

In February 2007, the Forest History Society and the wider academic world lost a vibrant and influential historian and friend, Hal Rothman. Hal served as the first editor of Environmental History and its predecessors from 1991 to 2001, and was serving on FHS's board at the time of his death. He was very familiar to the Society's library staff because they cataloged his prodigious output throughout his all-too-brief career: 26 books and monographs, 21 articles, and 45 book reviews and review essays, not to mention the countless op-ed pieces and articles that appeared around the country, all produced in less than a quarter century. Perhaps best known for his work on Las Vegas and on national parks, Hal wrote on topics as diverse as western tourism, the early Forest Service, and the Jewish community in Wichita, Kansas.

Hal succumbed at age 48 to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's Disease, but it was not without difficulty that the disease claimed him. Even after giving up teaching duties at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas because of the illness, he continued writing, including a column for the New West news website from which we reprint two entries. In each, he draws on his vast knowledge of National Park and western history to support his arguments for continued protection of national parks. The passion he felt for history was, by all accounts, exceeded only by the passion he felt for his family.

WHY THE NATION NEEDS NATIONAL PARKS

"WANT POLITICAL BACKFIRE? SCREW WITH THE AMERICAN VACATION" (APRIL 25, 2006)

The current attempt by the Bush administration to cut the National Park Service operating budget by 20% is only the latest in a shameless series of efforts to gut the most beloved institution in American society. An administration that has taken pride in ignoring popular opinion now offers a gratuitous slashing that cuts at something Americans regard as a birthright. If you really want to piss off the public, mess with their vacations. "So what

if the public's experience is affected?" these beltway divas are telling each other. "They won't be voting for us again."

Only six months ago, political hacks in the Department of the Interior tried to use administrative rules to shred nearly century-old protections of the nation's most cherished places. The public objected and they failed; now they are back, seeking to use a different kind of power to unravel some of the few remaining common bonds in our society.

I suspect that this too will backfire. National parks are one of

BY HAL ROTHMAN

the very few things Americans consistently point to as a visible symbol of their national identity. In their almost century and one-half of existence, the parks have been a crucial dimension of the glue that has bound Americans together as a nation.

Even more, the National Park Service, the agency charged with managing national park areas since its establishment in 1916, has consistently been rated the most loved federal agency by the American public. The keepers of the nation's sacred landscapes and treasured historic places connect with a public that is starved for meaning in a shallow age.

Even in a changing America, national parks retain tremendous psychic power. Created to forge a vision of what was special about the American nation—and not incidentally, to illustrate the differences between American nature and European culture—they remain icons that bind us together. Especially when you stand amid the parade of tour buses at Mather Point at the Grand Canyon, watching the Japanese disembark en masse, or join the constant stream of people to Old Faithful, you know who you are.

That has been the gift of the national parks. It is not the nature and the history preserved within that defines us, although that nature is often stunning and the history moving. The idea of the national parks is even more important than what they contain.

Especially in the West, national parks have become cornerstones of state and regional economies. From Montana to New Mexico, California to Colorado, every state counts on the jobs national park visitation creates and the dollars it brings in. I would hate to try to balance my state budget in the interior West without that revenue.

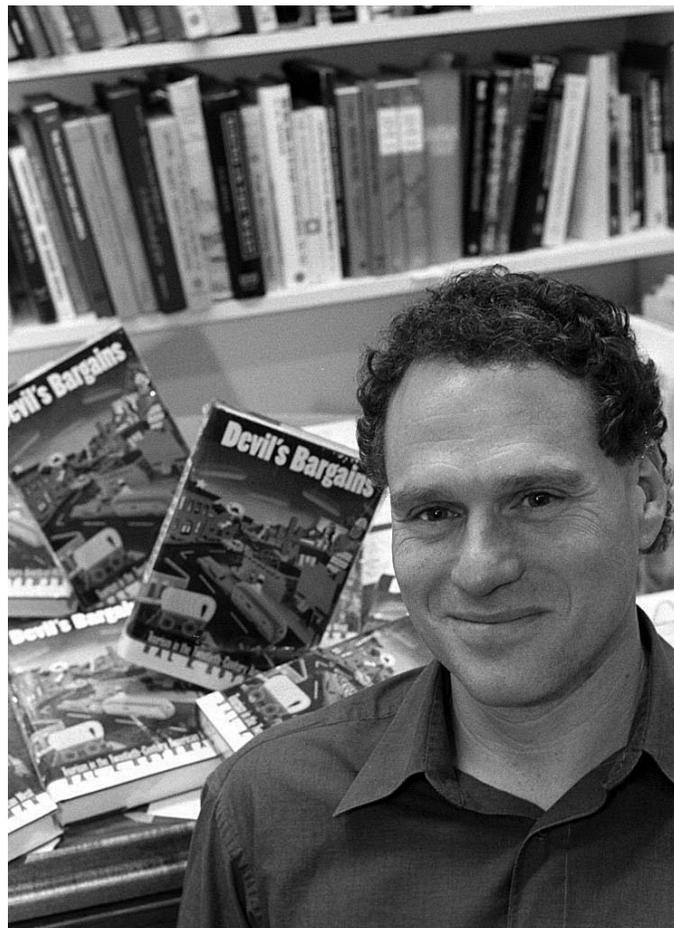
Economic arguments aside, if there is a greater American contribution to the application of the principles of democracy, I can not imagine it. Before the eighteenth century, when people like you and I first got the individual rights we now take for granted, the idea of a public park didn't exist.

In Europe, everything belonged to somebody. Robert of Locksley, who we know as Robin Hood, happened along and saw the Sheriff of Nottingham and his men arresting a man who killed a deer to feed his family inside the king's private reserve. The king's lands and animals were private, hunted only if the monarch allowed. All of it belonged to the liege. Robert objected, stove in the head of one of the minions, and found himself an outlaw.

Not here. National parks define the difference between the United States, full of land and promise, and hidebound Europe, where centuries of privilege weighed heavy on the backs of all but the nobility. Never mind that for a long time, their democracy was more symbol than reality. Until after World War II, only affluent Americans could easily visit their parks.

Since then, the democratization of travel has made the national park experience available to the vast majority of Americans. Although minorities and immigrants are still underrepresented among park visitors, the park system received more than 388 million visits last year. That's a lot of people.

So this summer, when you visit the national parks, be sure to let your congressional representatives know what you thought about the reduction in service that this administration arbitrarily caused. I'm sure they will want to hear from you, especially with elections this fall. If the institution of the national park is important, the public needs to come to its rescue.



COURTESY OF LORI CAINI/ZAS VEGAS SUN

Hal Rothman, at his desk in front of a display of his many publications. He continued writing after his diagnosis with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in December 2005.

"WHY THE NATION NEEDS NATIONAL PARKS" (MAY 8, 2006)

I love the national parks—both for what they are and what they represent about this country, but I have great fear about their future. I am afraid that both the public and park advocates take the parks for granted, in very different ways, but that unintentionally creates long-term dangers for the national park system.

National parks are a highlight of American democracy, one of our few genuine additions to the principle of a social contract between the governed and the governors. Despite the American conceit that we invented the idea of democracy, we didn't; all we did was tweak it a bit. National parks were one of the best wrinkles we put into the game plan of the Age of the Enlightenment.

Imagine what the idea of a "nation's park" meant in a world where all the land belonged to someone richer than you. Even if you never visited one, the very existence of such a place promised that the world could get better, that you, immigrant or native, urban or rural, could belong in this world, could find a way to be part of something larger.

I am deeply afraid that in twenty years, this will no longer be so. And when that happens, the votes in Congress necessary to provide the national parks with the funds they need may not be there either.



Hal Rothman in front of the La Concha Motel. Rothman joined others in pushing for its historic preservation. Although the motel was torn down, the lobby behind Rothman was preserved and moved, and now serves as the visitor center for the Neon Museum.

The public that loves the parks is still overwhelmingly white and middle class, precisely the segment that is diminishing as a percentage of the American whole. This group, while still tremendously numerous and influential, is very less likely to be so in twenty-five years. Given demographic trends, this constituency is likely to be a plurality instead of a clear majority before too long.

What will happen when senators and representatives whose states and regions depend on the parks have to negotiate with powerful blocs that have no appreciation for the institution? Will parks far away have the same appeal to the representatives of the future as they do to those of today?

National parks used to mean a ticket to Americanism, an experience at the very core of the meaning of national identity. Remember when it seemed like everyone had an “I Visited Carlsbad Caverns” bumper sticker on their car? It signified more than a vacation. Even today, people of a certain vintage get all misty-eyed when I bring up this long-forgotten symbol from their youth. More than anything, the bumper sticker made you part of something larger than yourself.

Today, that sense of belonging comes from commercial culture, from television and the airwaves, from music and *People* magazine. Where do Super Bowl MVPs want to go? Yellowstone? No, it’s Disney World.

The point was driven home to me a few years ago, on a trip to Disneyland in Anaheim. There, I watched multitudes of Americans, new immigrant and native-born, seeking and finding their identity in the embrace of Mickey and Minnie; this was defining, a way of being baptized into the state religion of our day, self-indulgent liberal consumerism.

This change in perception does not bode well, but even worse is the lack of communication between the conservation community and the larger public, the newest America. The immigrants of today represent the future of the country; so do the seemingly anarchic mountain bikers and the extreme sports

enthusiasts of today. In 25 years, they will be stockbrokers and physicians, political brokers and voters.

I’m not certain they love the national parks like you and I do. And it is our fault. We haven’t done a good enough job of competing with pop culture for the attention of the many. We haven’t successfully explained what the parks mean, concentrating too much on their spectacular scenery. And more than anything, we have not connected with the new America, the urban, immigrant, Spanish- and Tagalog-speaking people, not to mention those who speak so many other languages, so prevalent in cities in the West.

We are the most successful polyglot nation on earth; we are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but I will take our racial and ethnic problems over those of any European nation. In the U.S., the potential to become American is always there. In Germany or France, that is simply not true.

But what does being American mean, especially twenty years from now? I would hope that appreciation for the beauty and meaning of national parks remains in 2026. If it does, if Congress in twenty years still thinks national parks are important, it will be because we have changed trajectory from the present. This is still possible. It requires more from all of us who love the national parks. □

*Hal K. Rothman was Professor and Barrick Distinguished Scholar at the Department of History at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Considered one of the nation’s leading experts on tourism, travel, and post-industrial economies, he was the award-winning author of numerous books, including the widely acclaimed *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the 21st Century* (2002); *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West* (1998); and most recently *Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks* (2007).*