-effacing, hard-working lawyer who made certain that the grand visions of his chief were carried into reality. It was a crucial partnership; neither could have achieved the outcome without the other.

Albright's memoirs close at the end of the missing years. Newly married and with an infant son, he had intended to return to San Francisco and practice law. Instead, in July 1919, he moved his little family into the big stone commanding officer's quarters at Fort Yellowstone and became the first National Park Service superintendent of Yellowstone National Park. His health restored, Mather assumed his duties as the first director of the National Park Service. During the decade of Mather's tenure, Albright served both as Yellowstone superintendent and as "field assistant director," a post in which he continued to aid his chief in the political, budgetary, policy, and management activities of the service. He was Mather's obvious successor and served as second director from 1929 to 1933, when he resigned to embark on a corporate career. He retired as president of the United States Potash Company.

Although it is a significant historical document, Horace Albright's book stands out as a story of compelling human interest. In addition to his distinctive relationship with Stephen Mather, he lays bare his own feelings and self-doubt as he confronts demands almost overwhelming to one of his youth and inexperience. He also relates without reservation his love for Grace Noble, the tortuous course that led at last to marriage, and the influential role she played in his career.

Throughout, Albright tells engagingly of his dealings with political leaders in the Wilson administration, the Congress, and state and local government; with eccentric but potent figures of the conservation movement; with luminaries of the scientific community; with corporate functionaries and media giants; and even with walk-ons such as Buffalo Bill Cody, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Thomas A. Edison, and Orville Wright. Personalities are vividly drawn and forcefully judged. Conflict and harmony are set forth candidly and incisively. Humorous anecdotes abound.

Finally, Albright exposes graphic fragments of the social history of the United States in the years before and during World War I. The ways in which people thought, behaved, dressed, lived, and traveled are implicit in the narrative. In particular, a continuing theme is travel, by mule back and wagon, by railroad and auto, coupled with the magnificent American

scenery that unfolded before the eyes and emotions of a young idealist from California. Here is a virtual travelogue of the United States in the second decade of the twentieth century.

In the years since World War II, America's national parks and monuments have suffered a variety of crushing impacts. Millions of people in millions of automobiles demanding ever-expanding road networks; proliferating campgrounds, lodges, and hotels; rampant development crowding against park boundaries; air, noise, and water pollution; and a host of destructive special uses severely damaged the very qualities that gave the parks national distinction. At the same time, shrinking appropriations and new scientific insights into the vulnerability of delicate ecosystems severely impaired the ability of the National Park Service to cope with the challenges and, as commanded by the Organic Act of 1916, preserve the parks "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Against this backdrop, modern critics fault the Mather-Albright administration for laying the groundwork for some of these afflictions. Mather and Albright organized a massive publicity campaign to lure people to the national parks, championing automobiles, roads, luxury hotels, and other amenities of comfortable travel. They adopted measures to afford visitors maximum opportunity to view and even interact with wild animals. Albright himself lived to see their knowledge of the natural world outmoded by scientific research.

Such criticism not only unfairly disparages the reputations of two great men but egregiously distorts history. It judges Mather and Albright by the conditions, knowledge, and experience of today; it ignores the social, political, and economic realities of the early twentieth century. Mather and Albright knew that Congress would not create any new parks or fund existing parks unless people visited them. Without publicity, roads, comfortable accommodations, and relaxed enjoyment at the destination, people would not travel to the parks in numbers sufficient to prompt action in the Congress. That the United States today boasts a National Park System at all testifies to the validity of these Mather-Albright policies.

Most national parks display a bronze tablet bearing in bas-relief the likeness of Stephen T. Mather. The text reads: "He laid the foundation of the National Park Service, defining and establishing the policies under which its areas shall be developed and conserved unimpaired for future generations. There will never come an end to the good that he has done."

As Horace Albright's chronicle makes plain, a truer tribute would read, "There will never come an end to the good that *they* have done."

Introduction

by Marian Albright Schenck

Some people will ask what this book is, and why Horace Albright, approaching his century mark, chose to undertake another narrative about the National Park Service. Hadn't enough been written about Stephen Mather, Horace Albright, and the history of the National Park Service? In a way, the answer is yes. But in another way, the answer is an emphatic no. What he called "the missing years," 1917-19, had never truly been examined.

This book is not an autobiography in the precise sense. An autobiography is a biography of a person written by himself. Instead this is a book conceived, planned, and for the most part overseen and checked, page by page, by my father. I did research, meticulously copied his spoken words as we discussed the events of his life, followed his directions in locating material, and then wrote the narrative for his correction and final approval. He died on March 28, 1987, before the last section of the text had been completed, although the outline had been created and important parts had been written.

My father took on this chore in his nineties because for many years he had been concerned that the early years of the National Park Service had not been chronicled in sufficient depth. He realized that he had been partially to blame because of his reluctance to discuss this period. He had overseen, corrected, and approved all three books published about Stephen Mather and himself (plus an unpublished one). They contained much the same material and presented history as he wanted it told at the time. He feared that a full disclosure might harm Mather's reputation. My father worshiped Mather and wanted to do nothing to damage his name.

As the years went by, however, my father grew increasingly worried about the rising criticism of early Park Service policies and actions. He

considered some of the criticism unwarranted and disparaging of Mr. Mather's reputation. He decided that the time had come to write about these "missing years," to explain how the policies were formed, and to emphasize the serious difficulties that had to be overcome.

But my father faced a terrible dilemma. Since 1916 he had kept files of these early days in his home. He allowed access only to such documents as he chose. These files contained sensitive material about Mather and other matters. He agonized that laying out the detailed history of the years 1917-19 would do more harm than good. He treasured the memory of Mr. Mather and felt that his daughter, her husband, and her family had to be protected, for he loved them all as his own family. He wavered over whether he should destroy these records for the sake of the Mather descendants, but was held back by the belief that, as a historian, he should save them.

Finally, because these events were so far in the past and because some modern writers were distorting the true history, he believed that his personal documents and memories were needed, as he called it, "to put the record straight." He was uneasy with the writers' reluctance to use primary sources and with their simplistic and revisionist tendencies. He concluded that if he could set down the factual history it would throw needed light on those shadowy years. He wanted to clarify the context of that eventful time and place. He would relate the development of the National Park Service, but he would also show how profoundly Mather had suffered and how he had emerged through his own strength to return to years of brilliance that benefited the service.

Even as we worked on other projects (*A Trip to Paradise 1920*, *My Six Trips with Ickes*, and *The Mather Mountain Party*, the last for the centennial of Sequoia National Park), my father began to formulate the story of "the missing years."

First, my father read every document and letter in his old Phoenix File boxes, sorting out what would be pertinent to the narrative. He intended to start with meeting Stephen Mather and end with Mather's return to Washington after his prolonged illness. He then made a general outline of the narrative he wanted to write.

Next, my father and I combed the material that he and Frank Taylor had used to write a biography of Mather several years after his death in 1930. My father had written to more than four hundred people who were close to Mather, asking them for anecdotes or anything else they could recall about the man. I don't know how many responded back in the

1930s, but quite a few answers remained in his files. There were also chapters from their uncompleted book *Along Came Steve Mather*. In addition, there were more than a hundred pages of my father's handwritten or typed information prepared for that book but as yet unused. Much of this Robert Shankland used when my father asked him to start afresh on the biography later published as *Steve Mather of the National Parks*.

For the period we were writing about, my father had retained his personal files, his pocket diaries, my mother's diaries, and his scrapbooks. There were files with data provided for Donald Swain's *Wilderness Defender*, as well as oral tapes and transcripts for Robert Cahn when he was working on *The Birth of the National Park Service*. My father also had four or five transcripts of tapes he had made for Columbia University, the National Park Service, and other organizations and individuals.

After we had culled all these sources for the years through 1919, my father sent me to the University of California at Los Angeles, to which he had donated personal papers. The research assistant there helped me check these out and made copies of items I thought useful. Historians from many parks combed their libraries for material. I might add that a few years after the death of my father, the Park Service's bureau historian, Barry Mackintosh, introduced me to the early records of the service in the National Archives, where I double-checked some of the details.

Now the work was to start. By this time, my father lived at the Chandler Convalescent Home near Los Angeles. But he spent much of his time at our home, a drive of about ten minutes. In a study my husband and I had set up for him during the years he had lived with us were his books, files, photograph albums, and my computer. We spent hours here as we began to put the book together.

As my father grew older, he remained at Chandler more of the time. A different routine became necessary. We would discuss the work on the book. I would take down his instructions and conversations, go home, check out details, write a section, and take it to him to read, correct, or make additional suggestions. Another rewrite or more might be necessary until he was satisfied.

At some point in this process—I don't remember exactly when—my father decided he wanted to tell the whole story of his life before the missing years. I believe my daughter asked him to do that, not for the book but just for family history. He got out some manuscripts he had written years earlier, a partial autobiography. Publisher Alfred Knopf, his friend and a longtime park supporter, had asked him to write this and

intended to publish it. However, my father never got beyond the years from his birth to his move to Washington in 1913.

This was a turning point for him, because he decided that he wanted every possible detail about his early life written down. The planned book would still cover only 1915-18. Later he decided to extend it into 1919 to include his appointment as superintendent of Yellowstone National Park. Of course, the narrative now burgeoned well beyond the original concept, but my father said the part for the book could later be cut down to size. Meantime, we were going to write every fact that we could find and he could remember. As he worked over the primary source material, the photograph albums, and his old scrapbooks, the narrative kept growing as my father's fabled memory clicked in, providing an incredible amount of detail. It turned into an extraordinary marathon.

We found it fairly easy to bring his original manuscript up to the creation of the National Park Service in 1916. From that time on, however, especially with Mr. Mather's breakdown in January 1917, it was a slow, meticulous task. It's hard to describe how painful much of this was for my father. He wanted to skip lightly over Mather's illness, and sometimes he would say that certain facts couldn't be included, or he would want to gloss over them, always trying to protect the Mather family. Then he'd come around to feeling that the story had to be written, that it had to be true history this time. Occasionally tears slowly coursed down his cheeks as memories became too vivid.

We worked for several years in this manner. Then in the summer of 1986 my father nearly died. When he returned from the hospital, he seemed to feel that he wouldn't live much longer. He had to finish his projects as rapidly as possible. From that time until March 1987, when he left forever, we finished his *Six Trips with Ickes* and polished *The Mather Mountain Party* for publication. But he always pushed ahead with this book too. Believing that his time was getting shorter, he fortunately insisted on skipping ahead to get down the facts on Mather's problems at the end of 1918, his own conflict with Interior Secretary Franklin K. Lane, his resignation and ultimate settlement with Mather, and his assumption of the superintendency of Yellowstone National Park in 1919.

In the years after my father's death, I worked on this project whenever possible. To finish the last section myself, I followed the same procedures we had used for so many years. My husband and I made trips to places that figured in my father's life, down old roads to destinations bypassed or forgotten and on to modern parks. I spent hours in various

national parks going through the archives with the always helpful ranger-historians. Few people still lived who were involved in the missing years, but I corresponded or talked with most or with their relatives, many of whom I had known as a child.

Finally, this monster of a manuscript, close to two thousand pages, was wrapped up. And then the question arose of what to do with it. My father had often said he would have a National Park Service historian look at it. So I hesitantly asked our friend Bob Utley, a retired chief historian of the service, if he would do this. He kindly read the whole thing and felt that, with careful editing, it could be offered for publication. At his suggestion, a "prequel" of my father's life from birth to 1915 was included as an introduction to the main story.

To pare the manuscript down to publishable dimensions, many large segments had to be cut out altogether. To connect what remained and preserve continuity, "bridges" became essential. My father, of course, could not oversee these; I created them, using his distinctive first-person style and his own words and thoughts where possible. I am confident that he would have changed virtually nothing in these connecting paragraphs. They are set in italics to distinguish them from the body of the text.

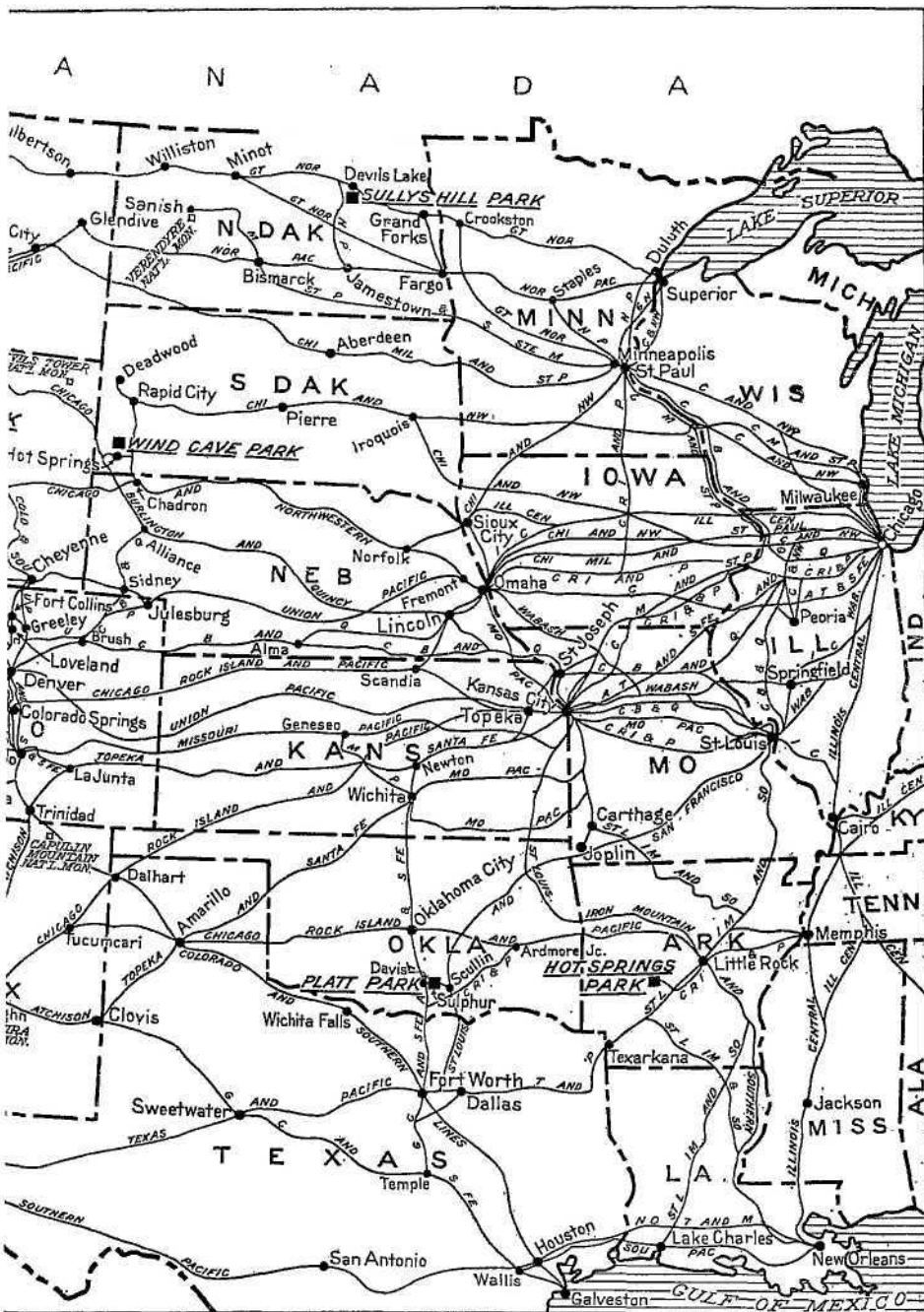
It is impossible to state the debt we owe to Robert M. Utley. His place as a historian of America's past is well known and honored. His face and voice are recognizable through his appearances in and contributions to fine television documentaries, such as *Real West* and *How the West Was Lost*. But only those who know him personally can appreciate the man who is kindly, intellectually brilliant, and devoted to his country and the National Park Service. I also owe him my humble appreciation and gratitude for his endless hours of plowing through thousands of pages of manuscript to pull together a clear and concise narrative while leaving my father's original words and actions intact. As for me, I learned an encyclopedia of information on editing, punctuation, and writing discipline from his patient teaching and sage advice. More than that, I learned about a man who is in many ways a "clone" of my father: a fine-honed mind with an understanding, gentle, humorous, optimistic, and idealistic soul.

In conclusion, let me say that my father and I tried to produce a narrative as historically accurate as possible, using almost entirely primary source material along with his memory of dates, places, and events he had experienced. His age precluded his writing the text, but he read and approved all except the last chapters. His death left me with only a short period to cover, a time for which he had already supplied the salient facts.

This, therefore, is neither a personally written autobiography nor a personal memoir. It is an effort on the part of a man who loved his National Park Service and Stephen Mather and wanted to tell the history of both to the best of his ability in a factual historical manner.

INTRODUCTION

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National Parks and Monuments, October 1, 1917. Seventeen national parks containing 9,773 square miles or 6,254,508 acres and twenty-two national monuments containing 143.4 square miles or 91,824 acres. Courtesy National Park Service.

Creating the National Park Service

Maybe it's like constructing a house. I'm at the stage where I am laying the foundations. They are what everything else is built upon. I have no blueprints and no architect. Only the ideals and principles for which the Park Service was created—to preserve, intact, the heritage we were bequeathed.

HORACE M. ALBRIGHT, SEPTEMBER 1917