

From the Depression to World War II 1929–1941

On February 1, 1929, Roger Toll, the superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park, was named as Horace Albright's replacement in Yellowstone when Albright assumed Stephen Mather's position as National Park Service Director. Albright would continue to monitor the concessioners' improvement programs initiated during the past few years.

In March, Jack Haynes entered into a new contract with the government which allowed him to open a delicatessen and lunch counter at Tower Fall and to establish motion picture theaters within the park.¹

As part of the continuing sanitation program, U.S. Health Service official, H. B. Hommon, worked with William Wiggins of the park maintenance staff to improve the garbage disposal in both the concessions and government areas. Six one-ton trucks and five teams with wagons made daily rounds to the main areas of the park and every other day visits to the outlying camps to collect garbage and clean the comfort stations. The four-ton incinerators at Old Faithful, Lake, and Canyon burned the garbage for those areas, and the Fishing Bridge area garbage was sent to the Lake incinerator. "Bear-proof" garbage cans were installed in the camping areas.²

During 1929, several important Eastern landscape architects visited the park, probably as a result of the influence of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who was interested in the park's aesthetics. Fine Arts Commissioner Ferruccio Vitale made a return visit, and Grosvenor Atterbury visited the park in the summer. Vitale suggested numerous improvements throughout the park but determined that it was most important to

come up with a plan for Mammoth Hot Springs. He was initially concerned with locating a Mammoth Hot Springs museum, but he quickly recognized that a site could not be chosen until a close examination of the entire development was completed. He was not the only person with such concerns. Dr. Frank Oastler, who was interested in the educational aspects of the park and was a member of the Fine Arts Commission, suggested that Atterbury also examine the need for a general plan for Mammoth. Atterbury concluded that "a restudy of the roads with proper provision for future growth in each case is the only way in which a proper and permanent site for the Museum, as well as certain other future buildings such as a Post Office can be secured."³

The discussion of a proposed Mammoth plan caused some uncertainty among the concessioners, including Anna Pryor, who wanted to make additions on her property. Director Albright suggested that she postpone any changes until the Mammoth plan was under way.⁴

In response to the need for a Mammoth plan, Major Gilmore Clark of the Westchester County Park Commission, of New York, prepared a plan for the Mammoth area and also inspected the park for other landscaping needs.⁵ Over the next few years, some aspects of Gilmore Clark's plan for Mammoth were adopted, but many were not.

Rail passenger numbers to the park decreased from 41,697 in 1928 to 38,979 in 1929. However, total visitation figures for Yellowstone again increased from 230,984 in 1928 to 260,697 in 1929.⁶ The early



Concessions buildings behind the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel. 1936.

1930s was a time of general economic depression throughout the country. For the first time in years, the park experienced a drop in visitation, with the decrease most notable in rail service passengers. The declining trend continued through 1932. Rail traffic in 1932 was down 55 percent from the 1931 figures, and total visitation was down about 30 percent from 1931 to 157,624. The concessioners suffered losses for three straight years, with 1932 being the worst; business losses were 50 to 60 percent of their 1931 business revenues. The travel and spending trends indicated people went through the park “as quickly as possible with the least expense.”

Superintendent Roger Toll predicted that the “experience of this past summer will probably result in extensive changes in the operations of the hotels and lodges in order to meet the wishes of the traveling public.” Toll complimented the concessioners, who, despite the continuing financial losses, provided services “of the highest order and few complaints were received despite the fact that the crews were kept to a minimum.”⁷ The hotels were particularly affected by the decrease in rail travel, and the transportation company now had a surplus of buses. Late in 1930, after several months of negotiation among the concessioners, Albright and the Department wrote a new agreement for the sales of particular items in the park. Much of the agreement covered merchandise, but food services were covered as well. The agreement called for Haynes to be the sole provider of pictures, postal cards, film, Kodaks, and guide books.⁸

In 1931, the Yellowstone Park Transportation

Company purchased six Ford roadsters and eight 14-passenger White buses.⁹ Construction projects already scheduled continued, but the long-range program was stalled. Visitation across the system showed a very slight increase over the previous year with most visitors camping. Director Albright expressed concern about the Depression’s effect on the concessioners in his annual report for 1932:

I have been seriously concerned over the lack of patronage of the hotels and transportation lines. These operations, carried on under Government supervision and at rates approved by the Government, have suffered big losses, largely because of the decline in rail travel. The



White bus at canyon rim. 1931.

public-utility operators render an efficient and highly essential public service. Many of the stockholders in these companies have invested their money solely from a sense of public obligation, in some cases at the urgent suggestion of Government officials. Several of the individual operators and some companies, too, are now in dire financial straits, and all aid consistent with Government policy and procedure must be extended to them in order that their facilities may be kept available to the public. During the season we encouraged and occasionally suggested changes in the types of service, special rates to encourage longer stays, and other measures to attract patronage. To conserve utility-operator resources and reduce losses we permitted curtailment of service, and some plants were authorized to be closed when it was apparent that the public demand for the facilities would not justify their availability during the entire season.¹⁰

The only major change in the concessions operation was the naming of William "Billy" Nichols as president of the hotel and transportation companies in 1931 following the death of H. W. Child.¹¹ A minor disturbance arose when George Whittaker sold his interest in the stores and filling stations at Mammoth and Canyon to Anna Pryor and Elizabeth Trischman for less than what he had told Jack Haynes he would sell for; Haynes had even agreed to pay the higher amount. C. A. Hamilton was also disappointed with this deal because he had wanted to make an offer on



Indian goods at Lyall's Store at Mammoth. n.d.

the Canyon store and filling station. The National Park Service's Chief Auditor believed that while Pryor and Trischman had been successful at Mammoth, extending their business into the park might be another issue. He favored the sale of Canyon operations to Hamilton.¹²

The sale of Indian items and foreign-made goods became an issue in 1932 for the National Park Service nationwide, with the sale of foreign goods being a particular issue in Yellowstone. During the summer of 1932, a park visitor purchased an item made in Germany. Upon returning home and realizing the origins of his "Yellowstone" souvenir, he became furious and complained to Congressman Robert Simmons, "My opinion as a good American Citizen, an Ex-service man who served on foreign soil, fought for the country, think that such goods should be burned or at least forbidden to be sold on the lands owned and maintained by the government." According to Jack Haynes, the parks were not allowed to sell German goods for a period of time. But in 1931, with "the belief that now there would be no objection since our new treaty with Germany was signed." (C. & A. Richards of Boston provided a line of art from Germany). C. A. Hamilton, who had about one percent of his merchandise made in other countries (mainly Switzerland), believed that "articles made in Germany, or any other are plainly marked, and anyone that is adverse to foreign merchandise is certainly not compelled to purchase same." He went on to write, "I wonder if the party raising this complaint refrains from drinking coffee or tea, or ever uses silk in any form!" Since World War I, not only did the issue of who sold what remain a problem, but where merchandise was made was also an issue.¹³

The slight increase in park travel in 1933 did not mitigate the losses the operators faced. Rail traffic now accounted for only 4.2 percent of visitors, with the hotel business mostly affected. Several actions were undertaken to protect concessioners from further losses. It was decided that Lake Hotel and Lodge, Mammoth Hotel, and Roosevelt Lodge would remain closed during the 1933 season. Old Faithful Inn and Canyon Hotel offered both the American Plan (room, meals, and services included in price) and the European plan (only room and services included in price with meals at additional cost) as a means of lowering prices for the visitors. Haynes also lowered some of his prices. In June, Hamilton took over the Brothers bathhouse and swimming pool operation. Because the nights were cool, he first decided to enclose the

pool at Old Faithful with glass, but instead built a new building over the pool. One other event of note for that year was the legalization of beer by the state of Wyoming in May. An April 8, 1933, National Park Service policy allowed “the sale of wine, beer and other beverages containing legal percentage of alcohol in national parks and monuments, when consistent with the laws of the state.”¹⁴ Thus, beer went on sale in the park following the repeal of the eighteenth amendment.

In 1934, park visitation jumped by almost 100,000 people, bringing the total to 260,775 visitors, but Lake and Mammoth hotels remained closed for the season. Demand for housekeeping cabins and the cafeterias increased, and it became apparent that these were the types of services visitors preferred during these times.¹⁵ In May 1934, a joint meeting of the superintendents and the operators was held in Grand Canyon National Park to develop a policy on the establishment of motor camps, housekeeping cabins, and similar facilities in the national parks. Vernon Goodwin of the Yellowstone Park Lodge and Camps Company explained that the housekeeping cabins in Yellowstone were different from what the industry considered this type of accommodation to be (“a place where a man can come in with his family and live as at home, doing washing and cooking”). In Yellowstone, the cabins were more like “shelter cabins, to relieve the visitors of carrying three things: stoves, mattresses, and tents.” Goodwin explained that 65 percent of the cabin guests used the cafeterias. He called the term “housekeeping” a misnomer.¹⁶

The group also discussed the possibility that the

government would take over the concessions in the parks, however, with the poor state of the national economy no one thought this likely. As for the sale of Indian-made items and foreign-made items in the concession stores, Superintendent Toll believed that the sale of foreign-made goods should be allowed, but that the Secretary of the Interior would not allow the sale of factory-made Indian goods. Sale of handmade Indian goods would be allowed in the hopes of stimulating the trade of such goods. It was pointed out in the meeting that a recent Federal Trade Commission ruling denied the sales or shipment of machine-made jewelry under an “Indian made” label.¹⁷

Because park concessioners were required to follow many government regulations and standards and because many parks had a limited travel season, many of those attending the meeting concluded that the park operators could not compete with the “mom and pop” campgrounds or the private auto camps outside the parks. The conference attendees hoped to devise some cost-cutting methods for building in parks, with many wanting the government to provide more assistance with utilities. On the question of air service within the parks, the vote was about equal with Fred Harvey, a Grand Canyon concessioner, supporting the proposal. The group wrote a resolution recognizing the emergence of air travel:

It is the opinion of this conference that the importance of the airplane problem in connection with travel to the National Parks should be recognized and that study should be made to determine the extent to which facilities shall be



Old Faithful area—housekeeping office and cabins. 1934.

provided eventually at Park gateways and to what extent commercial and private flying over the Parks should be regulated to the public interest.¹⁸

In November 1934, at the park superintendents' conference in Washington, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes explained his philosophy about concessions and the parks' role in providing for the enjoyment of the people:

I do not want any Coney Island. I want as much wilderness, as much nature preserved and maintained as possible....parks ought to be for people who love to camp and love to hike and who like to ride horseback and wander about and have a real community of interest, a renewed communion with Nature. That is what they ought to be. I am afraid we are getting gradually alienated from that ideal. We are becoming a little highbrow; we have too many roads....they were beginning to demand showerbaths and running hot and cold water and all the rest of it. That is perfectly natural. And that is what I am trying to emphasize. There is no limit to it. If you give them hot and cold running water for shower-baths the next thing they will want will be their breakfasts in bed. Frankly, we don't want that kind of people in the park....We must forget the idea that there is competition between the parks and the seaside or mountain resorts or that we must have share of the trade....I suspect that a great deal of that feeling that we are unduly giving away to its pressure from the concessionaires. I have a lot of sympathy with them. Certainly with our acquiescence and probably as the result of our urgent representations in many cases, they have gone into the parks and invested their money and put up hotels and established various conveniences for tourists. I wish we had the statutory power and the money to take over all of these concessions and run them ourselves.¹⁹

Ickes continued with his theme that the parks were not "Coney Islands" and not a place for alien entertainment. He did not want Indians to be used in "Wild West" type entertainment, but did support a dignified, legitimate role for Indians, citing Yosemite as

a park that gave preference to hiring Indians. Ickes disliked the "expensive hotels" calling them the "wrong concept to begin with."²⁰ Ickes made himself abundantly clear—he would prefer that the government own and operate the concessions and that the experience of the visitors be more consonant with nature.

Concession improvements in Yellowstone had slowed considerably during the Depression due to lack of demand and the heavy financial losses incurred by the owners. Government improvements, however, increased due to public works programs. With the increase in the number of visitors in 1934, the park anticipated that 1935 would produce concession improvements to meet renewed demands. Late in 1934, Superintendent Toll reminded the operators that extensive alterations would receive the same level of review as new construction and all exterior painting needed approval. He issued new orders concerning the construction, painting, and placement of signs. The erection of signs on concession buildings and sign details such as the size of sign, size of lettering, color of both and type styles needed approval.²¹

Visitation increased in 1935 to 317,998 people; even the numbers of visitors arriving by rail increased. However, Lake Hotel remained closed for the season, and only one wing of the hotel at Mammoth was open. Hamilton continued to accommodate early visitors (beginning May 15) and late-season visitors at Old Faithful and Lake as he had done the previous year. Just before the season opened, the concessioners learned that the Director had approved the sale of alcoholic beverages by the drink at the lodges and hotels, as well as the sale of packaged alcohol goods in the stores, hotels, and lodges. Because the park complied with Wyoming state law, liquor could not be sold on Sundays nor to anyone under 21 years of age.

The concessioners responded to the new rule by changing use areas in some of the buildings. The company stressed that they would serve drinks at a bar.²² At Canyon Hotel and at Old Faithful Inn, the hotel company planned to serve guests drinks in a wine room and one main room connected to the dining room. They planned to also serve guests drinks in their rooms.²³

Cabin accommodations were the subject of considerable discussion in 1935 about cabin accommodations, particularly after National Park Service Landscape Architect Thomas Vint suggested that Mammoth Lodge be taken down and the hotel converted to a



Mammoth Lodge being demolished. 1949.

lodge-type facility. Vernon Goodwin was eager to determine the needed number of cabins throughout the park as well as the best design for them. He considered the possibility of following the design of the Swiftcurrent Cabins in Glacier National Park, but because 100 cabins needed to be built in 1936, cost became a factor.²⁴

The beginning of 1936 was marked by sadness in the National Park Service ranks with the untimely death of Superintendent Roger Toll in an automobile accident in New Mexico. Edmund Rogers, Superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park, succeeded Toll.

Visitation in 1936 jumped by more than 100,000 people to 432,570; Rail service increased about 28 percent. In June, the hotel, the transportation, the lodge and camps, the boat, and fuel companies consolidated under the name Yellowstone Park Company with William Nichols as president and Vernon Goodwin as vice president.²⁵ Not enough cabins had been built at the start of the season to accommodate tourists who preferred them to hotels. But, the increased rail traffic eased the situation somewhat because rail passengers still preferred to stay in hotels. Lake Hotel, which had been closed for the past four years, remained closed in 1936. Plans were made in 1936 for the transformation of the Mammoth Hotel into a lodge-type facility.²⁶ In 1936, fuel changed from wood and coal

to oil, provided by Conoco Oil Company.²⁷ The transportation division bought 27 new White, stream-lined 14-passenger busses, three Ford Sedans, and two Ford dump trucks.²⁸

Visitation in 1937 was just short of a half-million (499,242). The Lake Hotel once again opened, and by mid-July, 43 rooms in the girls' dormitory were used as lodge-type guest rooms. The Yellowstone Park Company focused on the project at Mammoth, which coincided with an overall redevelopment of the area as outlined in the earlier park Master Plan. The company installed oil tanks throughout the Park to accommodate the change to oil fuel.²⁹

In 1938, visitation declined to 466,185, but rose again in 1939 to 486,936. In these years, travel trends were clearly changing; by mid-summer, hotel sales were up, and lodge and housekeeping sales were down. A park official attributed the change to the fact that many people were beginning to stay outside the park and come in for day trips.³⁰ Western Air Express, which operated out of West Yellowstone for a few years, experienced a 30 percent increase in business in 1938; 1102 park visitors arrived via Western Airlines. In 1938, the company offered flights over the park on Saturdays and Sundays, serving 116 passengers, but the service was discontinued in 1939. Another emerging trend was the entry of travel trailers into the park. Despite an additional \$1 entry fee, about



Mammoth Motor Inn. 1953.

500 to 700 trailers had come into the park since 1936.³¹

A major reorganization of the lodge areas began in 1939, starting at Old Faithful. After many discussions with architects, landscape architects, engineers, Yellowstone Park Company managers, and National Park Service officials, it was decided that all cabins would have electricity and running water; the cabins would be spaced 14 feet apart; lap siding would be used on new cabins; and, in the Old Faithful area, brown stain would be used with red paint for the window trim, at the suggestion of Landscape Architect Thomas Vint.³²

Late in 1939 at a National Park Service conference was held in Santa Fe, new policies were issued for park concessioners. One new policy required concession operators to “include with plans of public facilities submitted for approval, details as to cost of construction, proposed rates, and estimated revenue expense, and resulting net profit, to provide reasonable assurance of satisfactory operation of the proposed facilities on a socio-economic basis.” The government strongly favored the development of accommodations outside park boundaries; in fact, in many of the newly created eastern parks, a policy was being formulated “whereby only the daytime needs of visitors for gasoline, oil, food, and picnic supplies shall be met by operations within the parks.”³³ Another new policy that received high visibility required the use of park timber instead of logs in the constructing new lodges in the park. In a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, Secretary Ickes explained that in order to preserve “the scenic and natural conditions within the parks and monuments,” only “material salvaged from clearings for roads, buildings, or other developments, or from insect and tree disease control and fire hazard reduction operations” could be used for construction



Mammoth dining room. 1937.

purposes. He emphasized to the President that “there is no proposed new construction in Yellowstone that would utilize [new forest] logs.”³⁴

Early in 1940, the Yellowstone Park Company decided to erect slightly larger cabins, 14 by 16 feet, which delighted the Washington office because it wanted newly constructed cabins to be 12 by 15 feet. Associate Director Arthur Demaray also liked William Nichols’s experiment of adding small porches to the cabins.³⁵

In October 1940, Superintendent Rogers asked the Yellowstone Park Company for a status update on the recommendations made in 1938 for fire protection in the concessions buildings, particularly retarding the spread of fire and allowing prompt egress of the guests in the event of a fire. The company had followed most of the recommendations outlined in the 1938 report, and some action was in progress such as the installation of fire detectors and installation of some “Exit” signs. The National Park Service was concerned about the installation of the oil storage tanks so close to buildings. While the spacing met a municipal code, park officials were worried about the locations of tanks in areas without facilities for fighting an oil fire. They feared the possibility that “the temperature of the oil in the tanks [could rise] so that vapors will be given off which will increase the pressure within the tank and cause a tank rupture.” Park officials stressed the need for extra fire prevention and precaution in these areas, and they demanded that no combustibles be allowed within the dikes built around the oil tanks. The trees in these areas were removed as an extra precaution. More hose houses and fire hydrants were also recommended.³⁶

In August, after seven years as National Park Service Director, Arno Cammerer resigned, and Sec-

retary Harold Ickes selected Newton Drury for the post.³⁷ As the world situation became more tense with the approach of war in Europe, an order was issued from Washington “restricting employees of the Park Operators to citizens and those in the process of becoming citizens of the United States.”³⁸ Visitation broke the half-million mark in 1940 with 526,437 people coming into the park. Visitation would again rise in 1941 to 581,761, and the park concessioners remained busy trying to meet visitor needs. With the lodge improvements completed or underway at Old Faithful, Lake, (construction of new cabins and installation of new utilities) and Fishing Bridge (new utilities installed and cafeteria enlarged), the Yellowstone Park Company began addressing needs in the Tower Fall/Roosevelt Lodge area. The company wanted to abandon the Roosevelt Lodge development, but Edmund Rogers refused to consider the idea because he saw a need for facilities in that part of the park. Rogers wanted to have both a campground and lodge facilities available for travelers coming in through Cooke City.³⁹

Also in late summer, C. A. Hamilton requested permission to build a new store on the site of the Old Faithful bathhouse/swimming pool, which meant a total of three Hamilton stores in this development. This raised the issue of “how far beyond supplying basic necessities merchandizing in the national parks should be permitted to expand.” Rogers was opposed to a third Hamilton store. He believed that “appropriate curios have a legitimate place in the national park,” but that “some standard should be established and some control be maintained over what articles are sold in the national parks under the guise of park souve-

nirs.” He knew that many parks had curios that were indigenous to their area, but did not think this was the case in Yellowstone—the practice was to stamp the name “Yellowstone” on any kind of item, the cheaper the better, and call it a park souvenir. Rogers pointed out that Hamilton’s recently submitted plans distinguished between the areas of “low quality” and “quality” curios. Rogers told Hamilton to dispose of the cheaper goods in order to achieve the extra space he wanted. He believed this was a issue in Yellowstone and that it was probably systemwide.⁴⁰

Hamilton also presented his architect’s plans for a new store at West Thumb in 1941, which drew harsh comments from the Regional Chief of Planning, Howard Baker. Baker disliked the use of “gable and flat roofs, the use of two different kinds of materials on such a small structure and the introduction of a few modernistic details.” While not objecting to using concrete, he did contend the building needed to reflect park character. Baker went on to suggest that “it would not be out of line at all for the Service to insist that the operators use the same architect and have him present to the Service a sketch, probably in perspective, of all of the proposed buildings for our review prior to our giving approval on any one individual structure.”⁴¹

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, all improvement programs and plans Yellowstone National Park changed. The Yellowstone Park Company’s ambitious lodge transformation plans would be put on hold, and concession activity would become uncertain. Once again, world affairs would impact the park and its concessioners.