

Mather Homestead 203-207-7001
 September 11, 2022 Heather Raker

Thanks for
 having me!
 Justin Duncan

Thanks . . . McPherson family

It's good to be here at this beautiful and historic homestead, which has its own story to tell, dating back to the American Revolution. And it's wonderful that the McPherson family made arrangements to ensure that it will be preserved in perpetuity and serve as a vibrant educational resource for future generations. Preserving things for future generations is, as you'll hear, a family tradition. //

I'm here today, not to talk about this place and the long family line of its ownership, but instead to talk about one of its owners and his lasting impact on the national parks and our national life. It's worth noting that this year is the 150th anniversary of Yellowstone National Park, commemorating the birth of the first national park in world history. Previously, a nation's most majestic and inspiring landscapes were the exclusive preserves for royalty and the rich and the well-connected.

But on March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed a bill declaring that the spectacular region near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River was, quote, "dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." //

Years later, as he dedicated the building of the stone arch at Yellowstone's north entrance, President Theodore Roosevelt—our greatest conservationist president—made special note of that phrase—even repeated it twice: "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people"—calling the park "noteworthy in its essential democracy" and "something unique in the world." /

Two generations after that, the writer and historian Wallace Stegner called national parks "the best idea we ever had." /

To me, the national park idea is the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape. / And so, while I'm not going to tell Stephen Mather's entire life story, I want to point out that he was born on the Fourth of July in 1867. / How appropriate. / The man who would go on to breathe new life into "America's best idea" began his life on the nation's birthday. //

But let's start our story in 1914, when he was in his 40s. / By this time, Mather had already become a millionaire, thanks to what reporters called his "incandescent enthusiasm" and an "eight-cylinder, 60-mile-per-hour sort of personality." /

He had made his fortune in the borax business, / where he deployed his special genius for promotion to create a demand for a mundane household product through a national publicity campaign, / branding the product from Death Valley as Twenty Mule Team Borax. /

(That branding was so successful that, more than half a century later, another great communicator, Ronald Reagan—years before he became California's governor and then the nation's president—was still using it when he reached millions of television viewers as host of "Death Valley Days.") /

By 1914, Mather had retired from business, but was restless for a new challenge. (Benjamin Franklin did the same thing in his 40s?)

Years earlier, during a climb up Mount Rainier, he had discovered that, during the darkest moments of his life, time in the great outdoors seemed to calm his sometimes fragile nerves and revive his prodigious energies. And he counted as one of the highlights of his life meeting the legendary John Muir on a hike in Sequoia National Park.

Now he was vacationing in Sequoia and Yosemite national parks—and grew disgusted by what he saw. Hiking trails were in poor condition; cattle could be found grazing among the trees; speculators had managed to file claims on choice parcels of land, planning to log sequoias Mather believed should be protected forever.

He dashed off an angry letter to an old college schoolmate from the University of California, Franklin K. Lane, now the secretary of the Interior, who sent back a response that changed the arc of American history. “Dear Steve,” Franklin wrote, “if you don’t like the way the national parks are being run, why don’t you come to Washington and run them yourself.”

And so, that’s exactly what Stephen Mather did. He showed up and told Lane he’d take it on for ^{one} a year—without pay. A nationwide search couldn’t have found a better person for the task.

At this moment in history, even though national parks had been in existence for nearly 50 years, there was no national park service. The departments of Agriculture, Interior, and War each claimed some responsibility for the parks, but in truth no one was in charge.

Mather decided that needed to change. In his new role as an assistant to the Interior Secretary, in 1915 he set out on a whirlwind inspection tour of the parks, covering 35,000 miles before the year ended.

With him went a 24-year-old legal assistant in the department, named Horace Albright, who was persuaded to stay on the job, when Mather doubled his salary, which Mather paid from his own pocket.

If Mather's sudden and somewhat serendipitous arrival in his new job was one of those happenstances of history that in retrospect seem more like Providence, the presence of Horace Albright would prove equally crucial to the future of the parks. They became a team; each one indispensable to what they would achieve. But Mather was always the driving force and fountain of ideas; Albright was the man who took care of the details.

"He was old enough to be my father," Albright said, but "I instantly felt a strong kinship with him. Talking over an idea meant listening, while he restlessly paced around the room, gesturing to make his points. His was a lightning fast brain with an electric nervous energy to go with it. I thanked my stars I was young, strong, and healthy. His energy would have killed someone who wasn't."

In Colorado, they attended the dedication of Rocky Mountain National Park, the nation's newest. At Mount Rainier in Washington state, Mather concluded the superintendent was a political hack and fired him on the spot.

At Glacier National Park, in Montana, he decided that the park's headquarters were inadequate, so he found a better parcel of land, wrote out a check for \$8,000 to buy it, and then donated it as a new addition to the park.

In California's Yosemite National Park, he learned that the 56-mile Tioga Road was still in private hands and in terrible disrepair. Mather got out his checkbook again, putting up half of the \$15,500 price tag, and raising an equal amount from wealthy friends. Then he just as quickly gave it away to become part of the park forever.

During the wide-ranging inspection tour, Mather became convinced that the reason Congress continually underfunded the parks, was that too few people knew about them, and therefore too few people used them. The parks needed more park advocates.

The answer, Mather believed, would be a well-coordinated publicity crusade. To launch it, he invited a select list of influential Americans—editors, publishers, politicians, businessman—to join him for two weeks in the Sierra Nevadas in California. He called it his "Mather Mountain Party."

They would travel by horse over daunting terrain, though Mather made sure that no expense was spared to ease the way. And he paid for it all himself: from the newfangled air mattresses placed under their sleeping bags, to a Chinese cook, who brought along a sheet metal cook stove to prepare gourmet meals. Breakfasts included fresh fruit, steaks, eggs, sausages and hot, freshly baked rolls; suppers were capped off by English plum pudding and brandy sauce for dessert — all of it served on white linen tablecloths with fine silverware and China, carefully packed and transported by mule to the next campsite. (“Glamping?”)

At every opportunity, Mather preached to his guests about his evolving vision for the national parks: better protection and fewer private inholdings, improved services for tourists, more parks and expansions of existing parks, all brought together in a unified system under a single government agency.

They spent a night at Redwood Meadow, just outside the boundary of Sequoia National Park, amidst a privately owned stand of majestic trees Mather could not bear to think might be cut down. He bought the grove and donated it to the nation. Others became enthused by his example. Gilbert Grosvenor, president of the National Geographic Society and editor of its magazine, who was making his first trip to the West, was appalled to learn of all the private inholdings within the park's Giant Forest — and pledged \$20,000 from the society to help buy them out.

The group ascended Mount Whitney—the tallest peak in the contiguous 48 states — at the time, part of a national forest. Mather's hero, John Muir, had once called for it and the surrounding wilderness to be included in an enlarged “Greater Sequoia” national park, and Mather delivered the same gospel.

"Most of all," he exhorted them, "none of this will mean anything unless we have a safe haven for these wilderness places. / We must have a National Park Service. / Everyone of us must pull our oar. / Remember that God has given us these beautiful lands. / Try and save them for, and share them with, future generations." //

Back in Washington, he threw himself into the legislative fight for creation of a park service. / It had first been proposed in 1900, / but effective lobbying by powerful commercial interests / and bureaucratic resistance from the Forest Service / had repeatedly defeated it. /

John Muir had complained that, when it came to places of natural beauty, "nothing dollarable is safe." / Stephen Mather's solution was to make preserving them "dollarable." / To Muir's argument that parks were essential to the nation's spiritual health, / he now added an economic rationale for their existence. /

"This Nation is richer in natural scenery of the first order than any other nation, / but it does not know it," he wrote. "It possesses an empire of grandeur and beauty which it scarcely has heard of. / It owns the most inspiring playgrounds and the best equipped nature schools in the world / and is serenely ignorant of the fact. / In its national parks it has neglected, because it has quite overlooked, an economic asset of incalculable value." //

Only under a single government agency, he said, could the parks be properly promoted, and creatively packaged together into something much more valuable to the nation than a loose collection of far-flung, individual parks. /

In 1916, after he agreed to stay on for one more year, Mather's crusade shifted into high gear. The same promotional skills that had made Twenty Mule Team Borax a household word, were put to use on behalf of creating a national park service. Washington had never seen anything quite like it.

All over the country, newspapers and magazines ran glowing feature stories about the parks — the result of Mather's constant cultivation of publishers and writers. School children were encouraged to write essays about the parks for cash prizes; magazine and newspaper publishers were persuaded to editorialize in favor of a new park service.

Gilbert Grosvenor, who had been part of the "Mather Mountain Party" in the Sierras a year earlier, devoted an entire issue of *National Geographic* to the scenic wonders of America. Mather made sure a copy was placed on every Congressman's desk.

Then he produced a book called *The National Parks Portfolio*, with glossy photographs of every national park and every national monument. 275,000 copies were printed and mailed to likely park supporters, culled from the membership lists of professional societies, chambers of commerce and social registers by a team of volunteers recruited from the General Federation of Women's Clubs. The book was such a hit, Mather ordered a smaller paperback version to be created, and offered for sale in bookstores and in parks; 2.7 million copies were sold in the first year.

On August 25th, 1916, he was deep in the high Sierras, leading a second "Mather mountain party," when President Woodrow Wilson signed into law an act creating the National Park Service to oversee 5.5 million acres of some of the most beautiful scenery on earth.

Stephen Mather was named the new agency's first director; Horace Albright agreed to stay on as his second in command. //

Let me remind you that originally, in 1915, Mather's agreement with Franklin Lane was to work for only a year, then one more, as he led the campaign to bring the National Park Service into being. He could now have moved on to other pursuits—and what he had accomplished would still stand as a great achievement. But he wasn't done. Far from it. /

He would remain in the job for more than a dozen years—and leave a lasting imprint on the agency he had helped create, and on the larger park idea he so fervently believed in. I'll touch on a few of them. /

In his effort to encourage more Americans to visit their parks, he fully embraced the emerging national fascination with the automobile, and the rise of what was called "auto camping." /

Mather's hero, John Muir, had harbored mixed feelings about the horseless carriage — "blunt-nosed mechanical beetles," he called them, that might "mingle their gas-breath" with the fresh air of pines and waterfalls — though Muir also admitted they might help create new allies for the parks if they were allowed in under certain restrictions. /

Stephen Mather had no such qualms. He joined forces with automobile clubs, chambers of commerce, good-roads associations, local governments, and car manufacturers to lobby for a national park-to-park highway — a 6,000-mile loop of improved roads linking all the western parks. It would be, he predicted, the "greatest scenic highway in the world," one that would unleash what he called "the great flow of tourist gold" into every community along its route. /

The automobile, he proclaimed "has been the open sesame" to a larger portion of the American public, who previously could not afford to travel the country and experience that "empire of grandeur" that he reminded them was their birthright. "The parks," he said "have become democratized." //

Personally, he preferred taking long hikes or horseback camping trips in a park's backcountry, but he realized that most visitors had neither the time, nor the inclination, to experience a park that way.

He was against what he called "gridironing" any park with paved motor routes, but embarked on an ambitious plan in which each park was to have one major road that would open up that park's scenic wonders to the motoring public. And for every mile of new road, he wanted 10 miles of backcountry trails.

Mather also insisted that the new roads be well planned. Inspecting a road being built through the center of Glacier National Park over Logan Pass, he learned that the highway engineers' plan called for multiple switchbacks in the climb to the pass. A landscape architect Mather had brought along told him the visual impact would make the scenic vistas "look like miners had been there."

Horrified by the prospect, Mather decided to follow the architect's radically different design proposal—a straighter road that would have to be carved into the face of the steep mountain. It would be longer, much more difficult to construct, and much more expensive. But it would not mar the majestic panoramas. The result was the Going to the Sun Road, now one of the most awe-inspiring drives in America.

From then on, Mather insisted that a landscape architect take the lead in planning new roads. Throughout the system, the entire park experience was being redesigned—scenic turnouts, rest stops, new maps and guidebooks—with people traveling in private automobiles foremost in mind.

He also pushed for better hotel accommodations—such as the Ahwahnee in Yosemite, at Paradise Valley in Mount Rainier, and one on the lip of the ancient volcanic cone at Crater Lake. “Scenery is a splendid thing when it is viewed by a man who is in a contented frame of mind,” Mather said, but “give him a poor breakfast after he has had a bad night's sleep, and he will not care how fine your scenery is.” //

And he persuaded Congress to create new parks, nearly doubling the number that had existed in 1915. Many of them are now crown jewels of the system he was creating, including two in Hawaii, Denali in Alaska, Bryce Canyon and Zion in Utah, and Acadia in Maine, the first national park east of the Mississippi and the first to be created on what had been private, not public, lands. /

His biggest victory, perhaps, was at the Grand Canyon. In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt had urged for it become a national park, but powerful commercial interests and Arizona politicians had thwarted him, so he used the new Antiquities Act that permits presidents to set aside special places with a stroke of their pen by designating them as national monuments. /

Mather's fight to fulfill Roosevelt's vision lasted four years—and included a court case that went all the way to the Supreme Court and a vindictive round of Congressional investigations instigated by an Arizona senator who had his own financial interests at stake. /

But in 1919, Mather prevailed. And Arizona, whose political establishment had worked so tirelessly for so many years to prevent the Grand Canyon from becoming a national park, now proudly promotes itself on its license plates as the Grand Canyon State. //

Equal to all those accomplishments, I think, is the legacy Stephen Mather left on the National Park Service itself. It needs to be remembered that, prior to him, there was no such agency. He—and Horace Albright—were creating it almost from scratch. They searched for the right people to place in the role of superintendent, for starters. But for Mather, the park ranger would be the heart and soul of the park service. //

"Mather had a special vision of what the rangers should be," Albright said. "He felt they must bring to the service not only knowledge and skill, but an ability to relate to the public, and a considerable measure of dedication" and "he had a number of ideas for the national park ranger mystique that he wanted to create. He called it esprit de corps and he used every means at his disposal to build it." //

"I think a ranger should enter the service with the desire of making it his life's work," Mather said. And the man every ranger looked up to was Stephen Mather. He gave one ranger travel money to make a cross-country trip to visit his parents; occasionally treated rangers and their wives to meals at fancy restaurants; and in Yosemite, spent \$25,000 from his own pocket to build the Rangers' Club House, a place where the rangers could relax in private. Mather himself took to staying there, instead of in one of Yosemite's hotels, whenever he visited the park. //

Impressed by an educational nature program run by two college professors at a private resort at Lake Tahoe, Mather paid to have the whole thing transferred to Yosemite National Park. Soon, guided nature walks and evening campfire lectures by what he called "ranger naturalists" began in every national park. They quickly became one of the Park Service's most popular programs, and did more than anything else to burnish the image of friendly professionalism Mather was trying to create. /

"Our parks are not only show places and vacation lands," he declared, "but also vast school-rooms of Americanism, where people are studying, enjoying, and learning to love more deeply this land in which they live." /

To augment the educational programs / and initially supported almost entirely with private money, principally from the family of John D. Rockefeller Jr. / - small museums were started with exhibits explaining the wildlife, plants, geology and history to the increasing number of tourists arriving at each park. /

Mather loved seeing it all in person. / He always insisted on wearing the distinctive ranger's uniform, whenever he visited one of his parks. He gallantly offered people rides in the big touring car he traveled in, with the special license plate USNPS 1; / and he especially reveled in personally showing off the wildlife to passing tourists who would stop their cars to watch. /

Once, in Yellowstone, where Albright was serving as superintendent, / reports came in that a ranger was creating a traffic jam by stopping cars and lecturing the drivers about the most minor infractions. / Albright hurried to the scene. / The "ranger" was Mather. / Albright had to sternly, yet diplomatically, reprimand his boss for causing such a scene. /

As he traveled from park to park in his big touring car, wearing his park ranger's uniform, Mather kept a frenetic pace that became legendary. "We wore ourselves out trying to stay with him for sixteen hours a day," one traveling companion recalled, "and then [we] had to sit up half the night listening to him talk it over." /

Here's what else that person recalled: "He would talk for hours, reviewing his plans for the national parks. "They belong to everybody," he used to say. "We've got to do what we can to see that nobody stays away because he can't afford it." /

"I hear lots of complaints about the tin-canners," I told him. "They dirty up the parks. Strew cans and papers all over." /

"What if they do?" he would say. "They own as much of the parks as anybody else. We can pick up the tin cans. / It's a cheap way to make better citizens." //

Stephen Mather could be a whirlwind of action, and his intense energy and outgoing personality had earned him the nickname, "the eternal freshman." / He was also prone to spells of depression / some of them serious enough to require hospitalization. /

But that never stopped him / He always found the solace and rejuvenation he needed so badly, in the parks / Part of his legacy derives from his fierce desire that all Americans might experience that same healing power. /

The national parks, he wrote in a popular magazine, seem "destined" to play a role in "satisfying the longings of the people in times of great nervous tension, through the calming and inspiring influence of nature." / "The parks," he added, "will have a constantly enlarging, revivifying influence on our national life, for which there is no other public agency. They are our antidote for national restlessness. / They are national character and health builders." / He could have been describing himself. //

In 1927, at age 60, on his way back from inspecting Hawaii National Park, Mather suffered a heart attack. But a month later, he was in Yosemite, where he hiked to Glacier Point to prove to his doctor that he was back at full strength and capable of resuming his busy schedule. /

He went to Mount Rainier to go over plans for a new road in the park; / attended the opening of a majestic new lodge on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon; / took part in the official dedication of Bryce Canyon National Park, a place he had first seen a decade earlier and declared on the spot that it would someday be part of the system he was building. /

At Zion he showed up to check on the progress of a new mile-long tunnel. / The tunnel was considered an engineering marvel, and Mather became so excited about it, he stayed for several more days so he could become the first person to walk through it. /

On July 4th, 1928, he celebrated his 61st birthday in his favorite park, Yosemite, and took a long horseback ride up out of the valley to the Tuolumne Meadows in the high country and to the Tioga Road he had purchased back in 1915 and donated to the park. /

Then, on November 5th, 1928, he suffered a serious stroke. / On January 12th, 1929, with Mather incapacitated, Albright was sworn in as the second director of the National Park Service / - fourteen years to the day since Mather had first arrived in Washington and agreed to a one-year assignment to promote the parks and push for a federal agency to protect them. /

A year later, on January 22nd, 1930, Stephen Mather died. In his memory, a mountain just east of Mount McKinley would be named Mount Mather; an overlook at the Grand Canyon would be called Mather Point; a scenic stretch of the Potomac River would be named Mather Gorge; a nationwide tree-planting campaign in his honor would also result in Mather Forest near Lake George.

And in every national park, the agency he had created and molded to his vision would erect a bronze plaque with his likeness and these words: "There will never come an end to the good that he has done." //

"There will never come an end to the good that he has done." How true that is—and, as an honorary park ranger, I'd like to ^{end with} tell a personal story that exemplifies that truth.

In the 1980s, when I was courting Dianne, I took her, on her first trip to the West, to Glacier National Park, where we spent three glorious days, including a drive over Logan Pass on the spectacular Going to the Sun Road—the one Stephen Mather had insisted be built to provide the best panorama of those majestic mountains. At one scenic pull-off, I took Dianne's photo with them as the backdrop. It became my favorite memento of our trip.

Thirteen years later, we came back with the results of that courtship: our daughter Emme, age 11, and our son, Will, age 8. It was their first national park, on what would be a month-long trip to a lot more. On the Going to the Sun Road, we stopped at the same pull-off, and I took a picture of my beautiful daughter in the same place I had photographed her beautiful mother. I now cherish that picture as much as the one I had taken of Dianne.

At Logan Pass, Will and I took a short hike toward Hidden Lake, and on the way encountered a family of mountain goats coming toward us on the path. I hushed Will and moved with him quietly off the trail, behind a small boulder—and we both watched, wide-eyed, as they passed within three feet of us.

That night, in our hotel, Will got out the journal he was keeping of our trip, and after he nodded off to sleep, I peeked at what he had written. “June 30,” his entry began, in an 8-year-old’s block letters. “This was the most exciting day of my life.” //

Those two moments—three actually, counting my first trip with Dianne—are imperishable memories. When I think of them, as I often do, I say a silent “thank you” to Stephen Mather for making them possible.

And, on behalf of all us who treasure the national parks and America’s best idea, I say a little prayer: “May there never come an end to the good that he has done.” //

Thank you