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Rifle. Rulison. Fruita. Cortez. Gustine. Grand Junction. Missoula. Moab. Colorado Springs. Gunnison. Ouray. Montrose. This is my American West—a list of the places that I have called home. Like everyone I know who has lived in the region—and many who have merely passed through it—the West is very much a part of who I am. This project has afforded me the opportunity to think about a remarkable western park and to understand it more thoroughly. The pages that follow represent my attempt to pass along some of what I have learned so that we all may understand Rocky Mountain National Park for what it is, what it is not, and what we have made it.

Millions of people visit Rocky Mountain every year. Despite the park’s popularity and its rich past, historians have given it short shrift. In part, this book addresses that deficiency by offering a fresh look at how the park came to be and the complexities that make it such an engaging place.

More than a straightforward narrative of a single, albeit important, national park, I am interested in deeper questions that Rocky can answer about the modern American West. Thus, my primary focus is upon tourism and ecology—both powerful forces in the region—and how each has interacted with the nonhuman world in making and remaking Rocky Mountain National Park. We are often told that tourism provides western states an escape from the vagaries of extractive industry, just as we are often led to believe that the science of ecology is a force of restoration and regeneration. Both assumptions warrant much closer scrutiny than they have thus far received.

To gain a deeper understanding of national parks we must question other assumptions about them that have too long persisted. Parks are not, nor should we believe them to be, areas frozen in time and space. They are not slices of a perfect American past that the National Park Service has gallantly preserved, conserved, or protected. Rather, they are born of, and built upon, generations of dynamic environmental and cultural transformations. Parks are
places the very existence of which begs constant interpretation and intervention. Viewing parks from this perspective enables us to understand—without pardoning—why the Park Service has managed them as it has, while also shining a ray of light on possible paths forward.

Understanding the past and future of Rocky Mountain National Park also requires that we integrate mountain lions, elk, deer, beaver, willow, trout, insects, as well as wind, soil erosion, and fire into our historical analysis. Knowing something about how fires burn, how seeds move, and how mountain pine beetles reproduce—and how humans have tried to make sense of it all—is central to coming to terms with the history of this place as well.

Like most historians, I am confined by the narrative form and bridled by the reader’s willingness to read and a publisher’s willingness to print. Thus, I have made several tough choices in how I framed and wrote this book. In that process, some things—even important things—have been left out. For example, there is no discussion of the Lawn Lake Flood, or the construction of the Alva B. Adams Tunnel. The omission of these and other topics should not be taken to mean that they are not worthy of time and consideration. They are. Perhaps other scholars will give them the coverage they deserve.

The reader may also find it odd—even disconcerting—that Making Rocky Mountain National Park contains not a single, solitary map. Like words, maps are powerful; they can and do reify those things that they depict. The act of mapping also often obscures more than the maps themselves reveal. How, for example, would one map a herd of elk, or mountain pine beetle outbreak, or a fire regime, all of which shift over short and long time scales? How would one map—without reinforcing all of the assumptions buried deep beneath the lines themselves—the park’s outer boundary? Rather than compiling hundreds of pages of maps to honor the complexity of the historical and spatial processes at work, I will instead leave this important work to geographers.

Lastly, I hope that Making Rocky Mountain National Park will find its way into the backpacks and picnic baskets of park visitors. In a sense, this book is for and about them. All park visitors—past and present—are central characters in this history. What visitors see when they gaze upon this landscape, what they think they see, and what they want to see have all been powerful forces in creating Rocky Mountain National Park. It is a magnificent place
made all the more beautiful if we understand the people, plants, animals, and ideas that have made it what it is.

Although my name appears on this book’s cover, it is not mine alone. Over the past several years I have been humbled time and again by the gracious support of mentors, colleagues, friends, family, and complete strangers. I am honored to take this opportunity to offer my sincere gratitude to those who have made this book possible.

To begin, I could not have conjured a better mentor than Donald Worster. His work captured my imagination when I was in my early twenties, and I must admit that I am still under its spell. I have long marveled at his intellect, passion, ability to cut right to the heart of things, and his kind and generous soul. My work and my life are immeasurably richer for having worked so closely with him.

Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Karl Brooks, Gregory Cushman, Paul Kelton, and John Hausdoerffer all read versions of this manuscript and offered invaluable insights and advice. Timothy Silver and William Philpott served as anonymous reviewers, and I was struck by the time and attention that they gave to the project. The book is significantly better because of their insightful comments and cordial prodding. Maddalena Marinari, Shen Hou, Cheri Yost, Maple Taylor, Christy Briles, and Ann Leggett all reviewed various chapters of this book; I am grateful to them as well. I would also like to thank Dan Flores for introducing me to the study of parks and place, and for fostering my passion for both.

Museum curators Tim Burchett and Mariah Robertson patiently guided me through the archives at Rocky Mountain National Park. I also had the great good fortune of working the better part of a summer with Sybil Barnes, whose expertise in navigating the park’s library was matched only by her kind spirit. Archives specialist Catherine Kisluk embodies the very best of the National Park Service, and I was continually impressed by her knowledge, professionalism, and generosity. Chris Kennedy, Junelle Pringle, Barbara James, Nate Williamson, and Kathryn Barth all shared with me portions of their private collections, and Paula and Edward Brown took time out of their busy schedules to collect research materials when I was not able to do it myself.
I was fortunate to receive financial support from the Rocky Mountain Nature Association, the National Park Service, and the Research Council at the University of Missouri. Their generosity makes projects like this possible, and we should support them every way we can.

My colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Missouri and our talented Melinda Lockwood have also offered steady support and counsel throughout this process. Likewise, Ranjit Arab, Fred Woodward, and the staff at the University Press of Kansas have been incredibly helpful, patient, and professional, and I owe them all a great deal for their work on my behalf.

Martin and DeEtta Frank, Paula and Edward Brown, and Maple Taylor have been steadfast supporters of my work all along. Last, no person has given more to me and this project than my amazing wife, Jennifer. She has patiently plowed every acre of this with me, and I could not have done it without her love, keen editorial eye, kindness, and friendship.

Jerry J. Frank
Columbia, Missouri, April 2013
Making
Rocky Mountain National Park
What exactly are national parks? The question is so obvious that it often goes unasked and unanswered. To the millions upon millions of people who visit them, parks float above time and culture, forever disconnected from the profane world that bustles beyond their borders. The language that we use to discuss them—preservation, conservation, nature, wilderness—reveals what we think parks are and what they should be. These words tell stories. They tell us that parks were not “built,” at least not in the sense that a mine or a city is built. Rather, they deny any acts of construction at all. Parks simply exist.

We can all agree that parks entailed the building of roads, bridges, and visitor centers, but we assume that the rest of parks—their streams, forests, soils, animals, insects—have been protected in such a way that the rest of Yellowstone, or Yosemite, or Rocky Mountain is pretty much the way it has always been.\(^1\) We do not think of parks as places imbued with culture and history but rather as timeless spaces that have been spared the heavy hand of change altogether. They are, in other words, natural. This is why we love them. This is why we seek them. This is why we fight for them.

But parks are more interesting, more complicated, and more contested than all of that. They are, in fact, some of the most culturally rich places in the world. Since the creation of our first national park in 1872, Americans have been engaged in a fascinating discourse about nature, change, history, and humans through the parks themselves. In incredible ways, national parks offer primary sources that reveal ever-shifting ideas about the natural world and the human place within it. As such, they can be “read” like George Washington’s letters or the Pumpkin Papers. To read our national parks we must start by questioning nearly everything we see, everything we hear, and everything we smell as we pass through them. If we do this, a new and exciting understanding of the parks will emerge. No longer are they musty museums frozen in time and space; they come alive as we behold the history, the ideologies, the conflicts, and the ironies that make them dynamic and fascinating places.
Reading parks is not as easy as one might imagine. Generations of advertising and park management have conditioned many of us to expect to see nature in parks, and so we often see what we seek. But this raises still more questions. What is nature? To the National Park Service (NPS) and the majority of the traveling public, nature, wilderness, and parks all imply the absence of humans and human history. Accordingly, most elements of parks that speak to human influence have been hidden, or softened, to the point where they are difficult to see. It has meant that parks had to be managed, sometimes intensively so, but in ways that often concealed the fact that any action was being taken at all lest the façade of the natural park be shattered. The razing of historic structures, the use of naturalized building materials along roads and trails, the removal of stumpage and dead and dying trees, and the furtive killing of thousands of elk all speak to this impulse.

The need to present the “natural” has brought about more significant, and less perceptible, changes as well. Although we would not know it by simply looking—which is, of course, the point—the trail that winds along a rushing stream, the trout that swim in that stream, and the stately trees that shade our campsites are also products of humans and our ideas interacting with the nonhuman world. Even more difficult to apprehend are those things that are no longer present. The predators that do not live in the park, the native fish that do not swim in its waters, the fires that have not burned its forests, the cabins and fences and sawmills and roads that have been erased from the landscape, and the aspen and willow that do not grow in its meadows are all connected to humans and our history, too.

The pages that follow offer insight into the very human history of Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP). But it is not a history that has unfolded across a passive natural stage. In fact, the natural processes of this place are a crucial component of its history. At nearly every turn the NPS found itself face to face with a natural world that was difficult to anticipate and impossible to control. For more than a century elk, fish, mountain lions, beaver, aspen, lodgepole pine, fire, insects, soil, snow, and even wind have been powerful historical agents of change in Rocky Mountain National Park.

Within this broader natural context, two forces have been primarily responsible for giving shape to the park’s history. In this regard the culture of tourism has been of central importance. As an industry, tourism is based upon the need to entice potential travelers. Easy access, pristine forests, ma-
jestic peaks, great fishing, ample wildlife, and wonderful skiing were part and parcel of promotional activities intended to do just this.\(^3\)

In interesting ways, the promotional materials of local and regional boosters, businesses, corporations, and the NPS effectively created a Rocky Mountain National Park in the minds of travelers well before they even arrived.\(^4\) When visitors’ experiences met their expectations, they often wrote letters of thanks to the Park Service for a job well done. When their experiences did not meet expectations—when the roads were too rough, or when the fishing was poor, or when large charismatic animals were not readily visible from the roadside—visitors often wrote excoriating letters to their congressmen and others chiding the NPS for doing a poor job. To the Park Service, an agency that long sought to bolster its institutional power and stability, keeping visitors satisfied was a serious matter.\(^5\)

The NPS has not acted alone in its efforts to attract visitors. Many cities, counties, and states have embraced tourism and recreation as sustainable alternatives to traditional extractive industries such as timber, mining, oil, and gas. And in the American West tourism and recreation have become very big business. In 2011 tourism generated $5.3 billion in economic activity in Colorado alone. If we add to those figures the $1.46 billion that recreation-related activities garnered, and the $1.4 billion spent by “day-trippers” in the state, the economic impact of such activities is stunning.\(^6\) Contrary to popular belief, however, tourism and recreation are far from environmentally benign. Something as simple as watching wildlife, taking a stroll along a tree-lined trail, catching a beautiful trout, skiing down a snow-covered mountain, or going for an afternoon drive to marvel at the fall colors can unleash torrents of environmental change. If western states continue to fight for every tourist dollar—if they continue to sell the natural West to those who seek respite, relaxation, and entertainment in the out-of-doors—we would do well to know something more about the powerful forces that shape tourism, just as we would be well served to learn the manifold ways it changes anything it touches.

During the earliest history of the park, managing solely for the pleasure of tourists posed few problems. Over time, however, a competing vision of what the park was and what it should be challenged the culture of tourism that had so long reigned supreme. The science and culture of ecology came to Rocky in fits and starts, but they offered visitors and managers a new and
different way of imagining the park that did not sit comfortably with a management paradigm so firmly rooted in recreation, aesthetics, and comfort. Making matters all the more complicated, ecology arrived in Rocky well after the culture of tourism was entrenched and had reshaped so much of the park in ways that ecologists often saw as unnatural or damaging. Like tourism, ecology has been dynamic and unpredictable. For decades, it has continually asked new questions, employed novel research techniques, and reached fresh conclusions, all of which manifest still newer ways of seeing this place. A good deal of the park’s history can be understood as a contest between the fluid forces of tourism and ecology, each vying to re-create the park in its own likeness.

The parkscape bears witness to these competing ideas as Rocky became—like so much of America—subdivided. Along the park’s roads—the front-country—the culture of tourism that esteems breathtaking views, comfort, and convenience dominates. In the more distant reaches of the park—the backcountry—ecologically based values have come to rule. The tensions between tourism and ecology have also shaped aquatic and riparian areas as well as the park’s hundreds of miles of trails. Thus, Rocky Mountain National Park is not one place, but many.

At first glance, tourism and ecology seem very different. In some ways they are. However, both spring from the human impulse to understand, explain, and imbue our surroundings with meaning. In this light, the promotional literature of the Union Pacific Railroad (UP) and the ecological studies of the park’s flora and fauna represent attempts to create a culturally significant and intelligible place. Both offered, and both continue to offer, lenses through which we view the park. They have also brought widespread change to Rocky, yet neither has cut the Gordian knot that binds human and natural history.

To understand how national parks have been created and re-created over time, to see the manifold ways they preserve and protect environmental ideologies just as they preserve trees and elk, we need a history that unites the dynamic cultures of tourism and ecology while anchoring each within a specific place. To accomplish this, the following begins with the rise of tourism in Colorado and the founding of its crown jewel, then focuses on driving, hiking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, fishing, and skiing in Rocky Mountain National Park. Each of these activities has deep cultural roots that
stretch far beyond the park; each has impacted the park’s flora and fauna, often bringing widespread degradation; and each has been challenged by the rise of ecology and its unique way of understanding the world—all of which has brought still more change to Rocky.

*Making Rocky Mountain National Park* does not offer a tale of the fall of nature or an “unnatural” history of destruction and defilement. The park’s fauna, flora, water, and mountains are no less natural today than they were a century ago. They only appear to be so if we accept, at face value, definitions of “nature” and “parks” that exclude humans and human history. So much of Rocky Mountain National Park is a product of people imagining a space free from the human stain and then setting out to make that place a reality. The irony is difficult to escape. Making a *natural* park—one interlaced with roads and trails; one where fire and bark beetles were once banished but are now let in through the back door; one where the fisherman’s whim has initiated an ongoing ecological revolution in which scientists themselves have been unwitting revolutionaries; one where massive elk herds are a great boon and a symbol of tragic mismanagement; one where unwanted aspects of the landscape such as old roads, cabins, and ski resorts that were once allowed have been literally erased—has very often pivoted on how the cultures of tourism and ecology see the park itself.

If, however, we grapple with the place of humans within nature—within *all* of nature—then we can no longer understand overgrazed meadows or soil erosion as immoral and unnatural aberrations. Yet we must still confront all of the ways that humans have impacted the park’s ecosystems, some of which are in grave danger because of human beliefs and desires. But removing ourselves from the equation—seeing nature only in those places where we are not—makes this task impossible. This is one of America’s greatest challenges in coming to terms with what national parks are and what they represent. Parks do not simply exist. Rather, they are in a constant state of creation and re-creation as our ideas, hopes, and dreams interact with dynamic and powerful environments.
Dedication of Rocky Mountain National Park, September 4, 1915. Courtesy of the National Archives, College Park, MD.
Making a National Park

It must have been a glorious day. Good cheer, good food, and plenty of congratulations for a job well done. On September 4, 1915, hundreds of Colorado residents and other honored guests gathered at the newly created Rocky Mountain National Park to offer thanks to its supporters and to enjoy the fruits of their labor. The day’s events included coffee at noon followed promptly by the fine musical stylings of The Fort Collins Band. With bellies full of coffee and hearts filled with patriotic songs, luminaries including Enos Mills; Stephen T. Mather; Governor George Carlson; Mrs. John D. Sherman, president of the Conservation Department of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs; and F. O. Stanley, inventor of the Stanley Steamer vehicles and a local hotel owner, gave brief speeches praising the new park.¹ A great day, indeed.

Like so many national parks, Rocky’s history speaks to diverse interests that coalesced around a single idea at a single moment in time. Local naturalist Enos Mills spread the gospel of conservation and raised the profile of the Estes Park region, where he owned and operated an inn. The Colorado Mountain Club (CMC) also played a central role. Founded in 1912, the CMC was a staunch supporter of the national park idea, and its first president, James Grafton Rogers, deserves primary credit for crafting the parks bill that President Wilson eventually signed.

If we look deeper still, we see that the creation of RMNP was also a key element of a broader push to create the National Park Service itself. Between 1906 and 1913 Americans across the country joined
John Muir and the Sierra Club in the fight to prevent the Hetch-Hetchy Dam from being built in Yosemite National Park. Debates about the potential national park in Colorado must be understood within this context. Time and again, influential men like landscape architect Mark Daniels and the president of the American Civic Association, J. Horace McFarland, lent their support to the creation of Rocky not because it held unique scenic wonders. Rather, these men saw the opportunity to build a broader constituency, which would bolster support for a national parks agency to better protect and manage America’s growing constellation of parks.

Last, and perhaps most important, the elite businessmen of Denver were at the center of it all. Like McFarland and Daniels, businessmen agreed that a park nestled at the foot of Longs Peak was attractive because it held the promise of drawing tourists and generating revenue for the state and for Estes Park. Tourism—and its ideologies, assumptions, and power to transform those places in which it predominates—was thus woven into the fabric of Rocky from its very earliest days.

Growing Denver

Settled as a series of isolated gold camps in the late 1850s, east-central Colorado was a rough place. By the late 1860s some twenty-seven freighting firms stretched across the Midwest, turning Denver into a sort of storage bin for westward-bound goods and eastward-bound natural resources. In 1870, the completion of the Denver Pacific Railroad and the Kansas Pacific Railroad linked Denver to Cheyenne, Kansas City, and St. Louis, thereby making it easier to move resources from Denver’s hinterlands to the city itself, and then to faraway urban centers. These rails and roads facilitated the flow of people, information, and capital to and from eastern cities. The influx of capital, feeding off of and into the budding rail system, created an interconnected web of mines, smelters, and supporting industries, which brought alternating cycles of economic prosperity and desperation to the region.

Over the course of a few decades, the flow of goods, money, and people drastically altered Colorado’s leading city. From a population of about 4,000 in 1870, Denver grew to some 130,000 residents by 1900 and to more than 250,000 by 1920. Gone for good were the dusty mining shacks and musty canvas tents that once characterized the city. By 1920 Denver claimed about
one-fourth of the state’s total population and “was unchallenged in its urban dominance . . . across the interior of the American West.” It had achieved the same sort of market gravitational pull of Chicago, making it a natural location for “eastern capitalists and nearby mining magnates to locate their offices and investment.” By the turn of the twentieth century it had become the unchallenged “business center of the state.”

Coinciding with Denver’s demographic and economic growth were significant changes in its urban geography. The city grew more sophisticated as gas lamps and finely crafted buildings, such as the Tabor Opera House and Windsor Hotel, popped up around town. Key to the growth of Denver was a “close and profitable working relationship between the city’s real estate developers and those who invested in and promoted the city’s expanding street and cable car systems.” Together, those interests altered the shape, size, and function of Denver, all while making tidy profits for themselves.

Americans had long believed that the cleansing air, crisp blue skies, and sulfurous bubbling hot springs of the Rocky Mountains provided cures for a wide variety of physical ailments. By the 1880s, Colorado boosters hailed the state as a natural sanitarium for those suffering from lung disorders. Not only could a stint in the Rockies combat tuberculosis; it also promised to “broaden the chest,” foster a “cheerfulness and contented frame of mind,” and perhaps even ease the stress “on the class of overworked brains, which, in the intensity of political, professional and business life is quite numerous nowadays.” Although Colorado Springs and Glenwood Springs surpassed Denver as Meccas for the unwell, the capital city nonetheless benefited mightily from the unhealthy multitudes seeking relief.

As towns and cities across Colorado sought to capitalize on their cool, clean air by luring the unhealthy from across the nation, they also actively attracted healthy and wealthy patrons. Gold, businessmen found, was often easier to dislodge from the tourist’s pocket than from the stubborn quartz of the nearby hills. But the trip across the Great Plains in a Pullman Palace car was a pricey undertaking, out of reach for the commoner. This began changing, however, with the calamitous economic decline of 1893. Especially hard hit by the downturn were Colorado’s silver mines and the railroads that fed them. Seeking to supplement their dwindling revenues, several railroads began offering reduced rates while ramping up advertising campaigns. The Denver & Rio Grande, for example, marketed an affordable four-day,
thousand-mile tour through the most breathtaking portions of the Rockies for just $28. Adding incentive for railroads to continue reduced rates were the increasing numbers of the middle class, who craved affordable travel and adventure in the American West.

In time, the nascent middle class sought access to and through the West by way of automobile. As with rail travel, the automobile initially provided transport only for the wealthy. In 1908, however, the Ford Motor Company introduced its $850 Model T. Over the next couple of years Ford continued to streamline production techniques, and by 1914 the company could produce one car every ninety minutes and sold more than 250,000 in that year alone. Eager to attract and accommodate the growing number of automobile tourists, citizens of Denver founded the Colorado Automobile Club in 1902, the Rocky Mountain Highway Association in 1908, and the Colorado Highway Commission in 1909, all of which pushed for more and better roads in the state. Commercial interests in the area also actively sought to bolster the city’s appeal by building a system of roads and parks to better serve and attract the driving public.

Such was the character of Colorado and its leading city on the eve of the creation of Rocky Mountain National Park. This park, as we shall see, required more than any single devoted and impassioned individual; it required a city with deep pockets and political clout, the very name of which had the power to conjure evocative images in the minds of American tourists. Indeed, this park required city folk with money to spend and a desire to spend it in the wilds of Colorado.

Muir of the Rockies

In 1884, the state of Colorado not yet a decade old, fourteen-year-old Enos Mills of Linn County, Kansas, journeyed westward. Upon arriving at Estes Park, a hamlet of only 150 residents, the plucky young man worked for two years building a “little log cabin on the slope of Longs Peak,” where he lived much of his adult life. Often, when the weather turned cold or work became scarce, the untethered Mills packed his scant belongings and tramped about the West, where he “spent great days with the old prospector, the trapper, the capable cowboy and the Indian.” More often than not, Mills worked at least part of the year as a miner in Butte, Montana, or in Cripple Creek or...
Ward, Colorado. His mining experiences, which were “full of red blood, excitement and real characters from every mining region of the earth,” also led to a chance meeting with the naturalist John Muir.

After underground fires at Butte’s Anaconda Mine halted production in the fall of 1889, the nineteen-year-old Mills set out for San Francisco. By Mills’s recollection, he was walking aimlessly across a San Francisco beach in December 1889 when he saw an older man surrounded by an interested crowd. As he drew near, the young Mills realized that “the small gray bearded little man,” John Muir, was intensely describing the inner workings of the plant and animal world. Fascinated as much by the speaker as the message, Mills stuck around and eventually introduced himself to Muir. The two then embarked upon a lengthy walk through the Golden Gate Park. Mills had met his idol.

The chance meeting between Mills and the Apostle of Nature seems to have been a life-changing event for the young man. In Muir he found a father figure, a mentor, and an example of how to gain and sharpen his own public image later in life. Muir apparently urged Mills to learn as much about the natural world as possible while honing his literary skills. Following that advice, Mills spent a semester at Heald’s Business College in San Francisco, then set out to see “some of the wilder sections of America,” including Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and portions of Alaska.

After his contact with Muir, Mills continued working in mines across the West while endeavoring to learn more about the natural world. By 1902 he had traveled across much of Europe, gaining a new appreciation for the potential of tourism, all while saving enough money to purchase Longs Peak House from his mother’s brother, Carlyle Lamb. After changing its name to Longs Peak Inn in 1904, Mills intensified his efforts to refine his skills as a nature guide, writer, and speaker—all of which served nicely to draw guests to his rustic wayside inn.

Through a combination of self-promotion, determination, and persistence, Mills had made himself familiar to many important people by 1907. Among those acquainted with his reputation as a public speaker and nature writer were Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot and President Theodore Roosevelt. Seeing in Mills a man who might work well to publicize conservation efforts, Pinchot offered, and Mills accepted, appointment as an official lecturer for the United States Forest Service (USFS) in 1907.
For nearly two years the relationship between Mills, Pinchot, and the Forest Service benefited all parties. Mills received a steady wage, the opportunity to promote the ideals of the Forest Service, and notoriety, all the while dropping hints to audiences that the Longs Peak region offered almost unparalleled opportunities to hear the call of the wild. 

For their part, Pinchot and the Forest Service found a tireless and effective speaker willing to travel untold miles to spread the gospel of conservation. Speaking to his passion and drive, Mills conducted perhaps 200 presentations between October 1908 and May 1909 as he traveled to dozens of states. His message, varying somewhat according to the audience, emphasized the importance of science, education, and government regulation in maintaining healthy forests for future generations.

By April 1909, Pinchot and the Forest Service no longer required Mills’s services. He had broadcast Pinchot’s brand of conservation across the nation, giving a friendly, weather-worn face to the Chief Forester’s environmental policy. In his last lecture for the Forest Service, which he delivered on April 28, 1909, Mills said nothing derogatory about either Pinchot or the Forest Service. Both of them, however, he would later venomously attack.

Backbone of the Country

In September 1909, the Estes Park Improvement Association was searching for ways to bolster tourism in its area. To aid in the investigation, it called upon U.S. Forester Herbert N. Wheeler of the Forest Service to offer an opinion. Wheeler proposed the creation of a game preserve, which would improve and increase wildlife in the area and thereby, he thought, strengthen Estes Park’s appeal to cash-laden tourists. The Estes Park Improvement Association thought Wheeler’s idea was a good one, and a few days later Mills broadened Wheeler’s plan by calling instead for the creation of Estes National Park. Agreeing that a national park would better serve to make the Estes Park region more popular and profitable, the association quickly threw its support behind Mills’s idea.

With a national park plan stirring in his heart and mind Mills worked to muster as much public support as possible. In this endeavor, his relationship with J. Horace McFarland, president of the American Civic Association and devoted preservationist, was of crucial importance. From 1910 to 1915 McFar-
land proved to be a steadfast and loyal supporter, more than willing to use his strong public voice and deep political connections to help ensure creation of the park. Although the relationship with Mills later soured, McFarland wrote Mills often, offering moral and political support while attempting to stay Mills’s frequent public and private tirades against all those who showed even the slightest disagreement with his vision.

McFarland was clearly interested in protecting worthy “pleasure grounds” for future generations of Americans. He wrote of nature’s ability to revive the spirit and purify the mind, but he was also well aware of the broader import of a park at Estes. In a letter to Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger in 1910, for example, McFarland anticipated a crucial chord in the movement’s eventual success: “Having gone directly from Estes Park to Yellowstone National Park,” he stated, “I am in a position to say that while it in no sense compares with the Yellowstone in respect of natural wonders, it does compare most favorable [sic] in respect of its availability as a great accessible and beneficent pleasure ground.” At the time there was “no available national park in the large sense east of the Yellowstone,” and Estes Park already had a reputation as a summer resort within easy reach of Denver. By McFarland’s reckoning, a national park near Estes was needed not because of its inherent wilderness or aesthetic values but rather because of its prime location and potential as a resort for traveling Americans. We must remember, however, that even as McFarland was midwifing the creation of RMNP, he was actively involved in protecting Hetch-Hetchy and Niagara Falls, as well as creating an independent National Park Service. Viewed in this context, Rocky Mountain National Park takes on broader significance.

Mills and McFarland were not alone in recognizing the potential of a park in the region. In December 1910, the Denver Chamber of Commerce gave its wholehearted endorsement to the plan and formed a national park committee to champion the cause. Led by Frederick Ross, a local real estate mogul, the Denver Chamber was key to the final passage of the bill. Shortly after the formation of the Chamber’s national park committee, another wing of the same group threw its support behind the plan. Representing “some two hundred . . . retail firms of the City of Denver,” the Retail Association of the Denver Chamber “emphatically urge[d] that Estes Park be thus set aside” as a national park. To these men, a park at Estes “would be of incalculable benefit to the business interests of the city and state, besides assuring the
control and preservation of one of the most beautiful spots in the world.”

Not to be left out, the Denver Real Estate Exchange also heartily endorsed the idea.

As details of the proponents’ plan crystallized, so did opposition. Initially, Boulder County and Grand County—both of which stood to lose a large section of territory if the initial proposal went through—opposed the plan. At the core of their opposition was the belief that a park threatened “many thousands of acres of undeveloped agricultural land” and several active mining projects, including the “finest grade of Gilsonite known.” Furthermore, county commissioners in Grand County “confidently believed” that “everyone familiar with this territory” knew “that it is liable at any time to become one of the greatest mining Districts yet known.”

Echoing similar concerns, the Boulder County Metal Mining Association objected to taking “119 square miles of the 440 square miles of our mountain and mineral bearing area . . . and making a playground . . . out of what we believe will become one of our most highly productive mineral sections in the near future.”

By the summer of 1911, several concerned citizens had banded together under the auspices of the Front Range Settlers’ League (FRSL) to oppose the creation of the park. Comprising citizens of Estes Park as well as neighbors, relatives, former employees of Mills, among others, the FRSL fought tooth and nail, writing sheaves of opposition letters to state and federal politicians, Department of Interior administrators, and two sitting presidents. Although the reasons for this opposition were many, a few chief complaints surfaced time and again. Mills, they charged, was not only a man of questionable character (they claimed that he had earlier been convicted of assault and perjury); worse, he was “not sincere in his pretended love of nature.” According to the FRSL, Mills was interested in little more than “making a nature faking shrine out of his summer hotel.” It also claimed that many of his “hair-raising personal reminiscences” were written while “destroying, pioneer fashion, the scenic beauty about him by cutting the finest trees and otherwise using the best of everything in the public domain.” Lastly, members of the FRSL believed the land in question to be “imperishable” and thought that the U.S. Forest Service was best suited to manage the area.

The complaints from this organization are significant for many reasons. In addition to raising questions about the Muir of the Rockies himself—in-sight we often do not see in the historical record—the FRSL’s complaints re-
veal the friction generated as the economic base of the Estes Park area moved more firmly toward tourism and recreation. As the FRSL often pointed out, a national park at Estes did not mean the end of economic development. Rather, they feared that such a shift would come at the expense of traditional resource extraction. On that count, they were right.

The last two months of 1911 were crucial for the national park. After writing numerous cordial but insistent letters, the Denver Chamber of Commerce and the Denver Real Estate Exchange were finally reaching and convincing the right people in Washington. Central to their message was the claim that all they needed to make the park a success was “the proper sort of publicity, coming from reliable sources to attract the tourist.” Soon, the Department of the Interior awakened to their case, concluding that “apparently there will be a strong effort made by the people interested in this proposed park to have it created during the coming session of Congress, and we had probably just as well prepare therefore.” Accordingly, Commissioner of the General Land Office George A. Ward requested that a map of the area be prepared. The following day, the commissioner’s order was forwarded to the General Land Office, along with a letter from the Denver Chamber claiming that “all of the best and most influential citizens of our state are heartily in favor of the park.” It is worth pointing out that the Department of the Interior and the General Land Office eventually sent Chief Geographer Robert Marshall to prepare the crucial map because they heard, understood, and agreed with the economic argument of Denver’s business class and McFarland’s broader political appeal.

As word got out that Marshall would soon visit the area, those opposing the plan redoubled their efforts. Senator Simon Guggenheim, Republican of Colorado, cautioned Secretary of the Interior Walter Fisher about the park proposal. Guggenheim had “received a number of letters and telegrams from Colorado protesting against the establishment of Estes Park as a National Park.” He also believed that much “of the land said to be included in the contemplated change is mineral land” upon which “extensive mining operations have been conducted in the territory for many years.” Speaking on behalf of Grand County and Boulder County, the Metal Mining Association, and many members of the FRSL, Guggenheim also “feared that such a proclamation or order would work irreparable injury to the mining industry, as well as to the agricultural settlement of the country.”
Much to the chagrin of those laboring to stem the tide of park support, the formation of the Colorado Mountain Club in April 1912 heralded yet another major victory for park supporters. The organization, whose founding members dedicated themselves to raising local awareness and support for a park in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains, also played an important part in the political process of its creation. Almost immediately, the club began an active publicity campaign.

Perhaps just as important as the club’s community activism was the fact that it boasted some well-connected members, including “a young lawyer named Morrison Shafroth whose father [John] was a leading Democratic senator in the Wilson administration and who was ready to travel to Washington with boxes of lantern slides and portfolios of photographs” to sell the park idea. Early leadership of the organization fell to James Grafton Rogers, a handsome young attorney whose legal and political acumen was of incalculable benefit to the cause of park creation. Not only would Rogers craft and redraft numerous iterations of park proposals, but he also understood the value of working with—not against—interested parties.

As Chief Geographer Marshall’s visit drew nearer, the Denver Chamber, Enos Mills, and the Front Range Settler’s League each insisted that he meet, stay, and tour the area with them. Realizing the potential volatility of accepting one offer over any other, especially prior to completing his surveys, Marshall wisely demurred. As park supporters had hoped, Marshall’s visit was a boon to their efforts. After making the surveys, Marshall listened, in turn, to the concerns of the FRSL, Mills, Colorado Senator John Shafroth, Governor-elect Elias Ammons, Frederick Ross, and former Colorado Senator Thomas M. Patterson. To Marshall, the crux of the opposition’s argument lay less with the creation of the park and more with concerns over its size. In an early effort to quiet the opposition, he proposed boundaries that encompassed far less land compared to some initial suggestions, omitting as many private landholdings as possible without violating the integrity of the park.

Park supporters later read with delight Marshall’s official report, which claimed that, although there were no “commanding natural feature[s]” as was the case in other national parks, the “region as a whole is as beautiful as any to be found in the United States, or, indeed in the world.” And even though Marshall highlighted the area’s beauty, he found it of secondary importance to what was “perhaps the most attractive feature of the plan to cre-
ate this park . . . from both the National and State standpoints,” which was the “accessibility of the area.” Apparently won over by the Denver Chamber of Commerce and J. Horace McFarland, Marshall echoed their refrain that “Estes Park can be reached from Chicago in about 30 hours and from Denver by automobile in about 3 hours.” Moreover, the effusive Marshall believed that because Denver was “the center of practically all the railroad systems west of the Mississippi River, the number of visitors that may be expected annually in the proposed park will add enormous revenues to the State of Colorado and will make this one of its most productive sections.”

Making the park idea even more palatable was the paucity of other marketable commodities in the area. Although there were sweeping vistas “spread[ing] before the eye a gorgeous assemblage of wonderful mountain sculpture[s],” the proposed park contained “little merchantable timber” and “no well-developed mines.” Thus, the arguments that the park would forever “sew up” valuable resources were less than persuasive.

From a purely business standpoint the Estes Park region had many things going for it. These included a solid reputation as a vacation destination, a potentially profitable location mere hours from the Queen City of the Plains, and relatively few usable natural resources. Still, the entire proposal lacked something. Where, actually, was Estes Park? Did “Estes National Park” have the same cachet as, say, the Grand Canyon or the Grand Tetons, which sent the mind along fantastic journeys to faraway places? Realizing this deficiency, Marshall proposed changing the park’s name to something more evocative and marketable. By his reckoning, this national park “should bear a name of broader significance. This striking section of the Rocky Mountains—the backbone of the country,” should be named Rocky Mountain National Park.

And so it would be.

On the heels of Marshall’s visit, and upon his recommendation, the Denver Chamber of Commerce sought someone to draft the designating legislation. To Marshall and the Denver Chamber, the CMC’s president, James Grafton Rogers, seemed the perfect candidate. This young attorney, a Yale graduate in private practice in Denver, was not only enthusiastic, but also a skilled negotiator and well connected. Rogers was willing to provide services and began collecting and synthesizing the legal details required to craft the bill. Over the next three years, he patiently shaped a bill with language that satisfied the varying demands of most parties.
Rogers’s first bill was introduced in the 62nd Congress in February 1913 as “An Act to Establish Rocky Mountain National Park” (Senate Bill 8403 and House Resolution 28649). Much to his dismay, it made little progress. Undeterred, he sought to isolate and to negotiate with those who opposed it. Much of the debate lay with Section 2, which protected private inholdings, reserved water rights to the State of Colorado, and preserved limited opportunity for mineral exploration within the proposed park. There was concern in Washington and in the Centennial State, however, that such provisions might not meet the standard of protection required for a national park. In his defense, Rogers explained that he hoped that the section would “still local opposition in Colorado” and that it was “not really of very much importance.” Candidly, Rogers admitted that he “desired to get a bill through, even if it contain[ed] some awkward minor clauses. When the wedge is once started,” he added, “no one will be readier than I to urge the most complete restrictions in the park.”

By October 1913, after conferences with the Denver Chamber of Commerce, Denver Real Estate Exchange, Governor Ammons, Senator Patterson, and the joint committee of the Denver Chamber of Commerce as well as local mining, grazing, and timber interests, Rogers had a revision in hand that he hoped addressed the most pressing points of contention. His hard work began to pay dividends in the summer of 1914 when Colorado Senator Charles Thomas introduced S 6007 and U.S. Representative Edward Taylor of Colorado introduced HR 17614. As passage of a bill seemed within reach, opposition—from both familiar and surprising corners—emerged.

Although he had never marshaled any evidence to support his claim that the USFS opposed the park outright, and though he received several letters stating USFS support, Mills was deeply suspicious of the Forest Service and most of its champions. And much to Mills’s chagrin, Rogers had been holding conferences with the Forest Service to work out an equitable (and passable) proposal. By 1914 Mills began suspecting that Rogers’s intentions were also less than pure. In a personal letter to Rogers, Mills fumed that he could no “longer remain silent while the President of the Colorado Mountain Club exhibits the Forest Service on one shoulder and the Park on the other.” Although Mills rightly claimed that the “overwhelming majority of the Colorado Mountain Club desire to see the Rocky Mountain National Park established,” he contended that Rogers had not “given adequate expression to this
opinion.” Mills went on to demand that Rogers cease “further conniving with the Forest Service in this connection.” Mills closed by stating that his letter represented “a last effort to arouse you with the hope that you will see your way clear to frankly cooperate with us in securing the Rocky Mountain National Park.”

Although Mills’s tirade doubtless set Rogers on his heels, the last-ditch effort of the Front Range Settlers’ League to scuttle the bill came as no surprise at all. Grasping at straws, the FRSL claimed that a new park would cost the federal government twice as much to administer as the Forest Service was currently spending there. Moreover, the park would be only a “great advertisement,” drawing tens of thousands of visitors from places far and near at taxpayers’ expense. To them, the proposed park was little more than a “selfish scheme concocted for the benefit of certain parties, in which it is proposed that Uncle Sam shall act as an advertising and press agent.”

Whereas the FRSL cast the bill as an economic burden to federal government, officials within the Department of Interior saw things otherwise. Mark Daniels, who was Interior’s general superintendent of Yosemite National Park and landscape engineer for the NPS, found in the pleas of the FRSL “not a single good argument.” Moreover, Daniels contended that Rocky Mountain National Park need not in any way create an extra charge upon the federal government. If the parks were “administered along the lines now being outlined,” he argued, “they will produce revenue rather than be a charge upon the Government.” At a time when many people—both within and without the Department of Interior—were working to create a separate and self-sustaining National Park Service, Rocky Mountain National Park took on new significance. What better way to bolster the campaign to create the National Park Service than with a park that had the potential to draw 100,000 or more tourists annually?

As the cold winter winds swirled briskly around the nation’s capital in January 1915, passage was at hand. Representative Edward Taylor of Colorado, standing proudly before Congress on January 18, 1915, proclaimed that it was through the good works of himself, Senator Thomas, Frederick Ross of the Denver Chamber of Commerce, the Denver Real Estate Exchange, and a handful of other interested politicians that Rocky Mountain National Park had congressional approval. Taylor was quick to point out the physical beauty of the area: more than sixty peaks above 12,000 feet, a “thousand varieties
of wildflowers,” and countless other interesting life-forms. It was true, he admitted, that Estes Park region already attracted some 10,000 automobiles annually from outside the state, but if a national park were created there it could, he imagined, pull in more than 125,000. Believing that “the American people have never yet capitalized our scenery and climate, as we should,” he felt the time was ripe to “cultivate the ‘See America First’ movement.” Providing well-publicized, easily accessed parks would compel Americans, now largely unable to tour Europe due to World War I, to spend their hundreds of millions of dollars not in Switzerland, but here at home. In the end, that economic argument carried the day, and President Woodrow Wilson signed into existence Rocky Mountain National Park on January 26, 1915.

Conclusion

The creation of Rocky Mountain National Park tells us a great deal about Colorado and the rise of tourism in the American West. The fact that Denver was, by the turn of the twentieth century, a well-connected, well-known health resort in a nation itching and able to travel was crucial to the park’s creation. In this regard, Rocky Mountain National Park was partially a product of greater urbanization in the United States. At a time when city life often dehumanized, rationalized, and sterilized the human experience, this park held the promise of peace, solitude, and rapture that so many urban Americans craved.

Enos Mills, J. Horace McFarland, James Grafton Rogers, Robert Marshall, and several politicians and government employees all experienced and responded to this sentiment. Although their personalities and professions varied widely, all agreed upon one simple fact: this park had the potential to draw a crowd—and that was a very good thing. Rocky Mountain National Park would bring money for city coffers, generate wealth for local and regional businessmen, and provide a place of play for Colorado’s outdoor elite, all while adding breadth and depth to the national campaign for a parks agency. In the end, they all got what they wanted.

But what exactly had they created? The park now had an evocative name and precise lines on a map demarking a world inside and one outside. It had rules and laws that were to govern and protect the sanctuary itself. But the work of park advocates was far from finished. In many ways, the moment
President Wilson affixed his signature to the final bill marks the moment that Rocky’s creation began in earnest. For the generations that have followed, tourists, elected officials, business people, and scientists have gazed into this giant looking glass and imagined divergent futures there. And what they have all seen, it turns out, has mattered a great deal.