

Chapter Three:

A Decade of Transformation:

The New Deal and Fire Policy

Beginning in 1933, a set of dramatic changes in the way the federal government operated in the United States led to the implementation of a full-scale National Park Service fire management regime. The National Park Service developed and adhered to a strategy that almost perfectly mirrored the avid fire suppression tenets of the U.S. Forest Service, taking its cues from that agency, and applying the resource-heavy philosophy to the national parks. In no small part a result of the influence of people such as the agency's first fire boss, John D. Coffman, the National Park Service embraced the doctrine of suppression as the best strategy for protecting national park lands from what its staff widely regarded as the scourge of fire. Fire suppression and all it meant dominated the NPS view of fire.

In 1933 the NPS finally received the labor and financial resources to implement a comprehensive fire management strategy. New resources extended fire protection everywhere on public lands. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a New Deal fusion of labor policy and conservation, provided the manpower to enhance fire control and prevention. The National Park Service could finally fulfill its image as the protector of pristine nature. The National Park Service suppressed fire because it could secure funding and workpower to do so, because the practice was consistent with the management goals it had developed during its first fifteen years, and equally important, because it allowed the Service to keep its major parks in a condition acceptable to its constituents. National parks were seen as the emblem of American nature, a physical manifestation of the meaning of nationhood. Expansive forests with mature trees were an important component of that image, and preserving the symbol became as important as protecting the resource. In effect, this distinction separated the NPS from the Forest Service, giving it a broader motive for suppressing fire.¹²⁵

The national parks were only part of a larger strategy on federal land. The New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt's program to counter the ongoing economic malaise that began in 1929, extended resources to every federal agency, and no single entity made greater use of them than the Forest Service. National forests received even greater largesse than did the national parks and the foresters responded with vigor. With its new resources, the Forest Service conceived of an end to historic boundaries in its ability to fight fire. It tackled suppression in the backcountry as well as near developed areas.

The result was a new vision of suppression. If federal agencies operated in a climate of uncertainty until after 1932, in the aftermath of the New Deal, they had new confidence, derived from the plethora of resources at their disposal and the aggressive

¹²⁵ Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* 2d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 33-47; Richard W. Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 140-44.

leadership of the Forest Service. The idea that no acre of national forest was beyond the foresters' control reflected American attitudes toward nature: science, technology, and resources could bring it to submission. This same extension of reach satisfied federal land managers.¹²⁶ It extended beyond the national forests, to places deep in the backcountry of the national parks.

At the same time, the National Park Service never forgot it was different than the USFS and that the foresters represented its main competition. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the two agencies were locked in a fierce struggle over land in which the National Park Service gradually gained dominance.¹²⁷ The rivalry was severe at times, inspiring animosity that was at once substantive and petty, meaningful and ridiculous. Fire defied administrative rivalry as well as the jurisdictional boundaries between federal agencies. Even in the worst moments of internecine conflict, the National Park Service and the Forest Service cooperated to prepare for fire and control its consequences. At the same time, national parks were different from national forests, and it served the National Park Service well to enunciate those differences whenever possible. As the National Park Service created a mission of fire management that replicated the actions of the Forest Service, it espoused a different agenda for a set of reasons that had more to do with the Service's vision of itself as keeper of American sacred spaces than it did with the goal of fire suppression.

Nor did actual conditions compel the National Park Service to reconsider its fealty to the idea of suppression. Again, the Service was fortunate. The drought years of the early 1930s coincided with the greatest influx of resources in the agency's history, and as had been the case earlier, fire protection activities dovetailed with other National Park Service objectives. They had the added attraction of being able to provide work to enough young men to bring the National Park Service to the center of government efforts to create jobs for a financially ravaged and despondent nation. In a decade-long push, the National Park Service was able to implement a conservation program that combined with infrastructure to make a formal regime of suppression possible within national park boundaries.

New Deal resources allowed the National Park Service to expand fire protection throughout every major national park.¹²⁸ Prior to the New Deal, NPS fire response often was concentrated on the areas closest to headquarters, visitor centers, campgrounds, and other facilities. This situation simply was a function of the available resources. With New Deal programming, the National Park Service was able to extend the reach of its suppression programs to remote areas in national parks, to monitor distant fires, and to construct fire roads and pathways to once isolated locations. Finally confronted by the

¹²⁶ David Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 94-106; Ronald Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future, 1984), 43-47; Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10-15, 330-34.

¹²⁷ Ben W. Twight, *Organizational Values and Political Power: The Forest Service Versus Olympic National Park* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 1-16; Hal K. Rothman, "'A Regular Ding-Dong Fight': Agency Culture and Evolution in the Park Service-Forest Service Dispute, 1916-1937," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 2 (May 1989), 141-61; Hal K. Rothman, *American Eden: An Administrative History of Olympic National Park*, (Draft, December 2003), 1-4; 39-73

¹²⁸ Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 126-27; Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 298-99.

vast weight of federal resources and the workpower it provided, fire seemed as if it were one more of the many natural problems yielding to human ingenuity and technology.

Before the New Deal, the image of fire protection in the National Park Service exceeded the reality of implementation. Without adequate resources, John D. Coffman's meticulous fire plans and the strategies he proposed for the park system remained a far-off ideal. The National Park Service had recognized the problem and created a context for addressing it, but until resources were devoted specifically to fire suppression, controlling and responding to fire competed with everything else that occurred at a national park. The nation's premier national park, Yellowstone faced the same predicament as every other park area. The resources available were not equal to the task of fire management. Fire protection – the art of recognizing fire and quickly responding with a suppression strategy – became a stand-in for suppression even at the brightest of the Service's crown jewels.

When Coffman developed in 1929 the first fire analysis of Yellowstone, a source of episodic major fires, he announced that protection was “not normally a very serious [problem],” as long as crews “discovered and controlled promptly” any fires, preventing them from becoming crown fires that would spread uncontrollably. This set a standard, creating an expectation that the park would find and address any fire. Coffman believed in prompt detection, but found the number of Yellowstone fire lookouts, two – one on Mt. Washburn and the other on Mt. Sheridan – inadequate to the task. Neither lookout contained sufficient facilities to allow a spotter to spend the day and night. In most cases, a fire observer made a daily trip from the nearest station to the lookout post.¹²⁹ The situation at Yellowstone was better than at most parks, but it was far short of what Coffman and the National Park Service envisioned.

Fires in Yellowstone during the summer of 1931, two years after implementation of Coffman's fire plan there, characterized the limits of protection before the New Deal. Yellowstone had not experienced a serious fire since 1919, and even before 1931, Superintendent Roger Toll worried that the park staff had grown complacent, and was not terribly vigilant about fire. After many years without a major fire, they discounted the danger. Yellowstone simply did not experience serious fires, many insisted. That summer, they were proven wrong. The park faced 112 fires, twenty-five of which required fire crews. More than 20,000 acres of timber burned before crews contained the outbreaks. No one could claim after 1931 that fire was not a threat at Yellowstone. “The experience of the past summer,” Toll drolly observed in his annual report, “has thrown this belief into the discard pile.”¹³⁰

From another perspective, Coffman's plan for Yellowstone revealed some success: the fires were managed effectively. In a drought year, with a hot dry summer following a mild winter with light snowfall, Coffman's preparatory system assured rapid response when a fire started and lookouts quickly discovered its existence. Several fires broke out in remote areas in Yellowstone, but the park's fire stations soon sighted them. With hard work from the road maintenance crew and the rangers, and deployment of the very caches of fire equipment and supplies that Coffman insisted upon two years earlier, the park was able to keep those remote outbreaks from becoming a serious threat. Even

¹²⁹ John D. Coffman, “Report on Fire Protection Requirements of Yellowstone National Park, 1929,” Yellowstone Box Y-223, Yellowstone National Park Archives.

¹³⁰ Roger W. Toll, “Annual Report for Yellowstone National Park 1931,” 1.

the worst fire, an 18,000-acre blaze near Heart Lake, was under control at the end of the second week of response. Coffman could look at his plans and see real success: Yellowstone had experienced a serious fire season but was able to keep the many fires from causing severe problems.¹³¹

From Superintendent Toll's point of view, the plan's cost to the park was simply more than could be borne. He calculated that the total cost of fighting the fires exceeded \$150,000, stripping Yellowstone of a good portion of its road maintenance budget and limiting facilities development. "The entire ranger personnel as far as possible was used on fire protection work," Toll noted, at great cost to nearly every other park program. In one instance, efforts to control insects such as mountain pine beetles were drained of resources by the cost of fighting fire.¹³² The fires may have been stopped, he averred, but the cost of the fire season impeded every other National Park Service program at its premier national park.

Yellowstone received special attention even during the worst of times. In 1932, in part to compensate for the expenditures that resulted from the 1931 fire, the park obtained \$122,780 in emergency reconstruction and fire-fighting funds and an additional \$16,300 dedicated to forest protection and fire prevention, sums so grand that they represented five times the amount allocated for fire in the entire park system just a few years before. The injection of resources prompted greater planning and cooperation between federal agencies involved in fire fighting in the Yellowstone region. In 1932, three important fire conferences took place in the park. The first brought together the heads of all government departments and the protection staff in the vicinity to discuss fire principles and to develop strategies for cooperation. In addition, Yellowstone convened a summit with Forest Service officials to discuss cooperation between the park and the surrounding national forests and John Coffman also presented a three-day fire training symposia.¹³³ That year alone, Yellowstone engaged in more planning than in any previous year. At the same time, the park tacitly admitted that managing fire required the cooperation of surrounding jurisdictions.

Yellowstone demonstrated that the conundrum that eternally vexed the National Park Service remained: suppression seemed an attainable goal, but the Service could not implement it and accomplish all the other priorities that NPS managers, Congress, and the public had for the park system. The Service's most basic priorities remained land acquisition and facilities development to accommodate the ever-growing number of visitors the NPS encouraged. In this era, landscape architects dominated the National Park Service and their leadership vision promoted planning and development. The Service sought to expand its domain as well. After 1929, NPS Director Horace M. Albright turned much of his attention to acquiring eastern parks and the nation's historic sites.¹³⁴ When NPS leaders received resources, they still typically devoted them to visitor

¹³¹ Ibid, 1; John Coffman interview by Herbert Evison, October 28, 1962, Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, NPS Cons 56 Box 1, Folder C, 6, 13; John D. Coffman, "Report on Fire Protection Requirements of Yellowstone National Park," January 18, 1930, Yellowstone Box Y-223, Yellowstone National Park Archives.

¹³² Roger W. Toll, "Annual Report for Yellowstone National Park 1931," 2-3.

¹³³ Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1932, 3-4.

¹³⁴ Horace M. Albright, *Origins of National Park Service Administration of Historic Sites* (Philadelphia: Eastern National Parks and Monuments Association, 1971), 1-17; Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by*

services or access to national parks. Fire was a recognized threat to those parks, as Coffman's hiring attested, but planning a response and providing the resources to implement it were significantly different steps in a long process. As a result, the National Park Service continued to respond to fires where and when they occurred, dramatically limited by the absence of resources to implement any plan that Coffman might conceive.

Despite ambiguity about the battle against fire in Yellowstone in 1931, the situation provided proof that Coffman had made tremendous progress in developing a fire policy. As the 1932 elections approached, Albright and others in the National Park Service recognized the scope of Coffman's accomplishments, and invited him to the annual national park superintendent's conference in Washington, D.C., to brief NPS line staff on his efforts. At the time, the superintendent's annual meeting was the most important event in the National Park Service's operational year and Coffman's appearance accentuated the significance of his work.¹³⁵ The National Park Service granted fire control increasing importance. The NPS cadre of chief field officials heard from the man in charge of fire, learning what they might do when the inevitable reached them. A significant problem remained: without resources or a staff dedicated to the purpose, much of Coffman's planning seemed beyond the Service's reach. A plan could only be as good as the implementation structure that underpinned it and the National Park Service still had little in the way of resources to bring to fire management.

While Yellowstone's size and position gave it some flexibility to respond to fires, the absence of infrastructure and resources was even greater elsewhere in the system. Yellowstone's privileged status accorded it a disproportionate share of National Park Service resources under any circumstances. In most years between 1920 and 1933, Yellowstone's funding exceeded that of the next three national parks combined. If fire protection at Yellowstone was inadequate, it was far worse almost everywhere else in the park system.¹³⁶

Coffman's hiring had inaugurated a new era in the National Park Service, and he spent his first two years in the Service traveling to parks and writing one fire plan after another. Although occasionally someone such as Sequoia National Park Superintendent John R. White might disagree with him, no one disputed that Coffman was the Service's guiding force as well as the lead person for fire management. Coffman formulated a servicewide fire policy, which would require a fire plan from each unit in the system. The Glacier National Park plan he began during his first days on the job became the Service's benchmark, the model against which other plans were measured for the subsequent decade. His efforts quickly yielded a considerable body of preparatory material. Fire plans and information maps for planning a response to fires became standard at national

Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 55-94.

¹³⁵ Coffman interview, October 29, 1962, 14; Swain, *Wilderness Defender*, 184-88.

¹³⁶ Report of the Director of the National Park Service for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1926 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 32, 33; Report of the Director of the National Park Service for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1926 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928), 41-43; Paul Schullery and Lee Whittlesey, *Myth and History in the Creation of Yellowstone National Park* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 92-99; Chris J. Magoc, *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 235-54; Mark Barringer, *Selling Yellowstone: Capitalism and the Construction of Nature* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 1-16.

parks. The Clarke-McNary Act of 1924 granted the NPS access to federal fire protection funds administered by the Forest Service under a complex array of formulas. National Park Service estimates of cost for fire fighting – with estimates of reportable expenses permitted under Clarke-McNary, added to plans of response and deployment of equipment in the case of emergency – furthered the image of the NPS as a competent, professional organization. The new circumstances even enhanced the coveted pseudo-military image of the NPS, already accentuated by the olive drab, World War I era National Park Service uniform.¹³⁷

The New Deal and the resources it furnished changed the context in which the National Park Service operated. The largess permitted the implementation of Coffman's program, a significant fire suppression regime backed by enough workpower and resources to inspire confidence in the idea of fire suppression in the national parks. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's constellation of programs to revive the U.S. economy and with it the national spirit transformed the country. The New Deal inaugurated powerful and lasting changes in the role of government in the United States. Before 1933, federal government officials only had a peripheral role in daily life for most Americans. Despite the ideals and reforms of the Progressive Era and the pivotal expansion it created in government responsibility, most of the changes inaugurated from 1900 to 1932 were regulatory in character. By 1933, the federal government contained agencies that administered public affairs in the most general of ways, but it still lacked the mechanisms to create day-to-day realities for most ordinary Americans.¹³⁸

Of a privileged social and economic class, Progressives hewed to a top-down vision of U.S. society. They believed that if they made rules and laws, the rest of the republic would respect and obey any strictures they created. This vision embodied optimism and naïveté but strangely, it worked. In a top-down world, making rules seemed enough. Enforcing them was often beyond comprehension. Nor did national institutions offer compelling reasons to abide by rules and regulations. Before 1933, most people rarely looked to government as a source of employment and sustenance. Government was remote and occasionally oppressive, but it was usually far from daily life.¹³⁹

The New Deal inexorably altered the relationship between the national government and the people. Roosevelt brought a dramatic tenor of activism to presidential affairs, a hands-on approach to the nation's needs. The years following 1929 had been hard on Americans, hard on their pride and sense of destiny. After the Depression began, people began looking to national leadership for direction and

¹³⁷ John D. Coffman, "Memorandum for Chief Ranger Bagley," November 13, 1931, Yellowstone National Park, Records of the Branch of Forestry, Forest Fire Reports, 1928-1949, Yellowstone 1933-1941, Box 3; John D. Coffman, interview by Herbert Evison, October 29, 1962, NPS CONS 56, Box 1, Folder C, Western History Section, Denver Public Library, 9-13; Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*, 33-37.

¹³⁸ Richard Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government: The Controversy over Executive Reorganization, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 1-11; Robert M. Crunden, *A Brief History of American Culture* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 129-59, 185-236; T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* 2d ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1-58.

¹³⁹ William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 1-15; Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives Achievement in American Culture, 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 1-27.

guidance. During President Herbert Hoover's term, they did not find what they needed. Although one of the best prepared individuals ever to assume the presidency, Hoover did not grasp the public's profound need for inspiration, comfort, and direct assistance. A few governors, most notably Pennsylvania Governor and former Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot, initiated relief programs, but the administration's only response was to convene the Cabinet daily to toss a medicine ball on the White House lawn to project an image of fitness and strength to the nation.¹⁴⁰ In the 1932 election, an electorate that wanted something he could not provide chased Hoover from office.

Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the need for government action, and the New Deal's many programs soon provided work for a distraught nation, primed the pump of the sluggish economy, and inspired hope. At the same time, the New Deal transformed conservation into labor policy. Under its auspices, conservation programs ranked as highly as capital development ventures – both put large numbers of people to work. Under New Deal programs, more work was done on federal land than had been accomplished in the forty years since conservation became a recognized ideal. The Tennessee Valley Authority, an enormous regional planning program designed to help the impoverished people of Appalachia, provided one component, as did programs to rehabilitate overgrazed Indian reservation lands and the Dust Bowl regions of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Conservation required intensive workpower. No commodity existed in greater abundance in 1930s America. Conservation projects became one of the era's most essential employment devices.¹⁴¹

A few weeks into his presidency, Roosevelt proposed that an army of unemployed men be sent into the rural parts of the nation to perform basic work on federal and state land. They would work in forestry by clearing brush and trees and cutting fire trails, preventing soil erosion, and helping with flood control projects. As it developed, the CCC became one of the central institutions of the New Deal, part of the process by which the federal government put people to work and helped them see a positive future in an otherwise dismal economic time.¹⁴²

The creation of a federally funded work force gave land management agencies the opportunity to implement conservation programs that prior to 1933 had simply and completely been beyond their reach. The CCC developed plans for work on federal lands, hired hundreds of thousands of young men, and kept them at work in six-month increments called "enrollment periods." Young people flocked to these programs in search of opportunity, so scarce in the 1930s, and stayed as long as they could. Even more, the establishment of so many federal work relief programs inserted the government

¹⁴⁰ Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2002), 315-18; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 1-23; Kendrick A. Clements, *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 148-208; Richard Norton Smith, *An Uncommon Man: The Triumph of Herbert Hoover* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 7-14.

¹⁴¹ Hal K. Rothman, *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 60-84.

¹⁴² John C. Paige, *The National Park Service and the New Deal* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1985), 8-18.

directly into people's lives in ways the Progressives never envisioned, and changed people's vision of government.¹⁴³

The CCC was a godsend for a struggling nation. It took single men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five and gave them hard physical work on the forests, parks, and other public lands of the United States. CCC workers were counted among the fortunate during the Depression. The young men lived in barracks, worked six days a week for a \$30 a month, all but five dollars of which was sent home to their families each month. They built roads, trails, firebreaks, structures, and a range of other necessities and amenities on public land. During its nine-year existence, more than two million enrollees worked in 198 CCC camps in national park areas and 697 camps in state, county, and municipal parks. The national forests and other public lands contained countless others. Under the bureaus that administered CCC programs – the Emergency Conservation Work program (ECW), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and others – crews built more than one thousand miles of park roads and 249 miles of parkways in national park areas.¹⁴⁴

The National Park Service under Horace Albright was nothing if not adaptable. The canny NPS director recognized in the New Deal an answer to every resource need the National Park Service had. Developing goals that meshed with the New Deal instantly became his primary focus. Despite his long history as a Republican, Albright embraced the new Democratic administration, making friends among the new leadership with dazzling speed. He and Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, the irascible Harold L. Ickes, found much common ground. Ickes had been a visitor in Yellowstone in the early 1920s, and he heard Albright, then superintendent, deliver an impressive talk. Ickes and Mather had been close and the secretary, a strong proponent of conservation and national parks, wanted to maintain that relationship with Albright. Not only did Ickes spend an extra hour with Albright at their first meeting, the relationship grew into weekend tours of historical sites in the Washington, D.C., area. A suspicious person by nature, Ickes learned to trust the affable if hard-edged Albright, giving the National Park Service and its director an edge as New Deal programming developed.¹⁴⁵

With Ickes's ear, Albright became an important figure in the new administration. His support for the New Deal and his recognition of what it could do for the National Park Service put him out ahead of the rest of the Department of the Interior. Albright cemented this recognition with his characteristic personal touch. On April 9, 1933, the director went on the most famous automobile ride in national park history. After lunch on a trip to Herbert Hoover's old retreat on the Rapidan River, Roosevelt told his staff that he wanted Albright in the jump seat of his car. In a discussion as the car rolled along the Rappahannock River, the director made his case for the transfer to the Park Service of historical parks and national monuments administered by other agencies. Albright and the president talked about other things, not the least of which was the value to the National

¹⁴³ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 6-9; Rexford Tugwell, *FDR: Architect of an Era* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), i-xiv; Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 241-60; Phoebe Cutler, *The Public Landscape of the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 1-8, 90-106.

¹⁴⁴ Paige, *The National Park Service and the New Deal*, 21-25.

¹⁴⁵ Horace Albright as told to Robert Cahn, *The Birth of the National Park Service: The Founding Years, 1913-1933* (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1985), 283-88; Tom H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes, 1874-1952* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 550-55.

Park Service of the Civilian Conservation Corps. With Roosevelt's approval and Ickes' beaming support, the director embarked on plans that would change the Service.¹⁴⁶

Long a champion of fire control, Albright drew Coffman into a pivotal role. Albright intuited one of the ideas that became a hallmark of the New Deal – programming that could be applied across geographical, regional, and even cultural differences. Fire control, which required similar deployment of resources almost everywhere it was necessary, easily fit such a model. Immediately after Roosevelt's inauguration, Horace Albright assigned Coffman to develop a report that showed how an emergency forestry and public works program could be implemented. The idea of CCC-like work camps had already been formed, and the ever-astute Albright recognized that the National Park Service could play a significant role and reap important benefits.¹⁴⁷

Starting March 15, 1933, Coffman was “busy night and day” developing the report that Albright sought. He delivered it on March 28 and awaited further instructions. Told to come to the nation's capital, Coffman arrived on April 3 and promptly joined Albright in a visit to the White House to learn what the president had in mind. Colonel Louis Howe, Roosevelt's long-time political operative who served as the most private of the president's private secretaries until his death in 1936, spoke with the two and introduced the National Park Service duo and a number of Forest Service and U.S. Army officials to Robert Fechner, the man Roosevelt had selected to head the Emergency Conservation Work program. Fechner already had a number of plans and Coffman discovered he was central to their implementation. “I didn't realize at the time that it was going to be eight-and-a-half months before I saw my family again,” Coffman recalled in 1962. “During the remainder of that year, I was the busiest I have ever been in my life.”¹⁴⁸

Under Albright's tutelage, Coffman vaulted to a position of influence and power. Albright's close relationship with Ickes landed the National Park Service authority for emergency conservation work within the Department of the Interior, as Ickes appointed the NPS director as the department's liaison to the ECW program. Albright in turn selected Coffman as his designee to serve in this critical role. The selection affirmed not only the importance of fire to Albright, but the director's faith in Coffman as well. Albright “requested me to work up a program of emergency forestry and public works that could be carried on by these youth camps that were planned for establishment,” Coffman remembered nearly three decades later. This department-wide charge was new to the National Park Service, until that time, a secondary bureau in the unwieldy Department of the Interior. It also presaged the largest conservation battle of the decade, Ickes' later attempt to create a Department of Conservation under his leadership that included the entire Department of Agriculture.¹⁴⁹

The pressure on Coffman was intense. The president set a goal of 250,000 at work by July 1, 1933, and although the number strained the limited administrative structure set up for the purpose, the National Park Service strove to meet the objective. Coffman

¹⁴⁶ Albright as told to Cahn, *The Birth of the National Park Service*, 288-90; Swain, *Wilderness Defender*, 219-25.

¹⁴⁷ Coffman interview, October 28, 1962; Albright as told to Cahn, *The Birth of the National Park Service*, 292-97; Swain, *Wilderness Defender*, 219-25; Caro, *The Path to Power*, 341-51.

¹⁴⁸ Coffman interview, October 28, 1962, 13-14.

¹⁴⁹ Coffman interview, October 28, 1962, 14; Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim*, 447-594.

worked at a torrid pace. In May, the Service had places for 12,600 workers in sixty-three camps within the park system. An additional seventy camps were authorized and being prepared to accept enrollees. By the July 1 deadline, more than 34,000 people were enrolled in 172 emergency conservation work camps within the national park system, and the National Park Service had made plans to accommodate many thousands more.¹⁵⁰

The impact of New Deal programs on the National Park Service changed its trajectory. The NPS base budget increased from a little under \$11 million in 1933 to almost \$27 million in 1939. In addition, between 1933 and 1937, public works agencies poured more than \$150 million into projects in the national parks. The number of camps in national parks rose from seventy in 1933 to a peak of 115 in 1935, continuing with no less than seventy-seven through 1941. In addition, the National Park Service oversaw as many as 475 camps each year in state parks throughout the country. As many as 150,000 enrollees worked in National Park Service programs in the peak years, with more than 6,000 permanent supervisors.¹⁵¹

The process transformed the National Park Service's fire control infrastructure. In 1930, the entire park system only had seventeen primary fire lookouts. A decade later, as a result of the New Deal, sixty primary lookouts and fourteen secondary structures offered far more comprehensive ability to recognize and respond to fire. In 1930, the National Park Service employed twelve lookout observers and sixteen fire guards. By 1939, the numbers had increased to fifty-nine lookout observers, fifty-five fire guards, and six fire dispatchers paid by Clarke-McNary Act funds to supplement park rangers. Many others in the National Park Service and affiliated with it had fire protection as a component of their daily responsibilities. In addition, 754 miles of telephone lines, twenty guard cabins, forty-seven fire equipment storage buildings, 522 miles of roads, 1,767 miles of fire trails, 109 miles of firebreaks, and a range of other improvements enhanced NPS capacity. The National Park Service also developed fire danger rating stations.¹⁵²

The sheer number of workers in the program guaranteed that every wish list any superintendent in the park system had on hand became a blueprint for action. The ever-savvy Albright took note, observing in the agency's 1933 annual report that CCC crews accomplished "work that had been greatly needed for years." He used the New Deal to chastise opponents, pointing to its immediate successes as proof that the Service's approach had been correct. Recognizing the advantage of this new source of workpower and funding, Albright championed greater access to funding for the National Park Service from the moment he heard of the plan, and the agency's fate and the CCC were completely intertwined throughout the 1930s.¹⁵³

Fire prevention became one of primary responsibilities of CCC camps, altering the tenor of the NPS's response to any kind of blaze. After their arrival at national park areas, many crews began to construct firebreaks, remove deadwood, erect telephone lines for better emergency communication, build lookouts, and engage in other fire protection

¹⁵⁰ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 11-15; Paige, *The National Park Service and the New Deal*, 11-19; 213.

¹⁵¹ Paige, *The National Park Service and the New Deal*, 18-19; 213.

¹⁵² L. F. Cook, "Forest Fire Protection in the National Park System, 1930-39," *Occasional Forestry Note No. 5*, March 25, 1940, Sequoia National Park, SNP 42, Box 375, F2, 5-6.

¹⁵³ *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service, 1933* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934), 2-4.

preparation. In the first year alone, ECW literature claimed that the presence of its workers reduced the amount of national park acreage lost to fire by 1,600 acres.¹⁵⁴ The availability of labor obliterated many of the resource issues that attended fire suppression, giving the National Park Service the ability to apply the tenets that Coffman had advocated since he joined the Service in 1928.

The combination of the seemingly endless supply of federal resources, the fear of more major fires, and the dominance of the Forest Service in fire policy and planning created de facto NPS policy. Successful suppression depended on resources. The contribution of federal relief programs to fire management in the park system was astonishing in its scope: 688,255 work days of fire fighting and 837,783 work days of fire suppression in the course of the program permitted a vision of National Park Service capabilities that would have seemed a dream a mere few years before 1933. Even as Coffman's responsibilities in the Roosevelt administration expanded, he thought about fire as the forester he was trained to be. The Forest Service model was already accepted as the only viable approach. With the obligation to administer programs in other agencies, the National Park Service followed the Forest Service lead. This tied the NPS to a policy that ran counter to National Park Service objectives in important ways. Fire as spectacle, creeping over the edge of Glacier Peak to the delight of tourists, was consistent with the Service's image of its obligation to accommodate visitors. Wild fire, which might very well have provided ecological benefit, was not.¹⁵⁵

The National Park Service's obligation to manage programs outside the Service was even more taxing. Responsibility for department-wide programs was new to the National Park Service. Despite forays into assisting state parks during the 1920s, the National Park Service usually had minded its own affairs. Only in the middle of the 1920s did it reach any kind of parity with the Forest Service, equaling that agency's political reach and finding its own cultural values more in tune with the tenor of the times. The breadth of the National Park Service's new responsibility was broad and wide. It included programs for the Indian Service, Bureau of Mines and other agencies within the Department of the Interior, as well as state parks throughout the nation. As Albright's primary operations manager for New Deal projects, Coffman found himself with responsibilities well beyond what he imagined just a few years before as a forest supervisor in the Forest Service.¹⁵⁶

To reward Coffman and reflect his new responsibility, Albright created a Field Education Division in the NPS's Branch of Research and Education and appointed Coffman division head under Branch Director Dr. Harold C. Bryant. The National Park Service already had established a tie between forestry and fire, the same relationship that The Forest Service had earlier developed. The arrangement gave the National Park Service a fire structure that paralleled the Forest Service's. Coffman initially balked at the appointment. His title in the National Park Service had been "fire control expert," with

¹⁵⁴ Emergency Conservation Work Press Release, October 23, 1933, NARA, RG 79.4.3, Records of Branch of Forestry; Third Report of the Director of Emergency Conservation Work, For the Period April 1934 to September 30, 1934 (With Certain Data from April 5, 1933 through September 30, 1934), 29-46.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Shankland, *Steve Mather of the National Park* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 303.

¹⁵⁶ Coffman interview, October 28, 1962, 15-16; National Park Service, "Conference of Superintendents and Field Officers, Washington, D.C., November 19-23, 1934, 145; Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary: The First Thousand Days, 1933-1936*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 18-19; Shankland, *Steve Mather of the National Parks*, 297-303; Donald Swain, *Wilderness Defender*, 223.

the lead responsibility in forestry falling to Ansel Hall, the Berkeley-trained forester who served as chief naturalist in the Service. Hall nominally headed the National Park Service's forestry and fire-fighting efforts, but spent most of his time working on museums and park interpretation. Coffman's reticence about the offer was understandable. He and Hall had grown close during the more than five years they worked together, and he did not want to be seen as usurping his friend and superior. Albright reassured Coffman that he was not superseding Hall, and he accepted the appointment. The change represented an acknowledgement of the growing importance of Coffman and his fire programs. Coffman headed the new division, which vociferously promulgated the message of suppression. Coffman's division became the center of the Department of the Interior's fire management activity, transforming policy into practice.¹⁵⁷

When Coffman assessed models, the Forest Service still dominated the field of fire management. Well before the beginning of the New Deal, the foresters had made suppression their practical religion. Since an important regional foresters' conference in the nation's capital in 1930, the USFS settled on goals and contemplated the extension of their reach in fire management. This theme became a major element of the Copeland Report, a 1,677-page behemoth formally titled *A National Plan for American Forestry*, which the Forest Service unveiled just after Roosevelt took office. The tacit question that drove Forest Service policy was simultaneously simple and complex: how far could the National Park Service extend its systematic fire protection – in geographic, technical, administrative, and financial terms. By the early 1930s, the Service enjoyed technical capabilities, but complete exclusion of fire remained too much to ask of the era's technologies. An enormous domain and insufficient resources ensured that USFS officials recognized limits to their control. Instead, that Service fashioned different categories for the fire protection status of its lands: critical, marginal, and acceptable. Defining what constituted each category proved far more difficult than creating the structure in which they fit. Prompt and thorough protection or no protection at all were agreed upon as the available options for response.¹⁵⁸

Even as the National Park Service implemented the USFS ideal of suppression, powerful voices in the Forest Service were challenging that model in the aftermath of the 1934 Selway fires in Montana. Their severity prompted Elers Koch, a prominent forester whose personal history with fire stretched back even before the terrible summer of 1910, to question the agency's approach to fire. Speaking of the northern Rockies and the trails and roads that the Forest Service had cut to aid fire response, Koch saw a mistake – a destruction of wilderness to no avail. He “firmly believed that if the Forest Service had never expended a dollar in this country, there would be no appreciable difference in the area burned over.” Such a bold critique of existing practice from someone of Koch's stature guaranteed a hearing for the new set of ideas, but in the Forest Service, only the innovative Robert Marshall and the brilliant Aldo Leopold supported him. The rest of the

¹⁵⁷ Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 126-27; Coffman interview, October 29, 1962, 16; J. F. Kieley, *A Brief History of the National Park Service* (Washington, D.C.: Civilian Conservation Corps, Department of the Interior, 1940); Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, *Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s* (Denver: National Park Service Denver Service Center, 1983), 245.

¹⁵⁸ Pyne, *Fire in America*, 270-73, 346-50; David Carle, *Burning Questions: America's Fight with Nature's Fire* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2002), 52.

National Park Service blamed a lack of resources as the problem and concocted even stronger measures to eradicate fire. Despite Koch's criticisms, suppression remained the dominant Forest Service model.¹⁵⁹

Forest Service policies such as the hour control program and the 10:00 a.m. standard illustrated that agency's technical proficiency and its commitment to the exclusion of fire. The Forest Service's research program emphasized fire protection. The goals it set – the 10:00 a.m. policy in particular, which specified that all fires be brought under control by 10:00 the morning after their sighting or by each successive morning at 10:00 – were only achievable with the resources of the New Deal. Federal programs such as the CCC permitted Forest Service leaders to think about fire in much larger terms than ever before. The programs created led to a level of implementation that no earlier era ever matched, and they gave the foresters greater autonomy. They no longer lamented the lack of the Army that had once helped the Department of the Interior, finding in the CCC their own general labor force. Instead, foresters launched the comprehensive modernization of the fire management system, replete with the goals of the early to middle twentieth century. The Forest Service began to use scientists and other professionals in its research program. With this plethora of resources now at their disposal, foresters expected no less than the complete conquest of fire. In this, they began to treat fire as they did other natural elements such as soil and water. This push for control of nature was the style of the era.¹⁶⁰

The National Park Service's aspirations in relation to fire were more modest. Coffman's roots in the Forest Service provided the National Park Service an advantage as it structured its fire and forest planning, but at the same time, what he advocated accentuated the USFS vision of fire management. With neither the cosmological viewpoint nor the overwhelming dread of fire and its consequences that stemmed from the summer of 1910, the National Park Service never quite accepted suppression as more than a policy objective. With its vision of protecting nature for visitation, the National Park Service utilized USFS procedures, but in a more flexible way. For the USFS, fire was a defining antagonist. The National Park Service readily absorbed USFS land and some of its practices, but it never reacted to fire as deeply as did the USFS.

Suppression did become the keystone of NPS policy. Leaders divided the park system into different categories. Large western parks, usually in the proximity of national forests, always had been the center of thinking about fire. With the threat of major fires ever present, parks such as Glacier, Sequoia, Yellowstone and Yosemite implemented more widespread suppression programs than ever before. CCC camps spurred the process. In 1933, five camps at Sequoia, five at Yosemite, nine at Glacier, four at Yellowstone, and three at neighboring Grand Teton National Park attested to the importance of fire protection.¹⁶¹ With direct instructions to use CCC resources to enhance suppression, the western parks finally had the resources they needed to mount extensive programs.

¹⁵⁹ Elers Koch, "The Passing of the Lolo Trail," *Journal of Forestry* 33 2 (1935), 98-104; Elers Koch, *Forty Years a Forester, 1903-1943* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1998), 91-107; Pyne, *Fire in America*, 278-82; Stephen Pyne, *Year of the Fires: The Story of the Great Fires of 1910* (New York: Viking Books, 2001), 264-66.

¹⁶⁰ Pyne, *Fire in America*, 272-75.

¹⁶¹ *Directory of CCC Camps Supervised by the National Park Service (Updated to December 31, 1941)* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 1, 4, 7.

The results of the CCC presence and the increased emphasis on planning were almost immediate. The northern plains experienced the same declining precipitation that prompted the Dust Bowl to the south, and by the mid-1930s, conditions were drought-like. From 1933-1935, Yellowstone experienced acute fire hazards resulting from mild temperatures, below-normal precipitation, and the early melting of snow from the warmer-than-usual conditions. Despite a large number of fires, the park suffered little damage. Some interpreted this as the triumph of fire control, for Yellowstone passed a critical test. The new infrastructure and increased resources prevented a replay of past bad fire seasons, proving Coffman correct and tempering Superintendent Roger Toll's pleas for vigilance. During 1933, more than 800 men worked on fire protection projects that included reforestation, clean-up, and road, trail, bridge, and telephone line construction. In 1934, six CCC camps were organized for fire emergencies, with the workers divided into "flying squadrons" of fifty fire fighters, with two additional squads of forty each. CCC enrollees were attached to ranger stations to act as smokechasers. "They have been of invaluable aid in this capacity," Toll reported, "and in numerous cases have prevented small fires from increasing to considerable size because of their prompt action, and because of the fact that they were immediately available for fire suppression duty." In 1935, all fire fighting was consolidated under the chief ranger, with responsibility for structure fires moved from the aegis of the master plumber to the ranger division.¹⁶² Fire had new precedence and a coordinated response developed.

The results were stunning, a testimony to the ability of adequate resources to make suppression a successful strategy in specific circumstances. In 1933, Yellowstone experienced thirty-seven fires, the largest of which was 850 acres. In 1934, only nine fires were reported before June 30. All were minuscule. In 1935, the trend continued: the park faced thirty-five fires, only four of which were Class C blazes of ten acres or larger.¹⁶³ In each of the years, Toll had anticipated a severe fire season. Light winter precipitation and dry spring weather made the prospect of fire extremely daunting, but each of the first three years of the CCC program, Yellowstone was able to control the fires it faced.

The difference at Glacier National Park was equally dramatic. Suppression worked so well that until a freak fire on October 4, 1934, the park had kept its net fire loss to less than 100 acres of timber for the year. A combination of the workers from the park's nine CCC camps, more than any other single unit in the park system, and the deployment of smokechasers and lookouts created a near perfect suppression regime in a short time frame. The October 4 fire spread wildly because of unusual circumstances. After a snowfall of eighteen inches, the park released its CCC enrollees. "We were so certain that our fire season was over," Superintendent Eivind T. Scoyen observed in the aftermath, "that we had put away all our fire equipment for the winter." With snow on the ground, rangers began to burn brush, a common fall practice. During one burn on the east side of the park, a "wind of almost hurricane proportions," as Scoyen recounted, spread

¹⁶² Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1933, 3; Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1934, 4-5; Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1935, 5; Circular No. 25, October 8, 1935, Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1935, Yellowstone National Park Library.

¹⁶³ Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1933, 3; Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1934, 4-5; Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1935, 5.

the flaming material into a crown fire that spread along the North Shore of Sherburne Lake. Bringing men from the CCC camps on the west side of Glacier, Scoyen and his full-time staff quickly brought the fire under control.¹⁶⁴

Other fires at Glacier National Park presented challenges, with blazes during August 1936 proving particularly taxing. A fire on the Glacier Wall on August 18 became a crown fire before it was detected. With the efforts of almost 500 men, it was under control by August 22. A dry thunderstorm on August 22 started ten fires in the park and more in the adjacent national forest. More than 200 workers were dispatched to these fires, 125 taken from the Glacier Wall fire. Two days later, the combination of rain and the addition of 1,200 new workers from the Forest Service put an end to that blaze. A fire discovered August 30, a remnant of the August 18 Glacier Wall fire finding new life, spread. It quickly became three separate fires: one on McDonald Creek, another a few miles north of Granite Park Chalets, and a third near Ahern Pass. The intensity of the fire shocked observers. "I have never seen as complete a burn-out as occurred in Swiftcurrent Valley," Scoyen recorded. "With the exception of a few swampy areas, every green living thing, from rocks on one side of the valley to the other, has been destroyed." The fire leveled all of the park's buildings in the Many Glacier area, three of the chalets across the road from the Many Glacier Hotel and many of the cabins. The hotel was saved because of the efforts of its employees.¹⁶⁵

Many factors contributed to this new ability to fight fire, but the clearest change came from the combination of labor and money. The CCC provided something the park system had never before experienced: an abundant supply of labor. Superintendents at parks with complicated fire histories could direct those resources at fire and came to see the New Deal as the solution to their problems. Toll recognized the impact at Yellowstone, as did Scoyen at Glacier, White at Sequoia, Charles Goff Thomson at Yosemite and many others. Scoyen rated the 1936 fire season as "one of the most dangerous ever experienced" in the northern Rockies. "The entire park organization did a magnificent job during this emergency," he informed Director Arno B. Cammerer. "Everyone, no matter in what capacity employed, willingly and cheerfully worked day and night without any complaint whatsoever, to bring the situation under control." Even Howard Hays of the Glacier Park Transport Company, a friend of the park who was sometimes critical of its operations, concurred. "Considering the unprecedented drouth to which the Park has been subject," he told Cammerer, "I feel we have been most fortunate to escape without a much greater loss." As a doctrine, suppression was possible when resources were available. When workers cleared underbrush, built roads, trails, and fire lines, and especially when lookouts with communications were staffed, reacting to fire as Coffman insisted gave the national park system a very good chance of mastering all but the most cataclysmic of fires.¹⁶⁶

One of the greatest coups of the 1920s had been the acquisition of the major national parks, Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains, and Mammoth Cave, in the eastern half of the United States. Far more heavily visited as a result of proximity to so much of

¹⁶⁴ E.T. Scoyen to the Director, October 11, 1934, NARA, RG 79.7., Glacier National Park.

¹⁶⁵ E. T. Scoyen to Director, September 10, 1936, Howard H. Hays to Arno B. Cammerer, September 7, 1936, NARA, RG 79.7, Glacier National Park.

¹⁶⁶ J.D. Coffman, Memorandum for the Superintendent, Sequoia National Park, August 6, 1933, Sequoia National Park. F275, F2.

the nation's population, eastern parks presented a different set of challenges in responding to fire. The humid nature of the region stood in contrast to the aridity and lack of water so common among the western parks. Fires were endemic because of human behavior. The combination of visitors and long-standing patterns of local use, some of which included seasonal burning, made such parks vulnerable not only to the carelessness that marked national park visitors across the country, but also to intentional fire-setting. National Park Service officials attributed the increase in number of fires during the 1930s to the creation of eastern national parks.¹⁶⁷ These situations mirrored the problems of Yellowstone and Yosemite in the late nineteenth century. In such places, local residents continued patterns of use after the establishment of the parks, burning in a casual manner that defied suppression efforts.

At Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky, authorized in 1926, but not established until 1941, the National Park Service faced the problem of fire from a new perspective. Unlike western parks carved from public lands, Mammoth Cave and the other eastern parks had to be bought, parcel by parcel, from private landowners or obtained by cajoling, negotiating, or exchanging with state, county, and local governments. At Mammoth Cave, two associations purchased land for the park throughout the 1930s. Before formal establishment, the National Park Service took administrative responsibility for the lands that were to be included in the park. This long and often drawn-out process left the Service with vast and scattered holdings that were hard to manage and even more difficult to consolidate. In essence, throughout the period between authorization and establishment, the National Park Service invariably managed a patchwork of land interspersed with parcels of private, state, and county lands.

Mammoth Cave had a different pattern of fire than did most of the parks in the system. Fires occurred in its vicinity in winter, with many just outside park boundaries and even more on private parcels inside the proposed park. Fires on private land within the park boundary required a Service response. NPS officials worried that such fires might spread and damage the park, and in any event, they expected eventually to acquire such lands. If it aggressively battled fire, the National Park Service also stood to gain friends in an area where it was resented. With the CCC available for fire fighting and protection work, the National Park Service stood to benefit from any fire protection efforts in more than one way.¹⁶⁸

Eastern parks such as Mammoth Cave highlighted the benefits of using a cooperative approach to fire response. The laudable goal of fire protection beyond park boundaries became an objective in large part because the CCC provided enough resources to contemplate it. Since early in its history, the National Park Service recognized that response to fire should extend beyond park boundaries. In the West, examples of interagency cooperation abounded; rangers and park staff fought fires on

¹⁶⁷ Cook, "Forest Fire Protection in the National Park System, 1930-39," 3; Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of an Appalachian Community, 1818-1937* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Warren Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Margaret L. Brown, *The Wild East: A Biography of the Great Smoky Mountains* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁸ "Report on Mammoth Cave, 1937," NA, RG 79.4.3, Branch of Forestry, Forest Fire Reports 1928-1949, Box 2; John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), 254-56.

national forest and private lands even as workers from other agencies battled national park blazes.

By 1935, the impact of the New Deal largess on fire response offered the Service a critical choice. The National Park Service could consider a formal policy of extending fire protection beyond park boundaries, effecting fire control in a regional context. Protecting parks from fire meant investing in the management of adjacent lands. The eastern national parks were central to this expansion of obligation. The circumstances at Mammoth Cave illuminated the question. “Due to CCC labor we are in a position to suppress numerous fires outside the park,” observed NPS representative Robert P. Holland, who became Mammoth’s acting superintendent in 1936, “and thereby assist our fire prevention program by making local people fire conscious.” Common enough at other parks, such a policy promoted the agency’s objectives at Mammoth Cave. Coffman concurred. “If it is necessary for the NPS to fight all fires with the maximum boundary in order to afford proper protection to the area within the minimum boundary, and there is no other agency who can be looked to for efficient protection,” he wrote, “then I feel the maximum boundary constitutes the park’s protection boundary.”¹⁶⁹ In the East at least, the National Park Service served the function of the Forest Service, in the West, as the dominant fire response and control agency.

By the end of the decade, the National Park Service had pulled back from this perspective. Experience showed that even with the CCC, the task often exceeded the resources available. By 1939, Lawrence F. Cook, head of the Western Region of the NPS Division of Forestry, deemed fire-fighting efforts outside of park boundaries as beyond the reach of the Service. “Little or no control over the use of fire on these outside lands can be exerted by the Service,” he observed in his summary of the decade. “Dependence must be placed on the agency responsible for protection of the area.”¹⁷⁰ The National Park Service in the West benefited from the fact that its neighbors were primarily federal. With mostly private or state lands around eastern national parks, the NPS found less assistance in implementing a comprehensive fire control program.

The nation’s first archaeological national park, Mesa Verde, generally experienced few fires. Colorado’s high mesa country offered few opportunities for fire to spread and at 52, 122 acres, the park encompassed a much smaller area than most western parks. In the first twenty-five years of park history, only one fire, the Todd Nine fire in 1926, was considered major. It burned only twenty acres of vegetation, barely reportable by the standards of parks such as Glacier and Sequoia. The park received three CCC camps, which in the summer 1934 housed 1,300 workers. When two fires started in July, the park responded. The first, the Wild Horse Mesa fire, began on the adjacent Ute Reservation on July 9. CCC workers fought the fire and briefly brought it under control. But the fire broke away, spreading rapidly and eventually subsuming the Wickiup Fire, a 286-acre burn that started on July 11. The blazes eventually burned a total of 4,492 acres of timber, 2,229 of which were inside Mesa Verde. More than 1,000 workers battled the

¹⁶⁹ Robert Holland Memorandum, March 26, 1935; John D. Coffman, Memorandum, April 17, 1935, NA, RG 79.4.3, Branch of Forestry, Forest Fire Reports 1928-1949, Box 2.

¹⁷⁰ Cook, “Forest Fire Protection in the National Park System, 1930-39,” 3-4.

blazes, including CCC enrollees, members of the Indian Service, and residents of Mancos, Colorado, and other nearby communities.¹⁷¹

The fire created a new consciousness about the threat Mesa Verde faced, and the CCC camps allowed the park a formidable response. Superintendent Ernest P. Leavitt recognized that the park had been fortunate. The fires on Wickiup and Wild Horse mesas did little damage to park facilities; if similar events had occurred on Chapin Mesa, he noted, Mesa Verde's developed areas would have been ruined. Leavitt emphasized the development of fire-fighting infrastructure. He wanted lookout towers, truck trails, and fire trails to allow the rapid movement of workers and materiel from headquarters to outlying mesas. The CCC and other New Deal programs provided his solution.¹⁷² Again, suppression depended on resources and technology. It had become the National Park Service's only strategy.

Despite its increasing success, the National Park Service's attempt to eliminate fire became a source of consternation for wildlife scientists within the Service. NPS scientists suggested that the Forest Service was clumsy in its approach, its methods heavy-handed and excessive. Under Coffman, some charged, New Deal programs made some national park areas look more like national forests, managed landscapes rather than vestiges of a natural past. In 1935, Adolph Murie, the noted naturalist, challenged existing NPS practice. He believed that clearing a twelve-square-mile area in Glacier National Park as the National Park Service intended was "gross destruction. . . . Removing natural habitat from a national park," he declared, was tantamount to declaring war on the national park idea. Clearing brush and removing dead trees, denuding roadsides to enhance the visual impact of parks, and otherwise altering existing conditions fit older notions of tamed nature, not the pristine nature that so many demanded of the national parks. The rise of wilderness organizations, especially the Wilderness Society, headed by Robert Sterling Yard and Bob Marshall, stemmed from this sense of lost wild as well as from other factors such as the spread of automobile tourism. Some scientists vociferously complained about NPS actions, arguing that such human-induced removal of brush impeded wildlife patterns, altered terrain, and generally disrupted natural cycles.¹⁷³

Suppression proponents such as Lawrence F. Cook blanched at the accusation that his staff had become "destroyers of the natural." National Park Service foresters sought to preserve the "natural values" of parks, eliminating excessive fuel loads and maintaining the easy access that promoted fire protection. A protection regime gave "nature" a better chance of long-term survival, Cook insisted. Without such protection, supporters argued, the National Park Service could not expect to preserve scenic and recreational values or even any semblance of native biology.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Annual Report of the Superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park, 1934, NARA, RG 79.7, Mesa Verde, Box 1; Paul Rogers, "Mesa Verde Fire History, March 2002," unpublished paper, Mesa Verde National Park archives, Mesa Verde National Park, 5-7.

¹⁷² Rogers, "Mesa Verde Fire History, March 2002," 7.

¹⁷³ Adolph Murie to Ben Thompson, July 13, 1935; Adolph Murie, "Memorandum for Ben H. Thompson, August 2, 1935," NARA RG 79.7, Glacier National Park, Box 973; Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 23-53; Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 128-29.

¹⁷⁴ Lawrence F. Cook, "Memorandum for the Chief Forester, August 28, 1935," NARA, RG 79, Glacier National Park, Box 973; Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 130.

The difference between the perspectives illustrated a gulf between two disparate ideals of national parks. Murie advocated something resembling a fictive pure nature, a physical world that appeared untrammelled to the visitor's eye and satisfied his scientific vision of the concept of natural. Cook argued for a managed scenic landscape, an ideal vista that coincided with the idealized image of national parks that the National Park Service advanced and the public embraced. In a sense, both fit the definition of nature. Both were managed, albeit in different ways, one by action and the other by the consequences of inaction, and both easily fell within the purview of National Park Service logic and vision. Simultaneously both pointed to a different kind of fire management future for the Service.

The debate took place at a pivotal moment in the history of fire management, during which the assumptions of the moment obscured longer-term judgment. Fire loomed large during the New Deal for ecological reasons. After an extended period in which truly major fires were limited to 1910, between 1919 and 1934 five major fire years occurred, heightening concerns and bringing fire to the forefront of planning. The National Park Service experienced these significant outbreaks along with the Forest Service, awakening both agencies to the consequences of cataclysmic fire and challenging them to conceive of their missions in new ways. With adequate resources, suppression appeared to work. The positive responses of NPS superintendents to their new circumstances affirmed the direction in which the National Park Service took fire policy. The result was the argument for Forest Service-like management that Cook and others offered. They advocated suppression because it was the NPS's goal in fire management.¹⁷⁵

Suppression, with CCC workpower, appeared to work. At the same time, an influential countertrend emerged. When George M. Wright, the NPS's first chief of the Wildlife Division, initiated a new plan for wildlife management, the National Park Service had the opportunity to recast its fire response in a manner distinct from the Forest Service. Wright and his growing cadre of wildlife biologists never agreed with Coffman's perspective; they liked his policies even less. The biologists believed that leaving dead timber material on the floor of the forest was healthy for the forest and the wildlife that lived in it. *Fauna No. 1*, the first wildlife policy directive the National Park Service issued, advocated preserving the forest as it was, letting natural processes drive any changes in ecology. Coffman's forestry model, extending protection throughout the national parks, attempted to protect them against not only fire, but insects, fungi, and other threats. Wright's model suggested a dynamic forest, ever-changing; Coffman's conceived of a forest frozen in ecological time. The latter remained attractive in no small part as a result of the looming threat of major fire and the success of suppression at the major parks. Following the Forest Service, which controlled the money available for fire protection, the National Park Service hired foresters instead of plant biologists or botanists to manage its fire programs, consigning scientists to the narrow realm of plant and wildlife management. Wildlife biologists found themselves alone as advocates of ecological management as the foresters continued to follow USFS practices.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Pyne, *Fire in America*, 255-56; Pyne, *Year of the Fires*, 253-67.

¹⁷⁶ Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 126-28.

The human resources of the CCC created a confidence in the National Park Service, a sense that it could face and defeat fire. With its embrace of suppression, the National Park Service also adopted another USFS idea, that nature could be shaped and controlled by human endeavor. This precept was more complicated for the National Park Service than for any other federal land management agency. With its tacit value that nature was to be preserved within its boundaries, the National Park Service outwardly embraced the idea of nature preservation even as it developed tourist facilities in national parks and made other significant accommodations for visitors. Fire suppression was not incongruous with the Service's vision of nature protection, for it preserved a vision of a pristine, pre-human America. A nation filled with forests surely greeted the first European settlers, American mythology announced with certitude, and fire suppression protected the very trees that attested to this complicated historical fiction. At the same time, the results of suppression provided a tacit justification of the means. Different in that they contained diverse species of trees instead of the monoculture of USFS planting, the national park area forests cleared of brush and understory in the Forest Service style, allowed trees to remain and let the National Park Service deploy its newly found resources to respond to fire away from heavily traveled areas. The National Park Service could suppress fire and defend nature with only a modicum of discomfort about the contradictions such a formulation contained.

Although a number of other factors clearly contributed to this positive record, the prevailing thinking about fire management pointed directly at the resources available for suppression. NPS circulars began in 1934 and became more focused on fire fighting and forest conservation after 1935. In 1936, Coffman added the CCC-funded NPS state parks program to his responsibilities. That same year, the Branch of Forestry initiated a review of each park's fire-fighting program. Specialized training for CCC enrollees became common. The idea that fire could be contained through proactive strategies became such a dominant ideology that when Cook later assessed the decade, he drew stark and clear contrasts. "Prior to 1928," Cook observed, "little training or planning for fire protection had been done. As a result, large acreages were burned. . . . With the advent of the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, much more rapid strides have been made in completing the most needed physical improvements for protection."¹⁷⁷ This perspective became the baseline National Park Service view, one that tied it to the Forest Service and the vast resources that National Park Service commanded for fire-fighting and protection and that marked the Service's cosmology and point of view.

The National Park Service's preventive fire protection became more aggressive, necessitating greater levels of organization. The presence of the CCC put considerable pressure on parks, for some of the activity undertaken by the ECW program conflicted with park goals. In some instances, park officials had to contend with overaggressive enrollees removing or cutting more than the National Park Service wanted. Because of the vast number of people working in most national parks and the confusion about what they were supposed to do and how they were supposed to do it, a clear set of guidelines

¹⁷⁷ L. F. Cook, "Forest Fire Protection in the National Park System, 1930-1939," Occasional Forestry Note No. 5, March 25, 1940, Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Sequoia National Park Archive, SNP 42, Box 275, Folder 2.

became necessary. Coffman developed principles to guide NPS fire protection. He approached the idea with his characteristic thoroughness and clear-headed thinking.¹⁷⁸

The circular Coffman authored to direct CCC efforts offered a scientific approach to managing ground cover that contributed to fires. Coffman insisted that he covered only “dead vegetative matter from the standpoint of fire hazard reduction giving due consideration to the requirements of aesthetics and wildlife.” This definition resulted from the increasingly vocal complaints of wildlife biologists and the avid work of CCC enrollees, whom the National Park Service often took to task for not differentiating between dead and living material. Coffman recognized that such work should be overseen by trained foresters, but knew that such specialists were in short supply. Direct administration fell to forest technicians, who Coffman insisted had to be concerned with “furthering the objectives of wildlife and landscaping.”¹⁷⁹

Coffman designed the instructional circular to create a common understanding of obligations and the terminology that defined them. He intended to describe conditions and to establish standards for management that could be applied to fire protection activities. “Debris on the ground is a natural condition in all forests,” he wrote in a section entitled “Limitations.” “Unfortunately, fire hazard reduction as an ECW project is too often conceived to mean the complete removal and disposal of all dead standing and down material from large forest areas. . . . Fire hazard reduction often serves as an excuse for intensive forest cleanup which is almost invariably ascribable to and governed by an inherent human tendency to tidy up the woods.”¹⁸⁰ This philosophical observation reflected what had become Coffman’s dichotomy, the problem of doing the job so well that it damaged the features the park was meant to preserve.

In the end, such circulars attested to both the success of the program and to the changes it brought to park ecology. When Coffman reminded his charges that complete removal of dead and downed timber was not a primary objective of cleanups and that wildlife and landscape values had to be taken into consideration, he asserted the values of the National Park Service over those he brought from the Forest Service. Fire protection was a crucial activity, but even to Coffman, it was not a precondition of National Park Service objectives in the way that it was for the Forest Service. Despite its embrace of the USFS model, the National Park Service vision of fire differed. It no longer even nodded toward the dissenting point of view that Superintendent John White advanced in favor of light burning. In the same circular, Coffman called light burning a “practice [that] cannot be tolerated in the national parks.” In response to a suggestion from Yellowstone National Park to let remote and valueless timber burn after a summer in which the park lost more than 25,000 acres of timber to fire, Coffman responded with a firm articulation of NPS policy. “I for one do not concur with any such policy for the national parks and monuments,” he announced. “There are extremely few areas where any fire starting is not a threat to high values.”¹⁸¹ NPS fire policy did not demand the sanitized forests that the National Park Service attributed to its chief rival. National parks were to look like nature

¹⁷⁸ Coffman interview, October 29, 1962, 19.

¹⁷⁹ Miscellaneous Circular No. 15 for Western Parks and Monuments, December 17, 1934, FR 31-34, Man U, Box 2, F20, Sequoia National Park, 1-2.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 4-5.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 2; Superintendent’s Annual Report, 1940; John D. Coffman, Memo to Regional Director, Region II, November 8, 1940, 883-03.3, Y-240, Yellowstone National Park.

and be free of fire. In many ways, accomplishing these ends was a more difficult assignment than simple fire eradication.

CCC enrollees proved less compliant than Coffman hoped and his message had to be repeated throughout the remainder of the decade. Coffman and others in the National Park Service repeatedly issued rules to govern CCC actions and to affirm National Park Service oversight and responsibility. Even under National Park Service supervision, the CCC sometimes lacked the subtle touch that Coffman and the National Park Service sought. The crews often cleared indiscriminately, a valid response to both their training and to the USFS model from which it derived. The National Park Service sought a better balance between clearing and landscape and wildlife values. In this respect, the CCC became a liability as well as the tremendous advantage it certainly provided. The National Park Service had to grapple with the embarrassment of riches ECW programs offered. In fire management, officials learned that an abundance of resources did not always yield the precise results they sought. The CCC drove fire control as much as fire control directed the CCC.

The National Park Service's language during this era contributed to the confusion. Fire plans typically were aggressive in articulating their intent. "The fire control plan recognizes no Sundays, holidays, or 8-hour days or shifts," Grand Teton National Park's 1939 fire plan enunciated. "When a fire is discovered or reported, immediate action is demanded, and control and patrol measures must be continuously applied without interruption until the fire is out." At Grand Canyon, the park's policy reflected similar objectives: "to reach and combat every fire that starts in the park, or that threatens the park, with such speed, skill, strength, and equipment as to confine it to the minimum of acreage burned and damage caused."¹⁸² Despite some complaints about overly enthusiastic CCC enrollees, fire suppression remained the lexicon of the National Park Service.

The most permanent dimension of the impact of resources was the degree of organizational structure it permitted. Before 1933, fire response had been a matter of quick action by anyone who was available. With New Deal resources, the National Park Service now had trained people and dedicated materials that it could deploy in a strategic fashion. The burgeoning communications networks in the national parks, combined with the many fire lookouts, allowed for a level of planning that extended far beyond the theoretical response of the 1920s. The New Deal changed the nature of fire plans. They became comprehensive documents that described leadership, responsibilities and strategies, while allocating resources and considering contingencies instead of general statement of goals. In some ways, the fire plans were draconian: in an age when cigarettes were ubiquitous, Grand Teton's document forbade smoking during fire season except in prepared camps and designated places. Grand Canyon's plan permitted the park superintendent to draft visitors to help fight fires.¹⁸³

With infrastructure provided by access to resources, the NPS facilitated a series of cooperative arrangements with adjoining national forests that extended the cooperative fire protection that began in the 1920s. Fire forced agencies into alliances and these

¹⁸² "Grand Canyon National Park, Fire Control Plan, Season of 1939," 1; "Fire Control Plan for Grand Teton National Park, 1939," 2.

¹⁸³ "Fire Control Plan for Grand Teton National Park, 1939," 4-5; "Grand Canyon National Park, Fire Control Plan, Season of 1939," 2-3.

relationships became a hallmark of the New Deal. U.S. Forester William Greeley became the primary advocate of cooperative fire protection. Even before he left office in 1928, structures such as the Forest Protection Board that supported interagency responses were in place. The New Deal provided a greater degree of centralized control, which affected all kinds of agencies, not just federal land managers. Most national parks had created relationships with other federal land management agencies. Although such agreements had existed since the 1910s, Yellowstone's 1932 agreement with the Absaroka National Forest served as a model. Before the New Deal, the two agencies were both short of resources and they essentially agreed to pool what they had. "Overhead will be loaned to adjacent units insofar as practicable," the agreement read, "without endangering the unit loaning the overhead." Both agreed not to charge each other for anything more than expenses, to deputize members of the other agency when necessary, and to share law enforcement obligations.¹⁸⁴

The preponderance of resources had changed the nature of such agreements, enhancing their significance and pointing toward comprehensive regional planning. A 1936 agreement between Glacier National Park and the Blackfeet Indian Agency created a "mutual purpose in aiding one another in suppressing all fires as soon as possible with whatever means that may be at hand." At Grand Canyon National Park, a 1939 agreement conceded that the boundaries between the two agencies were artificial and emergency responses could transcend jurisdiction. "Division lines will not be closely drawn," the document attested. "It is to be understood that there shall be no delay by either organization in going to a fire when there is a question as to which side of the boundary the fire is on." The first crew to arrive was expected to provide the initial response, its leader to serve as acting fire boss until the arrival of the lead person from the agency with jurisdiction. At Yellowstone, a new agreement with the Shoshone National Forest in 1938 extended the park's cooperative arrangement into similar terms.¹⁸⁵

By the end of the decade, the National Park Service had developed a clear and distinct set of strategies for addressing fires. CCC resources had been a basis, but the National Park Service had learned much more. Service officials relied on leadership at the park level to emphasize the importance of fire response, argued vociferously for careful assessment of fire experiences and for continuous updating of fire protection planning, collected data about the sources and causes of fires, and recognized the value of frequent training for everyone involved in the fire protection system. By 1939, the National Park Service had anticipated the end of the CCC. Superintendents were admonished to develop new sources of fire fighters in local communities and beyond. "The Service has an enviable position among agencies responsible for fire protection in that practically all the users of the parks are contacted directly by protection personnel," observed Lawrence Cook, a bit optimistically. "We have a wonderful opportunity to advance fire protection not only for our own areas but also in the general field of fire

¹⁸⁴ "Fire Cooperation Agreement Between Yellowstone National Park and Absaroka National Forest, June 13, 1932," W-238, Yellowstone National Park.

¹⁸⁵ R. R. Vincent to Director, August 11, 1936; "Cooperative Agreement," (ca. 1936), NARA, RG 79.7, Glacier National Park, Memorandum to Field Officers A-17-1, Cooperative Fire Fighting Agreements, December 17, 1938, NARA, RG 79.4.3, Branch of Forestry, Box 281; "Fire Cooperative Agreement: Kaibab National Forest Service-Grand Canyon National Park," Grand Canyon National Park.

prevention.”¹⁸⁶ The National Park Service not only saw its experiences with fire as valuable, it also believed its educational mission could be used to support the goals of suppression.

Cook also recognized that completely preventing human-induced fires was impossible. “The Service, perhaps, cannot expect 100 percent elimination of man-caused fires despite all that we can do, although our efforts should be pointed in that direction,” he summarized. “Any park can well be more proud of a record of reduction of preventable man-caused fires than in a reduction of area burned.”¹⁸⁷ This differentiation attested to the lessons that the National Park Service had learned. Prevention was good, but control was essential. More than any other idea, this subtle shift enunciated the differences between the National Park Service and the Forest Service. The primary threat to the parks remained the actions of people.

The initiation of hostilities in World War II changed the climate in which National Park Service fire management took place. From 1941 to 1945, the war took men and materiel away from civilian purposes, directing it toward defense efforts. The National Park Service did not escape unscathed. The Service’s budget was cut in half in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Between that date and the end of the fiscal year in June 1942, the National Park Service lost almost 25 percent of its permanent workforce. A year later, the number had fallen again, from 4,510 in 1942 to 1,974 at the end of June 1943. It dropped to 1,577 by 1945. The CCC was disbanded in 1942; most of the young men who worked in it went on to the military. The situation became so dire that the Service relied on camps of conscientious objectors to open and maintain trails for visitor use and fire protection in Glacier National Park. The National Park Service moved from its Washington, D.C. headquarters to Chicago and slipped into an inconsequential role as the war effort demanded more and more of the budget and the nation’s resources.¹⁸⁸

Fire presented a different kind of threat in wartime. “To the normal problem of fire protection,” NPS Director Newton B. Drury wrote in his 1943 annual report, “an acute threat of sabotage and enemy incendiaryism was added.” Areas of extreme fire hazard within 300 miles of any coast were included in the fire protection allocations of national defense agencies. The National Park Service contributed to the war effort in every way that it could; its contribution often extended to cooperating in fire fighting and in some cases, investing NPS resources in larger fire protection efforts. Labor shortage

¹⁸⁶ Cook, “Forest Fire Protection in the National Park System, 1930-39,” 9; Arno B. Cammerer, Director, “The National Park Service,” in U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Secretary, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 191-93.

¹⁸⁷ Cook, “Forest Fire Protection in the National Park System, 1930-39,” 10.

¹⁸⁸ Department of the Interior, *Annual Report for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1939* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 273-74, 296; Newton B. Drury, Director, “Report of the Director of the National Park Service, 1943,” in Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1944* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 207-08; Paige, *The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933-1942*, 132; Lary M. Dilsaver and William C. Tweed, *Challenge of the Big Trees: A Resource History of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks* (Three Rivers, CA: Sequoia Natural History Association, 1990), 159-67.

allowed women serve as fire lookouts, a task like so many others typically reserved for men prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1941.¹⁸⁹

The war also increased military use of the parks, providing a faint echo of the Army's earlier involvement in national parks. Instead of protection, their purpose now was largely recreation, as Drury noted in 1943 in his famous plea to maintain protection of the national parks. National parks functioned as emblems of Americanism, he argued, embodying ideals for which the nation fought. This symbolic role elevated the national parks' significance and made their protection even more essential. "Their proper protection in wartime is a responsibility of the first magnitude," Drury insisted in his annual report.¹⁹⁰

Although fire management suffered during World War II, the consequences were not as dire as anticipated. The war may have taken resources from the national park system, but it simultaneously impeded opportunities to travel. A dramatic decline in visitation, in no small part the result of gasoline and tire rationing, meant a primary cause of park fires – careless people – was in equally short supply. Even the influx of soldiers and sailors did not counteract the decline in visitation. In one astonishing example of the shift, the 1941 Clarke-McNary Act report for Arizona showed seventeen national park areas with more than 1 million acres of forest and no reportable fires. The list included Boulder Dam National Recreation Area, Grand Canyon National Park, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and smaller areas. A bizarre parity existed: the National Park Service no longer had the ample resources of the decade before, but neither did it experience high levels of visitation. Fire disappeared as the number of visitors diminished, confirming something that park officials noted all the back to the era of the cavalry in the nineteenth century: ongoing fire stemmed from human action with form consistency. In 1943, only 308 fires were reported in the entire park system, a level 23 percent below the average of the previous decade.¹⁹¹ A number of those were spotted by wartime volunteer lookouts, some of them women. In essence, the NPS receded from the vision of the 1930s, that it would fight fire anywhere it found it, and returned to an earlier vision of battling only proximate fire.

Still, the Service's ideology remained constant. Suppression remained the goal of the National Park Service and it still successfully battled fire wherever it found it, with whatever resources it could muster. No shift in perspective accompanied the diminished resources, leaving the National Park Service with home guard-like skeleton fire crews to guard vast expanses. Federal land management agencies followed national trends, recruiting older men and some women to replace those who went off to war. The NPS even considered using Japanese internees as fire fighters, but found insufficient numbers of men, because most of the people in the age group for fire fighting had already volunteered for the war. For the most part, the replacements lacked the "experience and training desirable for most of these positions." The National Park Service and the Forest Service shared workers as well. The "excellent fire programs" that Region II Regional

¹⁸⁹ Newton B. Drury, Director, "Report of the Director of the National Park Service, 1943," in Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Secretary, 1943* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 207-08.

¹⁹⁰ Newton B. Drury, "The National Parks in Wartime," *American Forests* (August 1943), 37-42; Drury, "Report of the Director of the National Park Service, 1943," 207.

¹⁹¹ Memorandum for the Director, January 24, 1942, Grand Canyon National Park Archive; Newton B. Drury, Director, "National Park Service," in *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1944*, 223.

Director Lawrence C. Merriam observed at Yellowstone and other parks served as the best form of training. They paid “big dividends,” Merriam noted, providing an essential component of park response.¹⁹² Experienced observers could be forgiven thinking that they had landed in the 1920s: the limits imposed by war were so great as to mirror the uncertainties of that earlier time.

The national parks rarely suffered major fire during World War II. Despite a prominent fear of “enemy incendiarism,” the threat of enemy bombers or balloon-borne incendiaries igniting massive forest fires never materialized. Restrictions and rationing limited travel; shortages of gasoline and rubber tires made remote national parks hard to reach. Overtime work provided plenty of money to civilian workers, but took the time that some might have used to travel to the national park system. As a result, human-induced fires diminished in number and the remaining park crews, as lightly staffed as they were, did the best they could under the constraints they faced. The National Park Service tried to scatter experienced fire fighters among less practiced ones, hoping for leadership in fire situations. Even as the Forest Service adhered to the 10:00 am policy, its leaders recognized that “an acute manpower shortage will probably make it impossible to put this policy universally into effect,” the regional forester for the northern Rockies, C. N. Woods, told Yellowstone Superintendent Edmund Rogers in 1942. “We will have to take more chances of a given fire getting out of control than if we had unlimited manpower with which to attack it.” The constraints of wartime were ominous. The attempts to respond were typically innovative, but other than the diminished number of reported fires, the results remained difficult to assess.¹⁹³

By the time the war ended in 1945, the CCC and its resources were a distant memory. Region Four Director Owen A. “Tommy” Tomlinson recognized the impact. “For the first time since 1932,” he informed his superintendents in 1946, “the agencies handling forest fire protection will not be able to call upon organized mass labor such as the CCC [and] the armed forces.”¹⁹⁴ This was a new reality, he instructed his charges, a shift back to the early days of suppression. Tomlinson asked that his staff do more with less, precisely how the national park system functioned before the New Deal. Suppression remained a powerful intellectual model of response to fire for the National Park Service. The realities shifted back toward a replica of an earlier time.

The New Deal and its resources changed the National Park Service in many ways, and the ability to address fire reflected a prominent improvement in the Service’s ability to fulfill its functions. Suppression had been an ideal; the CCC and its workpower, the millions of dollars from public works programs, and the addition of fire specialists to the National Park Service combined to inspire confidence in its model. With enough resources, suppression worked. Parks faced and fought fires and were able to minimize

¹⁹² “Special Report, Law Enforcement Conference, Forest Service Remount Depot, Huson, Montana, March 3 to March 12, 1942,” Yellowstone National Park, W-1; Carl G. Kruger to Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park, April 9, 1943, Yellowstone, Y-232; J. S. Veeder to Colonel R. G. Walters, July 24, 1943, Hugh H. Miller, “Memorandum for the Assistant to the Secretary in Charge of Land Utilization, March 7, 1945,” Yellowstone, Y-232; Lawrence C. Merriam, “Memorandum for the Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park, April 7, 1943,” Yellowstone, Y-230.

¹⁹³ “Report of Interagency Committee No 1, 1942,” NARA, RG 79.4.3, Branch of Forestry, Box 3; C. N. Woods to Edmund B. Rogers, March 13, 1942, Yellowstone, Y-232.

¹⁹⁴ Memorandum for all Region Four Areas, February 27, 1946, Sequoia National Park Archives, Box 275, F2; “Special Report: Law Enforcement Conference, 1942,” 1.

their impact, except in the most dramatic of circumstances. Even if cataclysmic fire remained beyond the Service's reach, ordinary day-to-day fires and most extraordinary fires could be controlled without terrific damage. As a result of the New Deal, fire seemed to become one more natural force that human ingenuity subdued.

This vision, of an orderly intact nature managed by humans, reflected the stance of the foresters in the National Park Service. It also coincided with the views of landscape architects, who remained the driving force in the Service. This neatly manicured version of nature contrasted with the messier ideal held by wildlife biologists and other scientists. The foresters' vision held sway even as the signs grew that the success of suppression was only temporary. In the post-war era, the tension between these two perspectives accelerated, highlighted by new experiences with fire within the park system.

