

Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism, by Rebecca Conard (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997). Illustrated. 382 pp. paperbound.

Reviewed by Ron Cockrell

Places of Quiet Beauty is not a history of Iowa parks and preserves per se, but Rebecca Conard effectively traces the progression of Iowa's park system within the context of twentieth-century environmentalism. The park movement evolved from a desire "to centralize control over resource use," with outdoor recreation and scenic preservation serving merely as secondary motivations. Iowa's example is therefore atypical of our common perception of how the U.S. conservation movement came to be, traditionally portrayed as dueling camps of conservationists and preservationists. As Conard demonstrates, such was not the case in Iowa, and thus lays down a challenge for historians to trace park movements in other states to test the veracity of our pet model.

Many readers will be surprised to learn that Iowa held a leading position in the state park movement early this century. So pleased was National Park Service Director Stephen T. Mather with Iowa's progress that in 1921 he helped organize the first meeting of the National Conference on State Parks in Des Moines, aiming a national spotlight on the state's expanding park system. [See Conard's 1997 article "The National Conference on State Parks: Reflections on Organizational Genealogy," *THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 28-43—ed.] It ranked fourth in terms of numbers of parks, behind only New York, Michigan, and Texas, and Iowans demonstrated their support by visiting these special places in record numbers. After World War II, as Conard shows, the

state allowed its leadership to wane because of state politics and increasing federal mandates.

Conard introduces key players by providing in-depth biographical sketches based on their own records and through interviews with their colleagues, students, and relatives. She succeeds in capturing their individual ideas and motivations. This admirable skill enriches *Places of Quiet Beauty* by making otherwise dull issues pertinent and pressing.

Agitation to set aside for conservation purposes a system of parks came from Iowa's academic community. Thomas Macbride, professor of botany at the State University at Iowa City, first proposed it to Iowans in 1895. Natural scientists associated with the Iowa Academy of Science pushed for a park system where re-

source conservation would dominate state land stewardship in protecting these special areas from depredation. Their effort culminated in the 1917 State Park Act and establishment of the Board of Conservation.

Conard contributes to women's history by detailing how this powerful coalition integrated the staunch support of clubwomen. Later, women exercised a distinct voice in policy formulation as state board or commission members.

Botanist Louis Pammel, the first Board of Conservation director, advocated a park system that captured Iowa's environmental diversity, and, to a lesser extent, its cultural resources deemed worthy of preservation. In 1933, the fish and game bureau merged with Pammel's group to form a new State Conservation Commission. An array of New Deal alphabet relief programs funded conservation work geared toward recreational development, but Pammel's successor, Jay Darling, insisted upon strict resource management principles guided by an overly ambitious twenty-five-year conservation plan.

This historian first picked up the book and, giving the table of contents a quick perusal, turned to the index to satisfy a long-standing research interest. In order to judge the degree of federal guidance over the state park movement, I searched for the entry "National Park Service" (NPS) and found only several pages cited under "national parks, in relation to state parks." While the index curiously omits NPS, Conard nevertheless

gives the federal bureau's role substantial treatment.

As was the case elsewhere, Iowa parks were transformed by the New Deal, principally through Civilian Conservation Corps labor, directed by NPS. Blessed by presidential resolve to "give Iowa all it wants," Iowa had planning documents on hand, ready to take full advantage of the financial avalanche, and often contributed state funds to cover any shortfalls. Iowa had already implemented its own brand of rustic architecture that NPS subsequently formalized and imposed nationwide on New Deal construction. In fact, many park planners or design engineers of the era were graduates of Iowa State University's school of landscape architecture. So much was happening in Iowa that the NPS inspector relocated from the Omaha regional office to Ames. Indeed, Iowa officials were perturbed with the Omaha office for not processing its paperwork fast enough to keep the money-powered steamroller going. In the willy-nilly spending race, Iowa inevitably strayed from its stringent resource management approach, and went in other directions not provided for in its twenty-five-year plan.

Following a period of stagnation during World War II, Conard reveals how historic preservation became an emphasis as a pet project of Commissioner Louise Lange Parker, with assistance from the botanist Ada Hayden, whose own professional interest included prairie preservation. Recreation gained ascendancy in the

1950s, with flood control and artificial lake construction inflating the numbers of state parks while operational budgets remained flat. The State Preserves Act of 1965 triggered the onset of environmentalism as Iowans scrambled to incorporate remnant natural and cultural areas into a state system so dominated by recreational use. Parks became secondary in importance to fish and game interests, and remain so today.

Conard elaborates on the pivotal role state politics has played concerning Iowa parks and preserves. She concludes with a discussion of Iowa's governmental reorganization of 1986 and its aftermath, at long last fulfilling Louis Pammel's call to blend conservation with pollution-control functions in the new Iowa Department of Natural Resources. While Conard's epilogue analysis is insightful concerning obstacles facing the infant department, events are too recent to

draw meaningful conclusions beyond enumerating goals and political realities. State managers, however, have Conard to thank for providing them the historical context upon which they can make informed policy decisions.

While one may wish that Conard somehow could have worked the four-letter-word "Iowa" into her title, *Places of Quiet Beauty* exhibits few flaws. Conard, a native Iowan, has produced a well-researched and -reasoned monograph, one that masterfully explores deeper issues of resource management within the historical progression of environmentalism. Aside from the not-so-small task of making an important historiographical contribution, Conard intrigues the reader about Iowa and imbues a desire to visit and experience firsthand those "places of quiet beauty."

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