

Using Historic Structures to Serve Park Needs: The McGraw Ranch, Rocky Mountain National Park

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The short press release had a disturbingly familiar ring to it: “After careful consideration of all alternatives, Rocky Mountain National Park has decided that removal of the historic McGraw Ranch is the only feasible and cost effective course of action to pursue.” Removal was justified, continued the release, due to “the high cost of rehabilitating the buildings . . . and the basic lack of need for the structures.” To those of us in the Mountains/Plains Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP), these statements sounded very similar to what we had been hearing from Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. In that park, numerous rustic barns and classic dude ranches that predated the establishment of the park had been systematically demolished over the years and others were still threatened. Similar losses had also occurred in Glacier National Park in Montana, where more than half of the park’s original inventory of historic buildings was gone, including several classic guest lodges built by the Great Northern Railroad. There was even talk of removing another rustic lodge, the Many Glacier Hotel.

Why were so many historic buildings in national parks throughout the Rockies threatened with demolition? Maintenance costs and lack of use were certainly major factors. But it seemed that the underlying cause was a belief, held by generations of park managers and some environmental advocates, that historic buildings didn’t really belong in the great, scenic parks of the West. Unless they were national historic landmarks like the Old Faithful Inn, most historic structures in these parks were seen as impediments to the goals of preserving scenery and natural resources.

When the plan to demolish the McGraw Ranch was announced, we at NTHP decided it was finally time to challenge this thinking. We wanted to see if we could come up with an alternative approach that would not only save this historic site in Rocky Mountain National Park, but perhaps influence decisions in other parks as well. Little did we know that we were embarking on a nine-year journey!

Located at the head of a popular hiking trail in the Northeast corner of Rocky Mountain National Park, the McGraw Ranch is not the kind of historic site that immediately impresses visitors with its ornate architecture or grand scale. It is a collection of 15 modest, vernacular-style structures that fit comfortably into the mountain landscape. The property was homesteaded in 1884 and

shortly thereafter a ranch house, barn, bunkhouse, springhouse, and rustic-style out-house were constructed, using locally harvested logs and stone. During the Depression, the owners of the ranch decided to make the transition from raising cattle to hosting guests, or “dudes.” A group of small cabins was built to accommodate visitors who would pay to stay at the ranch, ride horses, fish, and explore the mountain scenery. The first guests at the McGraw Ranch were Kansas governor and 1936 Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon and his family. “I want to lead a flannel shirt life,” said Landon, who made McGraw his summer campaign headquarters. Generations of visitors followed, and the McGraw Ranch gained a reputation as one of Colorado’s finest guest ranches.

After five decades of operation, the McGraw family retired from the ranch and in 1988 the property was acquired by the park. For several years, the ranch buildings sat empty and deteriorating, until finally the park announced its plan to demolish all 15 structures and return the site to its “natural” condition. To the park’s surprise, preservationists and local residents quickly voiced strong opposition to the plan and a major public controversy erupted.

The struggle between historic preservationists and the park over the fate of the

McGraw Ranch might have continued for years had not a new park superintendent, A. Durand “Randy” Jones, arrived and called for a cease-fire. He defused tension by setting up a committee to evaluate the condition and re-use potential of all historic structures throughout Rocky Mountain National Park, not just at McGraw Ranch. At the same time, an informal group of park staff and representatives from outside groups began collecting ideas for how various vacant park buildings might be used, based on park needs. A variety of adaptive-use options were discussed, including park employee housing, artist-in-residence programs, public education programs, Elderhostels, and retreat centers. This approach to the problem of vacant park buildings was similar in many ways to what Main Street groups have been doing for years to revitalize downtowns—matching up available building inventory with unmet market demand.

As it turned out, the key unmet market demand in Rocky Mountain National Park was housing for visiting scientists and researchers. Parks in general have been criticized by groups such as the National Academy of Science for not having sufficient scientific data on which to base important management decisions. Gathering better data is a particularly high priority in Rocky Mountain National Park, where independent consultants have identified a backlog of more than \$12 million in unmet natural and cultural research needs, including the investigation of issues such as the impact of acid rain on the park ecosystem, how to manage the growing elk population, and what to do about invasive weeds in the park. With park budgets stretched thin to meet growing demands for visitor services, it was impossible to hire staff to address these research needs. For years parks have relied heavily on outside institutions, particularly universities and their graduate students, to carry out a range of scientific research. The problem for Rocky Mountain National Park, and for many other parks in the system, was a lack of in-park housing for these researchers.

One solution that was considered in the

past was to build a new dormitory for researchers somewhere in the park, but Jones saw the potential for something more creative—a chance to address two park needs with one project. His “win-win” proposal was to establish a complete in-park research center by re-using the vacant buildings at the McGraw Ranch. It was a good fit. Without any new construction, the ranch could be rehabilitated to accommodate up to 20 researchers in private quarters, with room left over for an office, library, laboratory, seminar and meeting rooms, kitchen and dining facilities, and living areas for informal socializing.

With this concept for re-use in hand, potential university partners were asked if the proposed research facility would be attractive to their faculty and students. Colorado State University, an institution with long-standing connections to the Park Service, was seen as the key “launch client.” After they agreed that their College of Natural Resources would partner in the development of an expanded research program for the park, similar departments from the University of Colorado and University of Northern Colorado came on board.

Paying for the rehabilitation was the next challenge. In part because we had started the whole debate about the McGraw Ranch, but mostly because we believed in the importance of the project’s success, the Mountains/Plains Office of NTHP decided to become the lead private fundraising partner. Our commitment was to raise \$800,000 toward the \$2 million total project cost. The balance of the funding was provided by the park, primarily for budget items that are hard to raise money for, such as utilities and infrastructure improvements.

Because the project had so many dimensions—historic preservation, scientific research, university involvement, partnerships—we found that a range of outside funders were interested in supporting the rehabilitation of the McGraw Ranch. Our first major grants came from the largest source of historic preservation funding in the state, the Colorado Historical Society’s State Historical Fund. With this key state support and a matching commitment from the park in hand,

we were able to obtain additional support from private donors as well as several Colorado foundations. The Rocky Mountain National Park Association, a strong park friends group with a proven track record of raising funds for other historic sites in the park, joined as a funding partner as well.

Volunteers have played a major role throughout the rehabilitation of the McGraw Ranch—logging more than 5,000 hours to date. Nearly one hundred NTHP members from along the Colorado Front Range as well as groups from the Rotary Club, local churches, the Navy Seabees and Habitat for Humanity have contributed their time and skills. Volunteers were attracted by the beautiful park setting, the opportunity to learn new skills, such as repairing historic windows or re-chinking logs, and the chance to be part of a highly visible public project.

Carrying out a major rehabilitation in a highly visible public setting such as Rocky Mountain National Park has also presented excellent opportunities for historic preservation education and outreach. The rehabilitation site has become an outdoor classroom. For instance, when we were deciding what to do with the barn at McGraw Ranch, we invited a barn rehabilitation specialist to conduct a public workshop for barn owners from the surrounding area, using the McGraw barn as an example. Another workshop, organized by the Architectural Preservation Institute at Colorado State University, focused on the restoration of historic log structures at the ranch. As part of the Preservation and Skills Training (PAST) program developed by the National Park Service (NPS), a group of maintenance personnel from national parks around the country spent more than a week at McGraw, learning skills from experienced mentors while accomplishing considerable rehabilitation work on the property.

The final piece of the McGraw Ranch project came when Rocky Mountain National Park was selected to be a park *learning center*. Funded in part through an NPS initiative called the Natural Resource Challenge, these learning centers are intended to expand park research capacity, encourage collaboration

with partner organizations, and engage the public more fully in park resource and management issues. Designation as a learning center also provides Rocky Mountain National Park with additional long-term funding for research staff and maintenance dollars for the McGraw Ranch research facility.

The newly named Continental Divide Research and Learning Center in Rocky Mountain National Park is among the first five such centers that have been established around the country. The others are located at Point Reyes National Seashore in California, Cape Cod National Seashore in Massachusetts, Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee, and Kenai Fjords National Park in Alaska. Another eight park learning centers are currently being developed, with the ultimate goal of establishing a total of 32 learning centers in parks across the nation by 2005.

Preservation advocates should be pleased that the criteria for selecting locations for learning centers includes a preference for adapting historic structures. For example, at Point Reyes, the historic Hagmaier Ranch was rehabilitated for use as the Pacific Coast Learning Center, while at Cape Cod a former Air Force facility is being re-used as part of the Atlantic Learning Center. In addition, the list of research underway at these centers includes cultural as well as natural resource projects. Cultural landscape investigations, historic structures assessments, ethnographic studies, and the development of a historic archives database are examples of projects already underway. As research efforts expand and more learning centers come on line, there is great potential for parks to build stronger connections between cultural and natural resource preservation and to engage park visitors in these efforts.

We hope that the preservation of the McGraw Ranch, which will have required nearly a decade of effort by the time it opens for researchers in the summer of 2003, has contributed to an evolution in attitudes about historic structures in national parks. When the battle over the McGraw Ranch began, the property was viewed by the park as a site of

Managing Cultural Resources and Heritage

minor local interest, a drain on precious maintenance funds, and an impediment to natural resource management goals. Today, the McGraw Ranch is a model for the adaptive use of historic structures, a catalyst for increased park funding, and will soon become the centerpiece of the park's expanded research program.

"Americans have a deeply ingrained habit of seeing nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed; we automatically assume that whenever one gains, the other must lose," writes

Michael Pollan in his book *Second Nature*. Maybe it is time we got over this idea, especially in our national parks.

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