

In Praise of Platt

Or, What is a 'Real' National Park?

Subtlety, patience, and quietude are ... qualities not often exercised by most [NPS] visitors. In Platt, however, breathtaking vistas and dramatic phenomena have in their stead quiet, pleasant vignettes of nature's ageless ways which can only be appreciated through the cultivation of these qualities of mind and methods of observation.

— Ballard M. Barker & William Carl Jameson,
Platt National Park: Environment and Ecology (1975)

When we entered the park, we lost all stress. There is nothing like the natural beauty of this place and the water. I can't mention the water enough, it is so soothing.

— From a 1997 interview with a family who has visited the springs since 1902

Introduction

In 1928, Horace Albright was asked to succeed an ailing Stephen Mather in the position of National Park Service (NPS) director. Albright was reluctant; he wanted to stay at Yellowstone. But Hubert Work, secretary of the Interior, admonished:

Don't you realize that if you stay in Yellowstone ... you can be moved[?] You think you can just stay in Yellowstone the rest of your life ... but you can't. The next Director of the Park Service could move you from Yellowstone down to Platt National Park. How would you like that? (Albright 1985:223)

Albright reinforced these derogatory sentiments about Platt in his book on the NPS, saying that the national park "was a travesty—a tiny mineral springs in southern Oklahoma, well below national park standards, and we have been trying to get rid of it for years" (Albright 1985: 223). This paper discusses the philosophies, ideals, and criteria through the years pertaining to what

constitutes a national park—and their effects on Platt, once a small but popular national park gem in south-central Oklahoma, now relegated to a district in the larger Chickasaw National Recreation Area.

Establishment of Platt National Park

In the late 1890s, the town site of Sulphur was established by white en-

trepreneurs on Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian land located around numerous mineral and freshwater springs near the Arbuckle Mountains of south-central Oklahoma (Figure 1). Subsequently, efforts were made to set the springs aside as a federal reserve, and to move nearby Sulphur up slope to protect the quality of the waters (Ryan 1901). On November 19, 1902, Congress set aside the Sulphur Springs Reservation and established its boundaries expressly to preserve and protect the springs from contamination, preserve and protect Sulphur and Rock creeks, reserve space for public passage and comfort in connection with the waters, and preserve the beauty of the surrounding grounds, forest, and landscape (USDI 1902). This was accomplished through an agreement between the United States and the Choctaws and Chickasaws, which outlined allotment procedures for these two Indian nations, and also

conveyed 629 acres of their land to the federal government for the reserve and compensated them in the amount of \$20 an acre. In 1904, the Sulphur Springs Reservation was expanded to 848 acres, with the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian Nations compensated in the amount of \$60 an acre.

In 1906, Congress passed a joint resolution to change the name from Sulphur Springs Reservation to Platt National Park. The name of America's seventh national park (June 29, 1906, 34th Stat. 837) honored deceased Connecticut senator Orville Hitchcock Platt for his membership on the Committee on Indian Affairs and for his contributions to create the reserve (Platt 1901; Brown 1954:25; Arbuckle Historical Society 1984 [1913]; Brown 1937:81). The new national park was managed by the Indian Department, under the direction of the secretary of Interior, and continued to be until 1916, when the NPS was established.

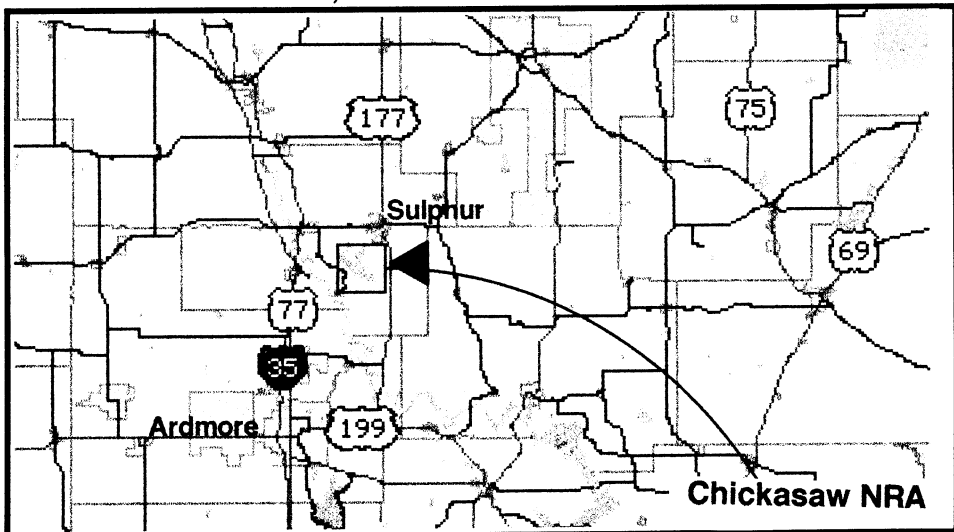


Figure 1. Location map.

According to historian John Ise, “the new park was not highly regarded by the Department of Interior” (Ise 1961:141). This may be an understatement, for Ise mentions that, in 1921, a “great deal of sarcasm and merriment” was exhibited by the appropriation committee at Platt’s expense (Ise 1961:141). The *Congressional Record* shows that Representative Mondell of Wyoming “had taken a shot” at Platt (U.S. House of Representatives 1921:1594). But Representative Swank of Oklahoma heartily defended the park, stating that he wished that

the gentleman from Wyoming could visit Platt National Park ... and partake of the health giving qualities of the water there.... I wish he could see the beautiful scenery in that park.... If he could only bathe in the pools ... and see the many wonderful results achieved from the use of the water he would never again advocate giving away Platt National Park.... Platt National Park belongs to the Nation (U.S. House of Representatives 1921:1594-95).

One retired Platt ranger, interviewed by the authors in 1996, felt that “Platt was one of the older areas, therefore, it didn’t grow up with the rest of them.... [I]t was kind of left there....”

But it wasn’t left there for long. Despite the seemingly valid purposes for which the park was established, and its demonstrated popularity, Platt regularly continued to be threatened with removal from federal protection

by both non-Oklahoma members of Congress and NPS administrators. Concerted efforts were made to disestablish Platt in 1910 and 1913, and they continued at fairly close intervals after the 1916 establishment of the Park Service: in 1924, 1927, 1928, 1930, 1932, 1938, 1941, 1957, and 1958.

For instance, in 1910, only four years after Platt’s establishment, Secretary of the Interior Ballinger indicated his interest in having it ceded back to the state of Oklahoma. Oklahoma members of Congress fought the move, praising the “health giving and invigorating waters of the springs, and above all pointed to the numbers of visitors—more than were registered at some of the worthy parks” (Ise 1961:141-42).

To rub salt into the expanding wound, in 1921, while Platt continued to be beleaguered by threats of removal from the National Park System because of the perception that it did not meet national park standards, NPS Director Stephen T. Mather encouraged Congress to designate Hot Springs Reservation in Arkansas a national park. (Platt and Hot Springs were both renowned as healing mineral springs—although Platt’s waters are cold). Hot Springs was a favorite of Mather’s, and he wanted to increase public awareness of its healthful qualities (Shankland 1951: 82). The reservation’s superintendent, Dr. William P. Parks, claimed that the health-giving waters were a significant factor in the promotion of the health of the nation (Parks 1918).

Representative Taylor from Arkansas boasted that "Hot Springs is one of the seven wonders of the world" with "at least 15,000 people" seeking relief from disease here. "The people of the nation own these waters ... [and] we feel that it should be dignified at least to the extent of being called a national park." Hot Springs became America's eighteenth national park on March 4, 1921 (Norsworthy 1970: 43). After visiting Hot Springs, Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work "seemed to be changing from his former rather hostile attitude toward Hot Springs to one of open-mindedness" (USDI 1923). Representative Mann of Illinois opposed national park status for Hot Springs, but he was unclear as to exactly why. "I will confess that the term 'national park' to me means, perhaps not a definite thing, but a great piece of scenic ground" (Norsworthy 1970: 42). Perhaps his uncertainty was due to the same varying park standards that clouded Platt's status until its national park title was revoked in 1976. John Ise wrote, many years after Hot Springs became a national park, that "there may well be some question as to the wisdom of this [park establishment], for Hot Springs was just hot springs, supposed to have great curative powers in baths, but with no particular scenic merit" (Ise 1961:244). Precisely why Mather and others chose to endorse Hot Springs as a national park, but not Platt, remains unclear to this day.

The attacks against Platt continued. In January 1930, Representative

Louis Cramton of Michigan presented two bills to Congress. The first was designed to change Platt from a national park to a national monument; if that did not work, a second would have transferred Platt to the state for use as a state park (H.R. 8283 and H.R. 8284). (This was the same Cramton who, after visiting Hot Springs years earlier, stated "that he had no idea of the scenic beauty of this little park" (USDI 1923).)

In the late 1930s, there was an attempt to enlarge Platt National Park in an effort to protect all of the unique geological features of the Arbuckle uplift. This resulted in a 1938 study and proposal to add Veteran's Lake to Platt, and change the status from a national park to a national recreation area (USDI 1958b). This plan was strongly opposed by local residents, who feared that the loss of national park status would result in Platt's transfer to the state.

Once a National Park, Always a National Park?

Although the importance of Platt was appreciated by its many local users and constituents, its small size and the efforts of Oklahoma representatives to receive funding for the park led others to believe that Platt was draining federal support from the more important parks (Ise 1961: 186), which further fueled the movement to disestablish Platt as a national park.

The thrust to remove national park status from Platt culminated in a proposal to add the Arbuckle Reservoir



Figure 2. Outing at Platt National Park, early 20th century (photo undated)



Figure 3. Waterfalls and Pool, 1996 (photo: Jacilee Wray)

to the NPS management of Platt in 1958, and its significance as a national park again came to the forefront. In the study proposal for the recreation area, it was stated that although the Arbuckle Reservoir would not qualify as a national recreation area, it might offer an opportunity to combine it with Platt National Park and transfer it to the state of Oklahoma. There were no standards and criteria for the evaluation of national recreation areas at that time (USDI 1958a).

When asked by the authors (in a 1996 interview) how the change in status from park to recreation area came about, one Sulphur resident stated that local advocates had believed that if Platt were redesignated as a recreation area, they would receive more funding. Unfortunately, when the change in status occurred, the reason the park had been established as a national park was downplayed: “[W]hen the lakes came along, the springs went by the way-side.... [They] shouldn’t have dropped why the area was created to start with.” In a companion interview, another local resident discussed the widespread confusion regarding the possibility of designating Platt as a national recreation area, and what “recreation area” meant. It seemed many people rationalized that, because Platt was an area where picnicking occurred, as well as swimming in Travertine Creek’s swimming holes, and because picnicking and swimming fall under the heading of recreation, then the place must be a

recreation area. The same resident said that she didn’t feel the name change made any difference in the use of the original acreage of Platt, but there was concern by long-time residents who felt that the loss of its status as a national park was merely a stepping stone to the future conveyance of both areas to the state of Oklahoma. “It was a genuine heartfelt concern,” she believed, for the community felt a great sense of pride about the park.

Nonetheless, in 1976 Platt was redesignated Chickasaw National Recreation Area by Congress. They did so at least partly on the advice of the chairman of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments. In a memorandum of October 6, 1971, to the secretary of the Interior, he spoke of criteria for national parks that had been developed after the initial authorization of Platt, criteria “that area does not meet” (USDI 1971b).¹ This represented a reversal of the Advisory Board’s previous recommendation, made in 1966, which stated that the status of Platt National Park should remain unchanged.

At a 1975 hearing before the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation to establish

¹ Dwight Rettie makes an important point that could be used to counter this argument when he says that he sees “no reason why parks that were brought into the System in 1925 (but pick any year) should be required to meet the same criteria intended to serve as a filter for new parks.... ‘There ought not be any “lesser” parks in the National Park System’” (Rettie 1996).

Chickasaw National Recreation Area, Representative M. Taylor asked, "What would be the difference in management of this park if it were changed to become a recreation area?" Douglas Wheeler, the deputy assistant secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, responded that "it is a difference in degree and emphasis ... from natural preservation to a more intensive recreation use by the visitors" (USDI 1975). In the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs Report of March 3, 1976, concerning the proposed recreation area, the committee described Platt as an "anomaly arising from the early conservation movement prior to the creation of the National Park Service" (USDI 1976:1).

Even with all the statewide support for Platt's national park status—and despite the fact that the Advisory Board had once recommended that Platt's status should remain unchanged—after all was said and done, in 1976 Platt lost its national park status and its name was changed to Chickasaw National Recreation Area.² The name "Chickasaw" was suggested by the Chickasaw tribe, which had requested several years earlier to change the name of the national park to memorialize the cession of their former lands for the reserve in 1902 (Chickasaw Historical Society of Southern Oklahoma 1968). The use of "Chickasaw" was

positively received in Oklahoma; however, the change in status was not.

But What Is a 'Real' National Park?

Before Platt National Park was established in 1906, there were neither federal policies nor firm criteria for the establishment of national parks, nor was there yet any National Park Service to manage or protect them. Although Platt's small size was often one of the reasons it was targeted for removal as a national park, the underlying issue was not size, but rather *differing standards concerning what national parks should be*, based on individual ideals of what constitutes a national park at given points in time.

For instance, in 1924, Director Mather wrote:

In general the policy of considering and admitting to the system only those areas giving expression to the highest types of scenery has been quite consistently followed. The national park system has been developed along wise and sane lines and it will take wise and sane judgment to resist the demand for inclusion of areas that do not measure up in the highest terms to the high standard that has been set for that system (USDI 1924).

In 1931, the annual report of the director of the National Park Service addressed NPS standards and stated:

Our ideals contemplate a national park system of primitive lands free from all present and

² In the process more acreage and the Bureau of Reclamation's Arbuckle Recreation Area (USDI 1966) were added as well.

future commercial utilization, but, like all ideals, they can not be uniformly attained in this day and age (USDI 1931:6).

It should be noted that, during the period of the 1920s and 1930s, there existed an elitist attitude that only areas having spectacular *beauty* ("beauty is in the eye of the beholder" notwithstanding) and vast size deserved to be national parks (Rothman 1989). Prior to the Antiquities Act of 1906, which allowed for the establishment of national monuments, many areas that should have been preserved "did not meet the amorphous standards for national parks.... A problem of semantics plagued such areas" if they did not have the *scenery* that characterized the national park class at the time (Rothman 1989:58).

In 1932, Louis Cramton, who had become the special attorney to the secretary of the Interior, was asked to make a careful study of the *Congressional Record* and all other legislative documents relating to Yellowstone National Park, to determine what Congress, in initiating the National Park System, intended the national parks to be, and what policies it expected would govern their administration.

Some of the key criteria for parks that Cramton identified, as summarized here, indicate that they should:

- Be dedicated and set apart for the benefit and enjoyment of the people and be of national interest because of their value from a scenic, scientific, or historical point of

view.

- Possess variety and have widespread interest, appealing to many individuals, regardless of residence, because of outstanding merit in their class of park.
- Be enjoyed and used by the present generation, with their preservation unspoiled for the future; to conserve the scenery, the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein.
- Provide inspiration.
- Relate development to their inherent values to promote beneficial use by the people (USDI 1932).

Note that there are no references to "grand expanses" of land here. And, although national parks continued to frequently be endowed with scenic grandeur, no reference back to the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act indicated any requirement for great expanses of scenic land. In point of fact, the 1918 administrative policy directive of the NPS (known as the Lane letter) specifically states that "it is not necessary that a national park should have a large area" (Albright 1985:72). This policy does recommend that "new park projects ... should seek to find scenery of supreme and distinctive quality or some natural feature so extraordinary or unique as to be of national interest and importance" (Albright 1985:72). It seems unfair that Platt was discriminated against on this basis of some unstated requirement for "large expanses of scenic lands." Platt's scenic beauty is unquestionable, and its nat-

ural features are undoubtedly of national interest.

Moreover, if the issue of *visitation* had at the time been a measure of park worthiness, Platt could easily have set the standard for such a criterion. In 1914, Platt National Park's visitation was second to Hot Springs Reservation, and ranked above Yosemite and Yellowstone (USDI 1916). By 1919—the same year that a visitation figure of 64,000 was used as a basis for evaluating the successful change in the status of Maine's Sieur de Monts National Monument to Lafayette National Park³ (Rothman 1989:105-106)—Platt's visitation was 107,976.

In the 1971 publication *National Park Service Criteria for Parklands*, the criteria for natural areas are cited as outstanding geological formations, biota of relative stability maintaining itself under natural conditions, and an ecological community significantly illustrating the process of succession and restoration to a natural condition following disruptive change. Platt met all of these essential criteria—and then some. Not only does Platt retain natural significance “following disruptive change” due to the removal of the original town site of Sulphur, it also possesses unique cultural significance: it is a National Park Service-designed landscape, with extensive elements constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) under the park's master plan.

³ The park's name was changed again, to Acadia National Park, in January 1929.

Furthermore, its history as a hydrotherapy resort at a time before medicines such as penicillin had been discovered fits the criterion for national significance related to the concept of historical areas as “[s]tructures or sites associated significantly with an important event that outstandingly represents some great idea or ideal of the American people” (USDI 1971a:13).

In sum, it appears that Platt National Park lost its national park status during a struggle on all fronts to understand *what national parks should be*.

In Praise of Platt

Looking back, it seems clear that Platt qualified as a “real national park” because of its pre-eminent value for *people*. Although the original park area is now the Platt District of Chickasaw National Recreation Area, for those visitors who enjoy and love this area it will always retain the dignity and qualities that it was recognized for from the very beginning.

In 1949, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., author of the NPS Organic Act statement of purpose, wrote to Conrad Wirth, expressing the philosophies of both men's fathers regarding the deep and true role of the National Park Service:

[There is] something of much more profound importance in park work than is generally recognized Constant and compelling interest in and sympathy with, the *people* [emphasis

added] using the parks—on finding one's chief satisfaction in appreciative friendly observation and study of the ways in which those people actually use, and derive pleasure and benefit from any given park, and in helping and guiding them by every available means to get the best values from their use of it ... that are made possible by the inherent characteristics of that particular park and by the widely various personal characteristics of the people themselves (Wirth 1980:21).

Platt seems to exemplify this view. At its heart, Platt *is* people. It is a place that excels in providing a healthful, relaxing natural environment where people come to drink curative waters, enjoy an early morning breakfast cooked on an open fire in a CCC-constructed picnic area, contemplate the sunset from Bromide Hill, view the purest waters emanat-

ing from the earth, and swim in the cool, naturally formed (and CCC-augmented) pools of Travertine Creek. Platt is a place rich in *tradition*, where people can experience a preserved natural area and cultural landscape as their families did for decades before them.

Perhaps what Horace Albright and others of his time in the late 1920s did not understand or acknowledge was this value that *people* placed on Platt—and value to people, after all, is what makes national parks important in the first place. Indeed, Oklahomans prized and respected Platt's national park status, and fought for decades to retain it as a national park, and to protect the qualities for which it was established. The Platt District continues to be a prime example of what all national parks strive to accomplish, which is not only protecting natural and cultural values, but also providing an environment where people understand and experience these values.

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