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The National Park Service and the American West: New Voices, New Missions, New History

Americans have long been fascinated with the glamor and romance of the West. From Hollywood to Houston, and from clothing to cuisine, the cowboy, Indian, pioneer, and the rugged landscape have gripped the imagination of young and old alike.

Thus it is not surprising at the close of the twentieth century that the National Park Service, formed in the West to preserve natural resources from the depradations of the industrial capitalism that created America's cities, now must address a new generation of visitors, residents, public officials, and park service imperatives, even as scholars question the very meaning of the frontier. How the NPS meets that challenge will influence its policies, services, and programs well into the next millennium, and will require much more attention be paid to the place of history than the agency has heretofore given the meaning of the past.

For decades, the story of the American West seemed as immutable as that told by Park Service interpreters at Civil War battlefields, Revolutionary War sites, and Independence Mall. First given credence in the 1893 essay of Frederick Jackson Turner, the "frontier thesis" supposedly argued that "the West explains America." Whatever caused the nation to embrace the triangle of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness most surely emerged from the westward advance of Europeans, redefining themselves constantly as they approached the Pacific shores. Even though Turner himself conceded the essentially urban future of twentieth-century life (the same 1890 census that declared the frontier "closed" also found two-thirds of all westerners living in towns of 2,500 or more), his ringing prose and powerful metaphors said it all for scholar and popularizer alike: there was no place like the West, and there was no reason to diminish America's "creation story."

One reason that the western metaphor gained such credence was the larger dynamic of American historiography, from the earliest days of the republic until the 1960s. That is best described as the narrative of "nation-building," in which the story of crafting a powerful society paralleled the actual events of the people telling the tale. Written primarily by white, male, Protestant scholars and amateurs, American history focused upon topics of political, economic, military, and diplomatic life. These

homilies were targeted at a nation of immigrants, whose educational level in 1900 was but the fourth grade, and whose barriers of language and culture forced the most simple and clear messages for inclusion in the public school curriculum.

Not surprisingly, the essential feature of the nation-building historians was the championing of individualism, conquest, and dominion. Ignored were the unpleasant results: slavery, racism, sexism, assault upon the environment, and the inconsistency of opportunity and oppression. By the 1960s, this explanation of the country's heritage had hardened to the belief that there were no differences, that "any boy could grow up to be president," and that America was the greatest nation that the world had ever seen.

The American West came to represent all that the nation-building school dreamed. In 1950, a survey of all films made in America since the turn of the century found that western movies made up 50 percent of the total. In addition, by 1959 the new medium of expression, television, boasted that 17 of the top 26 shows were westerns. Thus it was no surprise to park interpreters at Fort Davis National Historic Site, Texas, that visitors complained that the location did not remind them of John Ford's frontier posts (nearly all of which were filmed in Monument Valley, Arizona).

One day, as the German Jewish economist Karl Marx warned, people would question the assumptions of the nation-builders. That moment arrived in the 1960s as the children of the post-World War II "baby boom," weaned on the stories of male power and privilege in their local theatres and their own living rooms, became critical of the "disconnect" between freedom and inequality. From civil rights to Vietnam to environmental protection, young people changed the direction of America. This in turn drove scholars to craft a new narrative, known as "group identity," that highlighted the inability of people of color, women, and the poor to feel included in the words of "God Bless America" or "The Star-Spangled Banner."

From this message of opposition and protest came blessings and curses for the nation, and for the region most identified with the problems of the past. Voices that had been slighted (women, blacks, Latinos, American Indians, Asians, and others) cried out for recognition. They declared that America could not be made whole until it faced its denial of the true story of conflict and mistreatment. A rich and diverse narrative thus began to form, resisted by those whose intellectual lives had been shaped by the scale and scope of nation-building. One consequence of this struggle for the soul of America by the 1980s was the rise of "political correctness," caused by the "separatism" that excluded groups felt. No one, it seemed, could tell anyone else's story, and the country froze for a time as it searched for a way beyond the confines of group glorification.

It is small wonder, then, that public schools, the Park Service, museums, and other purveyors of America's story came by the 1990s to doubt whether the past had any meaning. Yet precisely at that moment, a third force in historical thinking surfaced to meld the best of nation-building and group identity: the "mixed-world" concept that crystallized in the book by Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes, 1650-1815* (1991). White, who would receive a MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellowship in 1995 for his contributions to scholarship, asked about the place of accommodation in the dynamic of cultural interaction. Studying Indian-European contact, a field that the group-identifiers had charged with emotion with such titles as Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1968) and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), White and other scholars suggested that case studies of people seeking balance were needed to defuse the tension caused by the polarizations of the previous generation.

In matters of nature and the environment, the voice most closely associated with the field was Donald Worster. A native of Needles, California, who grew up in the dry Arkansas Valley of Kansas and Colorado, Worster wrote powerfully of the mistakes made by people like his own family. In *Dust Bowl* (1981), and then *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), the son of irrigation farmers asked the question first posed by Karl Wittfogel: "How in the remaking of nature do we remake ourselves?" A good answer to that query came from William N. Cronon, another MacArthur Fellowship recipient, who wrote *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983). Cronon suggested that nature's voice needed attention, as it could change itself quite well without the aid of humans (through fires, floods, droughts, etc.). Then Cronon identified the habits of Native societies to alter the landscape to their advantage (especially the use of fire to clear underbrush that in turn made game easier to hunt). Colonists from England, fleeing a land of scarcity, found in the abundance of the New World a life of which they could only dream, and one that they remade in the search for security from want.

The linkage of Indians to settlers gave rise to other works of the past decade that offer insight for Park Service interpreters and historians. Albert Hurtado and Peter Iverson prepared the most comprehensive recent collection of essays, documents, and readings in their 1993 volume, *Major Problems in American Indian History*. Such general works fit with the newer quest for broadly defined messages of the West, such as one could find in Patricia Nelson Limerick (also a MacArthur Foundation Fellow), *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987); Richard White, *"It's Your*

Misfortune and None of My Own:" A Modern History of the American West (1991): and William Cronon, et al., *Under An Open Sky* (1992). All of these works declared the need to seek newer visions, beginning with the first inhabitants of the North American continent. They also suggested that the story of the West did not end when the U.S. census declared the frontier closed in 1890—an idea that had been pioneered by Gerald D. Nash in *The American West in the Twentieth Century* (1977), and further defined in his collection of essasys, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990* (1991).

Census indicators for the year 2010 state that Latinos and Latinas will become the nation's "largest minority," surpassing the historical place of blacks in America's tale of equality promised and denied. That phenomenon will have an impact upon the National Park Service, especially in the rapidly growing Southwest but also elsewhere throughout the country. Confusing to many people is the division among scholars of the "Borderlands" and the "Chicano Movement." The former arose in the early 20th century under the direction of Herbert Eugene Bolton, professor of history at the University of California. Seeking to elevate the nearly invisible status of Spanish-speaking Americans, the biographer of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and his peers selected the conquistador, padre, and the Spanish mission as the icons of admiration for Anglo audiences. While this resulted in some measure of acceptance of a sanitized and essentially deracinated Hispanic past, it did little to satisfy the 1960s activists self-identified as "Chicanos." In the process of protesting the mistreatment of their people at the hands of Anglo employers, politicians, educators, and merchants, Chicanos also crafted a story of pride and glory that they named "Aztlan:" the mythical homeland in the northern mountains of New Mexico that they claimed gave birth to the powerful Mexican warriors whom the Spanish met and vanquished in the sixteenth century.

Because the Chicano/Borderlands dispute threatened to blur the real contributions of people of Hispanic descent, scholars in the 1990s began to ask the same questions as their peers in Indian and environmental history: is there a place for accommodation alongside victimization and conquest? That answer is best seen in two works, one a general survey and one a monograph. The former is David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (1992). Weber essayed the most thorough treatment of the Spanish presence from Florida to the West Coast since the days of Father Francis Bannon (himself a disciple of Bolton), giving much credit to the work of scholars like Ramon A. Gutierrez, yet another western history MacArthur winner and the author of the much-praised and condemned *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (1991). Gutier-

rez, of Hispanic and Navajo descent, wove an interdisciplinary tale of Spanish-Pueblo interaction that leaned heavily on Native creation stories, the journals of priests, and the court records of the Spanish elite of the eighteenth-century Southwest. Weber's and Gutierrez's narratives moved beyond the glamourization of Bolton, and the bitterness of the Chicanos, to suggest that the new "majority-minority" of Latinos have much to say about the future of America, and of the shape of its stories.

Nothing to emerge in the past generation of scholarship offers more for new interpretations within the National Park Service than the shelf of literature about women, families, communities, and the relationships between males and females. Whether because of the scholarship driven by the feminist movement, the visitor base of the parks, or the changing character of the Park Service itself, the next generation of interpretation cannot ignore the place of women, children, and communities in both the park units and the surrounding countryside. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson edited in 1988 one of the best general collections of the many contributions made by women in the West, and the difficulties they faced from the environment, their own men, and themselves, in *The Women's West.* A larger study that contains many trenchant western essays was prepared by a western historian, Vicki L. Ruiz, and her colleague Ellen Carol Dubois, *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (1994). They and their contributors argued that western women's history should be careful not to glorify (even subconciously) the exploits of white women, but should listen to the pleas of women of color.

Of the many other works on women in the West, three are of interest to Park Service interpreters and historians for their content and focus. Jane Tompkins, a professor of literature at Duke University, attempted in 1992 to explain the gender inequities in western film and novels in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns.* Robert V. Hine, a social historian from the University of California at Riverside, wrote a thoughtful examination of the dilemma of individualism in the West, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate But Not Alone* (1980). He revealed how confusing it was to believe in the bonds of fellowship when one deliberately left one's home to seek the promise of the West, whether in the goldfields of California, the farms of the Great Plains, or the hippie communes of the 1960s Southwest. Sarah J. Deutsch merged issues of race, class, and gender in the history of Chicanos in *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (1987). Deutsch learned that the classic immigration factors of "push" and "pull" applied internally to the movement of native-born U.S. Latinos as they left their villages in north-

ern New Mexico for the railroads and coal fields of southern Colorado, the factories of Pueblo and Denver, and the sugar beet fields of northern Colorado. She also postulated that this journey reduced the power of Hispanas as they accommodated themselves to the masculine-dominated cash economy of urban America.

How all this new thought, as varied and speculative as it seems, affects the Park Service is apparent in a new book by Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice* (1996). Whether because of its quasi-military traditions, or its public communications, the NPS, says the author of earlier studies of women schoolteachers in the West, was not the most accommodating agency for women, either as rangers or as administrators. Yet the realities of the late twentieth century, where more women than men attend college, enter the work force, and shape the economic decisions of the household, indicate a need for the Park Service to meet the needs of women intellectually as well as economically.

Kaufman's book also speaks to the difficulties of the NPS as it seeks a new voice, a new face, and a new image for the generation of visitors, public officials, and scholars interested in its operations and its traditions. As the NPS, along with its peers throughout the federal government, faces limited financial resources and growing demands for services, its interpreters, historians, and other personnel must discover the means and the commitment to speak in new ways to constituencies that view the NPS through divided lenses. Perhaps the best way is for Park Service personnel to understand that new ideas and concepts in history can be exciting, liberating, and interesting both for themselves and their visitors. A focus on families, communities, women, and people of color can be represented in "real-world" terms devoid of the awkwardness that characterizes political correctness. In addition, the NPS needs to examine its own past more carefully, by means of scholarly studies, to place itself in the context of historical trends and patterns that influence all of American life.

An example of the lessons that the NPS learns about itself, and about the broadening effect of the latest scholarship, came to this author in the writing of *A Special Place, A Sacred Trust: Preserving the Fort Davis Story* (1996). Despite the west Texas post's importance in the Indian wars of the 19th century, its well-preserved ruins, and the nation's embrace of frontier history, proponents of Fort Davis's inclusion in the NPS system fought for decades to convince the park service, local cattle ranchers, and the U.S. Congress of the merits of the fort (whether historic, economic, or political). Only when the champion of park formation, Barry Scobee, expanded upon a tale of romance, fantasy, and tragedy known as the "Indian Emily" story, did locals and Texas politicians alike pay attention to his pleas. Such was the grip of the "Pocahontas-like" narrative of an

Indian maiden who died warning the fort of Apache attack to save her soldier-lover, that visitors, residents, and luminaries like U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough refused for years to accept the Park Service's efforts to authenticate the Fort Davis story.

One danger in studying the past is the failure to recognize the future when it is upon us. That should not be the case for the National Park Service as it moves its staff, units, visitors, and other constituent groups towards a new vision of history and memory. It has often been said that how a nation explains itself indicates its health and prosperity. America is built upon change, and the Park Service is dedicated to preserving changes made by previous generations. Believing that the past is worth knowing, and worth revealing to its new patrons, can maintain the Park Service's deserved reputation as the "keeper of the nation's stories," and the instructor of its proud traditions.

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