

## George Melendez Wright and the National Park Idea

*Dayton Duncan*

TEN YEARS AGO, WHEN I BEGAN THE RESEARCH FOR A DOCUMENTARY FILM about the history of the national parks for PBS, I faced the biggest challenge of my writing and filmmaking career with my colleague Ken Burns. Our ambition was to tell the story of a uniquely American idea—that the nation’s most sacred landscapes be preserved, for all people and for all time—spanning more than a century in time and more than a continent in geographic space.

We wanted to trace the origins of the idea in the middle of the 19th century and then follow its evolution to the verge of the 21st century. We wanted to incorporate the big issues and the broad scope of this sprawling narrative: how the definition of what a park should be has been challenged and changed over time; how different generations of Americans have experienced their parks in shifting social contexts; and how some threats to the park idea have existed and persevered from the very beginning, just as surely as the special connection Americans have forged with the land has equally endured. We wanted to tell the stories of as many of the 58 individual national parks as possible, as well as make clear that the larger park system has grown to include national monuments, historic sites, seashores, trails and much more.

And, because Ken and I believe, as Emerson said, that “there is no history, only biography;” most importantly we wanted to populate our series with an unforgettable cast of historical characters, some famous but many more of them relatively unknown, who were responsible for a park being created or for the park idea being defended and broadened. We were not interested in making a travelogue or nature film, although our series is filled with footage of some of nature’s most spectacular locales. For us, the story of the national parks is a story of people; people who were willing to devote themselves to saving some precious portion of the land they loved, and in doing so reminded their fellow citizens of the fuller meaning of democracy. Our goal was not merely to mention these people in passing. We hoped to bring them alive on film—with photographs, to be sure, but also through their own words (read off-camera by an accomplished crew of actors)—so that viewers would understand them as living, breathing human beings rather than names from the dusty pages of history.

It was a tall order. I began by reading everything I could about the parks, from the few broad-stroke histories that exist to hundreds of books about specific parks or particular park issues. I visited as many parks as possible (one of the most pleasurable research assignments imaginable) and talked to park historians and superintendents. Through a variety of venues, including the National Park Service's intranet, I solicited suggestions from a wide array of people. Over the course of several years, we conducted more than four dozen filmed interviews.

Slowly, the thematic outlines of a narrative began to emerge, and the list of historical stories I wanted to include started to lengthen—too many of them, it quickly became clear, than we could possibly tell, even in a six-episode, twelve-hour series. Some would eventually be winnowed out, victims of the necessary yet often painful process through which all of our projects must pass. But other stories cried out for more investigation and fuller development, like those brief encounters with a stranger that somehow pique your interest and encourage you to find any excuse to meet again.

**THAT'S HOW I GOT TO KNOW GEORGE MELENDEZ WRIGHT.** He hasn't exactly been ignored in the history of national parks. Richard West Sellars' *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* and Alfred Runte's *National Parks: The American Experience* both credit him with trying to point the Park Service in important new directions concerning the management of wildlife and plant life. And the fact that Wright has an organization of park defenders named in his honor testifies to the esteem in which he's held by insiders. That said, Wright remains a cipher to a large majority of NPS employees, let alone to a vast American public for whom Stephen Mather and Horace Albright are complete unknowns, and John Muir or even Theodore Roosevelt are vaguely recognizable names from our past.

It was Sellars' description of Wright and the cadre of biologists he gathered around him in the 1930s as a minority "opposition party" within the NPS that first caught my eye. A writer is always on the lookout for the yeasty tensions that comprise history in the making. My curiosity was heightened when I read of Wright's tragic death at the age of 31 and its devastating impact on the movement he had started. I wrote down his name on a list of characters we should pursue in greater depth and passed it on to Susan Shumaker, a skilled researcher we had been fortunate to hire, thanks to the generosity of a grant from the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr., Fund. I was hoping she could compile what Ken and I call the "critical mass" of material we need to fully flesh out a character on the screen: more biographical details, enough photographs, and, hopefully, a healthy selection of first-person quotes.

What Susan brought back exceeded my greatest expectations. Luckily for us all, one of Wright's two daughters, Pamela Wright Lloyd, and her son-in-law, Jerry Emory, had already done much of the spade work and were happy to share their results. They had written an excellent biographical article for *The George Wright Forum* in 2000, organized Wright's field notes and correspondence, and collected a treasure trove of personal photographs. Susan also turned in articles Wright had written and, of course, his landmark *Fauna* reports, the fruit of his and his colleagues' groundbreaking three-year survey of conditions in the parks in the early 1930s.

Poring through the material (enough, I would suggest to any ambitious environmental historian reading this, to sustain a lively, full-fledged, and much-needed biography), I knew immediately that Wright would become one of the “stars” of our film series. In him we had a fascinating personality with a dramatic and memorable life story who not only had an important impact on the history of the national park idea but in many ways personally embodied a multitude of the larger themes we wanted to illuminate:

**Individual Americans can make a difference and bend the course of history.**

The national parks are a federal institution, now administered by a large government agency, but running throughout our series is one inspiring example after another proving that the energy propelling the park idea has most often come from the bottom up, not the top down. Look at any national park and how it came to be, and you quickly discover a single person—or sometimes a small group of them—who set out to save a special place for posterity. Enos Mills at Rocky Mountain. Charles Sheldon at Denali. The Wetherills and Virginia McClurg and Lucy Peabody at Mesa Verde. Horace Kephart and George Masa at Great Smoky Mountains. Lancelot Jones and Lloyd Miller and Juanita Greene at Biscayne. Without them, and scores of others like them, many places we now consider sacred and permanently protected would have gone the way of development and desecration. “To me, that’s what national parks mean,” Greene told us in an interview. “It’s a symbol of democracy, democracy when it works well, at its best.”

In this pantheon of park heroes, George Melendez Wright deserves a larger niche than most. His fingerprints can be found in a number of parks. Ernest Coe and Marjory Stoneman Douglas rightly deserve top billing for Everglades National Park, but Wright gave the movement a crucial boost by urgently reporting, “Unless this area is quickly established as a national park, the wildlife there will become extinct.” Laurance Rockefeller may have personally made Virgin Islands National Park possible in 1956, but Wright had called for its creation twenty years earlier. Without Wright, the trumpeter swans might not have found refuge at Red Rock Lakes and instead joined the passenger pigeon in the mournful list of vanished species. If Big Bend ever becomes part of an international park, extending across both sides of the Rio Grande, we’ll have Wright to thank for initiating the idea.

But his major contribution was showing that, in order to thrive and evolve, the park idea has relied on the commitment of individuals even within the agency specifically created to preserve it. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., challenging the nation to apply the tenets of the Declaration of Independence and finally admit that “all men are created equal,” Wright challenged the Park Service to live up to its founding document and apply the injunction of “unimpaired” preservation to animals within park borders, whether they had previously been treated as pets to be pampered or pests to be eliminated. We take both men’s views for granted now, sometimes forgetting how courageously revolutionary they were—and how long it took for their dreams to take hold. As former park superintendent Ernest Ortega told us, Wright “was the savior of wildlife in America’s national parks, but more importantly, George Melendez Wright is the savior of the national park ideal.”



In February 1936, Wright, along with Roger Toll, superintendent of Yellowstone, participated in an international park boundary survey in the vicinity of what would become Big Bend National Park. Toll was the Park Service's chief investigator of proposed new national parks, and Big Bend had been authorized the year before. This group shot was taken near Boquillas, Texas. Wright is at the center of the back row (sixth from left). Toll is in the front row, fifth from the left; Conrad L. Wirth, who later would become the director of NPS, is second from left.

**Within the story of the national parks, science and spirituality are not antagonists; they co-exist and often augment each other.**

John Muir, perhaps the park idea's greatest champion, was an inventive genius who could have taken the path of Thomas Edison had he not decided to walk to Florida, studying plants; likewise his theories on how glacial action carved and polished Yosemite Valley were ahead of his time. And yet no one has ever equaled his rapturous prose, steeped in the cadences of the King James Bible, about the transcendence to be found in an "unconditional surrender" to nature. Waterfalls sang to him. "The whole wilderness," he exclaimed, "in unity and interrelation is alive and familiar . . . the very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly." When he told people that "this is still the morning of creation," he was not attempting to describe the natural processes of the universe with cool detachment. Equal parts scientist and prophet, Muir saw no contradiction between the two powerful impulses that drew him into the wild places he called laboratories and temples. "Heaven knows," he wrote, "that John [the] Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains."

Wright could be equally eloquent, combining the precision of a scientist's observation with what seems to me at least to be the passion of a belief in something larger. "If we destroy nature blindly, it is a boomerang which will be our undoing," he wrote. "Consecration to the task of adjusting ourselves to [the] natural environment so that we secure the best values from nature without destroying it is not useless idealism; it is good hygiene for civilization."

Whether he was describing the thrill of encountering a bear in the wild, the song of a Mearns quail (“the voice of eternity in the wind on the desert”), or the reverie he felt in watching thousands of water birds and feeling that “the illusion of the untouchability of this wilderness becomes so strong that it is stronger than reality, and the polished roadway becomes the illusion, the mirage that has no substance,” Wright brought soulfulness to his science—and in doing so, like Muir, made it accessible to our hearts as well as our minds. The same can be said of the crusading ornithologist and paleontologist George Bird Grinnell, the naturalist Charles Sheldon, and the biologist Adolph Murie, another of my personal favorites. Together, they make mockery of the current, yet tired, dialectic that pits science against religion, facts against feelings. “Oddly enough,” Paul Schullery told us on camera, “it’s the scientists who had the most to do with redefining beauty.”

**The park idea has not only depended upon individuals’ passion and commitment, it has often relied on their private philanthropy to survive.**

Perhaps the single-most recurring refrain in our narrative is a reluctant Congress finally being persuaded, after years of struggle on the grassroots level, to create a new park—and then not appropriating adequate money for its management and protection. The habit of inadequate funding began in 1872 with the creation of the world’s first national park at Yellowstone, with no provisions whatsoever for taking care of it. Congress has never really shaken this habit. In 1916, when Hawaii National Park was added, no money was appropriated for it, either, on the belief, as one senator explained, that “it should not cost anything to run a volcano.” Astonishingly, not until the creation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1933, more than half a century after Yellowstone, were the first federal funds ever spent to purchase land for a new park.

Luckily for the nation, individuals have often stepped forward to plug the holes. No single American donated more than John D. Rockefeller, Jr., whose gifts of land and money—nearly \$45 million by some accounts—helped create Acadia, Great Smoky Mountains, and Grand Teton, and established museums and supported worthy projects in many other parks. His family—his son, Laurance, in particular—carried on the tradition (Virgin Islands, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, the JY Ranch addition to Grand Teton), and even helped launch the National Park Foundation to encourage broader park philanthropy from individuals and corporations. Stephen

Wright in Yosemite Valley (undated).



Mather, the dynamic first director of the Park Service, was just as quick with his checkbook. From his own funds he doubled Horace Albright's salary; hired Robert Sterling Yard as a park publicist; bought land for a new headquarters at Glacier; saved a grove of threatened trees at Sequoia; purchased the privately owned Tioga Road in the heart of Yosemite and donated it to the nation; paid for construction of the Rangers' Club House—and cajoled his wealthy friends to be equally generous.

Rockefeller and Mather are merely at the top of a long list of Americans who have pitched in when the parks needed it—a list, it should be noted, that extends all the way down to school children, black and white, in Asheville, North Carolina, who raided their piggy banks of pennies and nickels to help the drive for Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But George Melendez Wright deserves being remembered in this regard, as well. The second-most important element of his proposal to conduct the first wildlife survey of the parks (after the idea itself), was his offer to underwrite it with his own money. It's impossible to say what would have happened without Wright's willingness to pay for the study himself, but it's not hard to guess. Look at the evidence of what happened to the wildlife division after his death; without his energy—and his philanthropy—it atrophied until others, like Adolph Murie, finally came along to breathe new life into the effort.

**Just as the national parks have been set aside for all Americans, from the very start, Americans from all backgrounds have been involved in their story.**

Among the earliest protectors of Yosemite, General Grant, and Sequoia national parks were the cavalry and infantry troops known as Buffalo Soldiers; sad to say that a hundred years ago, their presence probably meant a higher number of African Americans in those parks than might be found there on any given day this summer. Within those facts, a broader sweep of the park idea's story is told.

It is indisputable that for generations, the national parks have been viewed as the bastion of predominantly white, upper middle-class Americans. But while the preponderance of park visitors may have come from that segment of the population, the parks belong to *everyone*, regardless of income, race, or ethnicity. That's the genius of the park idea, the central tenet of its democratic promise. The challenge is convincing an increasingly diverse American population of that fact and encouraging them to exert the rights of their ownership.

Showing them a fuller history may help this effort, because in those stories they will invariably meet people like themselves: The Buffalo Soldiers and their dynamic leader, Captain Charles Young, who rose from slavery to be the third black man to graduate from West Point, and the first to be put in charge of a national park. A Japanese immigrant named George Masa, who devoted his life to saving the Great Smokies. Federico Sisneros, who protected the ruins of New Mexico's San Gregorio de Abó until the day he died in 1988, four days shy of his 94th birthday—the nation's oldest park ranger. Sue Kunitomi Embrey, who crusaded to preserve the Manzanar internment camp as a reminder of a shameful mistake in our past; and Adina De Zavala, who helped preserve the San Antonio Missions and therefore a more complete memory of American history. Lancelot Jones, the son of a former slave, who resisted the temptations of quick money and in doing so rescued the last undeveloped



islands between Miami and Key West from commercialization. Chiura Obata, who found inspiration in Yosemite and passed it along through his exquisite paintings. Gerard Baker, the descendant of Indian people informed by Lewis and Clark in 1804 that their homeland now belonged to someone else, who was put in charge of the Park Service's commemoration of the expedition's bicentennial and then became the first Native American superintendent of Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Robert Stanton, the *second* African-American to become a park superintendent, who then went on to lead the entire Park Service.

Once we started looking, stories like these jumped out at us—more stories than our film series could ultimately tell, but enough to prove without question that Americans from every background and every walk of life have been part of park history. The son of a sea captain and a mother from El Salvador, George Melendez Wright is one more thread—and a critically important one—in that diverse tapestry. His greatest contribution, of course, sprang from his devotion to science, but his fluency in Spanish was essential in 1929, when Totuya, the granddaughter of Chief Tenaya, returned to Yosemite Valley and an interpreter was needed to translate her vivid memories of what life had been like when the valley had been occupied only by the Ahwahneeches. And who better to represent the United States in discussions with Mexico about an international park straddling the Rio Grande at Big Bend than someone who was not only the head of the wildlife division but a Hispanic American who came to be called “Chapo” by his Mexican counterparts, because they liked him so much. It was

an endearing term for a small person, but as Pamela Wright Lloyd told us, “he was small, even by Hispanic standards, but he was a small person with a big heart, mind, and presence.”

**At critical moments, true visionaries have infused the park idea with new notions—often counter to prevailing attitudes—that pushed it forward to a better future.**

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the U.S. Census Bureau's official phrase for land that had been homesteaded, logged, or mined was “redeemed from wilderness by the hand of man”—a telling phrase, encapsulating the



Wright and his wife, Bernice (“Bee”), at Yosemite (undated).

nation's attitude toward pristine nature in its headlong rush across the continent. At precisely the same time, in the midst of an era of greed and grab, John Muir stepped forward to argue just the opposite: wilderness is not redeemed by man; man is redeemed by wilderness. It took generations before Muir's vision was taken seriously, let alone embraced by large numbers of Americans.

Upon his first peek at the Grand Canyon in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt advised the people of Arizona to "leave it as it is. You can not improve it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it." By this point, proposals to make the Grand Canyon a national park were already 20 years old and had been consistently defeated. Roosevelt's plans for a park fared no better, but in 1908, using the new tool of the Antiquities Act—and over the howlings of local politicians and Congress—he unilaterally set 800,000 acres aside as a National Monument, paving the way for the Grand Canyon to become a National Park ten years later. In that, and in so much else when it came to conservation, as former Interior Secretary Stewart Udall said in an interview, Roosevelt had "distance in his eyes." He could see things over the horizon that others could not.

Interestingly, among the collection of favorite quotations George Melendez Wright kept in a binder of handwritten pages was one from Roosevelt: "There is nothing more practical in the end than the preservation of beauty, than the preservation of anything that appeals to the higher emotions of mankind." (Also worth noting: Roosevelt spoke those words after camping for three nights in Yosemite with Muir.) Wright himself was no less a visionary.

However self-evident they may seem to us now, Wright's proposals for wildlife in the parks were nothing less than revolutionary for their time. During his survey, park managers were not only routinely killing predators of all kinds, rangers in Yellowstone were even

"Chapo" (or "Chapper," as Toll wrote it), Rio Grande, Texas, 22 February 1936. This is the last known photograph of Wright. The automobile accident that claimed his life, Toll's, and that of a teenage driver in another car occurred three days later in New Mexico. Photo by Roger Toll.





stomping pelican eggs to reduce the number of birds, which they considered competitors with fishermen; despite “paper” regulations against feeding bears, even park leaders such as Albright and Mather loved nothing better than to have their picture taken giving scraps to black bears, and grizzlies were a major attraction at park dumps; hay wagons routinely doled out winter forage to elk, deer, and bison. Wright sensed that “the very heart of the national park system” was imperiled by an attitude that narrowly defined the park ideal to preserving pretty views for tourists in automobiles. “Our national heritage is richer than just scenic features,” he prophesized. “The realization is coming that perhaps our greatest national heritage is nature itself, with all its complexity and its abundance of life, which, when combined with great scenic beauty as it is in the national parks, becomes of unlimited value.” Like Muir, like Roosevelt, he could peer into the future, then prod us forward by appealing to “the higher emotions of mankind.”

And at a moment in history when some of the park idea’s biggest supporters were opposing an expansion of the system, on the grounds that too many proposed additions were not up to “national park standards,” Wright saw the danger of doing nothing. Adding a “sub-standard area . . . would not be calamitous,” he warned. “The failure to save Mount Olympus’ forests, the Kings River Canyon . . . and a host of others just as valuable would be the real calamity. Shame upon any standard bearer so narrowly dogmatic as to stand in the way of the perpetuation of any one of these last precious bits of our primeval American heritage. The logical answer is more, not less, park area.” With distance in his eyes and urgency in his heart, he saw the rush of development that was about to consume the last half of the twentieth century and told us to save what you can, then protect what you save.

**WHILE HE EMBODIES SO MANY ELEMENTS** of the larger history of the national park idea, I must admit that what most attracted me to Wright was his humanity. That’s why I’m so happy he became one of the heroes of our documentary. I understood his contribution to history, but truth be told, like everyone else who met him in real life, I simply enjoyed getting to know him and being in his presence.

Look at the photographs of him engaged in conversation with Totuya, and you see a young man enthralled with learning something from another human being. Read any of his writings, and you enter a vibrant mind, pulsing with ideas. Examine other pictures—Wright with his fellow biologists in the field, Wright with his wife among the trumpeter swans, Wright with his family—and you recognize a man who embraced life and lived it fully; luckily so, since his was so brief. Even from a distance of more than 70 years, I felt myself pulled into the powerful gravitational field of his personality, which made me appreciate his visionary ideas all the more.

“Am I visionary or just crazy?” he wrote a colleague at the start of his wildlife survey, a seemingly uncharacteristic expression of self-doubt from someone who exuded such outward self-confidence. But that question humanizes him even more—a reminder that the people who make history are, like the rest of us, never sure how things will turn out. Such uncertainty is found in another of Wright’s favorite quotations in his notebooks. This one came from Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and I like to think Wright included it to provide himself with courage in moments when he needed it: “To think great thoughts



Wright in conversation with Totuya (later known as Maria Lebrado), a granddaughter of Chief Tenaya and possibly the last person to have known Yosemite Valley before European contact. Yosemite National Park, July 1929. Photo by Joseph S. Dixon.

you must be heroes as well as idealists. Only when you have worked alone—when you have felt around a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and in despair have trusted to your own unshaken will—then only will you have achieved. Thus only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker, who knows that, a hundred years after he is dead and forgotten, men who never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought.”

George Melendez Wright was a hero and an idealist. A hundred years after his death, the national parks will still be moving to the measure of his thought. But, if Ken Burns and I have anything to say about it, he will not be forgotten.

**Dayton Duncan** is an award-winning writer and documentary filmmaker who has been involved for many years with the work of his colleague Ken Burns. Among their collaborations, for which Duncan has variously served as consultant, writer, and producer, are *The Civil War*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, and *Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*. Their much-anticipated series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* will air on PBS starting in September. You can learn more about the documentary at [www.pbs.org/nationalparks/](http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/).