

Babbitts and Bureaucracies:
The Battle for Lake George, Alaska

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In 1937, Alaska Railroad official Harold Snell wrote to National Park Service Director Arno Cammerer with an unusual request. He told a remarkable story about a lake less than 50 miles east of Anchorage, and 30 miles from the new agricultural colony at Palmer. Lake George, high in the Chugach Range, was inaccessible by either road or trail, so very few Alaskans had spent much time there, and because the lake lay in an alpine bowl surrounded by glaciers, only a handful of adventurers had even seen it.

Despite those apparent drawbacks, Snell thought that the lake should be a national monument.¹ Lake George, he reasoned, was a rare example of one of those great geological oddities, the self-dumping lake. The lake's northern edge rested against the southern arm of Knik Glacier, and every summer, rain and glacial runoff coming down from the high Chugach pushed the lake higher and higher until it forced its way through cracks in the glacier in what geologists call an outburst flood. Water thundered through the gorge below the lake, swept out into the Knik River flats, and created a torrent that amazed all who witnessed it. One nineteenth century flood was so huge that it destroyed three Native villages; more recently it threatened and closed roads, bridges, and structures in the floodplain.² But residents of Anchorage, Palmer, and the surrounding area were entranced by the phenomenon, and local organizations—always looking for a way to stimulate economic development—hoped to see the area become a visitor attraction. Perhaps because the Alaska Railroad and the Park Service were sister agencies in the Interior Department, Cammerer quickly agreed to Snell's suggestion.

Snell's letter turned out to be the opening volley in a 30-year saga in which the George Babbitts³ of the area made repeated, spirited attempts to bring Lake George into the national park system. Over that 30-year time span, NPS officials learned more about the lake: they took surveys, they brought in experts, they met with other federal officials, state officials, and scientists, and virtually everyone they met said that making the area a national park made little if any sense. But historian Claus Naske has offered an explanation that bears repeating in this context. In an article about a proposed cement plant, he stated that "On the Last Frontier, federal economic programs never die, they just require more funding."⁴ To fit the Lake George case more closely, I'd like to postulate a corollary to Naske's axiom, which is "In Alaska,

¹ Frank Been, "Report on Investigation of National Monument Possibilities of Lake George, Alaska," November 10, 1939, in *Lake George Investigations* (or *LGI*), 1939-1966 (unpub. mss.), ARLIS.

² USGS, "The Breakout of Alaska's Lake George" (Washington?, GPO, 1969), 10. This pamphlet (also on p. 10) noted that "over the years, flood damage caused by the breakout was so serious that by 1940 [the community of] Matanuska was virtually abandoned." But the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, in its *Knik-Matanuska-Susitna; a Visual History* (Sutton, Bentwood Press, 1985), p. 99, states that floods from the Matanuska (not the Knik) River during the 1930s contributed to the community's demise.

³ The term is taken from Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel *Babbitt*, and more specifically from its protagonist, George F. Babbitt.

⁴ Claus-M. Naske, "Alaska in the Mix," *Alaska History* 16 (Spring-Fall 2001), 17.

conservation area proposals never die, they just require repetition, unflagging enthusiasm, and the patience to await a change in the bureaucratic winds.”

As I mentioned above, Harold Snell made his suggestion in 1937, which was a fortuitous time for development planning in Alaska. Congress that year initiated a major study on Alaska development opportunities.⁵ It was also the year that construction began on the McKinley Park Hotel; the Civilian Conservation Corps was active in the territory, and the military was getting ready to establish its first new base in Alaska in almost 40 years.⁶ And after years of slumber, Park Service officials were first beginning to look beyond the boundaries of the existing parks for ideas on where new parks might be located. In southeastern Alaska, wildlife conservation groups were demanding vast new acreages for the protection of brown bear habitat, and new interest was also being shown in the vast wilderness in the Wrangell and eastern Chugach Mountain ranges. So just a few weeks after Frank Been became the new park superintendent at Mount McKinley National Park, the Washington office sent him off on a long inspection trip to see which of these area, if any, were worthy of consideration as a national park unit.

So during the late summer of 1939, Been spent some time in both Anchorage and Palmer trying to gather what he could about the lake. He learned, indeed, that once each summer, Lake George gushed forth and flooded the Knik River bed. As a tourist attraction, however, its minuses greatly outweighed its pluses. The flood, for example, was typically of just a few hours' duration; just a few years earlier, the flood had not been a yearly event; Lake George was far from unique, because self-dumping lakes were “not an unusual natural happening;” the nearby countryside was “not unusual or spectacular;” and finally, this and other self-dumping lakes were a “temporary natural display” which would “inevitably disappear ... within a comparatively few years.” And the lake, moreover, was so remote that to reach the spot, visitors had to hire a guide, buck the Knik River current in an open boat, then scramble up the mountain side. So Been, not surprisingly, concluded that the lake and its surroundings were “not appropriate for National Park Service consideration.”⁷

If Snell had been a chamber of commerce official in Wyoming, or perhaps the owner of a cavern in Tennessee, Been's rejection might well have been the end of it, and the suggestion would have gone down as one of hundreds of spirited, well-intentioned requests that the Park Service has received over the years from people looking to bolster their local economy. But in Alaska, a federal territory, it was the government's business to foster tourism, and both the Park Service and the Alaska Railroad, its sister agency, were looking for new opportunities to bring tourists north and encourage them to linger.

⁵ Natural Resources Committee, *Regional Planning, Part VII, Alaska—Its Resources and Development* (Washington, GPO), 1938. The report's ten-page “tourism development” section does not mention Lake George.

⁶ Lyman Woodman, *Duty Station Northwest*, vol. 2, p. 57.

⁷ Been, “Report on Investigation;” A.E. Demaray to Harold W. Snell, December 29, 1939, in *LGI*. Most visitors to the site began their journey just south of the Knik River Bridge on the [old] Glenn Highway, which was completed from Anchorage to Palmer in September 1936. See Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report* for 1936 (p. 6) and 1937 (p. 7).

Beginning in 1940, Alaska's population grew quickly as it built up its military bases and prepared for war. Thousands who were new to the north were entranced by its wonders, and given the annual flood that resulted, Lake George quickly became known as "Alaska's famed self-dumping lake."⁸ News of the flood was front-page material in several local newspapers.⁹

Hardy outdoorsmen scrambled up the slope to see the lake, a movie showing the breakup was shown in local church halls, Sara Machetanz wrote a chapter about the lake in a book about Alaska, and local residents with a little "sporting blood" formed betting pools, hoping to cash in on when the Knik River flood would reach its crest.¹⁰ And at a lodge along the old Glenn Highway, the specialty of the house during the 1940s was drinks served with chunks of ice that had floated down from Lake George during its annual breakup.¹¹

Then, in the mid-1950s, a new supporter came forth: Robert Atwood, who had been editing the *Anchorage Times* since 1935. Atwood was a "boomer" who had touted the statehood cause for years and encouraged economic growth at every opportunity.¹² In an October 1955 letter to Park Service Director Conrad Wirth, Atwood didn't mince words about Lake George's potential: "We have near Anchorage the most stupendous, colossal, spectacular and unusual phenomenon in the world that would make one of the most interesting and alluring national parks in the entire nation." Atwood noted that "during the dumping process, huge chunks of ice which have been described as bigger than the Empire State Building tumble off the glacier and are washed down the river;" the lake, moreover, "could be made readily accessible for tourists and others by the construction of a road." And he assured Wirth that Lake George was every bit as important as Yellowstone, noting that "if so many thousands of persons enjoyed a trickle of water like Tower Falls, and a spurt like Old Faithful, the wonders of this spot in Alaska would really bowl them over."¹³

Wirth, in response, stated that Lake George had been prominently mentioned in the recently-published, government-sponsored Alaska Recreation Survey as "one of the finest examples of an ice-dammed, self-dumping lake which has been an annual thrill for those fortunate enough to see the ice go out." He cautioned, however, that because the lake's "principal feature seems to be a seasonal phenomenon of short duration, I believe that its suitability for national status is at least questionable." He recommended that Atwood contact Governor Heintzleman and work toward establishing Alaska's first territorial park.¹⁴ Atwood, however, didn't give up easily, and told Wirth that "Lake George meets every specification for a national park ... Your suggestion of making it a territorial park, or State park, is good but Alaska has so many

⁸ *Cordova Times*, October 3, 1941, 3.

⁹ See, for example, the following *Anchorage Times* items: August 16, 1949, 1; July 21, 1951, 1; July 18, 1960, 1.

¹⁰ *The Alaskan (Anchorage)*, October 17, 1941, in *LGI, Anchorage Daily Times*, July 21, 1951, 1 and July 25, 1951, 1; Thomas A. Fink to NPS, August 26, 1958, in *LGI, Anchorage Daily Times*, April 16, 1966, 24.

¹¹ "Community Profile: Knik River," *Anchorage Daily News*, June 24, 2007, B-3. The lodge was located where the old Glenn Highway crossed Goat Creek, about 4 miles west of the Knik River bridge.

¹² John Strohmeyer, *Extreme Conditions; Big Oil and the Transformation of Alaska* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993), 32-33.

¹³ Robert B. Atwood to Conrad L. Wirth, October 31, 1955, in *LGI*.

¹⁴ Wirth to Atwood, December 1, 1955, in *LGI*.

physical problems of development [that] I doubt that the Territory or State would be interested in developing it for many years to come.” By this time, however, Wirth had located Frank Been’s 1939 report, and sent a copy of it to Atwood.¹⁵

Local interests, however, continued to hype the idea. In early 1958 the Anchorage chapter of the Izaak Walton League sent a resolution to Delegate E.L. Bartlett calling for a national park or monument; it cited that the “scene of this ‘profound and lasting’ spectacle” during breakup “should be a public recreation site available to all henceforth and forever more.” In response, Bartlett asked Wirth to re-evaluate the agency’s earlier decision.¹⁶ Once again, as in 1937, the suggestion to study the area came at a propitious time, because the agency was just beginning to study “the adequacy of the National Park System to determine whether there are qualified types of area which are not represented or perhaps not properly represented.” The *Anchorage Times*, jumping the gun, soon announced that the agency would “initiate studies of the Lake George area in the near future.”¹⁷ And supporting letters soon arrived from the Anchorage Garden Club, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and other civic groups.¹⁸ Bartlett, during this period, “contemplated introducing” a bill to make Lake George a national park, but he never did so.¹⁹

The NPS, in fact, had not yet decided whether the idea was worth a studying again, and one agency planner told a supporter that the area should be considered for a state, not national, park. Not wanting to discard the idea entirely, however, another planner, George Collins, called on Kirk Stone, a University of Wisconsin geography professor, for help. Collins noted that “some of the people in Anchorage are much interested in having a road built to Lake George so that people could get up there easily in the late summer to see the ice go out.” Knowing that Stone had been interested in the lake since the late 1940s and had made an extensive survey of the lake and its environs in 1951, Collins asked him for “a pretty full account ... of its worth, or lack of it, for National Park System status.” And he also pitched the idea to the head of the U.S. Geological Survey’s Alaska Branch and wondered if “some of your fellows might give this subject their careful professional thought.”²⁰

In short order, Collins received detailed replies from his colleagues. Dr. Stone, who had just completed a lengthy manuscript on Lake George, told a local booster that “there were several things of a much higher priority and of much more serious value and consideration for a potential new state than working on the construction of such a road to Lake George. ... it is not worth the tremendous cost in dollars and in time for the construction of a road to the lake.” He readily admitted that Lake George was probably “the largest of the world’s ice-dammed

¹⁵ Atwood to Wirth, December 8, 1955; Wirth to Atwood, December 22, 1955; both in *LGI*.

¹⁶ Izaak Walton League of America Resolution, n.d.; E.L. Bartlett to Wirth, May 12, 1958; both in *LGI*.

¹⁷ Hillory A. Tolson to Bartlett, May 28, 1958, in *LGI*, *Anchorage Daily Times*, June 5, 1958, 1.

¹⁸ Betty Snider to “Gentlemen,” July 8, 1958; Thomas A. Fink to Lawrence C. Merriam, August 26, 1958; both in *LGI*.

¹⁹ Evert L. Brown to Bartlett, July 25, 1958; Bartlett to Egan, August 15, 1961; both in File 882 (1959-66), Series 41, RG 01, ASA.

²⁰ Leo Diederich to Mrs. Hugh Snider, July 22, 1958; George L. Collins to Kirk H. Stone, October 1, 1958; Collins to George O. Gates, October 2, 1958; all in *LGI*, *Professional Geographer* 1 (November 1949), 90.

lakes,” but he concluded that “I do not see that this is something which is worthy of formation into a National Monument or National Park.” As for the Geological Survey, the acting branch chief dutifully polled his colleagues; 11 voiced an opinion, and “the consensus seems to be that the Lake George area is not one worthy of inclusion in the National Park System although several of the men felt that it could be a useful recreation site of a somewhat lesser ‘rank’.” (One, in fact, stated that “personally, the bare bottom of a recently dumped lake is not my idea of a natural beauty spot or of a place to take the kiddies for a picnic.”) The agency’s regional director, Lawrence Merriam, felt likewise; he noted that “the area ... has been the subject of discussion from time to time” since 1939, but agency observations over the years “have not caused any reversal of this opinion, although we have reconsidered the matter several times.”²¹

The coming of statehood, however, apparently brought new life into the Lake George proposal. Newly-elected U.S. Senator Ernest Gruening, by July 1960, was well aware that after the lake’s ice dam burst, “a great cataract pours down into the Matanuska Valley” and “many people spend days and nights waiting for this dramatic spectacle.” His enthusiasm was so great that the Senate Interior Committee authorized him to investigate its possibilities as an NPS unit. And later that summer, he expressed an interest in touring the area with an Alaska park superintendent.²² Gruening’s announcement, followed by local publicity about the annual flood, forced Collins to once again examine “that hardy perennial, the proposal for a National Park at Lake George.”²³

Meanwhile, plans to study the lake further awaited Gruening’s visit. NPS officials, hoping to assist the Senator, gradually began assembling an official party to accompany him. Gruening, however, was forced to delay his trip from the summer to the fall, then again until the following summer.²⁴ The NPS was heartened to hear that Lake George was being identified as a potential state park site; but the Alaska government, which was struggling to gain a bureaucratic foothold, had not yet established any state parks.²⁵ Perhaps as a result, the Alaska legislature, during its 1961 session, passed a resolution calling for a *national* park at Lake George.²⁶

Park Service officials hoped to time Gruening’s Lake George tour during the dramatic days of breakup, and Geological Survey officials helpfully kept tabs on the lake to ensure a timely visit. The air tour was held on July 26, 1961, and according to one participant, “the run-off

²¹ Stone to Collins, October 14, 1958; Merriam to Fink, October 22, 1958; E. H. Cobb to Collins, December 15, 1958; all in *LGI*. In August 1960, Stone wrote back to Collins and reiterated his earlier opinions, in a manner even more forceful than before.

²² Gruening to Wirth, July 8, 1960, in *LGI*.

²³ *Anchorage Daily Times*, July 13, 1960, 3 and July 18, 1960, 1; Collins to Stone, August 5, 1960, in *LGI*.

²⁴ Samuel A. King to RD/R4, August 12, 1960; King to RD/R4, September 9, 1960; King to RD/R4, October 21, 1960; all in *LGI*; Supt’s Monthly Report, Mount McKinley National Park, August 1960, 3; SMR, MOMC, September 1960, 2-3; SMR, MOMC, October 1960, 2-3.

²⁵ Herbert Maier to Supt. MOMC, August 26, 1960, in *LGI*.

²⁶ Hugh J. Wade to Stewart L. Udall, April 24, 1961; John M. Kelly (USDI) to Wade, May 23, 1961, both in *LGI*; House Joint Resolution 26, March 27, 1961, in State of Alaska, *Session Laws, Resolutions, and Memorials, 1961*, 260.

through the gorge below Lake George was near maximum volume, presenting a spectacular sight with many icebergs of varying sizes being carried along by the large volumes of water.”²⁷

The five-man party, which included four federal officials and the state lands division director, quickly recognized that they were far from alone in watching the thundering flood. Spectators in a wide variety of aircraft—primarily fixed-wing craft based in Palmer—flew over the area. They were unable, however, to locate any formal trails that led up to the lake. Building a road to the lake, moreover, would be extremely expensive, and there would be little room along the steep, precarious route for parking areas, a campground, or other visitor facilities. They therefore concluded—as had others previously—that the area was “not of broad national interest.” Instead, it was more suitable as a state park.²⁸ Gruening, after hearing the group’s conclusion, agreed with that course of action.²⁹

Despite that setback, government planners continued to look into Lake George’s park potential. In February 1964, the Interior Department reserved a 30-mile-long, quarter-mile-wide right-of-way between the old Glenn Highway bridge and the lake “for preservation of public recreation values.” Soon afterward, new NPS Director George Hartzog asked a number of top staff to compile a document on potential Alaska parklands for a report that would be entitled *Operation Great Land*. Lake George, not surprisingly, was listed as an area of interest; its “paramount significance” was its research potential for “glaciers and glacial action.”³⁰

In early 1966, the idea of turning Lake George arose yet again when the Matanuska Valley Lions Club passed a resolution to establish a Lake George National Monument and an adjacent Knik River national park and game refuge.³¹ Shortly afterward, Rep. Ralph Rivers (D-Alaska) discussed the matter with officials from both the National Park Service and the state lands division. At Rivers’ request, NPS officials agreed to compile a report on the lake’s feasibility as a park; they told him about proposed boundaries, roads and trails, and upcoming public hearings. A report was promised by August 1. State officials, who also attended the meeting with Rivers, closely followed the planning process because they were considering the selection of these lands as part of the statehood allotment.³²

²⁷ King to RD/R4, July 31, 1961; SMR, MOMC, July 1961, 2-3, 5. Bob Atwood of the *Anchorage Times*, spotlighting Lake George’s “annual rampage,” wrote a pro-park editorial the day before the officials’ flight. *Anchorage Times*, July 25, 1961, 4.

²⁸ King to RD/R4, July 31, 1961; P. D. Hanson to King, August 7, 1961; both in *LGI*. State lands director Roscoe Bell, in a letter to his superior, was more reluctant in his conclusion. He “indicated that we had hopes this might be developed as a National Park or monument area, but that if it wasn’t so developed the state would expect to select the land and develop it for recreational park purposes because of its outstanding characteristics.” Bell to Phil R. Holdsworth, August 22, 1961, in *LGI*; Kelly to Bartlett, October 13, 1961, in File 882 (1959-66), Series 41, RG 01, ASA.

²⁹ Gruening to Kelly, October 21, 1961, in *LGI*; SMR, MOMC, January 1962, 2.

³⁰ Public Land Order 3324, February 7, 1964, in *Federal Register* 30 (February 13, 1964), 2423; Frank Williss, “Do Things Right the First Time;” *The National Park Service and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980*, 2nd edition (Anchorage, NPS, 2005), 10, 13-14. The public land order is still in effect.

³¹ R.J. Miller to Ralph Rivers, March 22, 1966, in File 883.1, Series 41, RG 01, ASA; *Anchorage Daily Times*, March 19, 1966, 13.

³² SMR, MOMC, April 1966, 2; SMR, MOMC, May 1966, 4; *Anchorage Daily Times*, April 16, 1966, 24;

Soon afterward, however, federal officials lost their enthusiasm for the proposal, and by August 1966 they concluded that “its suitability as a unit of the National Park System has not changed. Comments ... have indicated it to be of relatively great *local* interest...”. Instead, they felt that a new lands concept could more adequately identify and protect areas that were primarily important for their scientific or research value. This concept, implemented by Interior Secretary Stewart Udall during the Kennedy administration, was the national natural landmark. NPS officials quickly recognized that Lake George was an excellent candidate to be a national natural landmark, and in April 1967 they recommended the idea of Lake George becoming one of the first Alaska candidate to this registry.³³ Bob Atwood and the *Anchorage Times*, however, were underwhelmed by the decision. Atwood, in an editorial, sniffed that the landmark idea was “not much recognition for something that ranks as one of the great wonders of the world.” Instead, the *Times* felt that national park status was “long overdue” for Lake George.³⁴

Despite Atwood’s pleas, however, Secretary Udall officially designated Lake George as a national natural landmark on July 26, 1968; that same day, Senator Gruening dedicated a plaque to that effect in a ceremony held at the Old Glenn Highway bridge.³⁵ Ever since that time, the area has remained on the government registry because, according to the nomination form, it is the “most impressive ‘self-dumping’ lake in the country.”³⁶ But in an ironic twist of fate, it turned out that the remarkable self-dumping activities were indeed temporary, just as scientists had predicted. The year 1967 marked the first time in many years that the lake did not burst forth in a dramatic flood, and the flood has not been repeated at any time since then.³⁷ Today, therefore, Lake George is one of thousands of scenic Alaska lakes; it has no remarkable qualities that demand the attention of national park authorities. It does, however, bear a remarkable if little-known history.

In conclusion, the 30-year effort to establish a national park unit at Lake George seems, at first glance, to chronicle the pie-in-the-sky expectations of local economic development advocates and to pit their enthusiasm against the Park Service and its lofty, sometimes unrealistic

Anchorage Daily News, April 16, 1966, 3. Rivers, at the time, held the key chairmanship of the National Parks and Recreation Subcommittee for the House Interior Committee. State land records indicate that the State of Alaska did not select the land in and around Lake George until January 1972 (it was part of a massive, 182,000-acre application) and it received tentative approval for the land in September 1980.

³³ Richard G. Prasil to RD/WR, August 26, 1966, in LGI; Kirk Stone, “The Annual Emptying of Lake George,” *Arctic* 16 (March 1963), 26-39; Stone, “Alaskan Ice-Dammed Lakes,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 53 (September 1963), 332-49. Agency officials, in April 1967, recommended both Iliamna Volcano as well as Lake George to the NNL registry.

³⁴ *Anchorage Daily Times*, May 10, 1967, 4.

³⁵ Williss, “Do Things Right the First Time,” 8, 17; *Anchorage Daily Times*, July 24, 1968.

³⁶ Lake George NNL website (www.nature.nps.gov/nnl). Also see Keith Boggs and David Duffy, *Ecological Review of the Lake George National Natural Landmark* (Anchorage, NPS), October 1996.

³⁷ U.S. Geological Survey, *The Breakout of Alaska’s Lake George*, 1969; Austin Post and Lawrence R. Mayo, *Glacier Dammed Lakes and Outburst Floods in Alaska*, Hydrologic Investigations Atlas HA-455 (Washington, 1971), 4; T. Neil Davis, “Lake George Breakout,” *Alaska Science Forum*, July 28, 1980.

standards. On the one hand, advocates such as Atwood, the Izaak Walton League, state lands officials and the Alaska legislature all wanted to see a park established and improved, but only if the federal government was willing to pay for it. This attitude brings to mind Orlando Miller's quote about Palmer's residents during the late 1940s; "the ambition of the town contrasted oddly with the failure of local people to assume the responsibility for local affairs."³⁸ But it's perhaps more reasonable to see Alaskans' activism as a necessary ingredient in getting local citizens to back the idea of a new park—few if any NPS units, after all, have been established without a fierce set of advocates—and their insistence on a *national park* was mere pragmatism. Atwood and other Alaska leaders knew that territorial and state governments had neither the funds nor the political will to establish a park, and national monuments during this period were notoriously underfunded. So only a national park could command sufficient prestige to play any meaningful role in local tourism development. Alaska's leaders thus did a splendid job of galvanizing local support. But despite the intensity of their efforts, the realities of Lake George's site and situation—its remoteness, its lack of uniqueness as a glacial feature, and most of all the temporary nature of its wonders—combined to ensure that the area would not become a national park unit. Thus the conservation corollary postulated above is not true, because while repetition, enthusiasm, and patience are all necessary factors in the process that creates new conservation units, these qualities are not by themselves sufficient to ensure a park area's establishment.

³⁸ Orlando Miller, *The Frontier in Alaska and the Matanuska Colony* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1975), 190.